

EXPERIENCE OF EXILE: HOMELESS HEROES AND DIASPORIC JOURNEYS IN THE CLASSICAL EPICS THE MAHABHARATA AND THE ODYSSEY

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‘Classics in Translation’, refers to literary works from ancient and modern times that are translated from their original language into another language, such as English, to be accessible to wider audience. In this paper, two classical epics such as *The Mahabharata* and *The Odyssey* are being discussed in the diasporic lens, where examining their experience of exile, migration, identity crises, geographical dislocation, imaginary homeland, fusion of time and space, dangerous encounters, tactful strategies, intervention of Gods with human beings and so on.

The word ‘diaspora’ is literally, a scattering, carrying within it the ambiguous status of being an ambassador and a refugee. While ‘immigrant’ defines both a location, physical movement and a forward - looking attitude, ‘exile’ indicates a compulsory isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past. (Jain 12)

The Mahabharata functions as a diasporic epic primarily through its themes of displacement, search for identity and sense of belongingness. While the original Sanskrit epic is a foundational text for Indian culture. The central characters the Pandavas, are repeatedly displaced from their homeland, Hastinapura. They endure years of exile in the forest and a period of living incognito, experiencing a profound loss of home and status. *The Odyssey* is widely analyzed as a diasporic epic because its central themes are forced displacement, a perilous journey home, the longing for a lost homeland, and the challenge of exile with the experience of diaspora.

Odysseus’ 10 years of journey is not a voluntary migration but a forced wandering due to the aftermath of the Trojan War and the wrath of the Gods, particularly Poseidon. Thus both the epics mainly focuses on the experience of exile, which mirrors the study of diaspora. The diasporic experience involves a complex journey of migration, identity crises and belongingness, often shaped by factors like displacement, exile and dislocation. A crucial aspect is the maintenance of connections to the country of origin. Diasporic experience often share collective memories and narratives that includes a sense of loss or alienation from the homeland, alongside the positive memories, nostalgia, longingness to the past and the cultural heritage they carry with them.

In the epic *The Mahabharata*, the Pandavas are tactfully thrown out of their kingdom. They were given the territory, ‘Indrasprastha’ by the Kauravas, in that place, the Pandavas construct a huge magnificent grand Palace. Out of jealousy, Duryodhana wants to destruct their growth, fame and their prosperity. He in a very guileful manner, invites the Pandavas to his newly constructed Palace and also welcomes them to play the game of dice along with Sakuni, who is such a crafty, impish and a treacherous man. “Dice is a game of luck”, said Yudhishtira. “ It should not matter who rolls it. Sakuni, we should at least have a fair contest”. “Dice is definitely not a game of luck”, Sakuni laughed. “It is a game of skill. The player with superior skills usually wins” (TM 151).

Yudhishtira who already loves to play the dice, accepts the invitation and plays with Sakuni. They loose the game and each time when the dice are rolled, Sakuni wins and Yudhishtira loses all his jewels, his silk, his treasury, his granary, his army, his weapons his armours, his shields, their kingdom Indrasprastha, his brothers Nakul, Sahadev, Arjun, Bheem, he himself and finally even Draupadi. “I place Draupadi as my final wager”. “Draupadi is my slave”, screamed Duryodhana as the dice rattled to a stop. “Vidura, I order you to bring Draupadi to the court”(TM 153). Duryodhana

and Sakuni plans their downfall, Dhristarashtra gives permission for the Pandavas to return to Indraprastha in peace, but knavish Duryodhana invites the Pandavas for another round of dice but this time the wager was, “The loser will be banished to the forest for thirteen years. Also, the thirteenth year of the exile has to be spent in agyatvas”. . . “If anyone recognises them during agyatvas, they will have to return to the forest for another thirteen years” (TM 159). With this condition, the Pandavas are invited again to face what is destined to them.

