Chapter III

"In the beginning all the world was America"

--John Locke

Construction of the American Nation

This chapter attempts to analyse the construction of the United States of America as a nation. I would like to address two fundamental issues with respect to the conceptualising of the American nation: one, the problem of analysing the popular concept of American nationality (for an understanding of which I have cited writers belonging to various fields), and two, the problem of identification or rather the difficulty of comparing the popular construction of nation with a number of writings and a few instances from the popular culture. While attempting such a study I will have to specify the span of time I am interested in, since any study of a specific nation with respect to the construction of nation will have to be temporally restricted. Though I shall be looking at the issue from a historical perspective, the focus will be on the decade starting from 1970, for I feel that from 1970 onwards there is a characteristic fissure in the conceptualisation of the nation in the United States. And I will further argue (and try to illustrate) that there is a distinctive difference from the earlier ideals which were completely shattered by the seventies. The reason for this can be seen in many areas of human endeavour in different walks of life in the United States.
Approaching America is not without problems, especially for a non-American like me from a far removed place and context since I have no first-hand knowledge of the realities pertaining to it. Mason suggests a theoretical solution to this issue. He says:

The way in which observers of America resorted to the world that was familiar to them is a timeless response by self when faced with the challenge of the other. In using the elements familiar to them, they were in fact engaged in a double process of reduction and construction. In constructing the New World, resemblance was linked with imagination to avoid the endless monotony of the same. The result is a continuing process of construction and reconstruction of a world, which we may therefore call an imaginary world. The frame of reference remains the Old World. (25)

Mason also adds that there is no way in which one can approach America "as it really is" and such an attempt can only be futile. Furthermore he adds that there is no 'essential' Europe (and I would add Asia too) and that it is through discursive practices like texts and images that we make out what Europe is. It is the same case with America: the discourses on America, as presented in texts and images, are America (Mason 174). (Barry Smart also holds almost the same view as regards the problem of approaching America (51).)
Origins of the American Nation

One can locate an interesting figure of speech used in the early national period in the United States of America; as it is actually a nation which is "spoken into being" (Looby 4). In fact this figuration has a densely impacted connotation. The most prominent interpretation of this figure of speech is that the United States is made out of words; without specifying whether they are written or spoken (The importance given to the spoken word in the American society in a later period can be seen in the popularity of the TV talk shows, which is a part of my concern in this chapter wherein I discuss the 1970s in particular.) "The Declaration of Independence" is at the same time a declaration (to mean something spoken firmly in order to be asserted) and was written, as it were (by way of carefully thought and crafted documentation), by the leaders of the war of independence (It has to be remembered at this point that there was a committee constituted to draft the "Declaration" with Thomas Jefferson as the head.) This figure of speech (of a nation spoken into being) is scrutinized by Derrida in his essay "Declarations of Independence" (1986). For Derrida it is a "fabulous event" with a performative effect:

One cannot decide—and that's the interesting thing, the force and the coup of force of such a declarative act—whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance. [...] Is it that the good people have already freed themselves in fact and are only stating the fact of this emancipation in the Declaration?
Or is it rather that they free themselves at the instant of and by the signature of this Declaration? (9)

Derrida further argues that the Declaration was simultaneously “informative” (or rather “information-providing”) and performative, at once referring to the nation-state as if it already existed and instituting it since it did not yet exist. Thus the only legitimate author of that Declaration is the political entity: this “fabulous retro-activity” authorized the signers—after the fact—to (have) sign(ed) (Derrida 10). Knud Krakau (10) quotes other writers who tried to dissect the different facets of the Declaration of Independence in extremely minimal words without losing the spirit of the complex thinking. Elkins and McKittrick call it America’s “central myth”, Kaplan perceives it as a “mystical conception” and Murrin, Arieli look at it as a “substitute for any deeper kind of national identity”.

James Boon discusses national identity as an extension of religious orthodoxy in other nations and compares the United States at the time of independence in this context. He claims that:

Ours was the first national identity to project itself as a mechanical solidarity of citizens speaking the same language and required to prove it if they were born outside our sacred territory. America’s partial religious heterodoxy should be considered together with this peculiar linguistic orthodoxy, perhaps even dogmatism. (Cited in Looby, 14)

Nationalism in America is different from the usual pattern of national movements in many other countries. In fact, it is only in the case of America
that one can noticeably locate the roots of nationalist movements. Since it has a very recent history, it is easy for the researcher to go back to the origins of the nationalist movements in the United States of America. And most of these movements are carefully documented and preserved making it easier for the researcher.

One of the major boosters for the American nationalist movement has been the emergence of the press. In the first half of the eighteenth century itself there were the beginnings of the colonial periodical press. There were at least twenty-two weekly newspapers in wide circulation in the period between 1713-1745 (Degler 44). These weeklies were circulated in seven of the thirteen colonies, among a meagre minority. Though the viewpoint was strongly English, these papers linked together the ruling circles in the various colonies. The value of these newspapers in the building of national consciousness is gauged very high by the historians of the pre-Revolutionary period. These newspapers also addressed the egalitarian sentiments that had gripped the people of the colonies because most of them could read and write (John Adams, however refers only to men with respect to literacy; female literacy was considerably lower during that period (Degler 50)). Thus, it can be observed that the people of the thirteen colonies were fond of ideas like freedom, democracy and equality as early as 1700.

However, the Anglo-Americans established a nation without the support of any of those elements (such as a common religion or a historically defined territory) that are generally supposed to constitute a separate nation (Following Hans Kohn I use the term "Anglo-American" in this chapter. The
American War of Independence has been viewed by Kohn and the like (Krakau 9; Greenfeld, “American Nationalism” 24-25) as basically and originally a movement of the English speaking Americans—it is also important thus that the American War of Independence was prominent in the states which were under the direct rule of the British empire. However, I am aware of the problems the term “Anglo-America” raises with regard to the “original” inhabitants of America. Nevertheless, their contribution to the establishment of the nation is minimal given the various ways through which they were marginalized).

