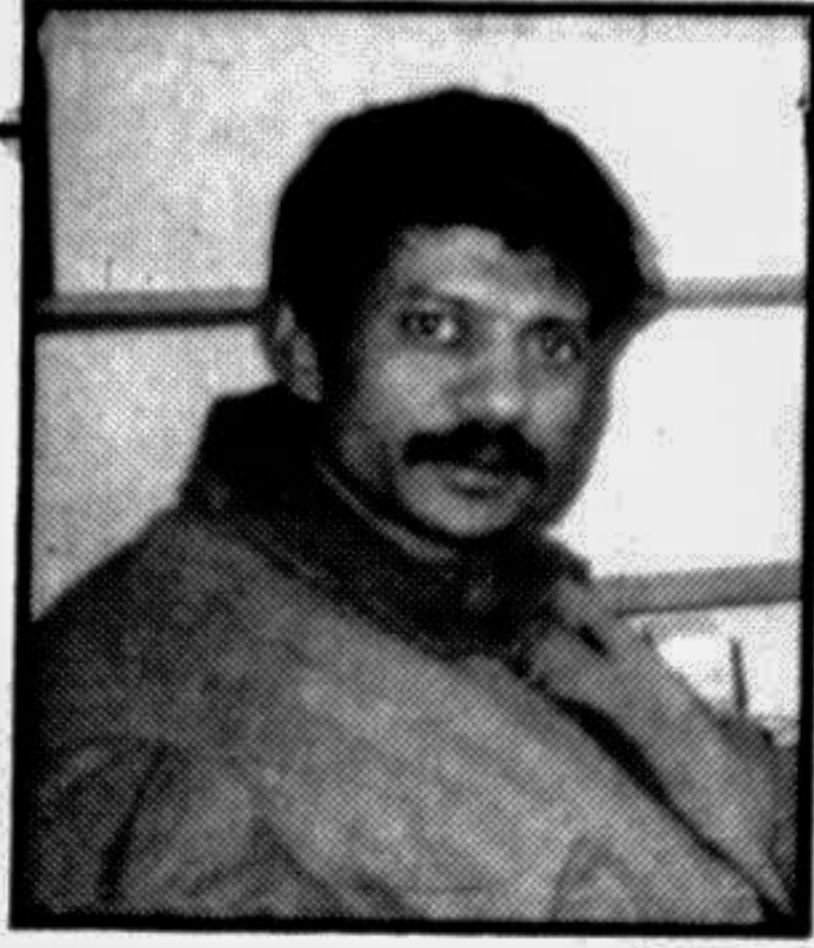


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## Notes on Fredric Jameson

by Azfar Hussain

A FEW YOUNG POLITICAL ACTIVISTS interested in the struggle for social transformation in Bangladesh were talking about Jameson and his work the other day. In my very recent conversations with those supposedly "Marxist" activists, it became immediately apparent that they felt the need for making Jameson's work available in Bengali—particularly Jameson's *Marxism and Form*. Indeed, the need for translating many important works into Bengali is a crucial one, but one of my colleagues, who is also a committed political activist, raised his eyebrows and his questions together: Who is Jameson? And is Jameson at all important for those of us working at the grassroots level? Here I intend to respond to those questions, of course very briefly. In fact, my purpose here is to touch upon some of Jameson's important works that have been both consumed and contested in the West today.

Fredric Jameson was born in 1934 and is presently teaching English at Duke University in the United States. Interested in both Vico and video, in both Adorno and Tarantino, or in both China and the United States, Jameson is considered as one of the foremost Marxist literary and cultural critics writing in English today. Continuously under attack from the contemporary left of various persuasions (poststructuralists-postmodernists-postcolonialists including Marxists, neo-Marxists and post-Marxists, for instance) and certainly also from the right, Jameson himself tirelessly launches his kind of counter-attack on contemporary theoretical issues and concerns (Jameson's recent and repeated response to Derrida's newly designed deconstructionist Marxism is, indeed, a case in point). Both Terry Eagleton and Aijaz Ahmad—the two noted Marxists writing today from two different locations, namely Britain and India—have meanwhile justly realized that Jameson is perhaps the only American Marxist who has been under most severe attack, indeed for a long time, by the left and the right alike, although both Eagleton and Ahmad themselves, in their own ways, had already taken Jameson to task.

