

1 Nostos: Visions of “Home” in the Indian and Greek 2 Epic Literatures 3

4 Where is home and why does it matter? What is needed to “be at home?”
5 This is the underlying concern of my provisional exploration here. “Home” of
6 course, can mean different things to people in different cultures and
7 communities. More often than not, however, “Home” has been identified and
8 described in terms of locality. In a number of European, Middle Eastern, and
9 Indian cultures, for example, one’s last name often referred to one’s place, as in
10 Paul of Tarsus. On the other hand, if one opens to the immense backdrop of
11 immeasurable time, the notion of a temporal, local home becomes problematic,
12 to say the least: for home is provisional, “until death do us part,” as they say.
13 This often ignored or denied reality has led a number of civilizational religions
14 to posit “home” as an eternal abode, apart from this world of “Red Dust,” be it
15 heaven or a happy hunting ground.

16 I suggest a need to amplify the notion of “home” in order to deal with its
17 considerable nuanced expanse. Home, for example, can be a place of refuge,
18 where you can finally rest. *Śaraṇa*, a Sanskrit word featured in what is
19 considered to be the Mahā Vākya or “Great Pronouncement” of the Bhagavad-
20 Gītā (*sarva dharmān parityajya mām ekaṃ śaraṇam vraja*), is usually translated
21 as refuge. However, it stems from earlier Rg Vedic notions of shelter, a place
22 of shelter or refuge or rest, a hut, a house, a habitation, or an abode.

23 The same word appears in the seminal Buddhist catechism: *Buddha*
24 *śaraṇam gacchāmi, dharma śaraṇam gacchāmi, sangha śaraṇam gacchāmi*. I
25 take refuge in the Buddha, the *dharma*, and the *sangha* – the awakened truth,
26 the teaching, and the community – all arguably aspects of home. Now, there
27 may be multiple levels of refuge, one’s home being one of them, but the Divine
28 is often depicted as the final refuge, the ultimate home.

29 Another Indo-European word that corresponds with the notion of home is
30 *dhāman*, a “domicile,” or “seat of.” This “seat of stability” allows for the
31 sacred fire, Hestia or Vesta to burn in the hearth as the central bonding flame
32 for the safe, the secure, and the protected. Such a capstone seals the central
33 sacrality of the land, specifically the land one abides on, the “homeland.”

34 There is a deep nostalgia associated with *nostos*, with homecoming, as
35 well. We yearn for that sense of succor, safety, and imagined ease. James
36 Hillman, in this regard, chronicles how the American admiral Bird, while
37 exploring the arctic, was simultaneously writing in his journals about the
38 secure joys of home and Christmas dinner. Home, wherever one may be, can
39 thus indicate one’s deepest felt sense of belonging. This may include “family,”
40 “community,” “tribe,” “nation,” wherever or whatever one identifies as where
41 one belongs.

42 In a world bounded by uncertainty and death, our world, with its
43 dispossessions, refugees, conquests, and periodic redrawing of maps, like ever-
44 changing weather conditions, there is an understandable drive to lead to the
45 positing of “Logos” as the home, perhaps akin to the Buddhist notion of
46 Dharma (the teaching) as the “Word of God,” “in the beginning,” or some haven

1 where one can truly exist above the temporal fray. But the fray continues, and
2 the epic universe places one right in its epicenter.

3 Epics can be significant with regard to this issue, because one can see epic
4 discourse as an underpinning of the collective psyche, very much in the sense
5 that James Joyce sketched the daily journey of Leopold Bloom through Dublin
6 as (unconsciously) tracing the steps and sequences of Homer's *Odyssey*. Such
7 epic-underpinnings may be seen as the matrix of the conscience of a race. We
8 may imagine that we have outgrown our narratives from the past, but they have
9 a way of circling around again. This may, indeed, be one of the reasons why
10 they are ever being revised, recast, and rewritten.