Yudhishtra was once again defeated by Sakuni, was forced into exile for thirteen years along with his brothers and Draupadi. For 12 years, the Pandavas experience exile, migration and diaspora, as they are expelled or driven out of their place where they belong to. They miss their sense of belongingness and they become nostalgic to the past, they long to return back to their native, but they cannot because of the scheming device of the Kauravas. The concept of diaspora has its roots in ancient Greek mythology, where it refers to “the dispersion or scattering of people away from their original homeland” (Roth et al, 2018). Today, this term is used more broadly to describe any group whose members live outside their traditional homelands due to various factors, such as war or economic hardship (Mikkelsen & Johnson - Hanks 2020). Pandavas experience exile, by being away from their homeland for 13 years, where they lose their identity and suffer by being dislocated to different locations.

Similarly, in the epic *The Odyssey*, Odysseus takes part in the Trojan War for ten years. After the victory of the war, he wants to go back to his native Ithaca, along with his comrades, in 12 ships. But unfortunately they experience exile for another 10 years as Odysseus is unable to reach his native. All ten years, along with his soldiers, Odysseus encounters various hazards and finally when he reaches Ithaca, he is a lone survivor, because the rest of his companions perish during the journey of 10 years. This experience of exile, teaches lots of moral lessons for Odysseus who is a real hero, brave strategist and a strong warrior.

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, there are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever. (Edward W. Said)

Odysseus was held captive by the nymph Calypso for seven years. Calypso, who lived on the mythical island of Ogygia, was in love with Odysseus and offers him immortality if he would stay with her, but he refuses the offer. With the Goddess Athena's help, Odysseus is released from the seven years of imprisonment. Calypso reluctantly obeys and builds a strong raft and provides him provisions and a favourable wind to continue his journey home but since Poseidon is hostile against Odysseus there is a heavy storm and his ship gets wrecked and reaches the city of the Phaeacians. Nausicaa, daughter to King Alcinous rescues Odysseus and brings him to the palace, where Odysseus narrates his sad treacherous, perilous and risky journey to King Alcinous and Queen Arete.

Odysseus begins his sad journey of exile, by saying that his risky and uncertain adventures commenced with the wind taking him to Ismarus, city of the Cyclopes. Odysseus says, “Thence we sailed onward with sorrow on our hearts, but glad to have escaped death though we had lost our comrades, nor we leave till we had thrice invoked each one of the poor fellows who had perished by the hands of the Cyclopes” (TO 122). Then later Odysseus was taken to the island of Cythera, they reach the land of the Lotus - eaters, who live on a food that comes from a kind of a flower. “We

sailed hence, always in much distress, till we came to the land of the lawless and inhuman Cyclops” (TO 122 - 123). In Odysseus 12 ships, each ship consists of nine goats and in his ship, ten goats, so they ate and drank plenty of wine, and later reached the city of the Cyclops. There they encounter a dangerous monster who leads a life of an outlaw. Polyphemous, a dreadful creature, not like a human being, he is a one-eyed giant.

After reaching the Monster’s cave, Odysseus and his men saw his cheese - racks, loaded with cheeses, he was having more lambs. “We lit a fire. Offered some of the cheeses in sacrifice, ate others of them, and sat waiting till the Cyclops should come in with his sheep” (TO 126). The Cyclops arrives, the cruel wretch Polyphemus kills two of Odysseus’ men. Later after drinking three cups of wine, offered by Odysseus, asks for his name, he says, his name is Noman. The monster decides to eat all Noman’s comrades and Noman himself. Odysseus adroitly drove the sharp end of the beam into the monster’s eye, Polyphemous burning his eyelids and eyebrows, and the roots of the eye, hence he shouts, Noman is killing me by force. Cyclops who arrives there exclaims, if Noman is attacking you, you must be ill, and they decide no help for it. Thus astutely, sensibly and deftly Odysseus escapes the danger. But since Polyphemus, the one-eyed giant is the son of Poseidon, the God of Wind, he becomes hostile against Odysseus during his journey of exile. . . . the diasporic journey is not merely a physical relocation but a transformative process that reshapes the individual’s psyche and worldview. As the protagonists navigate new territories, they encounter a spectrum of experiences - ranging from feelings of estrangement and nostalgia to moments of self-discovery and acceptance” (Waseem Majid).

