Chapter IV

“It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it”

—Mark Twain

Thousand Faces of America: The Nation in Fiction

Introduction

This chapter traces the roots of American fiction in an attempt to see how America is depicted in fiction from the earlier periods to the contemporary. This chapter also straddles the history of the American nation and the history of American fiction in a possible attempt to read with and against the undercurrents of the American life. In the process, we briefly study the approach in some of the acclaimed novels like The Scarlet Letter (1850), Moby Dick (1851), Light in August (1932) and Portnoy’s Complaint (1967) to the issue of the nation. These novels are taken in this chapter as representative examples of fiction that depict the mindset of the United States at particular times. It is also part of the concern here to look at the question of a pan-American identity and the issue of representational identity with respect to the oeuvre of American fiction. In a nutshell the enquiry in this chapter is based on the interventions of fiction in the political sphere in America. This chapter recognises the novel as a discursive formation (and not just as an allegoric representation or imaginative vision) in which the fictional uses of
'nation' and 'nationalism' are most pronounced. The novelist is perceived as a craftsperson who consciously builds a political statement through the novel, wherein, s/he recognizes nationalism as an equivalent to 'belonging', 'bordering' and 'commitment' (Brennan 47).

The second part of this chapter demonstrates the emergence of the ‘new’ writers of American fiction after the Second World War and tracks down some of the thematic and formal characteristics of these writers. (Calling these writers 'new' would be out of place at the present time, nevertheless, I use the word 'new' to imply the difference between the traditional writers and the writers who brought out a change in the scenario of fiction after 1950s.) I would like to show the importance of these writers in giving a distinctive outlook to the nation. In the process, I will be touching upon the main movements in post World War American fiction. This kind of survey will be in order, for these 'new' writers of fiction always tried to demonstrate their affinity to the actual reality persisting in the society and the culture of America in general. One can point out the examples of the emergence of the Jewish American writers, women writers, African American writers, writers from the ethnic minority groups, Asian-American writers, exiled writers, writers from the Chicano community, American-Indian writers, gay and lesbian writers and many others into the forefront, in the recent past. It is also imperative that these writers' approach differs considerably from that of the traditional writers in terms of the concept and construction of the American nation. Moreover, one cannot pinpoint a one-dimensional approach from these writers; instead what one finds are multifarious approaches.
Nation and Fiction: The Case of America

The roots of American fiction somehow correlate with the roots of the nation. Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) suggests:

Between the novel and America there are peculiar and intimate connections. A new literary form and a new society, their beginnings coincide with the beginnings of the modern era and, indeed, help to define it. We are living not only in the Age of America but also in the Age of the Novel, at a moment when the literature of a country without a first-rate verse epic or a memorable verse tragedy has become the model of half the world. (Fiedler *Love and Death* xvii)

Timothy Brennan's argument (50) linking the birth of the nation and the birth of the novel also echoes Fiedler's line of thought. However, Fiedler, in his declaration of America's emergence as a leader of the world, has a curious counterpart in Baudrillard who, as we saw in the third chapter, argues that America as a nation attained modernity without going through the perilous and exceptionally long period of the enlightenment (Baudrillard 76).

The 'nation writing the novel' is an idea which needs to be elaborated in some length at this juncture. This idea addresses an issue which is complex and had been developed through elaborate procedures over a long period of time. This metaphorical 'writing' goes on as long as the nation exists. Furthermore, even a novel which boasts of a completely apolitical
stand is also prone to depict some kind of vision of the nation. Thus, putting it in an extreme form, we have as many nations as there are novels. Timothy Brennan, though his essay "The national longing for form" (1990) concentrates more on the issues related to the novel in the Third World, mentions several common facts about the fiction:

It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles [...] Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation.

(Brennan, 50)

Brennan develops the idea further with the help of Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of 'heteroglossia' and 'dialogism' wherein one finds a meaningful "dialogue" between several "languages" like "territorial dialects, social and professional dialects and jargons, literary languages, generic languages within literary languages, epochs in language and so on" coming together to form a "national language" (cited in Brennan, 50). And as for the nation-forming role of the novel it parodies the epic in this respect. Nevertheless, the novel as a genre when compared to the epic ends in the "open ended present" whereas the epic never used to address the contemporaries. As a consequence the novel "becomes a contemporary, practical means of 'creating' people" (Brennan 50).

Not every writer of fiction will relish the idea of dealing with the nation in fiction. Most of the time such a treatment is not deliberate and is not done
consciously. Nevertheless, the nation expresses itself through various kinds of representations. The themes of novels in various ages would be a pointer towards the nature of society and the conception of nation at those times. It is the subjective dimension of the nation that comes out of the novels. People constitute a nation when they consider themselves to be one. And the novelist's claim for subjective representation has to have "some historical identity, some geographical contiguity, [and] some shared cultural characteristics" (like the language) (Beetham 217). Thus in the canon of novels of a particular nation various themes specific to a particular point in time also contribute to the larger representation of that nation.

This idea can be further developed in terms of the conflict between nation and state. Beetham says:

The theory is that nation and state should coincide. The reality of course is very different; there is no such simple coincidence almost anywhere. If you look at a world map of historical nationalities, they by no means coincide with the boundaries of nation states. And if you add other cultural communities—based on religion, language or ethnicity—then one could say that it is the exceptional nation state that does not have within its borders one or more minority nations or sub-nations if we may so call them (217).
The Treatment of Nation in Early American Fiction

Traditionally American fiction imbibes a symbolic order. This symbolic formation is believed to have its roots in the practice of Puritanism. According to Leslie Fiedler:

Our fiction is essentially and at its best non-realistic, even anti-realistic; long before *symbolisme* had been invented in France and exported to America, there was a fullfledged native tradition of symbolism. That tradition was born of the profound contradictions of our national life and sustained by the inheritance from Puritanism of a "typical" (even allegorical) way of regarding the sensible world—not as an ultimate reality but as a system of signs to be deciphered. (*Love and Death* xxiv)

Fiedler's position with regard to realism in American fiction is rather ambivalent and has to be scrutinised further.

Besides the allegoric and symbolic mode of narration one traces a kind of narrative that gives much scope to the depiction of ordinary life in American fiction. This is more evident in the fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The variation lies in the extremities of the raw materials and life situations that are being depicted. When the reality has, at the heart of it, stark turns and twists with added background of the hazardous landscape, even a "real" representation can hold the attention of the reader. Accordingly, it becomes inconsequential which narrative technique is being used by the novelist. When one compares the earlier novels of the United
States it is difficult to see the symbolic mode that Fiedler mentions. As a matter of fact this is precisely where Fiedler’s sweeping statement on the "non-realistic" and "anti-realistic" *(Love and Death xxiv)* becomes questionable.

