Chapter - 1
LITERARY
AND
BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND
The "pure" and "simple" way of life ceased to exist right at the beginning of this century and, since then, artists have been variously attempting to give shape and significance to the vast panorama of fragmentation, futility, massification and anarchy in contemporary life. Having ceased to be at home in his world, the avant garde writer gave expression to a feeling of homelessness, alienation, barrenness and nihilism which we discern today as being the basic premise of modernism - a revolutionary and dominating movement in art and thought. Beginning as a break from tradition, the modernist movement has moved along the paths of "aesthetic and intellectual" dissent, "unbounded innovation and experiment," vivid realism and, later, strayed into the realms of fantasy, surrealism, fragmented narrative, wild humour, subjective introspection and sometimes "social concern." It would be proper to trace the progress of the novel and its concerns from the 1920's until recent times.

Modern works of literature cannot be conveniently classified under a single heading or read in the light of a single encompassing idea. In fact the essence of the modern movement has been a resistance to formal ideas and, in trying to provide the intellectual background of a particular writer, one is unavoidably drawn into the social and cultural history of the nation which produced the writer.
World War I was a turning point in the history of America and the novel. Although the Americans were not directly involved, the War brought a new awareness among them regarding their position in world affairs, and also an awareness of the complex variety of its people. The large mass of people belonging to the public world became too complex to be understood by a single person and the technical innovations wrought by novelists like James Joyce, Proust and Virginia Woolf demanded more than mere story telling from the novelists. The form and story of the novel had to be adjusted to the demands of character and sensibility, thus ushering in a complete break from the past, the smooth past that was shattered by the War which left the people in a desolate and insecure position.

Before the War, the American novel largely conformed to what George Santayana called the "genteel tradition," a tradition that was unwilling to face the realities of life brought about by economic and political forces. The pre-war novel tended to avoid controversial subjects based on common life, and placed a high value on good manners and poetic language. Some realist and naturalist novelists of the period - like Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and, above all, Theodore Dreiser changed the pattern and wrote about working people and their problems, thus breaking away from the genteel tradition and "conventional morality."

After World War I, there took place a widespread literary rebellion against the old restrictions in respect of
subject matter and style, and the novelists steadily became bold enough to write freely and frankly. Three of the major novelists who emerged in the 1920's - Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos and William Faulkner, saw action on European battlefields before reaching the age of 21 and their first book dealt directly with war.

European novelists like Henri Barbuse, Arnold Zweig and Erich Maria Remarque also responded to the war with bitter and eloquent indignation. But there was a difference - the Europeans had lived in the presence of war and its threat for many generations, while the US in contrast had known no major war on its territory since 1865. But as Nathan Glick observes, when the war came, "its impact was more profoundly traumatic and disillusionary for Americans than for Europeans."  

The reaction to the war in the American novel took two major forms - protest against the senselessness of war on the one hand, and on the other, a frantic search for peace among the shattered illusions and in an uncertain future. Gertrude Stein called this generation of young writers "the lost generation" because their expectations of life had been betrayed and because traditional values could no longer serve them as a guide.

In much of his writings, Hemingway has made an effort to find an attitude towards life that could give men

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some dignity in the face of war's and life's cruelties. Dos Passos' revulsion against the war took a different form. In his writings he has made the most ambitious and wide-ranging dissection of American Society. Another response to the war was found in the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald who recorded the disillusionment of people as a result of the shock of war.

John Dos Passos, James T. Farell, John Steinbeck, and Ernest Hemingway were writers who recorded their impressions of the post-war period in their novels. Like Hemingway, Passos was a combat journalist; he wrote a great deal of general reportage and travel literature. His works are also permeated by a general sense of loss - loss of national and personal values.

James T. Farell wrote about the life of the Catholic working class and lower middle class of Chicago as it existed before World War II. He was a realist who presented his characters and their surroundings in the minutest detail. He has been seen to be a synthesis of Theodore Dreiser and James Joyce. He introduced an urban language, "the male language of working class, the language of sports and the poor room, delivered in a clipped, direct, bleak style."²

Steinbeck was a writer in the naturalistic tradition. He wrote about the agriculturists of northern California and gave symbolic significance to his realistic descriptions.

