

BOOK-REVIEW

Dr. Bashabi Fraser's *The Ramayana: A Stage Play and A Screen Play*

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To condense an epic of 24000 verses into a limited sphere without causing any harm to the age old sentiments that is associated with it is not a very easy task. However, Professor Emerita Dr. Bashabi Fraser in her book *The Ramayana: A Stage Play and A Screen Play* has done the above mentioned task commendably. As Professor Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay states in the Introduction of the book, 'Fraser has successfully transformed the epical into the dramatic' (xiv). The cover page designed in the style of Kangra or Nagarkot style of painting gives us a feel of the ancient and medieval times. It transcends our mind to an era and before we start reading our mind is ready to encounter the society in which the epic is set.

For people who have grown up in India *The Ramayana* is a known story and our lives at some point of time has invariably been affected by the story irrespective of the communities to where we belong. And for people belonging to a different cultural background *The Ramayana* has always been a hazy spot, almost like an 'exotic' landscape full of Gods and sages, demons and the ultimate triumph of the good over the evil. Fraser in her storytelling has catered to both the above mentioned groups. Her form of storytelling is simple yet elegant, short but does not hamper the essence of the story in any way all the while marking the relevancy of the story in today's world. It is a book which will keep you glued to the pages, a story known will unfold before you in various unknown aspects and will hold all your attention till the last page.

Fraser has completely preserved the zeitgeist of an epic - the book has a character list which gives the readers a short bio-note about their clan; the story begins in media res – in the middle of a jungle where Dasarath mistakes a blind man for a deer and shoots him and ultimately receives a curse which makes the wheel of fate and destiny revolve.

The stage play, told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator is an excellent and effective adaptation. The intelligent division of the scenes into various acts keeps our interest intact and makes it easier for us to perform the play. Even while reading, the short and crisp dialogues and the apt breakup of scenes plays out like a play in our head. We can actually visualise the events and hear the conversations between the characters - Ram and Lakshman fighting with the demons, the grand marriage ceremony of the four prince brothers of the Kosala kingdom, the desolate condition of Dasaratha when he was forced to banish Ram, his favourite son, into the forest for 14 years and make his younger son Bharata king to keep his promise to his second wife, Kaikeyi. The war scenes are replete with powerful imagery, 'a missile misses Ram as Lakshman's arrow diverts it' (Fraser 11) and Fraser has brought about various contemporary references which help the readers to connect with the actions 'beer belly' (Fraser 19). The use of modern equipments like back screen to project certain events juxtaposes the ancient and the modern but does not cause any damage to the pace of reading.

The various mythological characters have been described in mere one-liners so as to not confuse the readers with too much information but are enough to mark out distinctly the characteristics that make each and every one of them unique. The author has not burdened the readers with her own judgement or opinions about any character or event but has fully left this particular sphere to the discretion of her readers. The elaborate description of the props and setting: ‘the King’s bed chamber...on a carved king-size bed with an elaborate canopy’ (Fraser 5) and the exact movement of the characters: ‘moaning and shaking his head from side to side in his sleep’ (Fraser 5) and the timely intervention of music helps in imagining the exact lifestyle and the physiognomical details of the characters and at the same time serves as an effective guide if one wishes to enact the play.

The screen play, told from Sita’s point of view gives a much needed feminist perspective that has been long due to the epic. The prologue of the screen play gives a brief over view about the background of the story before the action actually begins. Instead of only focusing on Ram, Sita also tells us about the story of Lakshman and gives minute, yet, accurate details that help in effective understanding of the layers of the epic. And when Sita states that it is not only Ram and Lakshman’s story but her story too we are immediately reminded of the unjust trial or ‘agni pariksha’ that Sita had to undergo to prove her loyalty towards her husband: ‘the story of my undeserved trial which upset everything forever, and nothing was the same again’ (Fraser 88). The screen play metaphorically grounds the relevancy of the story as the narrator, Sita, states that: this story is about a curse and promises, about love and loyalty, about good and evil and a mighty battle (Fraser 88)

making it aptly clear that this is the ongoing trial between good and evil which will exist as long as human beings exist on the earth. Whenever we read a traditional retelling of Ramayana our entire attention span focuses on the bravery of Ram, Lakshman and Hanuman who uses their powers to ‘save’ Sita. But nobody talks how Sita also remains firm in her stand and effectively dodges all the tricks played on her by Ravan and saves herself within the limited spheres of captivity. The last lines of the screen play: ‘But this is not the end of my story or Ram’s story...It goes on...’ (Fraser 133) makes it clear that the story does not have a definite ending and probably this has kept the story etched in our memories for centuries.

Overall the book is a delightful read and an excellent re-telling of the epic *The Ramayana*. It successfully and neatly ties the story and after turning the last page we realise that it has and will effectively cater to both the target groups. For people who have not read *The Ramayana* it will give a condensed idea about the main story line of the epic and for people who have been associated with the book since birth it will bring back a treasure trove of memories.

The Ramayana: A Stage Play and A Screen Play

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Works cited:

- Bandyopadhyay, Deb Narayan. Introduction. *The Ramayana: A Stage Play and A Screen Play*. By Bashabi Fraser. Aadi Publications, 2019, pp. xi – xiv.
- Fraser, Bashabi. *The Ramayana: A Stage Play and A Screen Play*. Aadi Publications, 2019.