Historically speaking, 'pioneering' has long been considered one of the major moulding influences of American life. Significant books have been written claiming that Pioneering has been the most important single influence in American history and literature. In the context of American history, Pioneering means, to open new vistas and reaching out to new frontiers. One can locate three modes of depiction in accordance with the three distinctive types of frontier life. There was a type of life, mainly in the East, in which the forest was dominant. In another era, and partly in the Great Plains, grassland and the absence of trees determined the way of life. In the Far West, from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, the mountains and the deserts caused men to shape ways of living differently from that of farther east. Wars were also considered an integral part of pioneering. The Wars with the French, that between the United States and the British for the possession of the North West Territory, the Mexican war and the Indian Wars are all parts of this turbulent time.

There have been numerous novels about the wooded frontier. These novels have colourful characters leading lives of unrelenting toil and perpetual danger in scenic surroundings of log settlements, long rifles, wild game, domestic handicrafts, and Indian warfare. The stories vary from the picturesque and romantic historical novels, such as those of Hervey Allen to
the more carefully realistic tone of James Boyd, Esther Forbes, and Vilhelm Moberg. Among other writers of the 1850s, William Ellis and Mrs Janice Holt Giles produced several noteworthy works with settings in early Ohio and Kentucky.

Novels depicting pioneer life on the grassy prairies and plains have been many in number since about 1890, when first-generation pioneers began to look back and recollect. These novels recall a gloomy epic of life on bleak farmhouses where survival is threatened by blizzards, drought and grasshoppers, and existence is wrecked by loneliness and isolation. They show pioneers used to forests and ample wood painfully adjusting themselves to a woodless, semi-arid region which made dry farming, windmills, and barbed wire obligatory. The very fact that pioneering was so complex and perilous contributed to the development of a more realistic treatment of the frontier.

Stories of pioneer life deal with a variety of experiences and situations. Some of these books deal with the overland trips of the easterners moving across the mountains and deserts towards west, the ecstasy of the railroad making, and the perils of wars. (Indian wars, dramatic struggle by the Texans in 1836 with the Mexicans and by the United States in 1846-48 are some of the many examples).

A further theme for the novels was farm and village life. There cannot be a chronological understanding of this theme with regard to American fiction basically because this theme exists even at the present day as a consequence of the still existing village and farm life except in the cities and
their immediate environs. As regards the pioneer life, the farm and village life has a special importance for the reason that after the early hardships the pioneers start looking at a kind of settled life. When a country-raised generation found itself in cities after the Civil War the books about the village or small town life or life on the farm became common. The treatment used to range from the starkly realistic to the romantically optimistic. The later farm books have been heavily sociological, taking up tenant farming, disease, decay, and the farm labourer, who is not a farmer in the older sense at all.

A perfect example of the diversity of fiction of the pioneer life can be seen in the South. The specific case here is that of the novels from the South before the Civil War and during the war and Reconstruction. Ever since the 1830s, fiction has treated plantation life from varied viewpoints. Novels have been pro-South, anti-South, pro-Negro, anti-Negro, pro-abolition, anti-abolition, anti-North—but whatever their point of view, they have generally attributed glamour to the vanished plantation civilization, and they have taken up, at least by implication, the problem of human freedom. Novels like Norris's *The Octopus* and Steinbeck's masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* dealt with themes ranging from early attempts to establish the small farm to stories of factories in the field respectively. The South has been significantly present in the fiction of the later period too. Since about 1880 the South has become mostly the land of the sharecroppers. There has been much realistic and naturalistic writing partly since 1920, but also a persistent reappearance of the old-fashioned romantic story. The Southern literature of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s was marked by the emergence of an unusual number of
realistic writers picturing many facets of life in the South. Prominent among these writers were Erskine Carldwell, Ellen Glasgow, Edith Summers Kelly, George Milburn, Thomas S. Strabling and William Faulkner. Some of these writers tended to present more clearly the psychological patterns emerging from the peculiar stresses of changing ways of life. Among them the most important were William Styron and Robert Penn Warren. From the 1950s onwards one can find writers who deal with the civil rights struggle.

Another major category with regard to the life in the United States is the group of novels depicting the industrial society. Mark Twain’s *Hucklebury Finn* presents a vivid picture of the work in the industries and leisure-time activities of the workers. Pioneering was superseded in the United States during the nineteenth century by a more stable way of living; in the same way the farm-and-village pattern has been suspended in many sections by urban-industrial life in the late nineteenth century and twentieth centuries. While this change was taking place, it was reflected immediately in the work of American writers, who led the world in the production of fiction regarding the complexity of industrial-business endeavours of modern times. The most perceptible effect of the industrial age on literature has been the development of realism, with its twin facets of reform and naturalism, and the fostering of analytical, critical attitudes. The romantic element is still present in fiction, and amid all the realistic and critical treatments of labour, business, the city, modern society, and modern war there are hundreds of books creating a romantic picture of the same elements.
City life is mainly a twentieth century theme, when one considers the vast canon of novels in the United States. One can locate the inauguration of such novels in the United States in the publication of Henry B. Fuller's *The City Dwellers* (1893). The second major novel dealing with the city life is Crane's *Bowery Tales* (1900). The subject matter of these books includes the issues of labour, immigrant, leisure class etc. The emphasis on how people live in the city and the peculiar lifestyles, attitudes, and problems which have developed as a consequence of urban life and which stand out against the rural-life pattern of the nineteenth century are characteristic of these novels. While some authors present pleasant or admiring pictures of American cities, a majority of writers are strikingly in agreement in their portrayal of vice, crime, brutality, ugliness, frustration, mental illness, or poverty of spirit and culture. In some books, as in Elmer Rice's *Imperial City* and Louis Bromfield's *Twenty Four Hours*, the multiplicity of city life itself is the sociological theme. Later books more commonly emphasised psychological themes.

War has a major role to play in the fiction of the United States, basically for the reason that the Spanish American War, the First World War, and the Second World War, and subsequent military invasions in Asia and Latin America are so much a part of the modern industrial world. One can find a stream of fiction about the First World War from 1917 to 1940. Among the major novels of the post First World War era Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) induced much critical acclaim. Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) is another example. Some of these novels were apologetic for America's entry into the war and some others were against any war in general
(Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1933) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) are instant examples). The Second World War can be seen as the moment of epiphany in many ways in the history of the modern world affairs. It changed the political equations the world over. The United States played a major role in the Second World War sending forces in large numbers to many battlegrounds across the globe. Participants in the Second World War wrote a great many interpretations of their wartime and post-war experiences. These novels did not just document the experiences that the participants had in the battlegrounds but they also discussed the role of the American nation in the political undercurrents of the relationship between the modern day nations. Thus these novels try to place in perspective the role of military power and political might in making the United States a world leader.

