Chapter 2

Major Trends and Figures

The Marxist theory of social history initially emerged from the cauldron of social consciousness in the nineteenth century. It was the product of a period of turbulent social change fuelled by new sciences, new technologies and new political institutions. Central to the Marxist view of history is the economic struggle for power between the ruling class and the working class, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These groups are oppositional and yet they work together to produce the material needs of society. The means by which these groups work together define the mode of production of society. Over time, out of the give-and-take between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the mode of production changes; society evolves. From the social dialectic of class struggle for example, tribalism gives way to feudalism and feudalism gives way to capitalism. The essential values and attitudes defining the social relations of the mode of production of a period comprise the base of society. The institutions and conventions of a culture-its superstructure-both express and promote the ideology of the base. The ideology of society works to maintain the status quo of social relations and thus the dominance of the ruling class.

As Marxist theory has been applied to the understanding of literature, it has provided an often potent means of assessing the social significance of the literary text. The potency of Marxist literary theory is perhaps reflected in its resurgence in the late twentieth century even when the influence of Marxist
politics has waned. The Marxist response to literature begins with the recognition that literature is one artistic component of the superstructure of a society. As such, it provides a reflection of the forces shaping and maintaining the ideology of culture.

The German Philosopher Karl Marx (1818-83) and the German sociologist Fredrich Engels (1820-95) are the founding fathers of the Marxist school of criticism. In 1848, they jointly wrote the Communist Manifesto, which is still in vogue. Marx and Engels were basically concerned with political philosophy and economic production in the context of European capitalist society. They did not attempt a full-length study of art and literature. And they never advocated judging the merits of a piece of literature in terms of its political tendencies, or using some ready-made socio-economic formula. They were two of the most deeply learned and highly cultured German intellectuals of their time whose interests lay in the direction of economics rather than literature.

Karl Marx, the founder of the great economic and social theories, was a major influence in the field of literary criticism. To him literature was the mirror of the basic economic structure of a society. Therefore, the driving force behind the production of a literary piece and a social movement was the same. The early Marxist critics tried to find out how far a work of art succeeded in reflecting the class interests and aspirations of the author and how far it could contribute to the understanding of the goals of that society. At the extreme, the revolutionary Marxists wanted the writer to use his art as a weapon to expose the hypocrisies of bourgeois culture.
But at the same time Marx was never under the impression that a progress in the economic sphere resulted in a higher form of literature. To prove this, he pointed out that literary superstructures of extraordinary richness flourished in the ancient poor economic structure. In the early phase, some of the Russian critics tried to prove that art is medium, not only of emotion, but of thoughts also. These thoughts were expressed in art through symbols and images. Art recreated the emotional and intellectual experiences one undergoes under the influence of external nature. Thus art could become a social phenomenon when the artist creates, for others, the experience of his own thoughts and emotions.

Marxist criticism considered the relationship between form and content as dialectical. But the early Marxists gave importance to content and they were rather insensitive to texts. It was with George Lukacs that an insistence on some kind of form started in Marxism, though he too was against modernist form. For him a realist work was the reflection of the basic contradictions in a society. He said that the novel should give a “truer, more complete, more vivid and more dynamic reflection of reality”. It means that the reading of a novel should frame in the mind of the reader the “full process of life”. But he rejected a mere “photographic” representation. To him the process of life was not a “flux”, but an intensive order. Thus, by presenting the complexity of life, the artist should evolve, in the mind of the reader, an order. The dialectical view of history, borrowed from Hegel by Marx was the driving force behind his insistence on order.
In course of time the principles underlying Marxian thought came to be adapted and modified to create what has now come to be known as Marxist criticism. Marxist literary theories do not constitute a school. Marxists assign a structure to social reality. It is called a structural view of reality. Society is not a vague, indistinct background. It has a definite shape in history. There is always a series of struggles among antagonistic social classes, and the types of production they are engaged in. This is termed ‘dialectical’. The struggle between opposed forces is dynamic. Marx and Engels say that literature can only be properly understood within a larger framework of social reality. Any theory which treats literature in isolation divorcing it from society and history, will be deficient in its ability to explain what literature really is. This socio-economic element in any society is the ultimate determinant of that society’s character.