The First World War split the landscape like a natural catastrophe. Its effects are plain enough to see in the literature of the 20's. Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson - these men and women of 1914, greatly affected by War, became serious writers. This is what Virginia Woolf meant when she said, "on or about December 1910, human nature changed."³

The First World War with its millions of dead, initiated the Americans into several aspects of the horrible, and the earlier "romantic over - valuation of America being something special," the American dream, was shattered. The Second World War brought America into the world of international affairs as the dominant western power. The division of the world into two power blocks engaged in a Cold War, with America on the side of the free and the democratic, and Russia "totalitarian" and "godless," resulted in praise for the "American way," the "American century." America was a "consumer's paradise" a showcase of democratic free enterprise and any "deviation from the national consensus either in political views or personal styles resulted in the chilling charge "alien," "subversive," "un-American."⁴

The immediate years of the Second World War were marked by experimentation and exploration. At the heart of this experiment and exploration was unsurity, uncertainty as

⁴ Ibid., p.17.
to what lay ahead for the Americans. This period was marked by a flood of war novels and most of the novelists who emerged were "not so much interested in rebelling against society as they were in understanding society and themselves." 5

"The War novelists are not sociologists or historians. They are usually critical in temper and often they are self-critical to the point of being burdened with feelings of guilt." 6

From Balzac and Dickens to Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann, writers have used the novel to criticise, and protest against contemporary life. In the US, the reformist role of the novelist has been unusually conspicuous. The 20th century American novelist has acted as the "gadfly" of the nation's conscience. American fiction has tended to scan the more disagreeable aspects of American life and to concentrate on the spiritual and material evils that demand reform.

The young generation of novelists who matured during and after the Second World War were confronted with the fact that their own reactions to war had been anticipated by their World War I predecessors.

Perhaps the most famous of the post-war novels, Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead reminded many readers of Dos Passos' condemnation of military bureaucracy and the

5 - Nathan Glick - op. cit., p. 32.
6 - Walter Allen - op. cit., p.313.
society that created it. Mailer's version is more ideological and less sentimental than Dos Passos'.

James Jones' From Here to Eternity has the distinction of dealing with life in the peacetime regular army rather than war.

The young men who lived and fought through World War II had been prepared for war — and they did not feel themselves to be a "lost generation." The closest parallel to the "lost generation" was the so-called "beat generation" of the 1950's that rebelled against "conventional morality" and took "constant poverty as a lifestyle." 7

It is true that there was a sort of migration of modern literature from France to England and to America and that the "peak period of the movement must be placed around 1910-25." 8 But after the death of Virginia Woolf and Yeats, the movement became degenerate — some followed the religious front and some became fascist. The twenties are celebrated by books like Ulysses, Lady Chatterly's Lover and The Great Gatsby. The thirties, the disastrous decade, were devoted to lost causes like anti-fascism.

The War novels were written in what Gore Vidal, commenting on his own war story Williwaw, (1946) called the

7 - Nathan Glick - op. cit., p.35.
National manner ...."a simple calculated style, a style that is essentially a vulgarism of Hemingway."\(^9\)

Nevertheless, among these war novels, three or four novels stand out sharply and clearly as achievements in their own right, the earliest being Williwaw itself written when Vidal was nineteen. The others are John Horne Burn's The Gallery (1947), and Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead (1948). Bowles is a modern version of Poe and his novels are works of symbolism. Then there are the self-contained novels of Truman Capote and Frederick Buechner. But bigger in every way is William Styron's Lie down in Darkness (1951) which exploits both the self-contained form and the pre-occupation with the South.

Nothing has been more striking in post-war American fiction than the emphasis on the novels written by black writers. Among them Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin are prominent.

The emphasis on social criticism was especially evident during the Depression years of the early 1930's, when many writers protested against the economic misery around them. Most novels of social protest had an urban setting, but two of the most important and popular novelists who emerged in the 1930's - Erskine Caldwell and John Steinbeck - chose to write about poor farmers living in the southern region during the Depression years.