Unmistakably, even English-speaking Americans were not of the same descent. Nonetheless, historically speaking, the first settlers were mostly British. Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoer remarked,

> It is ... to England that we owe this elevated rank we possess, [...] these noble appellations of freemen, freeholders, citizens; yes it is to that wise people we owe our freedom. Had we been planted by some great monarchy, we should have been mean slaves of some distant monarch. (Cited in Degler, 63)

Liah Greenfeld takes into account the national identity which the English settlers carried with them when they came to America. As a result of the influence of these English settlers, according to Greenfeld, the nationality of American identity and consciousness demands no explanation. It has its deep roots unquestionably in the oldest of the modern nation states ever established. He adds,
They necessarily conceived of the community to which they belonged as a nation, the idea of the nation was an American inheritance. *National* identity in America thus preceded not only the formation of the specific American identity (the American sense of uniqueness), but of the institutional framework of the American nation, and even of the national territory, all of which are conventionally thought of as foundations of nationality. Because of this singular development, the symbolic nature of nationality and its essential autonomy from material or "objective" ethnic and structural factors, is demonstrated here with particular clarity. (Greenfeld, "American Nationalism" 21)

In order to interpret the American national character and its underlying conception one has to take into consideration the speculative vision and faulty empiricism of America because the theories of nationhood and nationalism in America blend both of them. In the case of America, the speculative vision of history is based more on tradition or convenience than on fact. This can be seen in the long belief in the "American Dream". Owing to the deterioration of the eighteenth century European ideal of universal man, there can also be found a search for human beings of diverse cultures in the thoughts of the American intelligentsia.

The America of the earlier period can be termed predominantly Puritan. Americans are seen as shaped by ideas from England and the realities of the New World environment. American thought and behaviour were derived from Puritanism. The belief was that God delivered the Puritans safely and he
would ratify the covenant but also expect a strict performance of the Articles contained in it. Thus the initial thought in America was related to the Puritan ideals and these ideals had a long and rather unhindered life till at least the first half of the twentieth century.

But the discussions on the origins of nationality should not be concentrated only on the English settlers. Even as early as the 1790s Americans represented peoples of varied descent. The now well-known letter of a farmer in Pennsylvania goes like this,

[...] that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a man, whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. (Quoted in Kohn, 3)

Important elements in the formation of a nation elsewhere, above all, before the nineteenth century were a common religion and a historically defined territory. Anglo-America had neither. There was no common religion in the thirteen colonies (there were confronting sects of Christianity like Puritans, Protestants, Catholics, Calvinists other than Jews in the early years.) Even by the middle of the eighteenth century religious diversity was recognized as peculiarly American. Christianity in America underwent profound changes during the eighteenth century. This change was more directed toward secularisation and to weaken the influence of religion and the church on the life of the people. One effect of this change can be seen in the decline of
Puritanism in New England just before the independence. However, this did not change Puritanical influence on the American citizen.

In fact, Anglo-America showed even then a unique liberty and diversity in religious life, different therein from all other countries of Western civilization. However, no single religion could be identified with Anglo-America, no single religion inspired its independence, even though the puritans who established themselves in New England have made a major contribution to the independent spirit of the Anglo-Americans. As a matter of fact, religious liberty was considered one of the driving forces that made people migrate to America. This religious liberty later became a central element in the emerging sense of American Uniqueness (Greenfeld, "American Nationalism" 23). This notion of religious liberty led to several other kinds of liberty as time went on. And it was on this notion that the migration picked up momentum. But the state of liberty, which later proved a romantic, unachievable "dream", was the concern of most people in the later part of the twentieth century.

Pointing out the singularity of the establishment of American nation and hinting at the factors that rupture the traditional notions of nationality in America, Christopher Looby suggests:

Other nations experienced their coherence as a matter of racial and ethnic similarity, religious orthodoxy, population concentration, geographical definition, massive and dense structures of inherited customary practices, and highly articulated historical self-representations. In America, by contrast, racial and ethnic diversity, religious heterogeneity,
population dispersal, geographical precedent all contributed to problematize (if not demolish) traditional notions of nationality.

(14)

The English settlers in North America in their opposition to the mother country did not act out of the motives which generally moved people in the Age of Nationalism—that means, after the rise of Napoleon—to fight for their nationhood against foreign rulers. The American War for Independence ought not to be compared—as it is done so frequently—with any of the later European wars of national liberation or with twentieth century movements for colonial independence. The Anglo-Americans fought England not because they felt themselves alienated from the mother country, but because they were English (Greenfeld, "American Nationalism" 25). In their struggle they did not fight for rights not possessed before; they were upholding English constitutional rights, based upon the English revolutions of the seventeenth century.

Benedict Anderson brings in another dimension to the early nationalism in the United States of America in connection with what he calls "creole nationalisms of the Americas".

For on the one hand, the American states were for many decades weak, effectively decentralized, and rather modest in their educational ambitions. On the other hand, the American societies, in which 'white' settlers were counterposed to 'black' slaves and half-extirminated 'natives,' were internally riven to a degree quite unmatched in Europe. Yet the imagining of that
fraternity, without which the reassurance of fratricide cannot be born, shows up remarkably early, and not without a curious authentic popularity. In the United States of America this paradox is particularly well exemplified. (202)

Nathan Glazer probes further the same idea of "fraternity", which Anderson discusses, and adds another dimension with regard to the social relationships in America. In an attempt to place the ethnic groups in the national outlook of the United States of America, in his essay entitled "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—and Ethnicity" (1976) Glazer argues:

It has always been difficult for Americans to understand the revolutionary slogan of France, "liberty, equality, fraternity."