In other words, Jameson is one of the most talked-about Marxist literary and cultural theorists writing today—a the-

orist who can certainly provoke and cannot be simply ignored. Exemplifying his almost unswerving commitment to Marxism, Jameson ranges freely within the zodiac of his own interests (although his free-ranging discursive engagements cannot be characterized as "purposelessly eclectic," given his interest in synthesis and system-building even in the very system-allergic postmodernist spaces), and his range is no doubt impressively wide. But Jameson was not certainly a Marxist while he was a doctoral student at Yale. In fact, his writing career began with his study of Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist. Jameson's first book called *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* was based on his doctoral dissertation and was published in 1961. Preoccupations with Sartre's stylistic and rhetorical resources, a la Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, are evident in this book on Sartre, when Jameson was yet to ask that very crucial question—Is not "style" itself political and ideological?

But then Jameson asked the above question, among many others, while decisively turning against the dominant and conventional modes of literary criticism in his seminal work called *Marxism and Form*, published in 1970. Neatly divided into five chapters, this very book attempts to envisage and evolve certain versions of a Marxist hermeneutic through Jameson's sustained and unusually provocative readings of such "Marxists" as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Georg Lukács. Moreover, in this book, Jameson does not abandon his Sartre at all but only rigorously engages him. In his reading of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Jameson, for instance, shows us in a new light how Sartre's own attempt to "see himself" turns out to be an attempt to see "his own class from the outside," or an attempt to see "through the concrete class antagonisms of history." Jameson then concludes by saying that "working his way down through the layers of ideological mystification, through the substrata of fetishized cultural institutions, Sartre attains the ultimate and determining reality of social being." Thus, clearly, Jameson's emphases on class, on historical location(s) and site(s), on the dialectic of the self and the social being decisively replaced the

earlier Jamesonian-Spitzerian kinds of microscopic neo-stylistic exercises that one abundantly finds in *Sartre: The Origins of a Style*.

But I find *Marxism and Form* significant for two other reasons. First, in its last chapter called "Towards Dialectical Criticism," Jameson successfully accomplishes the task of evolving a Marxist mode of criticism that engages literary and cultural texts in terms of their physical-material situatedness—in terms of their mode of production that is not at all dissociated from, but is profoundly implicated in, the active and interactive forces of history. In other words, with *Marxism and Form*, Jameson succeeds in playing a historical role as a theorist by introducing a tradition of dialectical Marxist literary theory to the English-speaking world. Indeed, somewhat earlier, Jameson deeply realized that the American theory absolutely lacked what he calls "the dialectical habit of thinking," and it is with this very realization that Jameson turned to Marxism at that point of time in history. Now, the second significant aspect of *Marxism and Form* seems to reside in Jameson's apparently marginal note on the possible—and certainly underdeveloped—theoretical links between Mao Tse-Tung and Gramsci. Indeed, this note, rather a clever hint, has often been lost sight of by numerous Jameson-critics, while the Mao-Gramsci connections in the context of historical-materialist cultural critiques have been profitably explored only recently in Chinese cultural studies. One need, for instance, look only at the most recent issue of *New Literary History* devoted exclusively to the topic of "Chinese Cultural Studies and the West."

While Jameson's real Marxist cultural criticism began in the early seventies, his other Marxist works include *The Prison-House of Language* (1972), *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) and *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). He has also several volumes of essays, the most notable ones among them being *The Ideologies of Theory* (1988) and *Signatures of the Visible* (1991). He has also a book on Adorno called *Late Marxism* (1990) and a book on film and visual

culture called *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992).

Given Jameson's wide range of engagements in his books somewhat randomly listed above, it is virtually impossible to deal with all of them, even briefly, within my space-limit here. I will, therefore, only quickly touch upon some significant trajectories of Jameson's two works which I find crucially important for a number of reasons that I will state later. These two works include *The Political Unconscious* and *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

As was already indicated, Jameson is interested not only in literary criticism but also in diverse cultural studies that embrace science fiction, film, magical narratives, painting, and even architecture. But what particularly characterizes Jameson, despite his diversity of concerns, is his unmistakable penchant for "theoretical synthesis"—an inclination that Jameson seems to inherit from the Hegelian tradition of Marxism itself. Douglas Kellner, perhaps the most notable Jameson-critic writing today, justly observes that "Jameson's theoretical synthesis is most systematically presented in *The Political Unconscious*." Now this very notion of "the political unconscious" that Jameson envisages and engages in terms of various cultural productions is inspired and informed by certain Lukácsian insights. Indeed, Jameson, almost in the manner of Lukács, engages the entire history of literary and cultural forms—and also modes of subjectivity—in an attempt to show how a given narrative, for instance, can be excavated and re-excavated to the extent that it can reveal certain "buried" or "concealed" forms and narratives that further reveal what Jameson calls "the political unconscious." Indeed, thus begins Jameson's massive hermeneutical project which, as Kellner further points out, "boldly attempts to establish Marxist literary criticism as the most all-inclusive and comprehensive theoretical framework." The notion of "the political unconscious," understandably, has meanwhile inspired many political readings of various cultural forms and texts, establishing Jameson as a master of a "double hermeneutic" of ideology and utopia, a hermeneutic that digs up buried forms and also critiques ideol-

ogy but does not dispense with utopian moments which are, in fact, preserved to the end. In fact, with *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson has done important work in making it more difficult for conservatives to mask their political interpretations as neutral, commonsensical, transcendental, or purely aesthetic, and in making oppositional voices a part of the curriculum.