11 In both the Greek and Indian epic fields "Home" and the nostalgia for
12 home can be seen as a yearning for something beyond the literal dimension of
13 "home," The "resting place," as we will see gets cast simultaneously in both
14 the mundane and the supermundane spheres. And, no matter what position you
15 may take vis a vis "home," you do have to come to terms with it. I look back at
16 Joyce, who declares in *Dubliners* that Ireland is a sow that eats her children,
17 and then goes on to spend the rest of his adult life writing about Ireland.

18 Quite resonant here is the conception of the epic hero as partially human
19 and partially divine. It may very well be that in their earliest forms, the heroes
20 from both Greece and India were all too human. However, in the same way that
21 the zodiac of Ptolemy split into a sidereal one in India and a tropical, moving,
22 one in Greece; concepts of the heroic went the way of their respective cultures.
23 Joseph Campbell's well known Hero's Journey, "Monomyth" model, posits the
24 hero is one who leaves home, but who eventually must return. What exactly
25 that return entails, and where one actually returns to is a far more nuanced
26 issue than any single narrative can encompass.¹

27 In India, the epic hero Rāma is elevated to the status of a full-fledged God,
28 an incarnation of Vishnu. No such evolution quite occurs in the Greek epic
29 tradition, but both epic heroes, Achilles and Odysseus become central cult
30 figures, who receive ritual offerings to ensure ongoing fertility and abundance.
31 This demonstrates how different concepts of home and homecoming are related
32 to specific world-views and cosmologies.² In the West, the polis and its history
33 become the principal area of cultural focus, whereas in India, what is known as
34 "the world" is more often than not relegated to the province of *māyā*, an
35 illusory apparition superimposed upon the one transcendental reality, Brahman.
36 The great heroes of classical Indian culture, therefore, are generally beings who
37 have lifted themselves out of the nightmare of history. In Greece and Rome, on
38 the other hand, history becomes the locus of activity and contemplation, with
39 the great heroes being those who demonstrate leadership, or influence over the
40 courses of events. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, and the cultural
41 landscapes are quite nuanced in this regard. Moreover, both the Greek and
42 Indian epics spring from a shared Indo-European narrative tradition, so it is not

¹Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.

²Brockington, J.L. *Righteous Rama: The Evolution of an Epic*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985.

1 a matter of starkly contrasting one with the other, for they are both part of a
2 larger field of discourse.³ Rather, looking at the sensibilities of home in these
3 epics may contribute toward a deeper and more nuanced sense of what “home”
4 may actually be.

5
6 Hence, this paper takes specific examples from Greek and Indian epic
7 narrative as a springboard to consider “Nostos,” and how its main images
8 reappear in contemporary cultures, and what the consequences of these visions
9 of the heroic may be in our own time.

11 Iliad

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15 Glaucus, fighting on the side of the Trojans, in the Iliad, (Book 6, lines
16 171-175) enters into a verbal exchange with the Greek warrior Diomedes on
17 the bloodied battlefield. Diomedes asks him: "Who are you, my fine friend? –
18 another born to die?" Homer expounds:

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20 Now the wind scatters the old leaves across the earth,
21 now the living timber bursts with the new buds
22 and spring comes round again. And so with men:
23 as one generation comes to life, another dies away.

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26 Homer compares lives of humans to the generations of leaves on the trees,
27 which fall and are replaced by new leaves in the spring. The fallen leaves are
28 said by (Nagy and other scholars) to stand for fallen soldiers. Like the
29 generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men come and go. Indeed, the
30 overarching frame of the Iliad is the looming destruction of Troy, the end of a
31 homeland, causing Anais to set sail to found Rome, a new incarnation of his
32 homeland. Might it not also be the case, however, that All homes and
33 homelands are like the fallen leaves (and that this is our lot)?