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9 - Walter Allen, op. cit., p. 313.
Although novels of the underprivileged dominated the scene in that period, a growing number of gifted novelists were concerning themselves with the higher and richer echelons of society. Among them are writers like John O'Hara, John Marquand and James Cozzens.

William Faulkner, a novelist of the American South chose to write about individuals and communities at moments of extreme crisis. In many of the novels written by southerners, there is a distinct ache to be special.

Many novelists made an effort to take the measure of the country itself. Novelists, like Farrell and Dreiser, wrote about the variety of America, and others like Henry James, Herbert Gold, Malamud, and Saul Bellow about a special group. Thus two distinct types of novels emerged during the post-war period - the naturalistic and realistic novel which concerned itself with the social classes of America and the continents, and the novel of manners where the influence of family, class or group yielded a pattern of stability to the lost explorer.

The major realist novelists are John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway. These realists who have written about ordinary life, gave a true portrayal of life. Drieser was an early realist and, according to Bellow, he is the pioneer of the realist movement. "Drieser, a realist, had elements of genius. He had a more open access to primary feeling than any American
writer of the 20th century."10

The works of Norman Mailer, Ellison, Algran, Blager belong to the realm of naturalistic fiction. Because they try to convey a familiar world, realists, naturalists and novelists of manners all piece together facts to construct that world. Both the naturalists and realists imply or assert larger than human forces. But the novelists of manners tend to be more involved with characters who are less describable. "The naturalistic novel therefore tends towards the reality of detail and fact, while the novel of manners tends towards the reality of psychological nuance......"11

Saul Bellow has emerged as the most important of the post-war novelists of America mainly because of his:

"intelligence, his firm grasp of the paradoxes of modern urban thinking man, his matchless feeling for cities and his refusal to relinquish a sense of possible human worth."12

However, the naturalists' central belief in the effect of environment and biology on the human beings, their belief in predestination, and the essential helplessness of man is contrary to Saul Bellow's humanism; it would,

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therefore, be proper to classify him as a realist writing about characters whose emotions and psychological crisis results in stability and better understanding.

The fact that English and American novels are written in a common language often blinds us to the differences between them. From the beginning, American novelists themselves have been aware of their divergence from the English tradition. Awareness was forced upon them by the nature of the society in which they lived as opposed to that of Britain.

The classic American novels "have dealt not so much with the lives of man in society as with the life of solitary man, man alone and wrestling with himself."\(^{13}\)

Symbolism seems to be specifically an American way of rendering experience in literature.

According to Bellow, European literature is intellectual in a different sense from the American. "The intellectual hero of a French or German Novel is likely to be philosophical or ideological."\(^{14}\) The intellectuals in America however, know that in their free democracy, ideas become effective within an entirely different tradition.

The American novelist is always tempted to work his sense of myth. Modern American novels "continually transform the enterprising hero into Man versus Nature and back again,

\(^{13}\) Walter Allen, *Tradition and Dream*, p.16.
as well as pretending that society is Nature." This is mainly due to the strong influence of society in America, and this is more so because of the massive technological progress in that country. The simultaneous presence of pride and heroism is what gives the modern American novel its "unique quality."

The marked tendency of modern fiction to become obscure is to be explained by the complexity of the problems of modern society. The four Americans who are associated with "absurd" fiction - John Updike, William Styron, Saul Bellow and J.D. Salinger - share a vision of the loneliness of man in the modern environment, strikingly similar to the absurd universe of Albert Camus and Sartre.

Saul Bellow, Herbert Gold, and Bernard Malamud rank among the realists. It is not an accident that all three are Jews whose forbears had come to the US from Central Europe, and they brought something quite new into American fiction. Bellow was the first of them to appear.

The novels of Herbert Gold have close affinities with those of Bellow in his exuberant affirmation, thus providing a positive solution to the problems of life. Malamud, together with Bellow, seems to be the most remarkable of the younger American novelists. Bellow and Malamud have brought a new note into the American novel. In spite of being modern, their novels are still capable of drawing upon traditional values.

The theme of the sense of individual isolation is central to the American experience. The American novelist also engaged in a constant attempt to define himself and the society he lived in.

Only in the 1960's did the Americans become aware of the real divisions and critical social problems of America. Movements were launched for social justice and racial equality. Shocking events such as the assassination of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy further eroded the assumptions of the earlier years.