Marx employs an architectural metaphor which is most commonly used to explain the relationships between economic production and other factors which depend on it. The basic economic structure (base) engenders a number of social institutions and beliefs which act to regulate or dissipate the conflict and keep the mode of production in being. All elements which arise from the socio-economic base form the ‘superstructure’ of society. From about 1870 to 1920, the view held was deterministic that the base caused the superstructure or the superstructure reflected the base, and that there was direct correlation between the two. This view of economic determinism-now discarded-goes by the name of “Vulgar Marxism”. Later, there has been a revisionist and flexible view that the superstructure can influence the base, and that works of art can and do possess a
relatively autonomous existence. There is no one-to-one correspondence between base and superstructure and the causation between them is a complex and problematic phenomenon.

Marx lodges literature in the superstructure of society. Economics is the base on which the superstructure of social, political and ideological realities are built. It includes political and social power. Economic conditions are the material circumstances and those generated by them are historical circumstances. Human affairs cannot be understood without reference to these circumstances. Marxist methodology maintains that theoretical ideas can be judged only by their concrete application with reference to the world we live in. People are divided primarily by their differences in socio-economic conditions. There is an external struggle for power between social classes. History is a class struggle. The proletariat, the working class, is always subjugated by the bourgeoisie, the rich who control the resources, and the wealth of a nation. The result of this exploitation is “alienation”. It is a process by which a worker is “deskilled” and made to perform tasks, the nature and purpose of which he cannot know. He relinquishes his labour power to the capitalist in exchange for wages, and becomes an appendage of a machine. This results in a state in which the world of human relationships appears as a set of relationships between things. Workers form the labour force. They are thought of as hands. People become commodities. The power structures can only be altered by the coming together of the proletariat, forgetting its divisions.
Marx and Engels were the first to discuss the different ramifications of the term “ideology” in their book The German Ideology. The concept of “ideology” is central to an understanding of Marxism. “Ideology” in Marxism means a system of beliefs, conditioned culturally: a system of beliefs using which human beings make sense of the world they live in. Louis Althusser describes ideology as a system of representations, (images, myths, ideas or concepts) endowed with an existence and a historical role at the heart of a given society.

Every field has its ideological component, and not all ideologies are beneficial, or productive, or desirable for a society. Undesirable ideologies are repressive, but they make way, through appearances, as natural ones for the society. Repressive ideology, in the words of Engels, is “false consciousness”. It is a distortion of the material, because the ideas are opposed to the material reality on which alone experience should be based. Repressive ideology is put in circulation by the ruling class to establish consensus in society. It is a set of beliefs in which people deceive themselves. For example, the belief that man is superior to woman is a sexist ideology. To own a big, cosy home is a capitalist ideology. Repressive ideologies prevent us from seeing the material or historical conditions of our existence. What people are led to think is different from, and opposed to what they believe or should believe in. Hence, ideologies are never recognized as harmful, but thought of as natural and inevitable ways of living, and dealing with this world. The American dream is an ideology implemented in the middle class that success is the result of hard work and initiative, and poverty is the result of laziness. It is a power ideology meant for legitimizing and
perpetuating the interests of the privileged ruling class. Ideology promotes false class-consciousness. Patriotism, religion, individualism, consumerism are all the different manifestations of repressive bourgeois ideology. Cultural productions and literature, film, music, television – all these carry and spread ideologies.

Having reviewed the basic concepts in Marxism, let us now examine how Marxian literary theories have applied these concepts in relation to literature. They can be classified under five headings, each bearing some relationship to the other. They are the Reflection Model, the Production Model, the Genetic model, the Frankfurt School and the Bakhtinian View of the Language-centred Model.

The Reflection Model goes back to Aristotelian tradition of mimesis. Literature is understood as reflecting the reality outside it. The material world of our being is reflected in the mind of man and then translated to forms of thought. The major exponent of this system is the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács. He says that literature is knowledge of reality, and not just a mirroring of it. The form of the literary work reflects the form of reality. Literature creates a fictional world which is a reflection of the real world, with all its contradictions, rendered with utmost clarity and concreteness possible. He attacks the dogma of modernism which is reactionary and decadent: it represents individuals who are alienated from society. The personality of man is represented as disintegrated: he is shown to be solitary, asocial, and unable or unwilling to enter into a happy communion with fellow human beings. Solitariness and its consequent mental illnesses are the inescapable burden of modern man. Lukác’s theory is concerned mainly with the novel, especially the realistic novel. For him, it is the novel that
matters. He does not take into consideration the language of fiction. Language, for him, is just a vehicle for shaping the form.