In *The Mahabharata*, the Pandavas, during their exile, they sleep on the banks of a river, where the Sun God blesses them with an ornate Copper bowl to Yudhishthira, where the pot will provide food for as many mouths as they wish to feed. Rice and meat doubled and tripled in quantity, as soon as Draupadi completed her share, the food vanished from the bowl. In exile, the Pandavas are fed by Suryadev’s Gift. Krishna visits the Pandavas and encourages her by saying, “Sakhi, the Kauravas will die on the battlefield . I promise you. The wolves and jackals will feast on their flesh” (TM 168). Thus eventhough the Pandavas were cast into the harsh wilderness, forced to confront the difficult realities of exile and abandonment, at the end, evil will be destroyed.

During their exile, Arjun after learning “Pratismriti - mantra” from Yudhishthira, goes on a quest for divine weapons. He travels through the pristine Himalayan forests, past the Gandhamadan-parvat and finally reaches the foothills of the Indrakila mountain. Arjun seeking the divine help of Indra says, “I will need those weapons in my war against the Kurus” (TM 174). Indra blesses him by saying receive Lord Shiva’s Pashupatastra and come to Indraloka, where he can receive divyas tras from Devas. Lord Shiva teaches Arjun the technique to invoke Pashupatastra, the deadliest weapon on earth, “ No mortal knows how to unleash it, nor can anyone block their astra” (TM 175). The Devtas gifts many weapons to Arjuna. He finally feels adequately prepared for the War. Hence the Pandavas steadfast dedication to duty and righteousness serves as the symbol of hope, inspiring the readers to remain resilient and patient with tolerance and forbearance. The author teaches that each individual must face obstacles and hurdles in life with strong confidence and determination, inspite of struggles and sufferings.

In the thirteenth year of disguise, Arjun cannot camouflage his dashing manhood with Indra’s counsel he learns to master music and dance along with Urvashi’s curse, who angrily utters, “Arjun, you are not fit to be called a man. You are an impotent eunuch” (TM

179). This curse serves right when Arjun disguises himself as Brahannala in the 13th year of Icoognito. During the Pandavas exile, they encounter many dangerous adventures, once there was a sudden outpour, storm, heavy thunder, trees were uprooted, Bheem thinks only his son Ghatotkach can save them, same way band of huge monsters emerge from behind, and protects the Pandavas from evil winds. The Pandavas are also caught by Nahush, a cursed snake but he is a learned King in Devaloka, says he is under a curse and will be lifted, because of Yudhishtra's precocious replies. The Pandavas encounter several dangers but they tackle all the predicaments with their reconnaissance and firmness. Yudhishtra's answers to all the questions asked by Nahush, brings Bheem back to life. Nahush says. "Yudhishthir, you have redeemed me. Humiliy is the greatest gift of knowledge. You are a humble King, and hence, your legacy is secured" (TM 194).

In the forest during the exile, the Pandavas are caught by the Yaksha, all the brothers except Yudhishtra drinks water, inspite of the warning given by the Yaksha to answer his questions, immediately all the four brothers become lifeless. Yudhishthira, looking at them asked, "Who killed my brothers?" (TM 219). The Yaksha said, they disobeyed me and told him if you want your brothers to come back alive, answer my questions: Yaksha asked questions like, "Who is heavier than the earth? Who is higher than the sky? What is faster than the wind? Yudhishthir replied, Mother is heavier than the earth, Father is loftier than the a formiddle cook, and we are the ingredients in its melting pot" (TM 220). Looking at Yudhishthir's wise replies the Yaksha gives back life to all his brothers. Thus ingenious Pandavas achieve everything by using their intellectual skills and valour.

12 years of exile gets completed. But still in the 13th year of Icoognito, they disguise themselves, Yudhishthir takes the role as Kanka to play dice with the King, in the country Matsya ruled by Virat, a just King. Bheem as Ballav, as his culnary skills in the kitchen are extraordinary, later Arjun as Brihannala to teach dance and music to the Princess, so that he can cover his wrist marks with bangles and dress. Nakul will be Granthik, will take care of King's horses and finally Sahadev as Tantipal who can take care of the cattle. Draupadi as Sairandhri to attend the royalty of Matsyadesh Sudeshna, Virat's Queen. With the perfect hiding place the Pandavas complete their challenges of 12 years of exile and one year of Icoognito. "Exile is full of depression, past memories of the homeland, feeling stringlet, and full of sufferings. "Exile, unlike, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, and their past" (Said 183). Same way, in the epic *The Odyssey*, the dangerous journey underwent by Odysseus are striking and unimaginable.