Now to move on from Jameson's "double hermeneutic" to his work on "postmodernism" is to face that very familiar debate on the "postmodern condition" itself—a debate which is still continuing in the metropolis. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* is also a massive work of cultural criticism in which Jameson's provocative thesis is that "postmodernism" is nothing less than the "cultural dominant" corresponding to and aiding the (re)production of "late capitalism." For Jameson, in other words, "postmodernism" is the culture that emerges from mass-mediated, multinational capitalist production, a culture he reads as a virtually seamless web of hegemonic form. He argues, therefore, that "every position on postmodernism in culture...is also and necessarily an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capital."

But there are many theorists and critics, located both in the metropolis and outside it, who do not—and would not—underwrite Jameson's homogenizing, macro-narrative of "postmodernism" envisaged as the cultural/superstructural logic of the base called "late capitalism," because there are reasons to believe that "postmodernism" is not a universal, monolithic, homogeneous category always neatly explainable in terms of a linearist model of the base-superstructure relationship (Marx's base-superstructure paradigm, however, is much more complex and much more both alien and disruptively dialectical than some Marxists have possibly imagined). Also, one has reasons to believe that numerous, conflicting versions of postmodernism are still being produced from different spaces with different political vectors and valences. Yet, while looking at this scene of differences and correspondences, one can easily recognize the fact (here Jameson will prove par-

ticularly useful) that there are certainly some, if not all, versions of postmodernism which bear the ideological traces of what Jameson calls, invoking Mandel, "late capitalism."

Although we have so far engaged issues and concerns from Jameson's work extremely selectively and inadequately, it is not difficult to realize at this point that Jameson's "double hermeneutic" cannot be uncritically or unproblematically appropriated in our context, nor can that hermeneutic be uncritically dismissed. Certainly, Jameson's context is radically different from ours, and Jameson's kind of Marxism is predominantly Hegelian-Lukácsian in nature, while the tradition of such Marxism is virtually absent in our parts of the world (we are used, for instance, to Leninist-Maoist kinds of Marxism).

But, then, Jamesonian Marxism can, to an extent, provide an effective hermeneutic in the service of a global anti-imperialist struggle; while, again, that hermeneutic, however clever and tactful, will surely fail to interpret what can be called "local knowledges." Moreover, for our understanding of what is going on at the discursive-ideological levels in the metropolis, and for our understanding of certain versions of postmodernism and late capitalism today, Jameson can certainly be used positively. But then I see at least two immediate dangers with regard to Jameson's "Marxism" and his hermeneutical methodologies. Firstly, they run the risk of homogenizing the diversity and complexity of issues and sites of struggles (Aijaz Ahmad's critique of Jameson was precisely directed against the latter's homogenizing hermeneutic) and, more importantly, they (Jamesonian methodologies and agenda) are almost blind to issues of gender and race (indeed, the most crucial challenge for any kind of Marxism today is how it addresses and accommodates issues of gender and race side-by-side with the issue of class). Secondly, to remind ourselves of Gramsci, Marxism without "organizations" only tends to be nothing but academic hot air, and Jamesonian Marxism—and by extension, academic American Marxism—suffer from their relative isolation from any concrete political struggle. ■

### poems

#### Summer Prelude

by Shawkat Haider

Amidst summer provocation  
And dismal conversations, in one of these  
Days, reverberating Eliot's cruelty  
That ascends my exhausted afternoon  
In Certain submission,  
My principles of waywardness  
Filled with murmuring fern, purposefully,  
I don't wish a flickering sun  
Among some commotion of hyacinth  
I know that would convey some peace  
To the crippled anthem of gloaming  
To my impassioned hiatus  
Making dull promises  
Or Hurling pains on forgotten streets  
When flaws of neonlights reappear.  
And they all grow in a twist of thought  
Like unswerving ashes of moon;  
I wonder how I recall  
I arrange them all, in concave earth  
By little argument of awful rillery  
Pondered in languid imaginations  
And that lingers my precision:  
The dried lips and green grasses  
And fabulous rhythm digging memories.