The first two terms are clear enough: they frame the central issues faced by society and polity in the modern age, neatly juxtaposed and in some sort of inevitable conflict. We all understand that the desire for liberty—for freedom of action—regularly comes into conflict with equality, the overwhelming tendency in modern society to ensure that each man (and woman, and perhaps child) count for one, and no more than one. The conflict can be more or less sharp, but it is impossible except through sophistry to eliminate it [...] the notion that the freedom of individuals was in some substantial measure reduced by the modest taxes that were then required for these jointly determined national efforts to introduce a minimal level of
decent living seemed extreme, ideological, and outlandish.

(Ethnic Dilemmas 209)

For Glazer American society has never learned to conceive or practise "fraternity". He argues that this lack of "fraternity" and accommodating temperament is the root cause of most of the ethnic conflicts in America. "Fraternity" can be understood as an issue that was of no great concern in America from the days of the establishment of the nation itself. Lack of "fraternity" becomes more evident when one tries to locate it in the context of the complex interactions between the several social groups and ethnic minorities in the United States. Things only became more complex once the immigration reached its peak in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Melting-Pot: Immigration and the United States

Immigration has always been a phenomenon which several sociologists have tried to comprehend. Their major question in this regard is why there are this many numbers of immigrants in the United States. The obvious rider to this question is how the increase in immigration through centuries has changed the society and the national character of America. Carl Degler puts it this way:

Thanks to the massive influx of immigrants from non-English countries, the ethnic character of the colonies was markedly altered in the course of the four or five decades before the Revolution. It has been calculated that by 1776 as much as one half and perhaps more of the population was of non-English
origin. This represented more than just the beginning of a long
history or diverse immigration into America; it marked the
establishment of an ethnic pattern which then, as now, has set
America off from England and other European countries. (54)

In 1908 Israel Zangwill, a British national, wrote a play about the
immigration experience that gave Americans a term for this special
phenomenon. He called the whole phenomenon The Melting Pot. (Canadians
have a similar term; "Mosaic" which denotes the existence of diversity within
the society.) It was in the 1830s that the immigration from Britain reached its
high point. This increase was basically because of the encouragement of the
cotton traders who had to return to America with largely empty ships after
selling all their goods in England. Even though these ships were meant for
trading and not congenial for the travellers there were a large number of
immigrants on each of their return journeys. People from all over Europe
started migrating by the middle of the nineteenth century. In twenty years
(1830-1850) the proportion of foreign-born immigrants in America rose from
one in a hundred during the time of independence to one in ten.

By the second half of the nineteenth century there was an increase in
the immigration of the people from other countries too. There was a steady
increase in the numbers from Australia, Argentina, New Zealand, Greece,
Portugal, Turkey, Mexico, the Caribbean, China, and Japan. The immigrant
community used to live in the factory towns like Wisconsin, Manhattan, New
York and Washington. It is after the economic depression of the end of the
nineteenth century that they started going into other unexplored parts of America.

The increase in immigration has influenced the language in particular and the culture in general of America. One can locate the wide-ranging influence of the Dutch language in “American English” (*boom* and *bumpkin* for example have their roots in the Dutch language). There is comparatively no more than a low linguistic influence of German and Yiddish, even though the influence of these nationals on the cultural and political realm is much larger and considerably strong.

It is imperative to analyse the immigrants’ construction of America and their loyalty to the nation. According to Greenfeld the reasons for the immigrants’ loyalty to America and the process in which it is formed throw light on the notion of national loyalty in general. “[T]he immigrant’s commitment did not derive from the love of country; it derived from the uplifting, dignifying effects of liberty and equality, the exhilarating lure of opportunity, and the enjoyment or even the expectation of a greater prosperity” (Greenfeld, *Nationalism* 435).

Even from the early days of the American nation people from African origin were encouraged to spread freely. Initially they were mostly from the Caribbean, brought to work in the plantations and for other physical labour. When there was more demand there was additional import of slaves from African countries. The additional import was related to the prosperity of plantations. However, in the South they were treated as animals. Even in the Northern provinces of America, though they enjoyed freedom, they scarcely
enjoyed the fruits of democracy. The Southern plantation engaged a number of mulattos too as bonded labourers.

Initially, the word "American" was an unambiguous reference only to nationality when it was applied to a relatively homogeneous social body consisting of white immigrants from the British Isles, with relatively small numbers from nearby European countries. When the numbers of those not of British origin began to rise, the word "American" became a far more complicated one. Glazer and Moynihan in their book *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963) observe:

Legally, it [the word American] meant a citizen. Socially, it lost its identifying power, and when you asked a man what he was (in the United States), "American" was not the answer you were looking for. [...] in the United States the word "American" does not stand by itself. If it does, it bears the additional meaning of patriot, "authentic" American, critic and opponent of "foreign" ideologies. (15)

Nevertheless, the so called 'original' Americans became "old" Americans, or "old stock", or "white Anglo-Saxon Protestants," or some other identification which indicated they were not immigrants or descendants of recent immigrants. These 'original' Americans already had a frame in their minds, which became a frame in reality, that placed and ordered those who came after them. Those who were like them could easily join them. It was important to be white, of British origin, and Protestant during that time. If one was all
three, then, even if one was an immigrant, one was not really taken for an immigrant, or not for long.

The common (and largely stereotypical) impression about all the 'coloured' communities was that they were more than happy with good food and a chance to sing and dance. No one, until Abraham Lincoln entered the scene, cared about their status as human beings. Even thinking about the political and social equality of blacks and whites was considered taboo. Even to the present day, Hollywood films and popular soap operas on television present a stereotypical representation of the coloured in the society.