The French Marxist Pierre Macherey developed the Production Model. Literary composition is seen as a productive labour in which materials are turned into end products. The author is not a person who creates out of nothing, but one who beats into shape literary genres, literary conventions and practices already in existence. The text that is produced is in some sense incomplete, and is concerned primarily with the staging of ideology. Pierre Macherey’s *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966) was the first extended Althusserian discussion of art and ideology. Instead of treating the text as a ‘creation’ or a self-contained artefact, he regards it as a ‘production’ in which disparate materials are worked over and changed in the process. These materials are not ‘free implements’ to be used consciously to create a controlled and unified work of art. Irrespective of prevailing aesthetic norms and authorial intentions, the text in working the pre-given materials, is never fully “aware of what it is doing”. It has an ‘unconscious’. Ideology enters and deforms a would-be unified text. Ideology is normally lived as if it were totally natural, as if its imaginary and fluid discourse gives a perfect and unified explanation of reality. Once it is worked into a text, all its contradictions and gaps are exposed. The realist writer intends to unify all the elements in the text, but the work that goes on in the textual process inevitably produces certain lapses and omissions which correspond to the incoherence of the ideological discourse it uses: ‘for in order to say anything, there are other things which must not be said’. The literary critic is not concerned to show how all the
parts of the work fit together or to harmonize and smooth over any apparent contradictions. Like a psychoanalyst, the critic attends to the text’s unconscious – to what is unspoken and inevitably repressed.

Now let us see how this approach would work. Consider Defoe’s novel, *Moll Flanders*. In the early eighteenth century, bourgeois ideology smoothed over the contradictions between moral and economic requirements, that is between, on the one hand, a providential view of human life which requires the deferment of immediate gratification for a long-term gain, and, on the other, an economic individualism which drains all value from human relations and fixes it solely in commodities. The operation of literary form on ideology produces the effect of incoherence. The literary use of Moll as narrator herself involves a double perspective. She tells her story prospectively and retrospectively: she is both a participant who relishes her selfish life as a prostitute and a thief, and a moralizer who relates her sinful life as a warning to others. The two perspectives are symbolically merged in the episode of Moll’s successful business speculation in Virginia where she founds her enterprise upon the ill-gotten gains which were safe and secure during her Newgate imprisonment. This economic success is also her reward for repenting of her evil life. In this way literary form ‘solidifies’ the fluid discourse of ideology. The writer does not intend this effect since it is produced ‘unconsciously’ by the text. The critic will therefore seek to disclose the rifts and silences (the ‘not-said’ of the text) in what Althusser termed a ‘symptomatic’ reading which reveals the limits of its determining ideology.
The Rumanian sociologist, Lucien Goldmann developed the Genetic Model. This approach is called “genetic” because it is concerned with the origins of literary production. How did literature develop out of the social life and customs of the people? Literary works arise out of social consciousness. Some social groups possess a superior form of ideology, a superior form of “world view”. These social groups may be reactionary, or revolutionary. The views of this group form the mental structures, which are shaped and given ‘coherence’ by great writers in their works. The literary work is not to be understood as the expression of the author’s self or his individual genius (as the Romantics believed) but expression of the social class. A literary work is the collective product of a social community. It is built on “transindividual mental structures”. The mental structures of Goldmann are not linguistic structures, but interrelations of concepts. He calls them “Homologies”. World views are social facts. Artistic works represent the coherent and adequate expressions of the world views. The problem is one of finding out how the various parts of the superstructure (literature, philosophy, politics, religion) are related to one another, and to class relationships. Great writers discover these mental structures and transform, or better still, transmute them into lasting works of art. Goldmann’s The Hidden God (1964) is a classic illustration of this theory. Such an accommodative view stands in clear contrast to the vulgar Marxian view that economics (base) causes literature (superstructure).

