Raymond Williams who began his writing career under the influence of the Scrutiny group, gradually developed a distinctive, eclectic and independent thinking on cultural, sociological, political and literary issues. He describes his position as 'cultural materialism'. This position, which was arrived at over the years, differs on several key-points from the Marxists and amounts to an approach to literary theory which seeks to provide an alternative to the critical credo of the Scrutiny group of critics.

In fact, his approach, as the study shows, is his response to the theory and practice of literary analysis at work in the existing institutions of English studies. This theory and practice was marked by an overemphasis on the individual at the expense of the social; and it also displayed a tendency towards ahistorical and apolitical analysis of literary texts. In other words, 'cultural materialism' emerged from Williams' deliberate opposition to orthodox Marxist thinking on many cultural and ideological issues and signified a strong reaction against the abstract idealism of the Scrutiny group of critics. Since the beginning of his writing career, Williams rejected dogmatic formulations of Marxist theory and
argued against any interpretation of Marxism in which the human agent is represented only as a passive and servile subject.

Williams’ theory of culture insists that culture does not transcend the material forces and relations of production. Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political systems nor is it something independent of them. Williams holds that cultural practices are of the nature of material production. He sees culture as a dynamic process—always in the making. He does away with the elitist notions of high and low culture and pleads for common culture or popular culture that will ultimately overcome the class distinctions in the society. Williams reinforces the idea that art, culture and social realities are closely interlinked and they are not separate categories in practice. He tried to grasp the whole process of the working of society, of the forms of its writings or the changes in response to history. In the course of this study, it has been noticed that Williams does not recognise the long-standing dichotomy between form and content, individual and society, artistic domain and social domain and between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’. He effects a synthesis between the warring and opposing tendencies both in art and society. And it seems to the governing principle of Williams’ thinking in various fields.

In his theory of culture Williams attaches due importance to the modern communications system which plays an important role in the shaping and propagation of culture through well-established institutions in advanced capitalist societies. For Williams, means of communication are also means of production. They are always
socially and materially produced and reproduced. Williams emphasises that in a democratic set-up, communication is something that belongs to the whole society. In other words, cultural institutions and the mass media should be collectively owned and the people should have easy and unrestricted access to them.

The study shows that Williams’ theory of culture has a direct bearing on the development of his literary theory. His literary theory can be properly understood only after we have seen how precisely it is related to his theory of culture. In fact, his literary theory cannot be separated from cultural theory. They may look separate and different from each other but at the deeper level they are inseparable. ‘Structure of feeling’, an important component of Williams’ theory of culture, refers to the complex relationship between social and literary facts. For Williams this concept is both a practical experience and a theoretical tool. It is a leit-motif throughout his work, providing him with a means of examining history not just as a product but as a process. With the help of this concept, Williams discusses literary theory in relation to patterns of social change. Williams believes that art forms and literary forms are closely linked with the ‘structure of feeling’ which is always changing in most subtle ways. According to him, art forms or literary forms are never created in a vacuum. They never remain unaffected by the changes taking place in society. Any change in society will have direct impact on the development of art forms. This argument of Williams is developed with great persuasiveness
in Drama from Ibsen to Brecht and The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence. Williams traces the history of different dramatic and novel forms and analyses the way in which the formal structures of the two cases are constituted and reconstituted as society undergoes changes. Unlike liberal humanists who emphasize the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the literary text by detaching it from the social context, Williams sees art and literature in relation to the social context in which they are produced.

However Williams does not support literature being reduced to propaganda or 'tendency literature'. The critique of propagandist literature is not a case against 'commitment' but a case for serious commitment to social reality. So Williams avoids the extremes of 'pure art' and tendency literature. He strikes a healthy balance between these conflicting and contradictory notions. The claims of objectivity, 'neutrality' and 'simple fidelity to the truth', Williams would frankly admit, are never realised in practice. He also clarifies that the relationship between literature and society is very complex. The consciousness of the time is effectively present in literature but this consciousness is never directly produced by the objective conditions of social existence and gets in a work of literature through a complicated process of mediation which often makes it available to us through a more concentrated attention given to form than to content.

