



# Echo of the Past: Nostalgia in *Ancient Futures* by Helena Norberg-Hodge

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**Abstract**— *The present paper explores how the journey of Helena Norberg Hodge to Ladakh evokes nostalgia. Throughout the book, the author shows her fascination with the Ladakhi culture, which is deeply rooted in ancient tradition. It also shows how her fascination and curiosity about Ladakhi culture is a result of her modern world. It also reflects on how traditional societies were a universal element that was and is part of the ever-evolving modern societies.*

**Keywords**— *Travel, Past, Nostalgia, Ladakh and Simplicity.*



## INTRODUCTION

In an era dominated by rapid technological advancements and ever-changing social landscapes, there exists a palpable yearning for the simplicity and authenticity of bygone eras. This yearning for the past, often tinged with a sense of nostalgia, manifests itself in various forms, from a rekindled interest in vintage fashion to a fascination with historical periods predating the modern age. In particular, the allure of the pre-modern era holds a unique grip on our collective imagination, prompting many to explore and romanticize the customs, aesthetics, and lifestyles of bygone epochs.

At the heart of our fascination with the pre-modern lies a desire for authenticity and a perceived simplicity that seems to elude us in the complexities of contemporary life. The pre-modern world, with its agrarian societies, close-knit communities, and reliance on traditional craftsmanship, is often idealized as a time when life was slower-paced and more grounded. There is a certain charm in imagining a life without the constant buzz of digital devices, where interactions were face-to-face and communication was more personal and deliberate.

The term “nostalgia” was coined by a 17th-century Swiss physician, Johannes Hofer, to describe the homesickness experienced by Swiss mercenaries. The term is derived from the Greek words “nostos”, meaning home, and

“algos”, meaning pain. Originally started as yearning for home, categorized as a disease, the term over the period has evolved to a yearning for prelapsarian times when things were better. Dr. De Witt C. Peters defines nostalgia as “a species of melancholy of a mild type of insanity, caused by disappointment and a continuous longing for home” (Wilson, 1999, p. 297). With the increased technology and rapid transformation, nostalgia today is defined by its yearning for a bygone period that can be personal and universal simultaneously.

Travel is often associated with its tendency to take individuals to a world that is culturally and geographically different to theirs. Helena’s journey fit into the definition of travel writing. There, she encounters a world that is fundamentally different from her world. According to Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, “travel writing, just like tourism, generates nostalgia for other times and places” (Holland & Huggan, 2004, p. 8). Indeed, most precisely to a time when things were very simple and innocent.

Helena Norberg, a traveller by profession, travelled to Ladakh in the wake of the opening of the region after decades of restriction. Known for its Buddhist culture and unique traditions, Ladakh fascinated Helena in every aspect of life. A place which she had never heard of, and showing her reluctance to go at first, changed Helena

completely. Being one of the few outsiders to reach Ladakh, Helena arrived with very little or no knowledge of the region. In the Preface, Helena says;

“In Ladakh, I encountered a landscape that was more beautiful than anything I’d ever seen and a people who were happier and more peaceful than any I had ever met. Ladakh captured my heart, and I have remained involved with the region until this day”(Hodge, 2016, p. 13).

Helena begins her writing by giving a brief description of the wild landscape of the region. Seeing the barren and rugged landscape of the region, she wonders how “people could prosper in such desolation, yet all the signs are that they do” (Hodge, 2016, p. 43). The author’s comment on traditional life reflects her interest in the region and its people. Her confession, “I was becoming increasingly fascinated by the people, by their values and the way they saw the world. Why were they always smiling? And how did they support themselves in relative comfort in such a hostile environment?” (Hodge, 2016, p. 48) shows her astonishment and wonder. This is not surprising as she is essentially a product of modern industrial society, whose perspectives and values are very distinct from a fundamentally different society.

*Ancient Futures* represents a world that lies at the periphery of modernity. Contrary to the other parts of the country and due to its geographical position, the region was in total oblivion of progress and development. Due to this backwardness, the region becomes an embodiment of an ideal past that was free of the complexities of the present. Helena depicts the region as a manifestation of an ideal world that is contrary to the mediocrity of the modern world. This ancient world also becomes a shelter for Helena, seeking refuge from the modern complexities and problems.

The absence of the influence of the modern world allowed Helena to experience a different world. As she says in the Prologue, “In Ladakh I have had the privilege to experience another saner way of life” (Hodge, 1991, p. 7). This lack of modernity allowed Helena to engage with nature personally and realize her essential human being. The author, a product of the modern cosmopolitan world, was fascinated with the region and its lifestyle, which was in total contrast to her industrial world. Helena’s description of the region reflects a ‘cosmopolitan vision’ that allows space for difference. Rather than judging it negatively, she shows her admiration for the distinctiveness and authenticity of the culture and encourages a traditional system of living over a modern. Helena’s ‘cosmopolitan vision’ is not only limited to

embracing and celebrating the differences of the world, but also the encouragement of heterogeneity and diversity.