The Frankfurt School of Marxism promoted by Theodore Adorno rejects the earlier view (held by Lukacs) that art is a reflection of objective reality, but
suggests that the world of art is different from the world of social reality. The two stand far apart from each other. Art has its own ‘formal’ laws. Art is the essence and image of reality, and not its photographic reproduction. Art exposes the contradictions of reality. Art is the negative knowledge of the actual world. Negative knowledge is not negation, but a knowledge that can negate a false condition. Adorno argues that art acts within reality producing an indirect knowledge. In his Aesthetic Theory (1984) Adorno defines the relation between art and reality:

Blissfully soaring above the real world, art is still chained by each of its elements to the empirical other, into which it may even sink back altogether at every instant. (9)

Hence, Adorno and his followers applaud modernism and experimental art. For them, modernism should be approached as a critique of late capitalism. Techniques, such as the use of fragmented form of narration, are meant to serve as formal features, which offer us a negative knowledge of the dehumanized society of capitalism. Modernism, as depicted by such able practitioners as Beckett, for instance, exposes the alienation of man from society which capitalism causes. Knowledge of reality is thus indirectly achieved. “Avant-garde” is that which resists conformity, never willing to submit to conventions. It is this autonomy and antagonism to bourgeois norms that are supported as progressive. Adorno’s followers are also sympathetic to the technological reproduction of art through films, TV and other mass media. These have rendered elite and esoteric art
accessible to the common man. The wall of distinction between ‘high’ art and ‘low’ art has broken down.

While Brecht and Lukacs held conflicting views of realism, the Frankfurt School of Marxist aesthetics rejected realism altogether. The Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt practised what it called ‘Critical Theory’, which was a wide-ranging form of social analysis grounded in Hegelian Marxism and including Freudian elements. The leading figures in philosophy and aesthetics were Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. Extinct in 1933, the Institute was relocated in New York, but finally returned to Frankfurt in 1950 under Adorno and Horkheimer. They regarded the social system, in Hegelian fashion, as a totality in which all the aspects reflected the same essence. Their analysis of modern culture was influenced by the experience of fascism which had achieved hegemonic dominance at every level of social existence in Germany. In America they saw a similar ‘one-dimensional’ quality in the mass culture and the permeation of every aspect of life by commercialism.

Art and literature have a privileged place in Frankfurt thinking. In an early initiative in critical theory, Marcuse proposed the notion of ‘affirmative culture’, by which he sought to register the dialectical nature of culture as conformist but also critical. Marcuse, while always insisting on the negative, transcendent power of ‘the aesthetic dimension’, adapted the revolutionary commitment of his youth to changed social and cultural circumstances. For the outstanding exponent of Critical Theory, Adorno, art-with philosophy-was the only theatre of resistance to ‘the administered universe’ of the twentieth century. Adorno criticized Lukac’s
view of realism, arguing that great literature does not directly address social reality. In Adorno’s view, art’s detachment from dominant reality gives it its special significance and power. Modernist writings are particularly distanced from the reality to which they allude and this allows them the space to criticise conformist trends in their world. While popular art forms are forced to collude with the economic system which shapes them, ‘autonomous’ works have the power to ‘negate’ the reality to which they relate. Because modernist texts reflect the alienated inner lives of individuals, Lukacs attacked them as ‘decadent’ embodiments of late capitalist society and evidence of the writers’ inability to transcend the atomistic and fragmented worlds in which they were compelled to live. Adorno argues that art cannot simply reflect the social system, but acts within that reality as an irritant which produces an indirect sort of knowledge.

In Frankfurt School thinking, literacy works did not aspire to the formal coherence and progressive content valued by Lukacs, but sought rather, by distancing and estranging reality, to prevent the easy absorption of new insights or the co-option of the work of art by consumer society. Modernists try to disrupt and fragment the picture of modern life rather than master its dehumanizing mechanisms. Lukacs could see only symptoms of decay in this kind of art and could not recognize its power to reveal and ‘defamiliarize’ from its own antagonistic, non-conformist position. Proust’s use of ‘monologue interior’ does not just reflect an alienated individualism, but both grasps a ‘truth’ about modern society and enables us to see that the alienation is part of an objective social reality. In a complex essay on Samuel Beckett’s Endgame, Adorno meditates on
the ways in which Beckette uses form to evoke the emptiness of modern culture. Despite the catastrophes and degradations of twentieth-century history, the play suggests, we persist in believing as if nothing has changed. We persist in our belief in the old truths of the unity and substantiality of the individual or the meaningfulness of language. The play presents characters who possess only the hollow shells of individuality and the fragmented clichés of a language. The absurd discontinuities of discourse, the pared–down characterization and plotlessness, all contribute to the aesthetic effect of distancing the reality to which the play alludes, thereby giving us a ‘negative’ knowledge of modern society.