An important formulation of Williams' literary theory, as pointed out in the study, emerges from his essay "Base and Superstructure". This essay challenges the classic Marxist thinking
on this issue. Williams looks upon ‘base’ as a process and underlines the reciprocity of interaction between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’. Thus Williams does not vulgarise ‘historical materialism’ into crude economic determinism. He takes a different position and recognises the complexity of the process of determination of our consciousness and its relationship with our conditions of social existence. In other words Williams emphasises the reciprocity of interaction between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’.

Williams’ thinking about the relationship between individual and society constitutes another basic facet of his literary theory. He does not endorse the existentialist idea of man as a being estranged from himself and from the world in which he lives. He views society and individual in terms of a definite and definable relationship. He discovers many significant social dimensions in the existence of each individual and also recognizes an active and decisive presence of individual factors in all social formulations and processes. Williams shows his preference for realistic mode of literature as against modernist literature because in the realistic mode, individual and society are not shown as separate entities, one asserting itself at the cost of the other. Neither the society nor the individual has priority over the other in realistic literature. On the other hand, modernist literature shows individual pitted against a powerful and oppressive social system. Williams dismisses the conventional thinking about individual and society and recognizes the dialectical relationship between the two. The same holds true about author and society relationship.
Williams' concept of tragedy, which he explicates in his book *Modern Tragedy*, also bears on his literary theory. The concept of tragedy, according to Williams, has acquired new meanings with the passage of time. Tragedy is both historically and culturally specific and this recognition is itself a rejection of received definitions. Williams traces the development of the concept of tragedy from Greek tragedy to the concept of tragedy in modern times. He shows that there is a close relationship between the concept of tragedy and 'structure of feeling'. The concept of tragedy changes with the change in the 'structure of feeling'. Greek tragedy centred around the royal families belonging to the past and the hero was not an individual in his own right but represented the collective personality of a society or community. On the other hand, the interest in modern tragedy is directed towards the 'isolated individual and his condition'. He is not a representative figure. He is a common man whose fate does have any linkage with the fate of the state.

The study shows that Williams is one of the rare Marxist critics who attach a great importance to the element of language in a work of art. His theory of language is one of the important tenets of his literary theory. According to Williams' language is a 'constitutive activity'. It is not separated from the social reality. Signs of which a language is made are not arbitrary; rather they take their meanings from the social context in which they are constructed in the first instance and consequently changed and modified according to the requirement of the society. Language, to
Williams, is a dynamic process through which social reality and within it human relationships can be gauged and understood. Unlike the Formalists and New critics who overemphasized one element of language (form) at the cost of the other (content), Williams avoids the extremes and accords judicious importance to both the language and the social and historical context in which a work of art is produced.

Thus Williams’ literary theory, as the present study indicates, not only challenges and rejects orthodox Marxist thinking on literature but also offers a fully social theory of literature in which each element is part of a continuous and interrelational process.

Sometimes Williams’ work and his terms of argument and analysis sound ‘distant and unfashionable’. This is because we fail to translate his unfamiliar vocabulary into something more closely resembling our own. It is not the case that Williams is overlooking and avoiding some of the key issues pertaining to literary theory. In fact, he is addressing himself to these issues in seemingly unfamiliar and new vocabulary. His basic concepts such as ‘structure of feeling’, ‘knowable community’, ‘new realism’ and the concept of ‘flow’ need to be understood in their totality and with their different manifestations in his analysis of novel, drama, television and cinema.

His theory of ‘cultural materialism’ can be best understood if it is described in terms of the two dimensions of oppositional address which it sought to articulate: the opposition to both
‘official English culture’, and to orthodox Marxism. In other words, the analysis of his work can best be made in terms of its cultural, conceptual and political means and conditions of production. While making an objective and comprehensive assessment of Williams’ work we notice that he is challenging the existing canons of literary theory. However his literary theory, which he has evolved during his long practice as a literary critic, is not without small errors. But these errors are not of serious nature and they do not weaken and contradict the main argument. They can be easily overlooked if the magnitude, range and reach of Williams’ work is kept in mind.