Novels of the wars in Korea and Vietnam deviate from tales of actual combat to stories about other matters like mine sweeping, peace time duty in Hawaii, or assignments to supply depots and airfields in Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East as part of defence system "against aggressors". Most of these novels discuss the ethical grounds of the modern day wars. They also question the moral integrity of the United States in these battles disputing the ways in which the enemies are labelled and claiming that the real "aggressor" is the United States itself in many of them. In many of the novels written from the late 1960s onwards one can find characteristic and critical remarks on the moral issues of the Vietnam War appearing again and again. It reflects the anguish presented in huge protest rallies all over the United States during the days of the Vietnam War.
Puritanism and Other Religions

Stories of the Puritans and Puritanism have had their influence upon the United States at every stage of its history. There are stories of the settlers, stories of the great witchcraft delusion, stories of Puritan fundamentalist beliefs and superstitions carried on through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are such artistic endeavours as the works of Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne, with their probing of confessions and their obsessions with the problems of evil and retribution. Besides, there had been writers who were at the same time moralistic crusaders and mystical spectators. In the twentieth century one finds several revolters against Puritanism, who dwell on the frustrations and unhappiness of those who are bound by too rigid a code, several of them attempting to picture ‘the last Puritan’—and it is easy to find there are objective researchers among the novelists who work as carefully as historians. However, Puritanism has not lost its importance. It continues to be a major obsession of the novelists—only that there is a drastic difference between the traditional depiction and the twentieth century one.

Even though the traditional novels discuss puritan notions in America these discussions have most of the time followed the notions that are intact. The traditional writers never dared to venture into the other side of the nation. They took pride in picturising the rosy side of the nation. The change came around in the later half of the twentieth century when they also talk of the dark
side of the nation, more so with the advent of themes like minority issues, racial imbalance and immigrants.

Even though there is some kind of critical observation found in *The Scarlet Letter*, it largely follows the traditional scheme in looking at the nation. In the novel the letter A stands as the spiritual birth of the new world, of America. It may in fact be taken to be an allegoric representation of America itself.

The scarlet letter A becomes thus the centre of the romance and the sacred centre of the new world. The tale unfolds the promise offered in this first vision and acts as a revelation of the richness of the meanings of the mystic symbol. As the letter A and Hester form one inseparable entity, the question arises whether she possesses and embodies features of character upon which a new moral order might be founded. (Sachs 19)

Ahab in *Moby Dick* is modelled on several major characters in literature and mythology like Satan, Faust, Lear, Prometheus, Oedipus, and Narcissus. The novel itself roots back to the Bible, Milton, Rabelais, Cervantes, and Shakespeare. Robert Clark sees the novel as "a political allegory of the American belief in Manifest Destiny" (132). Further on, the novel escapes from the studies of symbolism with regard to its Christian inheritance by its emphasis on the Americans in their relationship to nature.

Melville discovers a framework of political allusions that would allow his whaling narrative to pass comment on recent national events. It is the allegoric and symbolic structure that helps and motivates the reader into
reading further in the novel. The reader might be able to reach an analysis wherein images and symbols indicate, “that America has set off on her quest for the Promised Land burdened with the blood of the Indian and Negro races” (Sachs 49). Viola Sachs says:

The Ship stands for America and leads the whole world’s quest for the Promised Land. Its crew consists of men of all races and from all parts of the world; they form an ‘Anacharsis Clootz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth’ (p. 108). (Sachs 48-49)

In The Scarlet Letter and Moby Dick the nation is represented allegorically; the case is somewhat different in the case of Huckleberry Finn and Light in August. In Light in August, the novelist still toils with realism and allegory in the plotline. As Leslie Fiedler rightly pointed out (xxiv) traditional American fiction does not completely do away with allegory. Given the unique association of fiction with the American society it is not very surprising if novelists indulge in allegoric representations. Nation, when it comes to representation, is made available through allegories. Allegory with its empirical status proves its affinity with biblical narration.

Sachs presents a peculiar problem related to what she calls the romance novels of America. She finds that certain images and symbols keep recurring in these novels and further points out that there can be found patterns and motives which refer to what she calls the “myth of America”. She thus concludes her analysis, which is inspired to a great extent by the semantic analysis of words and psychoanalysis:
The subjacent presence of the myth of America imparts to these romance-novels a mythical and a historical dimension even when, on the surface, they can be read as works clearly dated and situated, that is, appearing to belong to a historical time and an existing geographical space. Yet, a closer view reveals that historical particulars are abolished, for these novels function in the world of myth where symbols and images play the fundamental role. (Sachs 145)

Since Hawthorne began writing, there has been a steady tradition of depicting and psychoanalysing Puritans and their descendants in New England and to the west. For example, Evangelical religion has been treated in moods varying from the sentimentality of Lloyd Douglas to the satire of Sinclair Lewis. The various minority religions have attracted many novelists. Since the Second World War, with the Catholic Church making many adjustments to the American environment, Catholic novelists have been stimulated to interpret aspects of their church.

In the Jewish writers two themes can be termed as prominent: struggles for adjustment of various immigrant groups as they find their religious traditions in conflict with the customs and habits of the United States. As in stories of other religions the revolt of the young against the restrictions of their elders is a common theme. The questions that the reader finds interesting in terms of these Jewish fictions are related to the issues of national identity in very many ways. One finds a sense of alienation because of the uniqueness of the religion in these novels which is given complex
dimensions. The uniqueness presented in the Jewish novels reaches up to
the level of finding a sub-nation or minority nation within the boundaries of the
American nation itself. This alienation from the nation is much more openly
depicted in the Jewish writers like Philip Roth who came after the Second
World War. (Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* is discussed at some length in the
later part of this chapter.)

**Innocence and the Image of Garden**

The biblical notion of innocence and the Garden of Eden are motives
that the novelists of various ages have reacted to in America. They looked at
America in terms of Eden regained. Several critics (Clark 11; Sachs 145) have
termed this notion of America as a central myth. The reaction to this central
myth has gone through several interpretations and reinterpretations.
Stretching the same argument Viola Sachs (145) argues that all the novelists
of America are one way or the other reacting to this central myth. (The sense
of "myth" at this point is taken from Malinowski. He argues that "myth acts as
a charter for the present-day social order [...] the function of which is to
strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing
it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events" (quoted in
Brennan 45)).