34 Nagy explains that for ancient Greece, story had as great a value as
35 “reality,” for *kleos* is referred to as *aphthiton* or “imperishable glory” (Iliad IX
36 413) and is as real, if not greater than the finite time of natural life. In Homer’s
37 Iliad, *kleos*, becomes, if not the antidote to, at least the compensation for death;
38 as fame and remembrance are conflated with immortality. Seeking a specific
39 homeland, and or any above state above and beyond nature, is secondary to this.
40 The great exemplar of such a mindset, of course, is Achilles, who chooses
41 *kleos* over *nostos*, of being ever-remembered in song as preferable to a long,
42 comfortable mortal life and death.⁴

³Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. Ed. By David E. Elmer. Third Edition. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London England, 2019, p. 197-199.

⁴Nagy, Gregory. *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard/university Press, 2013

1 There are scholars of the epic who also point to some very personal
 2 reasons for the decision of Achilles. It has been argued, for example, that
 3 Achilles cannot return home because he cannot return from his grief over
 4 losing Patroclus, much as with Gilgamesh losing Enkidu in the Sumerian epic.
 5 Gilgamesh eventually reconciles with his loss and his mortality, and finds his
 6 way home, but Achilles will not descend to this level. To this day, there are a
 7 slew of popular cultural heroes (James Dean, Jack Kerouac, Janis Joplin, Amy
 8 Winehouse, etc.) who burn brightly and die before the end of youth,
 9 transmitting the epic notion that a short life filled with fame is preferable to a
 10 conventional one.

11 Is there anything that endures through this sphere of impermanence? One
 12 could argue that art becomes immortal *kleos*, or that *kleos* is what endures.
 13 Achilles chooses *kleos* over *nostos*. *Kleos*, therefore, appears to trump *nostos*,
 14 for it has more reality-value than a mere short leaf-blown life. But even *kleos*
 15 will fade at some point, for all leaves are ultimately blown away and the
 16 martial heroic consciousness, which is alive and well, is as partial as
 17 adolescence. Hence, the need for the Odyssey to offer a contrasting perspective
 18 on “*Nostos*.”

19 Achilles weeps for Patroklos and his own father. If one takes Patroklos, as
 20 Nagy suggests, to mean “the glory of the ancestors,” then the connection to the
 21 ancestors may offer another sense of home in the Iliad. Thus, it is said that
 22 Achilles is moved to free Hector’s body by the tears of Priam, Patroklos’s
 23 father, for he thinks of his own father and this allows him to reconcile with
 24 Priam. Such an ancestral connection may offer another type of “homecoming.”
 25 If home is where we belong, then we belong to and with our progenitors, for as
 26 James Hillman has reminded us in his commentary on Jung’s Red Book, the
 27 real task of humanity is to come to terms with the dead (i.e. with our history).⁵

28 Aristotle saw the Iliad as the prototype of tragedy.⁶ In Tragedy, the
 29 emotion of pity is a force of attraction while the emotion of fear is a force of
 30 repulsion. The witnessing of brutality activates the emotions of fear and pity,
 31 and here, the similarities between the Iliad and the Rāmāyaṇa are uncanny. In
 32 fact, the one similarity between all the epics being considered is the theme of
 33 loss and return, each one offering perspectives on this in its own particular
 34 way.

35 The Indian Epics, are skeptical about any ultimate value of an earthly land
 36 or kingdom, for their heroes exit from the stage of the world in the knowledge
 37 that their “play” (*līlā*) is done. The return home, in such cases, is not to a nation
 38 or a people, but (in the Rāmāyaṇa) to an other-worldly heavenly abode
 39 (*svarga*).

40 The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki narrates a story, similar to the Iliad, of a
 41 kidnapped princess, an army that goes to rescue her, albeit with a puzzling
 42 sense of return. The Rāmāyaṇa or “Goings of of Rāma” is also considered to be
 43 the Ādi Kāvya, or the first poem of the Sanskrit literary tradition. Vālmīki,

⁵Hillman, James & Shamdasini, Sonu. *Lament for the Dead: Psychology after Jung’s Red Book*. New York: W.W> Norton, 2013.