A serious charge has been levelled against Williams that he is an idealist who could never put his literary and cultural theory into practice. But this is a prejudiced and biased account of Williams’ serious and sustaining work. In fact, Williams’ approach to literature and society is practical and pragmatic. If there is any touch of idealism in his work, it has also its practical and material side. This is evident from the fact that he focuses his attention on the vital issues of our time. He never dwells on worn-out issues which have no relevance to the present. His practical and pragmatic approach is, however, not the same as that of a scientist. The essential difference between a scientist and a creative writer is that while the former deals with the ‘objective reality’ in a matter-of-fact manner and formulates theories and formulas which are fixed and not subject to change, the latter, however, deals with issues and challenges related to life and never offers ready-made solutions to
the problems he is dealing with. The creativity of Raymond Williams as a critic lies in the fact that he suggests the answers to the problems only obliquely. He is aware of the fact that objective reality and within it social problems are always changing and there cannot be easy and ready-made answers to these problems. Williams' commitment to contemporary social reality is very serious. This is evident from his response and reaction to the problems created in our life today by the Industrial Revolution and also from his literary theory which is closely connected with his theory of culture.

If there is any weakness in Williams' work, it is his culturalism. In his theory of 'cultural materialism' he seems to ignore the basic concept of the economic base and the determining position given to it in Marx's mature theory. He sees cultural revolution as a panacea for all ills and evils of an industrialised society. He seems to suggest that cultural changes will bring about necessary changes in the existing social system and he tends to place a low emphasis on bringing about social changes through political and economic reforms.

Williams seems to be indifferent to the politics of race, ethnicity, gender ('one great silent area' as Jane Miller describes it) etc., and the basic concepts such as class and state are also not well addressed to. These issues do not figure prominently in his theoretical writings. Whether or not they figure in his fictional work is a different area of research to be probed separately. His enthusiasm and overestimation of Eliot's verse drama could not
last for long and finally proved to be incorrect. Williams' preoccupation with drama leaves little scope and space for poetry as if poetry does not fit into his scheme of things. And despite the claims of his later work, Williams fails to engage directly with the works of his structuralist and post-structuralist antagonists.

His minor weaknesses do not, however, affect his eminent position as a literary critic. He has a number of merits to his credit and he will always be remembered for the seriousness with which he explored the basic issues of our time and thereby raised the intellectual tone of literary discussion. His genius as a literary critic lies in the depth of involvement and sense of urgency with which he deals with the contemporary issues of literature and society. Contemporary scholars such as John Barrell, David Simpson, Peter de Bolla and Alan Liu all record their debts to Williams even they criticize particular errors in his work. Despite any particular error of fact or interpretation, his work opens new horizons and new channels for research. The relevance of his work will never cease rather the utility and relevance of his work will be intensely felt with the passage of time. Though Williams did not live to see the events of 1989 and beyond—the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the dismantling of communist states in Eastern Europe and the reunification of Germany—his political analysis proved very right. His distinction between nuclear deterrence as strategy and deterrence as ideology taking over from deterrence as a strategy is the hallmark of modern day military and political system. He also pointed out the dysfunctional features of the arms' race i.e. the
military spending may not fetch the desired results and it is economically crippling and unproductive. The money could have been used for the social development schemes. Williams' developed political position and insights find expression in *Towards 2000* in which he seeks to reconcile the legacy of class-rooted politics with the necessary corrective offered by the 'new social movements'. He also highlights the dangers of neo-colonialism, cultural imperialism, globalisation with free economies and open-market system, environmental pollution and growing ecological imbalance owing to unmindful use of natural resources. He looks upon communication network as 'information super high ways' which can serve to form a shared consciousness, i.e. the country and the city are connected and brought together. But while rejecting technological determinism, Williams sounds a note of warning that technological advances can have an enabling as well as a repressive potential.

Since the present study explores only one dimension of Williams' work—his literary theory—we can get at more enlightening observations and understanding on various issues—culture, politics, sociology, mass media etc.—by exploring Williams' vast body of work from various angles. Only then Williams' full relevance and importance can be gauged. His works such as *Culture and Society, Modern Tragedy, The Country and the City* and *Keywords* have come to be recognised as modern classics which are frequently alluded to by the contemporary writers.
Though he had a large following throughout the world and especially American left critics were very keen to be guided and instructed by him, Williams was least interested in ‘academic stardom’ and never made the slightest attempt to form a ‘school’. He was never just an academic but always a ‘fully secular intellectual’ who himself did not toe a line of thinking until it appealed to his independent and unbiased mind. The most striking feature of his work and within it of his literary theory is its commitment to the connection of literary debate with the broader issues of politics and society. It is also marked by self-sufficiency and independent thinking; open to varied interpretations. One may differ with some of his formulations but nonetheless, they are thought provoking.