Looking at the history of the representation of innocence in American
fiction it can be seen that even this perception changes according to changing
history and society. Thus one might understand Huck (in *Huckleberry Finn*)
who wanders in the uninhibited landscapes as innocence epitomised. A
scrutiny of the heroes in American fiction will provide examples to prove this idea. Traditionally the American hero is being attributed with three fundamental qualities; innocence, harmony with nature and independence. Though ideological attributes of an individual novel change from one author to another and one era to another this basic equation of innocence and the Garden of Eden seems to have persisted.

Another important motive that keeps repeating itself in American Fiction is the journey. The foremost examples are *Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby Dick*. One can count several types of journeys in American fiction. A possible symbolic interpretation of the journey relates to life itself. In a set of circumstances the journey can be compared to the birth, life and death of the hero. This model of journey also goes through changes according to the context of each novel. The journey motive could be seen as changing in terms of maturation in the novels of the nineteenth century. It is the maturation of innocence to adulthood, or in Biblical terms the fall from the Garden of Eden. The life of the hero thus is appalling. Leslie Fiedler would call it “a world of fear and loneliness, a haunted world” and thus he concludes that “the American novel is pre-eminently a novel of terror” (xxi). By the later half of the twentieth century this notion changes to a more complex fall from the Garden. The novelists by now understand that Eden, which the others have been propounding, is no more a heavenly setting.

These discussions of the major themes and motives in American fiction point to a definitive understanding of American fiction. We see that the concept of nation fits well with the important themes that we observe in
American fiction. These discussions also make the readers feel the importance of the nation writing itself in these novels. These studies are on the one hand a product of the study of the major themes in the novels, which can be called the deep structure of the American novel. On the other hand one can also find various representations of the American nation in these fictions. However, by far it is a matter of unconscious assortment of themes.

The Politics of the Twentieth Century Novelists

Twentieth century American novelists and novels differ from their predecessors in very many ways. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries barring a few examples (like Moby Dick, The Scarlet Letter and Huckleberry Finn) the novels concentrated on the possibilities of the geography and the landscapes in the new nation. The 'pioneers' in American fiction were interested in projecting the newfound land as some sort of a heaven on earth and they found particular delight in showing the positive features of most of the attributes of the early American life. The most important criticism that is raised against these novelists is that they were not critical in their approach to the raw materials that they handled in their novels. An excess of contemplation on the realistic narrative style found in these novels is an indicator of this lack of a critical perspective. In the course of time this approach to the nation itself has undergone considerable change. By the twentieth century the traditional uninhibited notion of the nation in fiction has transformed into a more meaningful and critical understanding. By now the novelists started looking at from multiple perspectives.
All the major themes of the novelists during the twentieth century have something in common: the rootedness in and the enquiry into the divergent intricacies of politics. It might be interesting to see the approach of the novelists by and large to two kinds of politics. Some novelists are interested in the straightforward manifestations of politics in socialism, conservatism, capitalism, courses of the modern war, and gangsterism, the revival of the Ku Klux Klan and so on. On the other hand certain other novelists concentrated on the more subtle questions of politics in nationality, the relation between the minority and the majority and the questions of gender and sexuality. Other themes which can be observed in the twentieth century novels are atomic research and congressional investigations that were the fashion during the 1940s, McCarthyism, and so on. In the 1950s and 1960s the interest of the novelists lay in the use of public relations men by politicians and ultra-right pressure groups.

Pre-war America, as a society, was not entirely a long way from the so-called 'European' stream of thought. Hence, the developments in the fields of science (e.g. the theory of evolution of Darwin), psychology (Freud and his discoveries), sociology and economics (Marx and Communism) and philosophy and theology (Nietzsche and the discussions on God), all had their impact on American society too. However, in literature (and particularly in fiction), right from the beginning of the American tradition there had been a dividing line between European interests and American interests. Charles C. Alexander admits:
Despite continuing indictments in the twenties of the stifling crassness, complacency, and "feminization" of society in the United States, the fact was that by 1930, at least in its literary expression, America had magnificently "come of age." That year Sinclair Lewis became the first American to receive the Nobel Prize for literature, an event that recognized the literary stature of the nation as much as it acknowledged the achievements of an individual writer. (25-26)

When there was a general downward motion in the beginning of the twentieth century, like the First World War and the economic depression that followed, Europe started looking at life and human beings with an alienated sensibility; and a kind of philosophy that projected cynicism and existentialism came to the forefront. This movement had followers in literature in Kafka and Camus. Some commentators point out that this path of philosophy actually is designed by the pattern of these writers along with the overpowering influence of Nietzsche. Another trend during this period in the history of Western culture is the characteristic movement towards experimentation in every form of art (painting, sculpture, music, architecture, and literature). All these movements found resonance in American literature also. Moreover, the influence of these was greater in the case of American fiction when compared to other forms.

One can locate Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Faulkner as the counterparts to the European existentialist/modernist authors. At the same time these American authors followed the tradition of the American masters.
There are traceable influences of the forefathers of American fiction like Melville, Hawthorne and Mark Twain in these writers. Critics call these writers optimistic modernists, taking into account their differences with the European existentialists, whose worldview happens to be bleaker when compared to these American contemporaries.

It is not easy to call a novel, post World War novel, or a novelist, post World War novelist in the context of American fiction. For writers like Hemingway, whose literary career spans from the 1920s to the 1960s and Faulkner, who was writing almost from the beginning of the century to the 1970s, such a terminology would be out of place. The task one has to face while accommodating them under such a term is then, to locate the characteristics of the post World War fiction and then to include in it the writers who write according to this pattern and discuss these themes. A further problem arises when a single author himself/herself writes several novels in different modes. It would not be easy to call a novelist just a post World War novelist (for example, Philip Roth outgrows the anxieties and reservations that he had expressed while writing *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and *When She was Good* (1970) in the novels like *Operation Shylock* (1995) in the later part of his career).

However, a comparative study of the representative novels of these two periods, namely pre World War and post World War, will throw light on the differences in thematic and formal components. A discussion of William Faulkner's *Light in August* and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* in this
respect shows the differences in attitudes in the Pre World War fiction and Post World War American fiction.