It was "Buffalo Soldier" (Confrontation 1983), a popular song by Bob Marley, the legendary singer from Jamaica, that expressed the cheated feeling of an Afro-American in America. He reminds them that they have been forcefully stolen/taken away from Africa and brought to America. Hence, he says that if the Afro-American knows the history, s/he will know where s/he is originally from:

If you know your history
Then you would know where you coming from
Then you wouldn't have to ask me
Who the heck do I think I am
I'm just a Buffalo Soldier
In the heart of America
Stolen from Africa, brought to America
Said he was fighting on arrival
Fighting for survival
Said he was a Buffalo Soldier

Win the war for America

"Buffalo Soldier" was co-written by Bob Marley and N.G. Williams (King Sporty). It recollects the true story of four post-Civil War regiments of the U.S. Army—the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry. These units had black privates under the command of white Supremes. They fought for almost twenty-five years against the American ethnic groups of Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, Apache, Ute and Sioux. In the end, fourteen key black campaigners, whom the Indians had dubbed “buffalo soldiers,” were awarded the Medal of Honor as part of a public relations move to justify and glorify the genocide of Native Americans, underlining the U.S. government's policy of “manifest destiny”. Such were the ploys that, then as now, comprised the politics of neutralization (Timothy White 180). The song should be seen in the larger perspective of “Black Nationalism” and “Black Empowerment” movements during the 1970s, where they stressed the need to go back to the roots of the race.

What we gather out of the endless number of popular African-American stories and songs is that the nation that talks elaborately of liberty and equality is not the “Garden of Eden” in reality and that it is a nation which closes its eyes when it comes to the point where it has to take into consideration of two or more ethnicities.

Nicholas Lemann in his brilliant piece of narrative history that traces the twentieth-century mass migration of black people from the rural South of America to the urban North and its effects on the nature of life, politics and
Thinking about the history of American race relations can easily give rise to bitterness and fatalism, but it is encouraging to remember how often in the past a hopeless situation, which appeared to be completely impervious to change, finally did change for the better. The framers of the Constitution, idealists though they were, couldn’t imagine an American nation without slavery—but in the long run slavery was ended. In this century legal segregation looked like an unfortunate given impossible to eliminate, until well after the end of World War II. That black America could become predominately middle class, non-Southern, and nonagrarian would have seemed inconceivable until a bare two generations ago. (343)

Lemann also puts forward the theory that the racial problems in the American society were addressed only when there was a strong sense of national community. He believes that “The Civil War was one such time, at least in the Union states, and the long stretch between the New Deal and the Vietnam War was another; these periods brought us emancipation and civil rights” (351-352). Hobsbawm, on the other hand, suggests that ethnic groups are really failed nations, since their credentials as nations have failed to be successfully established (cited in Kellas, 98). However, that should not mean that the ethnic groups should be considered alien to American nationality.
Instead, what is needed is a larger perspective of nationality, within which, being a member of an ethnic minority shall work as an advantage.

The end of free immigration by the 1920s and the shared experiences of the Depression and of the First World War combined all the ethnic elements into an identical mixture. But the nonwhites, especially blacks, have not merged into the new mixture that made up the American nation. It is an obvious fact that from 1920s onwards the most telling and obvious change that had occurred is that life, in the material dimension of the term, has, for most people, become more comfortable. Giving a more compact view on the decades from 1920 to 1970s, Daniel Snowman deliberates on the change in the value system and the overall fabric of the society:

With the affluence of modern decades and the technology through which it was mediated there came a subtle shift in the values and attitudes of the people whose lives it was helping to alter. The more fundamental values were not substantially altered; the traditional American beliefs in liberty and equality, in hard work and deferred gratification, and in the US Constitution and the achievements of the Founding Fathers probably remained largely unshaken, as did beliefs about the sanctity of human life and of the social institutions upon which American civilization was based. But there also developed alongside these traditional values and in somewhat uneasy harness with them a set of attitudes which, while by no means totally ‘new’,
had nonetheless not received quite the same widespread emphasis before. (209-210)

By the later half of the twentieth century people started believing in the process in which the American citizens are moulded by taking into account those values on which the culture rests. By now the thinkers about the American national character understood that it is impossible to propound a single model of an American citizen and that the individual is a collective of several diverse cultures in view of the increase in immigration (the melting pot theory). One needs to look at the concept of the American Dream in this context to understand the unifying element of the same diverse individualities. A further discussion on the term American dream is attempted in the later part of this chapter.

**Baudrillard and Eco: the “ Outsider’s Point of View”**

America appears as different things to different people. Baudrillard once said that the whole of America is like a Disney Land. In his book *America* (1986) he adds:

America is the original version of modernity [...] America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth. Having known no primitive accumulation of time, it lives in a perpetual present. Having seen no slow, centuries-long accumulation of principle of truth, it lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs. (76)
Baudrillard thinks that the charm and power of American culture—he in fact wonders whether it is 'unculture'—derived from the sudden and unprecedented materialization of models which the European intellectuals consider as the uttermost values of democracy and technological progress (79). Comparing America with Europe he claims that as a nation and a people America has achieved modernity without the terrors and ambivalence of enlightenment. Repeatedly throughout America Baudrillard asserts that Europe and America are "radically different" (Smart 62) and adds that "all the myths of modernity are American" (81). That is the reason why he calls America a nation where Utopia has been achieved.

Though critics observe in Baudrillard a politically uncommitted, whimsical, and depthless approach to the whole project of America and consider it as "offensive to academics" (Turner 152), it is nonetheless true that he offers a kind of sociological backbone to the contemporary studies of the construction of nation. His views on America as a nation and as a people are drawn on the lines of his ideas on society, knowledge and power. His construct of America has to be viewed further in the light of his ideas on modernity and postmodernity. As a consequence, his America brings forth the concepts and notions of the traveller who has immense knowledge of the correlation between power, politics and ideology. He feels that as a nation America had no history or a strong and long cultural identity to boast of. Hence, he calls it a nation of "primitive society".