Nostalgia is prominent in contemporary travel writing, and *Ancient Futures* by Helena Norberg Hodge is not indifferent to it. The nostalgia in *Ancient Futures* implores images of the past when life was free and good. According to Raymond Williams, the tradition of yearning for the past has been a subject of every period. Helena is taken aback by the culture of the region that is deeply rooted in its ancient tradition. Due to its geographical and physical isolation, Ladakh is stuck in the innocence of the pre-modern era. Helena’s celebration of the ancient life and her departure from the modern world show and reflect the love for a pre-modern culture in the modern world. As Holland and Huggan argue, “the nostalgic urge of travel writing derives in part from its reaction against those modernizing forces that are felt to compromise the specificity and authenticity of the world’s different cultures” (Holland & Huggan, 2004, p. 139).

Helena’s depiction of Ladakh offers a compelling illustration of how nostalgia can serve as a cultural reflection, preserving the essence of a society’s past. In the early chapters, she describes Ladakh as a place where traditional practices and communal values were not merely remnants of a bygone era but the very fabric of daily life. The Ladakhi way of life, characterised by self-sufficiency and a deep connection to the natural environment, stood in stark contrast to the Western notions of progress and development that were beginning to infiltrate the region.

This nostalgia, however, is not portrayed as mere sentimentality. Rather, Helena argues that it serves as a vital force in maintaining cultural identity in the face of the homogenising influences of globalisation. She suggests that the reverence for tradition observed in Ladakh is a form of resistance against the erosion of cultural distinctiveness, a way of holding onto the values that define the community even as it confronts the pressures of modernity.

*Ancient Futures* is not just a book; it is a testament to the power of preserving traditions and embracing the wisdom of the past in the face of modernisation. Helena’s intimate account of her time spent in Ladakh paints a vivid picture of a society deeply rooted in its cultural heritage, living in harmony with nature and each other. Helena’s admiration for the golden period of the past is not only an invocation for a stable present, but rather for the promise of an imagined future. As the title *Ancient Future* suggests, it suggests that the ancient culture holds the key to a stable and sustainable future.

The drive for nostalgia currently fueling contemporary travel writing is shaped by two

temporal projections – on the one hand, dreams of a future multicultural utopia, and on the other hand, nostalgic memories of innocent and uncorrupted destinations. (Lisle, 2006, p. 207).

The nostalgia evoked by *Ancient Futures* is not a longing for a bygone era of technological primitivism, but rather recognition of the value inherent in traditional knowledge and ways of life. Helena highlights the profound sense of community and interconnectedness that permeates Ladakhi society, where every action is imbued with meaning and reverence for the natural world.

For Helena, Ladakh became an epitome of the pre-modern past in its innocence and in oblivion of the complexities of the present world. Juxtaposing the two, she advocates for the past for its freedom, peace and virtue, which, according to her, are lacking in the modern world. She criticises the modernisation in the West through the book by contrasting it with the primitive culture of Ladakh. The development in the West was very concerning, according to her, and she finds many faults with the modern world. Notably this complexity and chaos of the modern world leads to a yearning of the “Nostalgia is a means of grappling with modernity’s consequences, a subjective response to the spectacle of change, a prerogative of cultures that consider themselves advanced, a practice intrinsic to modern life: to “have” nostalgia is to “be” modern”(Burton, 2014, p. 87).

Helena’s nostalgia is not a personal longing for a home but an inherent “relationship between humankind and the natural environment” (After Nostalgia 56). The story reconstructs the past and expresses nostalgia for a time when universal values like unity, goodwill, brotherhood and humanity were the norm. “Recalling past splendours as a precedent, it naturalises and legitimatises” (Zhou, n.d.) the connection between humankind and the natural world and desires a return to a diverse and indigenous world.

Helena’s nostalgia is also a result of her awareness of the late twentieth-century environmental and ecological crisis. The changing world and the impact of modernity on society and the environment are the dominant themes of the book. Instead of a world with an exotic culture and mystic behaviour, Helena describes a world of beauty and potential with minimal human interference. However, Helena also showed her concern with the changing world and its impact on the future of Ladakh. The book’s “reverberation between the observer and the observed, the self and world, allows the writer to celebrate the local while contemplating the universal” (Blanton, 2002, p. 5).

Jared Diamond, in his book *The World Until Yesterday: What We Can Learn from Traditional Societies*, argues that the contemporary world is shaped by traditional societies. Following their ancient traditional lifestyle,

Ladakh reflects how human civilization lived centuries ago. The Ladakhi society also demonstrated how cultures are shaped by their geographical and physical environment. In the words of Jared Diamond, “the importance of traditional societies is that they retain features of how all of our ancestors lived for tens of thousands of years, until virtually yesterday. Traditional lifestyles are what shaped us and caused us to be what we are now” (Diamond, 2012, p. 278).