William Faulkner's *Light in August* stands out as a novel of sex and violence. There appear a large number of characters, more than any of Faulkner's own other novels, and three almost unrelated protagonists. The plot is complex and at times puzzling, but at the same time, the narrative is concentrated. Three plot lines follow the three protagonists, namely, Joe Christmas, Lena Grove and Gail Hightower and several themes intermingle throughout the plots. Acceptance or rejection of the values of the community, the alienation of Man, man's relationship to God as revealed in Christian symbolism, and Man's relationship with nature are some of the basic themes of the novel. The character of Joe Christmas in the novel shows man's doomed rebellion against himself and the whole of mankind. There is a certain amount of ambiguity about his birth. His colour shows that he is either a Negro or a Mexican. (Being a person who does not know his race is worse than being a Negro, says his Negro friend at the orphanage.) He is in search of his identity, and is in constant travel. He meets Joanna, who is equally lonely, and they have a sexual relationship (without knowing each other properly). He does not conform to the norms of society. He neither goes along with the black community nor does he socialize with the white folk.

Joe Christmas' life confirms that all the alienated beings are alone. Usually, such a theme of alienation in literature will be set in big cities (as in the case of Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* and *Oriental Express*), in *Light in August*, Faulkner shows the same depth of alienation in a poor and small
town where there are not many people. Even then, for the inhabitants of the
town communication among them in the proper sense is not possible. Gail
Hightower is an extended example of the society's alienation for he even
physically lives outside the bounds of the society and does not care to
communicate with the society.

Joe Christmas does not discover his roots. He is presented in the
novel more or less as a bastardised individual in a country full of different
ethnicities. His colour pronounces that he is neither an African American nor
a White Anglo Saxon Protestant. Hence his alienation finds a symbolic affinity
with the national identity. However, after all the bleak representation of
alienation in the form of Joe Christmas and his eventful wanderings, Faulkner
does provide some kind of optimism to the reader, in the form of Lena Grove
and her baby. Together, they represent the future—the title of the novel also
suggests the optimism of the novelist—when most of the other characters
seem to have been too much obsessed with the past.

In a sense, all the characters in the novel are shaped by their pasts. The main characters alone are aware of it and they alone fight against it.
Francois Pitavi suggests, "while Christmas represents alienation, violence,
and sterility, Lena is a fulfilled being, accepting nature and futility" (114). In
the beginning of the novel, she is pregnant and reaches the town completely
tired in search of the father of her baby. She is the opposite of Joe's
character, in the sense that she does not destroy herself, even though she
had reasons to do so. "Memory believes before knowing remembers," says
Faulkner in the beginning of chapter six. This remark stands as an epigraph:
of the novel, as it were. Moreover, we find in Lena's baby a symbol of the
nation itself which holds a nice and bright future, where, according to
Faulkner's optimism, there will not be any discrimination. We might add that
when the colour of the skin has no value in judging the nationality, the future
is going to be bright.

Faulkner built his work on a grand scale. Apart from the symbolic and
allegoric grandeur of his narrative he also took care to portray the framework
of the Southern life.

He related even his minor personages with one another, he
elaborated their genealogy from generation to generation, he
gave them a coutryside: a deep land of Baptists, of brothels, of
attic secrets, of swamps and shadows. "Jefferson," Mississippi,
is the capital of this world which reaches backward in time to the
origins of Southern culture and forward to the horrid prophecies
of its extinction [...] (Spiller et al. 1304)

The America (rather the South) represented in Faulkner captured the pulse of
the time. His novels including *Light in August* carried forward an essential
part of the older American life. The picture of the nation in Faulkner's novel
depicts the Populist reforms of the early twentieth century and revolts against
the Victorian gentility, Anglo-Saxon taboos, and bourgeois virtues.

Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* also is about sex and violence (sex
in the overt sense and on the other hand violence not so overtly). The
narrative is a *bildungsroman*. Alexander Portnoy's complaints are presented
in the form of a conversation between a psychiatrist and Alexander. The
psychiatrist is silent for the better part of the novel and in a "diarrhea of talk" (as termed by Bettelheim, 25) Portnoy goes on talking about himself.

Alexander’s problem is typical of a Jew in America. He has a strong and closed home environment, and also a strong tradition behind him. His search, strangely enough, is for pleasure, particularly forbidden pleasures. He suppresses his instincts but masturbates everyday in order to satisfy himself, but when meeting the psychiatrist he complains about his guilt feeling because of the extensive masturbating (at times he does it three or four times a day). He is of the opinion that his parents especially his mother is the reason for his suppressed sexuality. He is anxious about replacing another person in bed, or put it in another way, whenever he looks at a woman with sexual feelings he is reminded of his mother—there are hints in the narrative to Portnoy’s Oedipal relationship with his mother. He tries in vain to find a solution for this fixation. He deliberates: "Christ, in the face of my defiance—if my father had only been my mother! And my mother my father! But what a mix-up of the sexes in our house!" (45) He is sceptical of his upbringing. He says a home situation like his will only make a boy a homosexual. Portnoy can never be a heterosexual, though he desires to become one.

"Portnoy is simply crying out to be left alone, to be released from the claims of distinctiveness and the burdens of the past, so that, out of his own nothingness, he may create himself a ‘human being’" (Howe, “Philip Roth Reconsidered” 85). However, if at all there exists some kind of existential angle to Portnoy’s story, the narrative of Roth does not allow the reader to ponder over it. The narrative is comic and the torrent of Portnoy’s complaints
does not make the reader uneasy; instead, s/he becomes more interested in
the background and qualifying factors of the protagonist. "Roth's novel is
extremely funny, indeed hysterically so; yet it is in some ways as painful as
that strange and troubling work by Kafka, and equally fixated on the minute
details of the familial and social past and the focal point at the centre of it all -
the uncertain, suffering self" says Tanner who also compares the novel with
Kafka's Amerika (Tanner, "Portnoy's Complaint: the Settling of Scores! The
Pursuit of Dreams!" 64). In fact, Portnoy sees the wrong influence of Jewish
tradition also in himself. Herzog, the eponymous protagonist of Saul Bellow's
novel (1966) laments over western civilization as the principal cause of his
divorce; for Portnoy all of western and Jewish history has only led him to
masturbate (Baumgarten and Gottfried 81).

Reading Portnoy's Complaint against the question of national identity
of a person from a minority community would emphasise the attitudinal
change in the conception of nationality from traditional fiction. It is an inability
that overpowers all the negotiations with the nation that is presented though
Portnoy's difficulty. The closed and tradition-bound religious identity bars him
from taking a step forward to a complete naturalisation. In Roth's (and
several of his contemporaries) terms even if one is born and brought up in
America, nationality is a puzzle which can never be solved.