Comparing Umberto Eco's monumental work Travels in Hyperreality (1986) with Baudrillard's America, Barry Smart comments:
If Eco's journey through the hyperreality of America ultimately reveals the outline of a critical understanding of key features of the times in which we live, specifically that we are witnessing an erosion, if not collapse of American hegemony, Baudrillard's narrative, in contrast, for the most part reads like a homage to America, one which oscillates between a celebratory phenomenological excursion through the (hyper)reality of the 'New World', and an intermittent and dislocated comparative analysis of European and American modernity. (54)

Umberto Eco observes the entertainment industry of the United States of America with much enthusiasm and provides invaluable insights into the way in which things are perceived. As part of the travelogue and cultural commentary in *Travels in Hyperreality* he observes:

We must understand, however, from what depth of popular sensibility and craftsmanship today's photorealists draw their inspiration and why they feel called upon to force this tendency to the point of exacerbation. There is then, an America of furious hyperreality, which is not that of Pop art, of Mickey Mouse, or of Hollywood movies. There is another, more secret America (or rather, just as public, but snubbed by the European visitor and also by the American intellectual); and it creates somehow a network of references and influences that finally spread also to the products of high culture and the entertainment industry. It has to be discovered. (7)
Eco goes on in this journey in “hyperreality” to visit some of the art museums in America as well as some cities. His approach is based on his interventions in the semiotic outlook of sociology. When he finishes this journey he "discovers" the ideology of America in this fashion:

The Ideology of this America wants to establish
reassurance through imitation. But profit defeats ideology,
because the consumers want to be thrilled not only by the
guarantee of the Good but also by the shudder of the Bad […]
Both at the same level of credibility, both at the same level of fakery. Thus, on entering his cathedrals of iconic reassurance,
the visitor will remain uncertain whether his final destiny is hell
or heaven, and so will consume new promises. (57-58)

Eco thus believes that America still holds promises for those who search for them and the person who searches for these promises is made a consumer rather than a person who can sit back and relax. However, this search for promises never reaches the final destination according to him. That, for Eco, constitutes the means and ends for the person who seeks. In a way these destinations and search are derived out of spectacles like the Disney Land and endless number of Museums which carry the copies of original works from the world over.

Not every one needs to have the same idea about the United States of America, especially when one looks at the number of Wars and catastrophes that are now part of its history. From a ‘nowhere’ nation it has achieved the material progress that it boasts of in the present day. Far from being called a
nation of settlers it has proved itself to become a nation of successful people. We get such colourful pictures about the nation through the press, media, films, fiction and other possible means and signifiers of communication—fast cars, McDonalds, Kentucky Chicken, Hollywood and recently the Silicon Valley. The question then is whether this is the America which one gets to know when one is knee deep in that country, as a traveller, as a settler, or as a citizen.

In the contemporary period many of the most hallowed myths of nation have been challenged and criticized in feature films that contest the basic premises of American ideology—the myth of manifest destiny, for example, or of the progressive extension of liberty longing to displace the lived identity of race, or of the existence of a single, homogeneous nation extending from “sea to shining sea”. Even within mainstream Hollywood filmmaking (though it functions independently of state support or government guidelines), there has been an unparalleled expression of national culture, one that has moulded into the self-image of the nation in decisive and explicit ways (Conversely, Hollywood defines itself purely as an entertainment industry with its manifold marketing possibilities unlike the film industries of countries like France, Australia and Canada which utilise a film form that presents the national life). Robert Burgoyne argues that Hollywood cinema expresses both the mythic and the prosaic dimensions of nation (124).

Nevertheless, the Hollywood genre system can be perceived as an all inclusive arena which defines what passes as social reality in America. The foundational narratives of nation are increasingly being contested by films that
open up the locked doors of the national past and that emphasise the histories forgotten or excluded from dominant accounts. Following Brennan's argument that the nation is an "imaginary construct" that depends on an "apparatus of cultural fictions," Burgoyne states, "that apparatus in the present-day United States is centred in the Hollywood cinema" (124). This is apparent in the super-cop stories and the war-hero-oriented films that are now part of the world film genre.

The American Dream

It would be appropriate to look at the background and different manifestations of the concept of 'The American Dream' at this juncture. The birth, rise and fall of the American Dream strongly correspond to the cultural history of the United States of America. Perhaps we can say that there is no nation without a dream. These various kinds of dreams might be at several levels, sometimes they might be at the level of collective hopes, at other times they might be just individual ideals. However, in the United States, the Dream has acquired a very particular meaning. From the early years of the American nation, individual hopes, plans and ideas showed a tendency to amalgamate into a complex configuration of ideals that were later called the "American Dream".

Nevertheless, the term is not easy to define. Some commentators on American society believe that it cannot be defined unequivocally. The dream is an irrational collective hope rather than a logical notion. Specifically the term, "American Dream" includes in it numerous and at the same time overtly
contradictory perceptions namely (i) the traditional ethics of success, (ii) a utopia of some kind or simply a hope for a better national future and, (iii) the equivalent of the so-called "American way of life." Snowman says, "The American Dream has been based on the assumption that any lad can, if he is bright and resourceful enough, reach the heights. The major folk heroes have been the men who battled against great odds [...] and emerged triumphant" (215). Snowman equates the American Dream with social mobility in this respect. The assumption here is that "Americans have usually attached extreme importance to the belief that virtually uninhibited social mobility exists in the United States and that it has been one of the great American virtues" (Snowman 215).

If one tries to define the American Dream in accordance with the "Declaration of Independence" it could be as follows: the American Dream is a representation of the national democratic development that includes individual hopes for everybody in achieving success, equal opportunities, and the pursuit of happiness (Shestakov 584). This representation went through a number of modifications depending on the concrete historical periods. This was the collective dream, which constituted the enduring hope that the nation would progress in accordance with the "truths, ends and purposes" set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, especially its preamble and the Bill of Rights. The ideological and moral connotations that it had gathered over the years range from the propagandist slogans of the democratic ideals through personal success stories of the "self-made man" to
all kinds of American exceptionalism and to the power-play rhetoric of the presidents.