The Marxist theories we have discussed so far do not assign a central role to language. Language has never found a place in the Marxian dialectic. Mikhail Bakhtin and a few other Russian formalists developed a theory in the 1920’s which maintains that ideology is made of language in the form of linguistic signs. Ideology is the material embodiment of social interaction. Language is a social activity. Literature is itself an ideology, which reflects another ideology, which reflects the social base. The language of a literary work does question authority and convention, and subverts stability. This can be seen in the ‘polyphony’ of the novel, which is characterised by the many voices present in it, none of which is controlled by the writer. The monologic novel is dominated by the authoritarian voice of the writer, while the dialogic novel has many voices. Literature is to be understood as a practice of language within reality. The language of the carnival and popular festivals carries this polyphony. This Bakhtinian view of Marxism treats literature as a social practice, rather than as a form of knowledge. This
language-centred model has opened up several possibilities of rethinking Marxism in the light of the post Saussurean view of the world. Concepts drawn from deconstruction and psycho analysis are made use of in reading literary works, especially prose fiction.

Current Marxist theory is interested in examining the subtle ways by which society works. From 1930s onwards, there is a departure from traditional Marxism, which always relied on a single source for examining social phenomena. It is seen, more and more, as a growing and evolving historical process. The power of ideology is seen to be far greater than the power of the material. And so, literature has its own justification for existence. The base superstructure model is being given up in preference to an examination of literature based on the post-structaralist view. This is termed revisionist Marxism. Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton and Frederic Jameson have made significant contributions to it in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Marxist criticism in the later half of the twentieth century saw a shift away from the reflective model. The major intellectual influence on this change was the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, who is the author of works such as Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays (1971), a collection of essays written between 1964 and 1969. Althusser’s theory of art departs significantly from the traditional Marxist position.

Althusser was opposed to Hegelian or humanistic readings of Marx, which intended to concentrate on his earlier writings, and focussed instead on the later writings in which Marx attempted to establish a system that was scientifically
based. Althusser also drew on structuralist ideas and this alignment between Marxism and structuralism made Marxist criticism more appealing to critics who were not committed Marxists but were in broad sympathy with it or who accepted its analysis in part. Two aspects of Althusser’s revision of Marxism were especially influential because they allowed Marxist criticism to break away from the reflective model – the first was the concept of social formation, the second that of ideological state apparatuses, that is, his treatment of literature as ‘state apparatus’, an ideological imposition on society. The notion of ‘totality’ – the entirety of social reality, in which all parts of whole were seen as expressing its essence – had dominated in Hegel-influenced Marxist thinking. Althusser substituted for ‘totality’ the concept of “social formation”: a structure of various levels without a centre rather than a totality in which the economic level determined the structure of all the other levels. The various levels, he argued, possessed “relative autonomy” and were “overdetermined” that is, determined by a complex network of forces, with the economic base being the ultimate determinant. Althusser defined the various elements of the social formation, such as legal, religious, educational and artistic, as “ideological state apparatuses” and redefined ideology as a “representation of imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” rather than as “false consciousness”, as it had been understood by earlier Marxists. Each particular state apparatus creates its own form of ideological discourse.

Althusser’s theory created intellectual conditions for forms of Marxist criticism that drew on ideas from a variety of sources, such as structuralism,
psycho analysis and discourse theory. The first major literary study in which Marxism and structuralist thinking were aligned was Pierre Macherey’s *A Theory of Literary Production*, first published in French in 1966 and in English in 1978. Macherey, a French philosopher who had collaborated with Althusser, sees meaning in literary texts as “decentred” and not reflective. For Macherey, the ideology governing a work cannot be separated from the question of form since the literary text is “rooted in historical reality” not in a direct way “but only through a complex series of mediations”. Thus history is not directly accessible in literature and so can be apprehended only indirectly.

Macherey argues that literary representation is under the control of ideology and the role of criticism is to reveal history not as a presence in the text but as an absence: that which ideology excludes but which can be discerned in the fissures or gaps in the text which expose the incoherence of its ideology. The critic therefore does not look for order, coherence, and harmony, for what fits together, but rather for what does not fit; the text enables “ideology to speak of its own absences” and thus “to escape from the false consciousness of self, of history and of time”.