⁶Nagy (2013), *Ibid.* p. 274

1 Patala Loka greets Hanumān and asks what brings him all the way down to his
2 underworld. When Hanumān says that he is in search of Rāmā's ring, He asks
3 him "Which one?" Observing Hanumān's confusion, the ruler of the
4 underworld takes Hanumān with him and shows him a field with thousands and
5 thousands of rings. "Whenever Rāmā's līlā is about to end, and he is about to
6 leave the earth, he drops his ring," says the ward of Patala Loka.

7 Thus, in the epic Indian notion, *nostos* is neither in, nor of, the mundane
8 world, but – as in the Iliad - the story endures and is said to have the power to
9 move one toward the eternal abode, the one *pratishtām* that is not subject to the
10 ravages of time.

11 There are ongoing debates about Rāmā's exiling of Sītā, usually in terms
12 of *raja dharma* of the *polis* versus *shreshta dharma* or one's personal
13 predilections. While much contemporary discourse, especially feminist
14 scholarship, severely takes Rāmā to task for abandoning his wife and her
15 unborn children, an understanding of the Epic's notion of "home" can make
16 this decision somewhat more comprehensible, for exile is already the default
17 worldly condition. That is, exile in the sense of this world not being one's true
18 home. This also highlights why the "heroism" of the Indian epic protagonist is
19 not characterized by military prowess or intelligent leadership (as with Achilles
20 and Odysseus), but rather by renunciation. Rāmā is a hero, and is touted to be
21 the "perfect man" because he renounces personal desire, accedes to his father's
22 wishes, and is committed to dharma above all else.

23 It is quite interesting, as we shall see, that in both India epics, *dharma* is
24 the undisputed core value. While *dharma* is not directly related to a sense of
25 home, homecoming, or homeland, there is a significant oblique connection.
26 *Dharma* literally means "What hold things together, "from the Sanskrit verbal
27 root */dhr*, to hold. *Dharma* is what holds not only society, but the human
28 relationship to nature together, and the sense of holding or being held resonates
29 with *dhaman* as dwelling place or abode. Indeed, *dharma* may be seen as the
30 logos, the organizing principle of everything, the refuge of righteousness in the
31 midst of uncertainty, evil, and collusion, and hence, the only true home.

32 The Mahābhārata will problematize this notion, however, constantly
33 reminding the audience "*dharma sukshmāti*," that "dharma is subtle." Before
34 we go further into this, however, let us turn to Odysseus whose trickster
35 intelligence and ability to bend the rules, resonates strongly with the second
36 Indian epic.

37 38 39 40 Odysseus

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43 The Odyssey is an archetypal grand search for *nostos* (homecoming)
44 imagined as the city of Ithaca. This mimetic *nostos* is offered, however, within
45 a larger context that includes an archetypal return from death, an ongoing
46 correspondence between the search for home and the narrative (songs) about

1 the search for home, and the resonance of that narrative with the solar
2 trajectory of going from darkness to light.

3 Although Odysseus is already a hero in the Iliad, and although his
4 intelligence and wiliness in constructing the trojan horse win the day for the
5 Greek army, he is not given glory (*kleos*) until his return home. Aeneas, his
6 Trojan counterpart, also goes on an epic journey, to find and found a new
7 home, Rome. For Odysseus and like heroes, *nostos* equals *kleos*. Unlike
8 Achilles of the Iliad, in which these two concepts are opposed, Odysseus must
9 achieve one to have the other.⁸

10 Nagy discusses how, in the Odyssey, *nostos* means not only
11 “homecoming,” but the songs about homecoming. As in the previously
12 discussed epics, the narrative rises beyond events, however it is conditioned by
13 events. That is to say that the narrative, however poetically suggestive it may
14 be, depends upon mimetic recollection.⁹ Is it (the narrative) therefore a healing
15 balm that allows a culture to digest, or at least to live with, its past traumas?
16 After all, the oft-cited rationale for the study of history is not to repeat like
17 events again. This always seemed a bit apologetic to me. Could it be that we
18 keep stories alive, well, and morphing because they afford us ways to
19 reconsider, rework, and hence process whatever ghosts we live with from the
20 hoary past?