Henry Adams in *History of USA* (1884) is believed to have used this term—the 'American Dream'—for the first time. Even after a century it is one of the permanent themes of American creativity. However, the approach to the Dream need not necessarily be always optimistic. It varies from the belief in material progress and individual freedom to the nightmarish depictions of despair mostly in the post-war period. The recent approach to the American Dream is neither absolutely optimistic nor outright pessimistic. It is a fusion of both. The people who react to the dream are no longer just heralding the great American expectations; they are, at the same time, criticizing the 'Dream' that turned into a 'nightmare'.

If we observe the progression of the American Dream through the ages it becomes easy to understand that it lost most of its shine in the culture of the 1970s. Norman Mailer wrote in 1979: "in the 70s we, Americans, had no dreams. Perhaps that was the reason of all our troubles. The last decade we stood like a cow chewing anew the exciting and apocalyptic events of the 60s. I hope that the 80s will be quite different" (quoted in Shestakov, 586). This state of the American Dream in the 1970s was brought about because of the crises that engulfed the country which led to a crisis of faith like the ethnic/racial fights, the moral questions that were being raised by keeping in mind the Vietnam war, economic deterioration and so on. Quoting Anthony Smith, Smart argues that the continuing prominence of American culture and the neglect of the dark side of the 'American Dream' is the total lack of any
consideration of the relationship between processes of global diffusion and
economic and cultural forms of imperialism (63). Charles C. Alexander noted,
"the realization of the American dream lay not in central direction and
coordination but in a regional approach to national problems" (14). He
proclaimed this in the backdrop of the emergence of regionalism as
"something of an intellectual fashion and almost an ideology for its
governmental and academic proponents" in the 1920s and 1930s (Alexander
14).

Consequently, sociologists have tried to look at the apparent rise in
violence in America, and the American people's inability to react to it, with
respect to the rise of the American television industry and the psychology of
the youth during the 1970s. Connecting the issue of social mobility with that
of the American Dream and its position in the 1970s, Snowman states: "The
belief in social mobility was also both a cause and an effect of the social
tensions of the 1960s and early 1970s" (215). In his words:

Some people maintained that the nightly dose of horror footage
from Vietnam on television was numbing American responses to
violence and enabling people to commit it, or at least ignore it, to
a degree that would have outraged their more sensitive selves a
decade or two earlier; others argued, on the contrary, that the
very fact that Vietnam took its place on TV alongside comedy
shows and perfume ads gave it a sense of reduced stature and
prevented Americans from inferring any messages—either good
moral ones or bad violent ones—from what they saw.

(Snowman 223)

**American Nation: The twentieth century issues**

For most of the twentieth century and in the twentieth, the USA has been the giant of the western world. From the so-called Jazz Age of the 1920s, the Great Depression and the New Deal of the 1930s, the war years, the Eisenhower era, through the domestic dramas of the 1960s, and on to Vietnam and Watergate, modern American history has been packed with spectacular incidents, colourful personalities, and powerful social gains.

Incidents that mark the twentieth century in the American history are not always one-dimensional. From “the land of optimism”, which it was till the early twentieth century, it had become a nation dreaded by the citizens of the United States and other countries alike. The use of the nuclear bomb, the Vietnam debacle, and the Cold War are considered to go against the foundational ethics of the United States itself. However, the foreign policy alone cannot be blamed for the change in the character of the nation. Events like economic depression in the 1920s and 1930s, the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, the race riots in the 1960s, the antiwar protests in the major cities and universities 1960 and 1970s; and Watergate are jolts that cannot be erased from the collective memory of the nation. The effects of all these events were exemplary in terms of the changes in the construction of nation in the late twentieth century.
Looking back at the twentieth century state of nationalism in the United States from the point of view of the later 1990s Krakau suggests that there is a distressing feeling among the citizens that the nation’s security is in danger given the change in the political circumstances elsewhere. The post-war celebration of national identity has made way to more crucial questions of searching one’s own resources and the need for basic security. The re-emergence of this perspective, the world over, according to Krakau, will inevitably generate or reinforce an already resurgent new nationalism. The very efforts to neutralize (or endanger) this tendency might produce the opposite effect in strengthening the basis of a new nationalism (Krakau 7-8). This kind of a tendency can be observed in the case of the neo nationalist movements in the United States too. One immediate example is the emergence of the “black nationalist movement” (a detailed discussion of which follows in the later part of this chapter).

The American Nation: The 1970s

American society was not qualitatively different in the 1970s from what it had been in 1960s, and there is nothing magical about the turn of a decade. However, American social and cultural history including the construct of nation does fall into a reasonably cogent pattern since about 1970.

There were times in 1968 when it looked as though the social tensions and conflicts of the 1960s had reached a pitch of such intensity that the very fabric of American society was threatened. Urban riots and political assassinations were becoming more
frequent, race relations gave every appearance of deteriorating, student disaffection returned, in 1968 came the Tet offensive. Later that spring, public opinion polls began to show for the first time a majority of Americans opposing the war, and anti-war presidential candidates like Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy garnered much of the popularity that Lyndon Johnson had enjoyed a few years earlier. Kennedy defeated McCarthy in most of the primary elections and immediately after his final and most vital victory in California in June was shot dead. By the time of the riots in Chicago at the time of the Democratic National Convention in August, an observer might have been forgiven for wondering whether American society was not engaged in some sort of self-destructive spasm. Furthermore, as the repeated volleys of bitter rhetoric and bursts of furious activity helped to alienate social and political groups from one another, it was hard to see either a Humphrey or Nixon administration really getting to grips with problems of a scale and an intensity that were no longer susceptible to merely political, administrative and economic solutions. (Snowman 178)