The act of documenting travel is inherently intertwined with the nostalgia of reminiscing. Helena is taken back in time through her journey, when she caught a glimpse of what life was like for thousands of generations. Away from the modern urban world, Ladakh was strongly anchored in the traditional ancient culture that had remained unchanged for centuries; everything was a reflection of the past. Far from the complexities of the modern world, the story of Ladakh is a reminiscence of “more genuinely innocent tender recollections of what is at once an earlier epoch and a previous phase of life” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 70). Despite being a product of the modern world, Helena nevertheless feels a connection when she explains,

“For those few days at the phu, I glimpsed what life must have been like for thousands of years. The closeness between the people and the land and animals they depended on was deeply touching, something that had never been part of my life, yet something that felt familiar” (Hodge, 2016, p. 63).

indicating a kinship between humans and the natural world. This connection also illustrates the thread of unity between humans and the earth, even in this diversity. It also reveals how nostalgia is inherently reactionary, and it exists in counter to modernity.

Nostalgia embedded in travel writing is multifaceted. It is not just about a yearning for the past but also a celebration of the enduring elements that persisted despite the ever-evolving landscapes. *Ancient Futures* reflects the glory of the past with its simplicity, harmony and kinship that shaped its identity. Helena is fascinated by the way of life people live there. Coming from a modern technological world, where life is fast and convenient, Helena expresses her deep respect and reverence for the innocent and ancient way of life, which Debie Lisle referred to as “cosmopolitan vision” (Lisle, 2006, p. 4). Ladakh convinces Helena of the existence of an idealised past that was better than the contemporary world. Being a product of the modern Western world, Helena does not view the region as backwards; instead, she appreciates and embraces it. Deeply rooted in its ancient tradition, Helena

depicts a world that is innocent and uncorrupted. "On a deeper level, this desire for what is posited as a more essential, direct experience is a symptom of the larger cultural yearning for what is perceived to be a less complicated existence" (Tim Youngs, 2013, p. 92). The encounter with the people was more fascinating as they treated her like their own family, and she was surprised at the respect and the humbleness they showed towards her. The region becomes an epitome of a perfect past world where harmony and humility dominate every other element.

Nostalgia in travel writing is not just limited to the portrayal of idyllic memories or romanticised past; it is also a tool to analyse contemporary society. Raymond Williams argues that the nostalgic longing for a past often reflects reactions to the disorienting changes of contemporary society. According to Renato Rosaldo, "Nostalgia is a particularly appropriate emotion to invoke in attempting to establish one's innocence and at the same time talk about what one has destroyed" (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 70). It captures the bittersweet reality of the transition the world is undergoing. For Helena, it was a reminiscence of a pleasant past, a pre-industrial world that no longer exists. A reminder of a diverse and vibrant culture of the world that was collapsing with the advent of the homogenous industrial culture. Through the book, Helena attempts to protect and, at the same time, enlighten her readers about the diversity and wisdom of the past. We can say, "Travel writing, in this sense, serves to protect the idea of cultural diversity from the threat of homogenisation" (Holland & Huggan, 2004, p. 139) and the eradication of the vibrant culture.

Helena gives us a first-hand account of a pre-modern world steeped in ancient culture, a world that was marked by tradition, simplicity, freedom, harmony and a deep connection to the natural world. Given its geographical isolation, Ladakh was remote in both space and time, oblivious of the modern complexities and chaos, a world lying at the end of the "historical queue". For Helena, it is not only a place of primitive innocence but also an epitome of salvation.

Interestingly, Helena does not advocate for a complete rejection of modernity but rather calls for a balanced approach that integrates the wisdom of the past with the innovations of the present. She envisions a future where nostalgia is not merely a longing for what has been lost but a guide for what can be preserved and adapted in the face of inevitable change. This future-oriented nostalgia is what she sees as the key to building sustainable societies that honour their cultural heritage while also embracing necessary advancements.

## CONCLUSION

Helena Norberg-Hodge's *Ancient Futures* offers a profound exploration of nostalgia, not as a mere emotional response but as a powerful tool for cultural preservation and future sustainability. Through her portrayal of Ladakh, she illustrates how nostalgia can serve as both a mirror reflecting the past and a compass guiding the future, helping societies to retain their identity in an ever-changing world. The nostalgia is not just an idealization of the past but also an anticipation of a utopian future.

*Ancient Futures* is both a lament and a beacon of hope. The book calls for a reassessment of the true definition of progress and what it really means and motivates for a future that is progressive, simultaneously honouring the wisdom of the past. In this sense, the book serves as a rallying call for meaningful and attentive action rather than a retreat into recollection.

In essence, *Ancient Futures* serves as a poignant reminder of the timeless wisdom embedded in traditional ways of life. It challenges us to reconsider the relentless pursuit of progress at the expense of our collective well-being and the health of the planet. As we navigate an uncertain future fraught with environmental and social challenges, Helena's message resonates more strongly than ever: The answers to many of our problems may lie not in the pursuit of novelty but in the embrace of ancient wisdom and the reclamation of our interconnectedness with each other and the Earth.

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