Here the tinted roses glow  
For the arid conundrum of stones  
With voices coming back for  
The revelation in cerulean horizon  
"Do I kindle the trodden fire?"  
Still, the assertive magpie hurts.

Then, my frail wishes  
Put veil on resurrected rooms  
Of instinct, in leisure of vacant morn  
And fearless among airy sports;  
Inside my quiet sandbar, I feel  
Birds emerging from ether with  
Clamors beneath the wind, as if  
Frowning at my seasoned tune.  
I let the whim of time  
Feel the passion of summer

Touching wounded brooks and erected light  
For the melted and dried, known to mountains  
While on the margin of solemn horizon  
Thoughtful meadows in animation  
Grasping a furor of leaden sky.  
But our souls decayed  
Losing bright geranium in terror  
The lust in vivid arms  
Flocking beauties of white satin  
And desperate caresses of mounds  
Unclasp an arcane life for  
A prelude to new disaster.

Now, the damp amusement in sedges  
Meddling with peeled temptations  
Evacuating mundane faces on rocks  
For it revives the carnal skeletons  
So tempting at invisible forms where  
I seize a make-believe heaven, and  
Not a remembrance of dwelling  
In towering love subdued by hi-hopes that  
My primitive wisdom created.

Perhaps the grey city persists  
And pleasantry of unheard-of dust  
Tenders hard days' welcome to the  
Buoyant clouds where childhood arrives  
Bringing innocence of autumn-gourd,  
Of our immutable language.

The cheerless oyster laments a day  
with clutches at straws, propagating whispers  
Of derelict vacation I gathered leniently.

These are the days  
Of faithful dawning, reminisces of  
Unending azure where the music of endurance  
Mingles with thunder in morn.  
Apparently the dried sun recollects  
Some flossam kisses over erring decade  
Where would and water relieve all the  
Soaring pains in pastoral bondage.

And I know  
That would winnow my sane perception  
Drifting like valleys; and the slender stars  
Queuing for a long satire  
To admit the sinful wishes.

Shall I be aware of that flutter  
Wrecking immaculate nights  
At portals of severed moon  
Where I created flakes of requiem  
And when the sediments of dull window  
Rush in a copper-frenzy  
Grabbing remnants of beautiful nuisance—  
Like I'm deluded again  
By wide, April-concupiscence  
The owl-light reanimates an worn-out song.

But from a leisure of self-complacency  
I accumulate enlightened petal  
Of beautiful dreaming  
Unnerving moth-eaten cities and graceful fleshes  
Even a decor of sonic emotion  
Once scattered in wind-blown plumes  
Doesn't heal the unaccustomed youth.

While my idle conscience, awake in eastern wind  
And polished in inevitable tears,  
I fall on to the doubt  
Audible like wavering pebbles  
Breaking promises one by one  
Till our disgusted meteor perishes  
For the barren earth to fill  
For the swollen river to roar  
In shimmer of ephemeral love.

And today's freedom would lurk  
In our souls narrated by breezy humor  
With erosions of vast cloud  
Of some epic earnestness  
Revealing long summer-solitude, willingly.

Sleep won't come and cover my eyes —  
I lie on my bed  
In the spring night —  
It must be late!  
Over there you can hear the ocean sound,  
Up above is the skylight,

Birds talk to each other in the sky.  
And then where into the sky do they disappear?  
The whiff of their wings waft down in the wind.

My body savours the taste of the spring night,  
My eyelids won't shut;  
Through the window starlight drifts in,  
The moist sea breeze  
Revives my heart;  
All around me people sleep everywhere —  
Whose time is it now to cast anchor on this ocean shore?

On that side of the ocean — on its far shore  
Over some polar peak  
These birds flew;  
Till blizzards drove them away  
And forced them to descend in flocks on the ocean —  
As man falls into the unknown bourn of death.  
Within tawny — golden — white — speckled wings  
In small breasts like rubber balls  
Beat their hearts —  
A truth as fathomless  
As death spread over thousands of miles of the ocean!  
There is life somewhere — the taste for life remains,  
Rivers run — not the salt spray of the ocean  
Have their bouncy ball like hearts  
Known as the one truth —  
Breasting their way towards hope, leaving the chill of  
winter behind  
They arrive.

And then flying to some field  
With their mates  
What is it that they say to each other in the skies above?  
The time for their first eggs to hatch have come!

Savouring the fragrance of the earth meant surviving  
many salt seas,  
The taste of love and love's child  
And the delights of the nest  
Run deep — very deep.

This spring night  
Sleep won't come and cover my eyes  
Over there you can hear the ocean sound  
The skylight is up above.  
And birds talk to each other in the skies.

Translated by Pakrul Alam

#### The Birds

by Jibananda Das