This view on the background of the 1970s' political as well as social scenario is telling in very many ways. Nathan Glazer observes "A common theme [that] seemed to underlie a variety of issues that agitated the country in the 1970s. A term like affirmative action, [...]" (Ethnic Dilemmas 5). One can locate
the community's perception towards the different situations of political and cultural understanding in terms of affirmative action in the 1970s. Introducing the problems that are part of the history of the United States in the 1970s and the preceding years in his book *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race and Ethnicity in the United States Since 1938* Richard Polenberg comments:

In 1967 a Defence Department official observed worriedly that “the increased polarization that is taking place in the United States” contained the “seeds of the worst split in our people in more than a century.” He by no means exaggerated the severity of the polarization resulting from the war in Vietnam. From 1965, when Lyndon Johnson first made a large-scale commitment of American forces, until 1973, when Richard Nixon finally negotiated a cease-fire agreement, the nation was intermittently torn by internal division. Undercurrents of rage, outbursts of violence, and social discord, although varying in intensity, characterized the entire Vietnam era. Many of the catchphrases of the period—“the silent majority,” “Black Power,” “the new ethnicity”—indicated that the fissures occurred, in large measure, along the fault lines of class, race, and ethnicity. The result, to borrow a phrase Edmund Wilson once used in another context, was an “American Earthquake” (208).

This idea seems to be in vogue during the discussion on the relationships between ethnic groups in the 1960s and 1970s. The sociological theories of American nationalism suggest that there have been interrelated impacts on
the American nation as regards different historical incidents. In the 1970s these impacts became evident in almost every field of human endeavour. The major causes of concern were the Vietnam War vis-à-vis the increasing unrest among the minorities. At such a crucial juncture, as at all times when there is an unrest, thinkers started looking back at the fabrics that were part of the American nation.

**Vietnam War and after**

During the time of the Vietnam War there were protests all over the United States. Television had its own role to play in escalating the growing displeasure among the citizen. They showed footage from the war front time and time again. The casualties were high in number: "In all, 56,000 Americans died in Vietnam and 270,000 were wounded in battle" (Polenberg 230). All these led to a kind of divide within the society. There were confronting groups who argued for and against the war. One group believed that it was thoroughly unfair for the United States to attack a nation which was not even half its own size. There were radical antiwar activists, who were at the same time part of the establishment. Even the housewives took part in the protest processions. Among the African American intellectuals there was growing displeasure. During the war and as a result of it a belief in integration and assimilation gave way to a belief in separatism (Polenberg 231). Polenberg here refers to the Black Nationalist movements and the like.

Polenberg discusses how the Vietnam War changed the national consciousness in the United States of America forever:
[...] the public's capacity for indignation was largely, if not entirely, exhausted. It was not surprising that after entering a war the justification for which many came to perceive as at best morally ambiguous, after carrying on this war in a manner that demonstrated the inadequacy of American military power, after withdrawing from the war in a way that exposed the disproportion between the lethal means employed and the ends sought, many people came to regard deception in high places as the rule rather than exception. But Vietnam produced more than an estrangement from the government, for, as Daniel Bell has argued, "the rejection of the government led many to reject the nation." (219-220)

A congressional committee concluded their report on the general downfall in the civil society thus: "Careers were ruined, friendships severed, reputations sullied, businesses bankrupted and, in some cases, lives endangered" (quoted in Polenberg, 219).

**Disruption of National Ideals**

In order to have a fair idea of how the American nation changed its colour with respect to the national ideals during the course of the twentieth century and further in the 1970s one needs to look at the history of the USA from the early years after the revolution through to the present day. The postrevolutionary (1780-1800) period of American history is marked by extreme political conflicts and disunity among the citizens, as well as by a
powerful countervailing aspiration to national solidarity—that is, by the unresolved problem of national unity. Trying to find a possible answer to the question how America failed as a nation from a historical perspective, Hanna Arendt recalls Jefferson to prove the moment of departure:

The failure of post-revolutionary thought to remember the revolutionary spirit and to understand it conceptually was preceded by the failure of the revolution to provide it with a lasting institution. The revolution [...] had come to an end with the establishment of a republic which, according to the men of the revolution, was “the only form of government which is not eternally at open or secret war with the rights of mankind”.

(Arendt 232)

She further argues that “In this republic, as it presently turned out, there was no space reserved, no room left for the exercise of precisely those qualities which had been instrumental in building it” (Arendt 232). She considers the problem as inbuilt in the construction of nation itself. She suggests, “If foundation was the aim and the end of revolution, then the revolutionary spirit was not merely the spirit of beginning a permanent and enduring; a lasting institution, embodying this spirit and encouraging it to new achievements, would be self-defeating” (Arendt 232).

Unlike World War II and to a lesser extent the Cold War, which encouraged feelings of unity and a sense of national purpose, the war in Vietnam produced fragmentation, alienation, confrontation and a greater perplexity in identifying what America actually means. At almost the same
time the racial questions also were gaining importance. The importance of the time can be perceived as the critical point in the history when America's foreign policy and the home policy were being questioned by its own people. The Vietnam War thus acted as an eye opener to many other problems as well including minority rights. According to Glazer:

> Whatever concrete definition we give to pluralism, it means a limitation of government power, a relatively free hand for private and voluntary organizations to develop their own patterns of worship, education, social life, residential concentration, and even distinctive economic activity. All of these enhance the life of some groups; from the perspective of the American Negro they are exclusive and discriminatory. (Ethnic Dilemmas 27)

Glazer addresses the problems of minorities and their need for thinking in terms of their own virtues. He says:

