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The Ramayana: A Stage Play and a Screen Play

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The story of Ram, composed by the sage Valmiki as *The Ramayana*, is an oral epic that has been narrated through the ages not only in India but also in many other countries in Central and Southeast Asia. It has appeared in Sanskrit and different *bhasha* literatures, as well as in different literary genres ranging from stories, poetry and drama. The epic also is visually represented through carvings in stone and wood, paintings on cloth and paper scrolls, performances like dance, puppets, television serials and every other imaginable art form. In other words, the popularity of this ancient epic has never waned even till present times.

Based in Edinburgh, Scotland, Bashabi Fraser has added to this tradition by writing a new book of two plays that are based on the Indian epic *The Ramayana*, and which had been commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council and Edinburgh Puppet Lab. Narrated in two sections, the text under review is divided into two halves – a stage play, and a screen play. Dedicating the book to her daughter Rupsha “and all her friends who live outside India and have heard and enjoy the story of Diwali,” the objective of the book becomes clear – namely to acquaint second-generation non-resident Indian children with the rich heritage of our great Indian epic. Told in the simplest possible narrative form, Fraser therefore tells us the well-known story once again in a way that is meaningful to author and audience alike. She contemporises the language, adding her own bit of wit and humour without deviating from the source narrative, thus bringing in a special appeal and charm in reading this well-

known story. Apart from the queens of Dasarath being described as Bari Rani, Choti Rani, etc. she tries to maintain the traditional salutations of Pitaji and Mataji. Fraser also narrates incidents with a tongue-in-cheek humour that appeals to present day readers. For example, when the rakshashi Taraka is challenged by Lakshmana for insulting Ram, Taraka replies, “Oh my tiny morsel. You wouldn’t even do as a pakora starter! I could open my mouth and swallow you and your skinny brother at one go! See how he has turned blue with fear” (Act I, iv). Again, when Vishwamitra bring his pupils Ram and Lakshman to King Janaka’s court to try their hand at lifting the famous bow and win Sita, they are described as “strapping young men.” Fraser also draws interesting parallels between the Fire of Lanka and the Fire of London in the stage play. After the building of the bridge between India and Lanka is ready, we find Hanuman commenting on the rebuilding of Lanka after the fire:

“Since Ram has blest me with the ability to look into the future, I know that years later, there will be a big fire in the city called London like the one I started and it will take years to rebuild, with the designs of an architect called Christopher Wren” (Act V, ii).

Therefore, Fraser’s contemporaneity in writing style becomes her USP, contextualising the narrative in relatable themes and meanings.

Though narrated in brief scenes which are easy for performance, the stage play is completed in the traditional method of five acts with several scenes in each of these acts. Act I Scene I begins with the curse on King Dasharath that he will never enjoy the company of his most beloved son after he inadvertently killed the young Sravan Kumar in the forest. The last scene vi in Act V ends with Sita being freed, performing her agnipariksha (trial by fire) in order to free the suspicion of her honour in the hearts of the citizens of Ayodhya. The stage direction ends with the following sentence: “*Fireworks burst and people clap and rejoice, lights appear everywhere and beautiful music can be heard*”(83). In spite of space constraint, Bashabi Fraser does not deviate much from the widely accepted storyline of the original epic. The intermittent scenes and acts are duly described through the ‘narrator’ who recreates the ancient practice of introducing ‘kathakata’ (storytelling in the manner of rhapsodes) and is also akin to the narrative technique of the ‘sutradhar’, the introducer, who often foreshadows the event and helps bind together the interconnected threads of the dramatic events. He also often summarizes the events in the third person.

When we come to the second section of the text that is narrated as a screen play, we find Fraser even more innovative by making Sita the narrator. In the Prologue Sita states:

“This is Ram’s story, the eldest and most beloved son of King Dasharath. ...this story goes back a long, long time, but it seems it happened only yesterday. ...it is my story too, for at the centre of my husband, Ram’s story is the story of my undeserved trial which upset everything forever, and nothing was the same again”(87-88).”

Sita as the narrator further elaborates that “the story is about a curse and promises, about love and loyalty, about good and evil and a mighty battle.” Since it is easier to make frequent changes of time and place in a screenplay, Fraser’s narrative method in this section is much more concise, but she manages to retain the main story line in a much more dramatic way. The concluding line of the screenplay narrated by Sita is rather significant and open-ended when she says, “But this is not the end of my story or Ram’s story...It goes on...” (133).

According to the well-known Indologist and scholar Sukumari Bhattacharya, when searching for values in life, *The Mahabharata* stands to be several times richer than *The Ramayana*; but in spite of that, *The Ramayana* has gained greater popularity in our country. Also, complicated family relationships and kinship are found very little in *The Ramayana* which is also comparatively simpler and less significant. When man has to choose a single idea from the clash of values, he has to re-evaluate the inherent moral debates once again. And to respond to it, the reader has to face a moral dilemma which has pain ingrained in it. So, the ordinary man dismisses it and remains content with the simple values of life that are found in *The Ramayana*. This is the reason why *The Ramayana* is more popular than *The Mahabharata*.

Brotherly love, conjugal love, parental affection, duties of a Kshatriya warrior, valour, obeying a father’s orders, friendship, fighting to maintain the prestige of one’s own lineage – all these were practical issues in the socio-political life of those times. These have been emphasised as well as analysed in *The Ramayana*. Also, description of natural elements – trees, forests, mountains, rivers, ocean, valleys, along with descriptions of animals and birds, sunrise, sunset, night, dawn – all add up to the enjoyment of the simplicities of life. This epic also has beautiful descriptions of spontaneous human emotions in various moods and so all these elements easily overwhelm the reader. The troubles of a kingdom do not affect many men directly; instead he has to regularly face conflicts in family values. These values are presented in *The Ramayana* through different incidents;

hence the ordinary man has found a reflection and a solution to all his problems in it. Thus, Indian society has easily accepted the epic as a guide to its own limited socio-political life. With a very colourful and attractive cover, Fraser's book is a delight to go through, especially for the very simplistic way of narrating the story of the epic without compromising on the basic framework of the original text which is not only more than two and a half thousand years old, but has also been narrated over the years in every possible conceivable form and style.