



Historical and Cultural Hegemony in The Epic of Gilgamesh

Dr. U. Fathima Farzana¹

¹Assistant Professor of English,
Sri S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur
Virudhunagar dist. 626 203

ABSTRACT

Ancient epics and narrative texts are storehouses of historical hegemony lashed out against the lower strata in the hierarchy of the time. These texts assert that rulers suppressed the subjects because of their culture and origin, thereby forcing scribes and scholars of the time to inscribe the dominant culture as the perfect one. Several inscriptions on clay tablets are coded facts revealing oppression based on income, race, nativity and physical appearance. The Epic of Gilgamesh is a massive historical text that divulges instances of killings based on ethnicity and establishing a history that was tattered and ruined in the past. The epic saga is not just a tale of friendship and adventure but a chronicle of betrayal, treason and despotism. This paper researches into the epic and brings out the cultural and historical hegemony of Gilgamesh who craved for immortality, the immortality that comes with history.

Keywords: *Critical Theory, Gilgamesh, hegemony, Metahistory, New Historicism*

Historical texts have existed ever since the birth of man dating back to the ancient and primeval civilizations that created history in the name of myths and legends. Sir Walter Scott, the pioneer of historical narrative, has given the genre a structure of its own but the origin goes way back beyond the epic of Homer. Modern historical narratives contest history and reveal the truth after the application of theories. Ken Follett, Philippa Gregory, Wilbur Smith and many contemporary writers use fiction as a tool that excavates history hidden behind ambiguity. These are not just records of the past but documents of the truth – what is the real story behind the history.

Literature was born with *The Epic of Gilgamesh* written about 2,600 BC in Sumerian cuneiform and preserved in twelve clay tablets. The anonymous writer of the original epic chose the vernacular Sumerian over the official Akkadian of Babylonia to put down his chronicles of Gilgamesh who ruled the city-state of Uruk around 2,800 BC. The saga was widely studied and translated in ancient times by scribes who lived as far as Egypt. The scribes of Ur and Nippur have inscribed tablets about the reign of the mighty Sargon who built the Mesopotamian Empire with the help of the goddess Istar. Sargon was claimed to have descended from Gilgamesh, who was a sort of Arthurian



figure that the Sumerian states designated to be their hero. Various Babylonian poems about Bilgames as he was known in those states were born from the original epic and formed part of the scribal curriculum of the Babylonians. When King Hammurapi (1792-1750 BC) came to the throne, he made the learning of both Sumerian and Akkadian mandatory for all scribes. This brought the twelve tablets to be copied by war-prisoners and students alike. The Tablet Houses or libraries of Ahur or Assyria have housed these tablets for a long time.

Hayden White's *Metahistory* is a combination of historical, philosophical and literary arguments presented in his revolutionary *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe* (2014). The theories formulated by Jules Michelet, Leopold von Ranke, Alexis de Tocqueville and Jacob Burckhardt – and those of major philosophers – Johann Gottfried von Herder, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Benedetto Croce come together to excavate facts behind fiction. White states that there are five levels of conceptualization of a historical work: chronicle, story, mode of emplotment, mode of argument and mode of ideological implication, where the emplotment is either a tragedy or a comedy. The atmosphere and setting in the work are collectively termed historical field and the people in them – both real and fictional – are the historical objects.

History is transmuted into a narrative through either one of the following steps: (i) Inaugural motif – arrangement of events in the chronological order, (ii) Transitional motif – introducing the element of surprise till the last and (iii) Terminating motif – the denouement. While arranging the events into these, the writer, consciously or unconsciously, leaves a set of trails that asks the question “What are the unique characteristics of a specifically *historical method* of inquiry?” (White 1[1]) which the reader or the critic must find through explanation by emplotment, argument or ideological implication.

The explanation by emplotment is derived from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and warns the reader that the emplotment – satire, comedy, tragedy or romance – is an illusion and that each hints at certain drawbacks in the historical timeline. The explanation by argument is based on Marx's Base-Superstructure model which most of the monarchs understood too well to run their kingdoms. While production was their major goal, they obtained it easily enough by keeping the producers as producers for all time. This paper researches into the emplotment of the Sumerian epic through the parameters of historical analyses.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, first ever to be written by mankind, has traces of cultural hegemony and relative history that proves the existence of racism, segregation, tyranny and inequality. Civilization with all its progress destroys the environment and this is shown in a realistic mode of emplotment. Ancient epics like *The Nibelungenlied*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* all have a similar mode of emplotment. These epics are written proof that hegemony existed in all major kingdoms and that racial segregation existed ever since the birth of man. Practices like tournaments for collecting tax, forced military service, pogroms and droit de seigneur were common in every civilization alike. The



Biblical Deluge has its origins in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in the tale of sage Uta-napishti narrated as a warning against Gilgamesh's quest for immortality.