Odysseus during his journey of exile, reached Aeolian island where lives Aeolus son of Hippotas, who entertains him for a month where Aeolus gifts him a sack of wind, after travelling for nine days and nine nights almost they were about to reach their native land Ithaca, these men open the sack thinking to be gold and silver, but wind flew and raises a storm which carries them back to Aeolian island. They reach Lamus - Telephylus - the city of the Laestrygonians where the shepherd is driving his sheep and goats. Antiphates, daughter to a Laestrygonian, calls her husband along with thousands of sturdy cannibalistic Laestrygonians sprang and kills the men of Odysseus, thus Odysseus faces many perilous encounter during his return. But he shrewdly escapes along with some of his men and reaches Aeaeon island.

Circe, a beautiful and skilled Sorceress lives in an Aeaeon island, a cunning Goddess, whose house is built of cut stones, there were wild mountain wolves and lions prowling but they were tamed by Circe' enchantments and drugged into subjection. She

gives Odysseus' men cheese, honey, meal and prammian wine, where she drugs and poisons it, as they drink, she turns them into pigs and shuts them in her pig - styes. The sad comrades forget their homeland, thus Odysseus and his men suffer during their journey. Odysseus is warned by Eurylochus, who stays outside witnessing the events. On their way, the God Hermes gives them a magical herb called Moly (a white - flowered plant) as an antidote to Circe's magic. As expected her magic fails, Odysseus threatens her with his sword, forcing her to yield and restore his companions to their human forms. Thus Circe washes and anoints the men with Olive oil and makes them comfortable in her home. Caren Kaplan observes that the discourse of exile refers to the same (kind of) experience - deep emotions that drive from separation, not only from persons, but also from locations and "homelands": "To be separated from the person or location that one loves or knows most intimately is an unbearable condition. Because each living being knows the pain of separation and loss on some level" (9).

From Circe' house Odysseus reaches the house of Hades where he meets Ajax, son of Telamon, Hercules and the ghost of his Mother. Already Circe warns Ulysses of the three dangers like Sirens whose sweetness of their songs will enchant men, hence they prevent them by plugging men's ears with wax. Next danger Scylla, awaits for them who is a dreadful monster with six frightful heads with three rows of teeth in each, no ship can pass without loosing some men, next danger Charybdis, a sucking whirlpool who will suck all the waters, so Odysseus looses six men instead of loosing the whole crew. Next comes Thrinacian island, where many herds of cattle and flocks of sheep belonging to the Sun God are grazing - but if men touch any sheep they will die. In spite of the warning, men kill the Oxen and all men perish leaving Odysseus as a lone survivor, becomes a captive of Calypso for seven years . After narrating the journey of exile, Odysseus with the help of King Alcinous reaches his native Ithaca finally. Thus Odysseus dangerous adventure, murderous encounter and risky journey comes to an end after ten years. The heroes of the epics *The Mahabharata* and *The Odyssey* suffer during their journey of exile, in spite of their struggles, difficulties, nostalgic past, painful experiences, shameful moments and so on they manage their difficult encounters tactfully. The author's of the two epics portrays how eventhough the heroes face issues like identity crises, loosing one's respect, dignity, name and fame, after being exalted as Kings, they face sudden downfall, failures, disappointments and disgrace, but they manage skillfully during their crucial period of time. They miss their luxurious life, suddenly fallen, live a downtrodden life, but with strong willpower they once again rise up with courage and outstanding self-discipline. They fight against all odds and achieve their targets in spite of lots of stumbling and floundering, during their exile. Thus the epic writers celebrates their path of weakness to strength and power which are depicted clearly in both the epics.

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