Some younger novelists of the 50's and 60's abandoned the old plots and rounded characters and, instead, they created one-dimensional caricatures or fragmented personalities. They employed parody, burlesque, private jokes and a wild bouncy style — all in the interest of conveying absurdity. Writers who had a "thirst for the unique" are John Barth, Joseph Heller (Catch 22), Ken Kesey (One who flew over the cuckoo's nest).

However, the fact that defining the modern now is a task that involves studying many distinguished scholars, may itself be a sign that the best of the modern period is over. According to Conrad Aiken, "American poetry has come to a temporary pause and there now exists no first rate fiction." 17

16 - Frank Kermode, op. cit., p. 25.

17 - Conrad Aiken, The Great Voyage of Conrad Aiken, Stephen Tabachnik (Univ. of Negev, Israel).
Fiction in US was for sometime dominated by southern writers, and then a set of Jewish writers started coming to the forefront. Though they are unmistakably Jewish, they are nevertheless in the American tradition because of their preoccupation with a dominant American theme, the "life of a solitary man, a man alone and wrestling with himself."\textsuperscript{18} The historical condition responsible for the entry of Jews into America was their breaking away from a traditional way of life, and the massive immigration of Jews points to the cultural changes that were sweeping the Jewish world.

Saul Bellow, the most celebrated and aesthetically most rewarding writer of America, was born on July 10, 1915 in Lachine in Quebec to immigrant orthodox Jewish-Russian parents. The Bellow family moved to Chicago when Bellow was nine years old. He grew up in that city's streets - learning the people and the scenery of urban America which were the subject matter of his novels. He studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, and North Western and Wisconsin universities. His first short story "Two Morning Monologues" was published in 1941, and was followed by his first novel \textit{Dangling Man} in 1944. Between 1948-52, he travelled in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship, and also taught at the universities of Minnesota, New York and Princeton. Before winning the Nobel prize and the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 1976 for his \textit{Herzog}, he had several times won the National Book Award. Since 1968 he has been Professor of English and

\textsuperscript{18} Walter Allen, op. cit., p. 16.
Chairman of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.

Saul Bellow's life has thus far been a very representative American life, "a life still intimately in touch with immigrant experience, a life deeply immersed in the vast urban complexities of Modern America." However in spite of his being an American, Bellow is self-consciously a part of this affirmative Jewish tradition and this is what makes him a specially interesting novelist of our times.

Saul Bellow belongs to the American intellectual community. His early novels published in the 1940's are bookish and sophisticated, following the modern European literary tradition. His novels focus on "American life in a manner supportive of intellectual values." With the publication of *Herzog*, Bellow's place as the novelist of the intellectuals was secure.

Philip Roth identifies James, Conrad, Dostoevsky and Bellow as "the great inventors of narrative detail and masters of narrative voice and perspective."

Now more than seventy years of age, with over forty years of distinguished writing behind him, Saul Bellow has been more successful than most writers in standing up to the rigours of the chase. In the course of his life, Bellow himself has


faced the crisis of identity due to his immigrant status in America, and critics have pointed out that perhaps he himself is the subject of his novels.

Mark Harris, Bellow's biographer, provides us with a marvellous insight into Bellow's strategy of survival in likening him to Robert Frost's Woodchuck, "that peaceful beast who shrewdly pretends that he and the world are friends." 21

Bellow yearns for the salvation of the world, risking himself to balance cynicism and hope. He is a model of man "truthful at all cost, going forward with his work in spite of fads and fashions, never stepping from his path to suit the trade." 22

Chicago is Bellow's city; he considers himself an "out and out Chicagoan." Of Chicago, Bellow has written, "the dense atmosphere of learning and cultural effort, heavily oppressed me. I felt that wisdom and culture were immense and that I was hopelessly small." 23

Bellow's reputation has grown steadily with the publication of a body of highly regarded major novels. It should be a rewarding endeavour to analyse his work in terms of its themes and the technique employed in their presentation.

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21 - Mark Harris, Saul Bellow: Drumlin Woodchuck, (University of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 5.
22 - Ibid., p. 6.