Comparing Light in August with Portnoy's Complaint one can easily
see that the focal point shifts from the society to the family as the cause of the
problems of the individual. This is the shift that happened in American fiction
soon after the war. Though there are existential questions raised in both the
novels, the transformation from high seriousness in narrative to the comic set up changes the mode of reception. In Faulkner, the only possible way out for the characters is a compromise with the social set up, whereas, in Roth the character presents himself as a right person—although he finds problems with his sexuality, the readers know that there is nothing wrong with it—and the only possible solution would be the society coming to terms with the individual. Hence, in Roth, unlike Faulkner and his contemporaries, memory is not the problem, the knowing itself is the predicament and Portnoy and the multitude of protagonists and characters in post world war fiction show that self understanding is the right direction to live in American society, especially after the World War. This also shows an attitudinal change in the conception of national identity. For Faulkner even though important to think of national identity it is not always problematic. On the other hand for Philip Roth it is all the while problematic for he feels that religious identity makes him feel uncomfortable in most of the living spaces in America.

Faulkner's anxieties with respect to Light in August are usually not comparable, for several reasons, with the anxieties of post-war novelists like Philip Roth. Since there is a long and disastrous war in between these two writers, calling them equal and comparable itself is inappropriate taking into account the contextual differences. Moreover, Faulkner’s novel was written well before the World War, whereas Roth's was written almost twenty years after the Great War. Still, these novels very well represent their respective ages and the characteristics of the different formal and thematic strata of novels.
Post World War American Fiction: Roots, Themes and Movements

World War II saw the creation of many terms in the history of the world. The political, economic and social equations of most of the world nations had changed drastically by the end of the war. In America, the aftermath of the World War related mainly to the economic, social and political consciousness. America became the most powerful nation in the world after the Allies vanquished the German group. After the disastrous bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and all the cruel experiences on the war front, as Ihab Hassan puts it, “millions of young men climbed out of the uniform, a new age was ushered in” (62). For some time there was unemployment and unrest. All these insecurities changed fast for good.

What resulted is an economically strong, independent and socially free society, which was not much affected by the cold war which followed World War II between the United States and the former Soviet Union. The people believed in a stable and powerful nation. Thanks to its phenomenal economic progress, United States started inviting many more immigrants. The foremost attraction was the monetary benefits that America proudly exhibited in front of the other countries. For example, the salaries of the workers had doubled by the end of the fifties. The political, social, and economic situation of many European countries also helped to increase the rate of immigration in the late 1940s and 1950s. Basically, the United States of America was viewed as a nation proclaiming freedom and equality by many of the immigrants. As manifested in the term, “the American Dream,” America was a fantastic dream
more than a nation and the immigrants as well as the citizens looked forward to the bright future they were off to obtain.

In American literature too, the effect of the World War was tremendous, when one considers the issues and consequences that were to follow. As far as American Literature is concerned the World War had resulted in bringing forth new writers and new themes. However, most of the critics who commented on this age do not necessarily exhibit optimism about the age (Olderman is pessimistic and he calls it, though ironically, *Beyond the Waste Land* (1972)). As far as the fiction is concerned, there was no direct break from the tradition of Hawthorne and Melville immediately. Writers like Faulkner and Hemingway were still writing fiction following the traditional narratives and themes. It took years to get new literatures representing all the social and economic undercurrents. One particular aspect we can think about is the break up of tradition by a group of young writers—one thinks in particular the Beat Generation—in the 1950s and 1960s. Though it took time for them to get critical acclamation, their presence was categorically felt. Their quarrel was not just with the American tradition but with the European tradition as well. The modernist and existentialist trends that were prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century in American fiction and elsewhere were dethroned and many new trends established.

What we find in the post World War writers is not the continuation of the early modernist vision of imagination and society; but rather a version of that vision, literally a revision of the modern context. They set off on an attempt to locate in the contemporary evidence of psychic survival and social,
political health. The early modernists were optimistic, traditional and moralistic, on the other hand the contemporary phase defined by the writers like William Burroughs is marked by its complete and even joyful acceptance of the fact of apocalypse, without recourse to any of traditional, quasi religious beliefs. In the early modernists one can usually find a myth of the "Good City" (one can find such images of the city in *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*). This has roots in the moral values and cultural consolidation that the modernists unconsciously accepted. The new writers are rupturing this and the concentration now is on the "true field of human civilization": the human city constructed on the foundation of the fictiveness of existence. Hence the language becomes self-conscious. The language of the post World War novelists shows a return of the word from the clutches of all other things to the world of the human beings capturing all the senses of manic-brooding and surreal.

In the post World War novels a universal pointlessness is projected, concentrating and focusing on a particular theme or vision. In addition to looking at a particular theme in such a way these writers get a free choice to look at the other issues also. Their vision is not blinkered unlike the traditional modernists. Their focal point is disrupted or rather all the points become focal points.

By the sixties, new voices had gained ground in the realm of fiction. Whether it is acknowledged or not, there has been a relevant presence of a thick dividing line between the popular and the high literature in America (Leslie Fiedler was the first critic to try to demolish the dividing wall between
high culture and mass culture in America, in his essay titled, “Cross the Border and Close that Gap” (1969)). For the popular writers the “American Dream” was a virtual reality and they praised and dealt with it elaborately in order to exalt the position of the individual in American society. At least this was the way they projected the individual in the novels during this time. On the other hand, the other so-called “serious” writers were not so optimistic about the whole agenda. They also looked into the matter of the “American Dream,” but their approach was decisively distinguished from that of the popular fiction writers. They were not just interested in the American Dream; they had many more crucial issues to deal with. In fact, there were the bleak and at the same time vital realities (like the issue of racial discrimination) for the post world war writers to face. Hence, there are numerous voices and manifestations in fiction as well as in other arts.

Soon after the World War, there was a concentrated interest in experiments with form in fiction. Writers like Thomas Pyncheon, John Barth had tried to experiment with the form and themes in their writing. This fascination, however, seems to have died out by the end of the seventies. The interest now is to look into the depths of the life and see the differences of self and identity. This kind of political writing gained ground all over the world by the end of the twentieth century. The writers understand the need for raising their voice for the marginalized, or in other words, the writers by now understand the importance of representation as a possible political strategy in gaining ground in the society.
A major voice in the post World War American fiction is that of the exiled writers: from Isaac Bashevis Singer to Nabokov and Sholzhenitzin. Post World War American fiction asserts its debts to these immigrant writers at many levels. These writers, in spite of their many differences, have at least one thing in common: they keep the reality of their past green in their memory. It is that which enables these writers to write unique and characteristic novels with vivid descriptions. The literature of the exiled writers does not end in the fifties or sixties. As the immigration continues, the literature of exile also continues. Unlike in the fifties, the new writers are not just from Europe. By the end of the last century there is a flow of immigrants from the Asian and African countries as well. There are new writers also from these countries (the latest among the lot being Jhumpa Lahiri with her prize winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, 1999). Hence, the interpretation of America gets complicated with respect to the approach of the immigrant writers, for these writers try to compare and contrast the realities of their past with the present life in the United States.