> It is my impression that those who want to teach loyalty to a single nation that has virtue are intimidated and demoralized by the events of 1965-1975 and the way these have been interpreted in the dominant media and in many scholarly circles. Thus the problem is not that minority groups will be crushed by American culture but that, quite the opposite, they will be taught an unrealistic and unrewarding emphasis on the independence and separate virtue of each group, and the necessity for it to defend itself from the basically corrupt Anglo-American dominated society (Ethnic Dilemmas 118).
Black Nationalism, a doctrine deeply rooted in the African-American community, came to the public's attention largely through the efforts of Malcolm X, who in the years before his assassination in February 1965, attracted a substantial following, particularly among young people in the northern ghettos. He asserted: "the Negro was really in exile in America [...] No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism [...] And I see America through the eyes of a victim. I don’t see any American Dream; I see an American nightmare" (cited in Polenberg, 232). The extreme expression of Black nationalism can be seen in 'Black Power' movement, which generated many violent outbursts in the 1960s in the form of Black Panthers. In the 1970s, nevertheless, it had lost most of its teeth and by the 1980 came to adopt only constitutional methods (Kellas 99). But one cannot deny the fact that there are instantly recognizable links between Black African nationalism and the so-called Black nationalism in the US. Consequently, many of the black nationalists see themselves as 'Afro-Americans' and stress their roots in Africa.

1950 and 1964, the Civil Rights Acts

In the US, social and political change after 1945, and especially after the Korean War, led to a strong civil rights movement, which achieved considerable success in the 1950s and 1960s, after a fierce struggle. The political objectives that were central to the civil rights movements were the slogans 'equal opportunity' and abolition of adverse ethnic and racial discrimination. This movement by and large resulted in the Civil Rights Acts
of 1950 and 1965. The 1950 act cannot be considered a successful one (the Civil Rights Act of 1957 guaranteed jury trials—that is certain acquittal—to people accused of violating blacks’ voting rights, besides many other civil liberties). On the other hand the Act of 1965 barred racial discrimination in theatres, gas stations, hotels, restaurants, and other places of public accommodation. It authorised the Attorney General to eliminate segregation in public schools, libraries, museums, hospitals and playgrounds. It provided for the withholding of funds from federally assisted projects which failed to desegregate.

The Act, however, proved ineffective in safeguarding the right to vote. It made a sixth-grade education a presumption of literacy and prevented the rejection of applicants for slight errors on their registration forms. This Act can be seen as the after effect of the civil rights movement which was active from the 1950s onwards. The civil rights movement raised the question of the status of the largest of American minority groups, the one most closely bound up with American history from its very beginnings. It is clear, however, that even after this Act the African Americans could not achieve what they dream. The idea of pluralism, as a consequence, has become a mockery in the case of this major group, even though it might have supported the development of various other groups. Kellas points out that it is reasonable to include “long established pockets of minority populations as ‘ethnic’ rather than ‘national’ where no nationalist aims or viable nationalist movements have developed” (98).
It is ironical to note that nationalism in America had led earlier to one of the major civil wars in the history of the nation. The southern people believed that their culture entwined about the institution of Negro slavery and in turn made them a separate nation. But at the same time another feeling also was prominent that the Union was eternal and indissoluble. The Civil War proved the popular notion that it is in the time of war that people turn to the ideals that shaped the nation.

The War for the Union was a turning point in American history. After it Americans lived in a different nation, one in which freedom and equality now applied to all men—though not yet to all women—one in which the unity of the nation was beyond dispute, and one in which the power of the national government was supreme. The price of this change, however, was the ruthless denial of the southern white people’s aspiration for nationhood. (Degler 206)

It is the same kind of turning back to the roots of the founding ideals of the nation that takes place during the 1970s also. However, after the 1970s there is a characteristic change in the way racial difference is looked at. This can be seen as the outcome of the questions which arose from all the issues that were part of the decade. The national advisory committee on civil disorders (Kenner Commission) itself was prompt in their report which addressed the 1970s. The Commission states: 

The immigrant who laboured long hours at hard and often menial work had the hope of a better future, if not for himself
then for his children. This was the promise of the "American Dream"—the society offered to all a future that was open-ended; with hard work and perseverance, a man and his family could in time achieve not only material well-being but "position" and status. (227-231)

Conclusion

In a country like America, questions of nationality gain a unique and difficult dimension. It is rather obvious that a multiethnic society will have various ways of identifying with the nation. America had witnessed friction between the races many a time, since the country comprises compound relationships linking diverse communities and groups. Not only the compound relationship but also the differences in origin (Greek, Latin American and Asian), geographical significance (whether South, North, or West etc.) in economic position and even gender, make it difficult to arrive at a conclusion why an individual in America constructs himself or herself as an American. Through the centuries of the existence of the United States of America there have been other critical issues that questioned the very fabric of the American nation. The national commitment is a related question which many commentators addressed with regard to the diversity of America. Greenfeld comments on the relationship between an individual and the American nation:

The national commitment of America—to liberty and equality—remains the main source of social cohesion and the main stimulant of unrest in it. The rigidity of loyalty to these
national ideals, as well as its laxity, endangers the nation; yet this loyalty preserves it. In America, the maxim "My country, right or wrong" is wrong: it betrays the ideals. But the alternative principle—"My country, right or wrong! When right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be put right!"—is unrealistic and sets one onto a frustrating project which may lead to disaffection. Compromise is inconsistent with idealism. Yet the ability to compromise has become a distinguishing character of this intensely idealist nation. To be an American means to persevere in one's loyalty to the ideals, in spite of the inescapable contradictions between them and reality, and to accept reality without reconciling oneself to it. (Greenfeld, *Nationalism* 484)

One is tempted to say that in America, as in any other country, the choice of nation or nationality is a forced one. The driving forces behind the individual's loyalty to nation might differ from economic individualism to political freedom. Nevertheless, empirically the individual subject stays far away from all the powers (the machineries such as state and the president) that make a nation like America what it really is. And at the same time s/he is far removed from another citizen who might be living hundreds and thousands of miles apart. This is a crucial issue that have been addressed by the numerous novelists of America time and time again.