Macherey compares the critic’s interest in the relationship between text and history with Freudian focus on the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious, for the unconscious is never directly accessible but can only be understood through interpreting such phenomena as dreams and slips of the tongue. The apparent order of a literary work is only “an imagined order” based on the fictive resolution of ideological conflicts, and the critic’s role is to expose
the incoherences, gaps and absences that are part of that resolution since ideology is always incoherent and contradictory. Though Macherey uses the word “defect” to describe such gaps or absences in the text, no adverse criticism of the literary work is implied since this is where the “truth” of the work is to be found. Althusser and Macherey changed the direction of Marxist criticism. The leading British Marxist critic Terry Eagleton has clearly felt their effect in his major theoretical study *Criticism and Ideology* (1976).

Raymond Williams appeared on the British critical scene in the early nineteen fifties, the period of transition from New Criticism to the moralistic criticism spearheaded by F.R. Leavis. New Criticism and the Leavisian movement had equal influence on the early writings of Williams. Terry Eagleton comments on the British critical context when Williams started writing.

> When Raymond Williams came to write in the early 1950s, the ethos of thirties criticism, compounded as it was of vulgar Marxism, bourgeois empiricism and Romantic idealism, could yield him almost nothing… Marxism had, inevitably, influenced Williams: indeed Marxism and *Scrutiny* supplied between them the formative influences on his early development (CI 21)

Raymond Williams was interested in presenting a cultural history of the Western world, deploying the Marxian matrix. His chief disciple, Terry Eagleton, views literature as not necessarily reflecting reality, but influencing an ideology that creates reality. Frederic Jameson contends that Marxist criticism alone can be
an inclusive and fool-proof method in bringing to light “the political unconscious”, subversive ideology which lies concealed in the sub-text of a work. He takes an uncompromising stand that the political perspective is the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.

Marxist critics are interested in examining human behaviour as a product of ideological forces transmitted through arts and other institutions. Literature does not exist in a vacuum, or as a timeless aesthetic artefact. It is a manifestation of the ideological condition of the time. A literary work might reinforce or criticise the ideologies it presents or encloses. Both content and form are involved in this practice. Marxism has special affinities with the realistic mode of representation, because it presents the real world as it is, without any deliberate distortion. Marxian critics do not think of the experimental mode that keeps the common readers away from it.

Marxist criticism revived in the hands of Terry Eagleton during the nineteen seventies. His suggestion was that texts do not reflect reality, on the other hand, they produced an effect of the real by introducing ideology into them. Ideology is the individual’s consciousness of experience. To Terry Eagleton, literature is a reworking of already existing ideologies and at the same time production of new ideologies. Eagleton liberated criticism from the clutches of F.R. Leavis and Raymond Williams.

During the same period, Frederic Jameson wrote that dialectical criticism was the only answer to the present situation. Possibly the most ambitious Marxist critical study of the past thirty years or so is Frederic Jameson’s The Political
Jameson has strong sympathies with the Hegelian Marxist tradition as exemplified in the work of Lukacs but he attempts an ambitious reconciliation of Lukacs with Althusserian Marxism in a totalizing criticism that can also embrace non-Marxist critical perspectives, such as formalism, archetypal criticism, structuralism and post-structuralism. He sees Marxism, as a “master code” which underlies all other forms of criticism. Even the most detailed formalist or textual analyst, he argues, is governed by a philosophy of history even if critics are unaware of it. Like Eagleton, Jameson does not want to give up the idea that all levels of the superstructure are essentially similar in structure to the economic base and directly determined by it. He argues that such a concept still functions in Althusser’s theory. Working with an implicitly psycho-analytical model, Jameson sees history as an “absent cause” since it does not exist separately from its products, and as history cannot be separated from politics it functions as a “political unconscious”. Jameson, like Althusser and Macherey, does not regard ideologies as forms of false consciousness, but as “strategies of containment” which repress knowledge of the contradictions which are the product of history, history for him being driven by the “collective struggle to wrest a realm of freedom from a realm of Necessity”. Works of art are the most complex products of ideologies as strategies of containment and the Marxist critic’s role is to restore “to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history”. The Marxist critic looks for clues and symptoms which reveal the way literary texts evade the realities of history or refuse to acknowledge contradictions.
What has been striking about modern developments in Marxist criticism is how recent Marxist critics have not been willing to accept Marxism as a fixed system but have moved it forward through dialectical confrontations with other forms of thought, such as psycho analysis, structuralism and post-structuralism, with the result that even at a time when Marxist politics is in crisis as a result of the break-up of the Soviet Union, Marxist criticism still remains a force in modern critical theory and practice.
Works cited