John Barth in his essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1956), defines the life and role of a post World War American writer. By coining the term "literature of Exhaustion", Barth disputes the attitudes of the modernist writers. He does not believe in the concept of existentialism and optimistic modernism as reflected in the works of Faulkner and Dos Passos. His primary concern in fiction is experimentation with the form and the theme. He is not alone in this regard. He has followers in William Burroughs, Sukenick, Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pincheon. But Barth theorizes the environment in his essays in a
fashion, which many of his contemporaries could not do. He argues that all
the possibilities of literature have been exhausted by the writers who had
passed by and that there is not much left for the new writers. John O. Stark
says that Barth uses the word, “exhaustion,” in two ways: one, that literature
is, or nearly, used up; the other, that, given its current condition, writers
should invent and exhaust possibilities and thus create for literature an infinite
scope (1).

Stretching the same idea of exhaustion into Barth’s novels, one can
see that his primary concern is with the same idea of existentialism that the
modernist writers dealt with. For example in The Floating Opera (1956), Todd
Andrews tries to commit suicide because he feels that there is nothing new in
life. Then he ponders over the idea of suicide and finds out that there is no
meaning in committing suicide either. Hence, he decides to come back to life.
Barth’s cynical attitude towards the philosophy of existentialism (which is in a
way a European construction) is presented in the novel in brilliant terms. The
audience, watching the floating opera of Hamlet, pooh-poohs Hamlet’s
existential dilemma, which otherwise is believed to be the supreme
expression of modern man’s existential angst. They howl at Hamlet’s
soliloquy, beginning: “To be or not to be, that is the question”(232). This ironic
reversal of existential questions can be perceived as an American reaction to
the Western philosophies. Barth’s novels Letters (1979) as well as Sot-Weed
Factor (1960) show the commitment of the author to the new forms. He being
a master of techniques uses them as an integral part of his fiction itself, for
him, it is more than simple discovery. Klinkowitz says, “in some of his stories
Barth brought American fiction to the level of innovation and self-discovery" (Literary Disruptions 5).

Another of the prominent voices of the post World War American Fiction, Philip Roth, is more sceptical about the role of the writer in the contemporary world. He says, in the essay, "Writing American Fiction"(1957),

The American writer in the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make 'credible' much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing at talents and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. ("Writing American Fiction" 49)

There is a constant attempt in the novels of Philip Roth to blur the distinction between fact and fiction.

A group of critics like Susan Sontag, George Steiner and Richard Poirier reflect about these new writers' obsession with experimentation. Sontag calls it the aesthetics of "style as radical will", for Poirier it is the "art of performing self", and for Steiner, "Pythagorean genre" (Olderman xii).

According to these critics the direction of this writing is toward a radical, revolutionary redefinition of the idea of human personality and human freedom. And the final effect of the same would be to dissolve the ancient strictures with which society binds the individual and to liberate everyone into a free-form, guiltless celebration of the life of the senses, of self conscious delight, the rationalistic, critical spirit (Olderman xii).
Other Voices in the Fifties and Beyond

In this part of the chapter I would like to discuss the themes and reservations of some of the major groups of novelists in the United States in the past fifty years. I would like to suggest that most of these writers who belong to the marginalized communities (like the ethnic writers) or marginalized categories (like the women writers and Afro-American Writers). Marginalized works are, largely, the products of groups who have relatively less access to political, economic, or social power. To put it in another way, the works generally considered central to a culture are those composed and promoted by persons from groups holding power within it. Thus, I am concerned with the work of minority men as well as that of women—for while there are profound differences between a culture defined significantly in terms of gender and one defined significantly in terms of race or national origin, nevertheless the burdens and opportunities posed by marginality generate unusually significant parallels. And thus, the discussion here is of the writings of a group of the people of the American nation, whose cultures continue to be less than fully understood or appreciated by virtue of the factors that are discussed here briefly.

The minorities are not usually settled into the nation state. This can be seen in the works of the writers from the Jewish religion and African American communities in the United States. The African American novels concentrated on the Civil Rights issues during the 1960s and 1970s. (A detailed discussion of the Civil Rights protests and Civil Rights Bills is attempted in the third
These novels voice a challenge to the constitution of the nation state when people from these communities come to demand a measure of political autonomy for themselves. Going back to the roots—to the African roots that is—was considered a fashion during the 1970s. Alex Hailey's novel *Roots* (1976) shows such a metaphoric journey. Minorities asserting themselves against the nation state is a common problem that the novelists addressed in large measure during the 1970s.

Developing and extending the embryonic idea, of adult heterosexual love and its obsession with death, incest, and "innocent homoeroticism" in the American novel studied using the psychoanalytic tools of Leslie Fiedler in his book *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Benedict Anderson argues that "Rather than a national eroticism, it is [...] an eroticized nationalism that is at work" (202-203). He further argues that "Male-male bondings in a Protestant society which from the start rigidly prohibited miscegenation are paralleled by male-female 'holy loves' in the nationalist fiction of Latin America, where Catholicism permitted the growth of a large mestizo population" (203). One detects the nation's intervention in American fiction from the early years of Protestantism itself.

**Jewish Fiction**

By the nineteen fifties, an important new bunch of Jewish-American novelists had emerged. These writers drew on their Yiddish tradition—I. B. Singer was one of the prime practitioners of this—and on Russian and European Modernism. The older tradition of the Jewish-American writing has
been transformed by the new writers like Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth, who had concentrated more on the immigrant victim trying for a place and recognition in the New World. For the new Jewish-American novelists, the Jew is a modern victim forced by history into existential self-definition. This definition is not completely religious, political or ethnic. These writers are realistic about the history and sociology of the country in which they live. Along with a sound knowledge of their own tradition they also are aware of the individualistic attitudes of their fellow citizens, a fundamental knowledge that the Jewish writers possessed when compared to the popular writers of the same age (whereas popular writers many a time celebrate the individualistic way of life). According to many critics (Bradbury and others), these are the writers who moulded American fiction after the Second World War. But looking at the history of American post World War fiction only from the point of view of Jewish-American fiction would be a grave error.

Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth present an uneasy and absurd situation of the self. An individual who is troubled by a complex history is always tempted to look ahead. Bellow presents such a situation in *Herzog*, so does Roth in *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Kafka’s nightmarish situations are projected in various Jewish-American novels like Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream* and Saul Bellow’s *The Dangling Man*. Most of the time, the heroes of these Jewish-American authors go on searching for their own identity and confronting a friction between the individual and the system. In an extensive study of *The New Novel in America* (1970), Helen
Weinberg argues that Bellow, Mailer and Salinger show great affinity towards the works of Franz Kafka especially, *The Trial, Amerika, The Castle* and *Metamorphosis*. Weinberg presents the heroes of these Jewish-American writers as spiritual activists who wage their wars in intellectual plains in an attempt to place the Jewish individuals in the scheme of things in America. Bernard Malamud is usually not classed with the other Jewish-American fictionists. His novels have a recurring pattern, they are, as Tanner says, “fables or parables of the painful process from immaturity to maturity—maturity of attitudes not of years” (323).

**Fiction Written by Women Writers**

Unlike Europe, there are not many women novelists in the history of American fiction. A consciousness of the “female experience” came into existence only in the mid 1960s in the realm of American Fiction. By the 1970s this consciousness had ripened to include various other aspects of being a woman in the United States. Joyce Carol Oates’ fiction is in one way or another concerned with the female experience. In *Do With Me What You Will* (1973) and *Wonderland* (1971), she talks about the sufferings of women in general. They are a form of self-punishment for their disabilities. For Joyce Oates and many others the women are part of an American tragedy, programmed to bad marriages and imprisonment. They realize that men have more control over their lives than they themselves. In Erika Jong, Marilyn French, Judith Rossener, Alix Kates Shulman and Marge Piercy; there is a tendency for the female characters to move towards lesbian relationships
after failing in the heterosexual and marital/familial relationships. Their aim in the novel is to find out the real self as in the case of African American Women writers. Their novels present the wishfulfilment of their quest.

**African American Fiction**

It is another kind of self-awareness that we see in *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison and many of the novels written by African-American writers. The basic theme of African-American fiction has been the search for identity of the African-American individual in a predominantly white Anglo Saxon society. In *Invisible Man*, the protagonist tries to find out his role in the predominantly white society and at last he understands that, “I am, what I am!” The unnamed hero in Ellison's novel reminds us of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* and proves that “introspection is always retrospection” (Sartre). Ellison has powerful followers in James Baldwin and Richard Wright. From the fifties to the eighties the voice of African-American is heard because of their fiction's power. The African-American individual is on the look out for an exclusive opening in American society, a space in the realms of power in the society. At times, these writers also try to show the dialectics in American society. Though American society projects liberty and equality, these ideas are still a myth. Ellison talks about it in his novel and many of his interviews. One might remember the remarks made by Nathan Glazer on the status of fraternity in America (209) when one thinks of the African American fiction. He argues that “fraternity” was never a concern of average Americans. Most
of the African American novelists also believe the same way and they express their anguish in their novels.

The other major voices in the African-American fiction, in the sixties, were Eldridge Cleaver, Julius Lester, and Malcolm X. The fundamental aim of these writers, just like their predecessors James Baldwin and Ellison, was the African-American individual's position and role in the white society. The next generation of African-American writers consists of writers like Ishmael Reed and Charles Wright. Reed's fiction is rooted in a radical aesthetics. Charles Wright on the other hand follows the same theme of search for meaning. He practises a new form of imaginative literature using the ultimate fantasy. In the beginning of the seventies, African-American fiction showed the traits of going militantly political. Writers like LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), William Demby, Clarence Major and John Edgar Wideman are the prominent voices of this extremist phase. They wanted to write of their own social, political and ethnic reality in America in a radical way. The general interest was to project such writers who produced materials of an uncompromising political mode.

**African American Women's Fiction**

Along the same lines is the position of black women writers who emerged in the later part of the last century. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison are the two major writers of fiction among this group. These writers specifically talk and discuss the problems of African-American women in American society. The basic argument of these writers is that African-American women face three or four kinds of oppression. They face
oppression from the white male, black male and even from white women. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker question the position of black woman, who is usually portrayed as the symbol of sex and lust in the dominant narratives. They are cynical about the language and even the medium of fiction. For all these forms are contaminated by the chauvinism persistent in the society. That is the reason why they have to find new forms of expression. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) is an attempt to find such a new form. Here the story is presented in the form of letters written by a woman with an extremely troubling history or life story. "Epistolary novel" can be considered as an old form; however, Walker uses several new dimensions to it making the form suit her character's anguish and anxiety. These writers not only believe in questioning the accepted structures of society they also try to explore alternatives. Alice Walker’s alternative is a society of women. (Rather than feminism, she calls it sisterhood or womanism.)

**The Beat Novels**

In the 1950s another group of novelists proclaimed their presence. They were involved in opening up new or alternative experiences. They also pioneered in developing a new terminology. George Mandel's *Flee the Angry Strangers* (1950) and John Clellon Holmes' *Go* (1952) are considered the most influential novels of this kind. William Burroughs is also regarded as another follower of this group. Grederick R. Karl is of the opinion that the language of the succeeding decades is derived from the early Beats. Their concentration on the countercultural elements like marijuana and free sex was
manifested in the novels of the coming decades also. Another interest these novelists had was jazz music. They also display an unending thirst to travel, as in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1953). These writers’ philosophy in a nutshell follows that of the existential masters of the west. Like those European novelists they believed that ‘life is a perpetual defeat’.

**Conclusion**

The nation expresses itself through various means in a novel. It is in fact one of the possible readings of any novel. It can be argued that the various themes that are dealt with in American fiction actually point to a pattern. The argument is not that there is a single, unified nation emerging through the works, instead it can be said that the novel brings out the questions related to national identity which are special and peculiar to the particular age in which the novel is written. However, it should also be added that the argument here is not related to the nation which is present in a single work of fiction, rather, the approach is to the manifestations and representation of the nation which is spread across the works of fiction irrespective of the time and the individual author. From a holistic point of view, I am interested in the American nation which comes through all the novels written in America.

America being a nation of different cultures and societies, there are plenty of opportunities for the new writers to live and write there. The progress of America without any rivals in world politics and economy was bound to affect the writing in some way or the other. The case of Jerzy
Kosinski turns out to be very important with respect to the issues that are part of the post World War writings in America. Being an outsider in one sense in America, he reflects on most of the issues and angsts that are part of the age. Nearly all of the concerns that make the post World War writer's political stand have a culminating presence in his novels. His works are taken in the next chapter as a reference point to ponder over the depiction of nation in the 1970s of America.

Kosinski's works play a part in the representation of the American nation, in the sense that every novel presents one kind of interpretation. These interpretations have an importance with regard to the nation, because the themes central to him are central to the time he lived in too. That time has further importance when we consider it from the perspective of the disruption of the American national ideals and the questions raised with respect to the national identity.