21 The failure of the companions of Odysseus to attain *nostos* is said to be
22 retribution for their slaughtering and eating the cattle of Helios (something that
23 Odysseus does not participate in). There is also Athena’s anger at the immoral
24 behavior of Greeks in Troy, engaging in atrocities of war. The greatest
25 antagonist of Odysseus, however, is Poseidon, who already was predisposed to
26 Troy and whose son, Polyphemus, the Cyclops, is blinded by Odysseus.

27 The Greek epic will *speak* of *hubris*, disrespecting the sovereignty, and
28 power of the gods, as opposed to *dharma*, but there are similar connotations
29 here. The hero’s *noos*, mind or intellect, makes it possible for him to achieve
30 *nostos*, however, this intelligence is not quite as protective as dharmic
31 adherence. Without the interventions of Athena there is no *nostos* for
32 Odysseus. As in the Indian epic universe, in which *dharma* is subtle and
33 pluralistic, that is manifesting according to situation, locality, social class, and
34 the like, the way to *nostos* is necessarily circuitous and many-faceted. The
35 prophet Teiresias, however, will declare that it is Odysseus’s fate to return
36 home, as well as to die, after re-establishing his sovereign kingdom. In all the
37 considered epics here, fate is something that cannot be circumvented.

38 The *nostos* of Odysseus, as mentioned, is compared to the solar course,
39 being seen as a passage from darkness to light, from life to death (Framep.53)
40 in this sense, the drama of temporal homecoming exists within a greater cosmic
41 frame. Thus, the achievement of *nostos* maintains, or is at least in resonance
42 with, the natural order of things.

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⁸ Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. Ed. By David E. Elmer. Third Edition. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London. England, 2019, p. 197-199.

⁹ Nagy. Op. cit. 250-70.

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The Ceremony of Innocence

This leads me to speculate on what the poet W.B. Yeats named “The Ceremony of Innocence,”¹⁰ as in seasonally recurring festivals that offer a semblance of home as the order of reoccurring tradition that keeps things together. Odysseus and his crew, for example, go completely unconscious in the land of the lotus eaters, with such unconsciousness being correlative with the utter forgetfulness of home. Unbalanced action (*hubris*), or self-important inflation, leads toward forgetfulness of life’s greater cycles.

The return of the hero from darkness and death to life and light typifies such a greater cycle. While a microcosm of the passage of the sun, it is also said to hold connotations of the journey of the soul through death and back to life. Odysseus passage through Hades in Homer, is significant. It is in Hades, where Odysseus hears the prophecy not only of his of his *nostos*, but also of his own death. So, is home Ithaca, or is it the song of return which becomes immortalized in liturgy? With the Iliad and the Odyssey performed at seasonally occurring festivals, the purpose of such ritual action may be to ensure fertility and continuity, home as the ongoing generations of a culture.¹¹ Interestingly, Odysseus, is instructed in the underworld that after his return, he should take his oar inland until he arrives at a place where people have never seen the sea. When he meets someone who tells him his oar looks like a winnowing shovel, he is to stick the oar in the ground and make appropriate sacrifices. What to make of this end of questing and wandering? May this be the post-heroic return of offering gifts to society and ensuring its ongoing productive fertility that Campbell speaks of?¹² If this is the case, and I believe it is, “home” in the Odyssey is neither the local Ithaca, nor the transcendental Good, that Plato will later extoll. Rather, “Home” is the continuity of the human culture through the successive generations, and this is where belonging ultimately lies.

