

Lecture Notes : 02

B.A. (HONS.) ENGLISH SEMESTER -II

PAPER- I: LITERARY TERMS & MOVEMENTS (CODE: ENG- 201)

UNIT-III DRAMA/THEATRE

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AGITPROP THEATRE

Agitprop has acquired wider currency and is used as a comprehensive term to describe politically combative or oppositional art. It is a portmanteau term (also agit-prop) coined in 1938, which meant "political propaganda in the arts or literature." It is derived from Russian *agitatsiya* ("agitation" from French *agitation* + propaganda from German) which conveys the terse telegraphic efficiencies of Bolshevik bureaucratic rhetoric. Considered both as a mode of artistic production and a set of formal characteristics, agitprop had an immense impact on modernist cultural practice, particularly in graphic design, visual art, and theatre.

Agitprop theatre is a form of theatre animation designed to raise the audience's consciousness of a political or social situation. It emerged after the Russian revolution in 1917 and developed mainly in the Soviet Union and in Germany between 1919 and 1932–1933 (when socialist realism was introduced by Zdanov and Hitler took power). It had little success in France; its sole publication *Scène ouvrière* had only a fleeting existence.

Agitprop has its distant ancestors in baroque Jesuit theatre and in the Spanish and Portuguese *auto sacramental*, which contained exhortations to action. But agitprop is much more radical in its desire to serve as a political instrument for an ideology, whether one in opposition (as in Germany or the United States) or one propagated by the governing power (Russia in 1920s). This is clearly a leftist ideology, with its criticism of bourgeois domination, initiation to Marxism, and attempts to promote a socialist or communist society.

The main contradictions of this critical movement is that it is sometimes at the service of a certain political line striving to prevail (as in Germany), or at times, at the mercy of the directives from above that are to be disseminated and made to triumph (as in the Soviet Union). Depending on its political status, agitprop is therefore, expected to lead to invent forms and discourses or to apply a programme that it did not necessarily refine itself, and from which it may wish to distance itself. This explains its fragility and diversity as a hybrid genre that is both theatrical and political.

In its connections to current political events, agitprop theatre appears above all as an ideological activity rather than a new artistic form. It proclaims its desire for immediate action by defining itself as “agitatory play rather than theatre” or as “information plus stage effects”. Its ephemeral and periodical nature makes it difficult for the researcher to follow: text is only one means among many of stirring political awareness, and it is relayed by just gestural and stage effects that are intended to be as clear and direct as possible-hence its attraction to the circus, pantomime, buffoonery and cabaret.

By giving priority to the easily comprehensible and visualisable political message, agitprop allows itself neither the time nor the means to create a new genre and an ideal type; it is often nothing but a “steamroller” with no subtlety. Its forms and borrowings are as constantly changing as its contents, varying greatly from one country to another according to cultural tradition. Most often, “agitator-propagandists” base their work, albeit in a critical way, on such traditions as *commedia dell’arte*, circus or melodrama. The “inferior” genres, such as circus or pantomime, are quite effective, as they are very popular and supply a familiar form for new or revolutionary contents. Even when the play is so elaborate as to tell a story embodied by characters, it holds on to a direct, simplified plot that leads to clear conclusions. *The Lehrstück* (a didactic play that is a “sophisticated” form of agitprop-the works of Brecht being the clearest examples) meets the same simple or simplistic criteria. It is often called the “living newspaper”. A political revue made up of barely dramatised numbers and “news flashes” provides the through-line for the agitprop play. A *chorus* of storytellers or singers sums up and “inculcates” the political lessons or slogans. Art may even come into play, when agitprop is inspired by and inspires avant-garde movements.(Futurism,Constructivism) and mobilises artists such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Bertolt Brecht or Erwin Piscator.

Ajitprop theatre appears suddenly at the time of acute political upheaval, when the humanist and “bourgeois” heritage seems irrelevant and dated. It disappears just as rapidly once the situation has stabilised (in Fascism and Stalinism, but also in a liberalism capable of withstanding any shock), or once authorities no longer tolerate any questioning or statement. When its message begins to lose its relevance, agitprop tends to become too repetitive -it makes the audience laugh or squirm rather than helping them “progress” ideologically. To avoid this pitfall new forms of agitprop theatre

(like Teatro Campesino, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Bread and Puppet) try not to be too schematic and take pains with the artistic presentation of their radical political message. They realise perhaps that even the most inspired political speech can only convince if the actors keep in mind the aesthetic and formal dimension of the text and its stage performance.

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