

Special Lecture

Speaker: Arshia Sattar

Date and time: Wednesday, June 5 at 1800 hrs

Venue: Ramanujan Lecture Hall

Title: Finding oneself in another: translating Ramayana for the 21st century

Abstract:

The story of Rama, exiled prince of Ayodhya, god incarnate, has been told in every Indian language for the last two centuries. It has become the bedrock of Hindu culture within the sub-continent and beyond, providing us with a cultural vocabulary that is reflected in our everyday speech, in music and dance, in painting and sculpture. The first English translation of the Sanskrit *Ramayana* by Ralph Griffiths was published in the second half of the 19th century and we continue to translate it today with the same dedication and fervour as that of early Indologists and scholars who first brought it to a wider audience.

What are we doing when we translate *Ramayana*, a text from a time and a place that is far away? What meaning do we 'carry over' and what, apart from meaning, do we leave behind? How do we persuade our readers that a story that was first told two thousand five hundred years ago can still speak to us, can provide us with a way to think about our own lives? What are our responsibilities when we translate a text that has become central to a religion, especially when that religion is not ours?

These are some of the questions that a translator of the Sanskrit *Ramayana*, or any other classical text, must ask of her/himself. But, as a translator negotiates the two languages and cultures that are in conversation with each other through the act of translation, s/he must also be aware of her/his own voice and its relationship to the voice of the original writer. No translation can be perfectly neutral or objective. What it can be, and must be, is transparent. Such transparency can be achieved only when the translator locates her/himself within the text and the context of the work and acknowledges the enormous distance between the time and place of the text and her/his own time and place.

It is a translator's job to make a text from another language accessible to a new audience. This means that s/he must seek out the universals in the story – the emotions and motivations for action, the compelling power of central events, the inevitability of the end as it is. As translators and readers, we can only respond to the characters in the text if we believe that all great stories, from any culture and any time, speak, ultimately, to the human condition. Different cultures might provide different answers but the fundamental questions we ask – who am I, why am I here, what does it mean to be good, what will happen to me after I die -- remain the same.

About the Speaker:

Arshia Sattar as a Ph.D. from the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, where she worked with such scholars as Wendy Doniger and AK Ramanujan. Arshia's abridged translation of the Valmiki *Ramayana* was published by Penguin Books in 1996 and has never been out of print. Her other books include two volumes of essays on the Valmiki *Ramayana* (*Lost Loves: Exploring Rama's Anguish* and *Uttara: The Book of Answers*) and a translation of selected stories from the *Kathasaritsagara*. She has also retold the *Ramayana* and Hindu myths for children.

Arshia has been both a Fulbright Scholar and a Rockefeller Fellow. She has worked with Hindu myth and epic and the story telling traditions of the sub-continent for more than 30 years. She continues to write about and teach classical Indian literatures here and at various colleges and universities in the U.S.