Mahābārata

The second Indian epic features home as a battleground, for it is a story of a fratricidal conflict not over the land per se, but over power and the rights to power. While *dharma* is said to be the cornerstone of this epic, it is constantly deconstructed by its own machinations. The hero Bhishma, for example, takes a “terrible vow” of celibacy so that his father can marry the woman he desires, for the woman’s father will only part with his daughter if their issue is guaranteed royal succession. Since Bhishma is the eldest prince and heir to the throne, he renounces his position with his “terrible vow,” one which spawns all

¹⁰ Yeats, W.B. “The Second Coming,” 1910.

¹¹ Nagy. Op. cit. p.23

¹² Campbell. (1972), Op. cit.

1 sorts of unresolvable complications in the epic narrative. Even when trying to
2 do the right thing, the situation unravels.

3 As the battle for the kingdom progresses, all rules of *dharma* are broken,
4 and by the end of the holocaust there is not much of a kingdom left to
5 rule.¹³ Eventually, the epic heroes (for the Indian epic features composite
6 versus individual heroes) renounce the world and go off to the mountains. Even
7 at the point of death however, their ascension to heaven is problematized by
8 their earthly enemies being already there.

9 Perhaps unique to the Indian epics is the presence of characters who are
10 living on the earth, but beyond time and history. The *parivrājaka*, or mendicant
11 wanderer, holds, to this day, an exalted status in the India landscape. Likewise,
12 is the notion that Buddhas or awakened souls, awakened that is from the
13 machinations of rebirth, hence time and death, are alive and well, and walking
14 on the earth. In the epics of India, the dramas of time take place on a backdrop
15 of implacable timelessness. Such a backdrop, however, does not necessarily
16 cancel out the albeit temporal realities of time.

17 One way of dealing with this situation emerged in Buddhist discourse and
18 is known as the doctrine of “the two truths,” absolute and relative, which are
19 spoken of as coexistent. Still the themes of exile and return in the epics tap into
20 our deepest levels of longing. Interestingly, unless you are a devotional theist,
21 the Mahābhārata offers little sense of refuge or home.¹⁴ In fact, the text is
22 considered to be so powerfully dangerous, it is said that one should not keep it
23 in one’s home. After all, if the greatest moral hero of the epic, the righteous
24 king Yudhiṣṭhira, could not make peace in his kingdom, what makes you
25 imagine that you can?

26
27 The issues in the Greek and Indian epics are not completely dissimilar;
28 there are both significant similarities and contrasts. Douglas Frame connects
29 “mind” itself with *nostos* “returning home,” whereas the Yoga-Sūtras will
30 claim that mind, that is thought itself, is the symptom of exile, and that home is
31 achieved through the ending of the mind, *cittaḥ vṛtti nirodhaḥ*. Plato too will
32 posit the “Good” lying beyond the cave-ridden world of delusions.
33 Nevertheless, the story endures. If arriving at one’s domicile is akin to the end
34 of (the) story, one may presume that the story can ever end, for indeed
35 *saṃsāra*, the repetition of birth and death, is said to be beginningless and
36 endless. Still, the deep nostalgia for a refuge moves one to wander. Perhaps the
37 archetypes of wandering and stasis need not be mutually exclusive but exist
38 simultaneously as inconceivably one and different. This is indeed the
39 declaration of *the Prajñāparāmhītā*, *rūpam śūnyātaiva śūnyātaiva rūpam*, form
40 is none other than emptiness, emptiness is none other than form. One arrives at
41 such a causeless state, however, through loss, battle, agon, and subterfuge, the
42 stuff that the epics are made of, the stuff that our lives are made of. Nostos -

¹³ Hildebeital, Alf. *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996.

¹⁴ The Bhagavagītā in the Mahābhārata speaks of a param *dhama*, a supreme luminous abode with no need of the Sun or Moon.XV.6

1 nostalgia offers a vector, a compass that lends meaning to the ten thousand
2 things and allows us to negotiate loss with (at least) a hope of return. As the
3 epics remind us, however, return is slippery, *dharma* is subtle, and conclusions
4 are at best provisional.

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