The setting of the epic is the ancient city-state of Uruk-Eanna or modern-day Al-Warqa in Iraq. Uruk is the greatest city of the day ruled by the tyrannical Gilgamesh, a demigod born to the divine Ninsun but mortal nonetheless. Gilgamesh is tasked with rebuilding the wall of Uruk on its foundations but is distracted with pleasure and sin. The tyrant commands all young men to be his slaves and takes on any woman he fancies. He exercises droit de seigneur with brides-to-be. The people pray to the god Anu who sends the wild Enkidu as a match against Gilgamesh. However, Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends after their first combat. They go on an adventure to the Forest of the Cedar to kill Humbaba the ogre. Goddess Ishtar falls in love with Gilgamesh and proposes marriage but he rejects her stating the fates of all of her previous lovers. Furious, Ishtar asks her father Anu for the Bull of Heaven to be unleashed. Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay the bull as well.

The gods gather a council and decide that Enkidu must die. The painful death of Enkidu sparks Gilgamesh to seek out Uta-napishti, the immortal sage who lives across the Waters of Death. He forces Shiduri, the goddess of wisdom to point the way. The sage narrates the tale of the great Deluge, much similar to Noah and the Deluge. Uta-napishti was a wealthy nobleman of Shuruppak who had been warned of the Deluge by god Ea to build a boat and save himself and all life. For his diligence and obedience, Uta-napishti and his wife are made immortal. The sage mentions a coral-like plant growing on the ocean-bed that can give eternal youth. Gilgamesh dives into the sea and returns with the plant. However, he loses it to a snake and enters Uruk in dejection. Gilgamesh realizes that the people and his city would make him immortal and constructs the great wall. His name is recorded by great sages for his heroic deeds. The Babylonian poems mention that Gilgamesh is made governor of the Netherworld after his death.

Enkidu is a pure being roaming free in the wild created from a pinch of clay by the goddess Aruru; "In the wild she created Enkidu, the hero, Offspring of silence, knit strong by Ninurta" (*Gilgamesh* 5; Tablet 1[2]). It is clearly mentioned that Enkidu, and not Gilgamesh, is the hero of the epic. Gilgamesh, the scion of immortal Ninsun and a mortal man, strong enough to take down celestial bulls, does not have hero material though he lives in a castle. Enkidu, wild and matted with hair, who knows no people and no language but who lives in harmony with the animals is majestic in his own self. Enkidu loses his purity when the prostitute Shamhat teaches him the ways of men. Only after the civilizing of Enkidu, is he able to enter temples and sacred ground. He gains reason and knowledge; "Enkidu was weakened, could not run as before/But now he had *reason* and wide understanding" (*Gilgamesh* 8; Tablet 1[2]). much like the self-awareness of Eve after eating the Fruit of Knowledge.



The Mountain of Cedars at Lebanon is beyond the reaches of Sumerian Gilgamesh. Yet, he desires to kill Humbaba, the Guardian of the Cedars and build a temple to his own gods, thereby establishing his monarchy in a foreign land. Humbaba is a poor native who recognizes Enkidu because both of them had been brought up together in the wild. Enkidu has lost his identity when he got civilized and Ninsun adopted him as her own son to raise him up the hierarchical ladder. Though she labels Enkidu as the equal of Gilgamesh, she knows very well that the gods would claim one of the adventurers after their quest and she does her best to save Gilgamesh. In short, she offers Enkidu up as sacrifice because he is not their kind. Humbaba recognizes this before his death and warns them. Humbaba pleads for mercy and offers to be Gilgamesh's slave and raise rare trees for him. But Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the poor exotic creature just because he was different and claim their authority over the forest.

Humbaba is perceived through the eyes of the Sumerians and his cultural reality is something the Sumerians have given him: "The described culture is therefore very much a product of the particular ethnographic encounter – the text creates the reality of the Other in the guise of describing it" (Ashcroft 57[3]). The seven auras surrounding Humbaba are his supportive clans and the god Shamash invokes the thirteen winds of superiority to crush the minorities. Shamash crushes Humbaba because he does not want anyone to challenge the Sumerian authority to rule over Uruk. Gilgamesh and Enkidu start felling the cedars to construct a mighty temple for Enlil, Gilgamesh's Sumerian god who plans to kill Enkidu. Cedars are trees of life and symbolize immortality, Gilgamesh's wish to be remembered forever. Gilgamesh uses the cedars to build his city and his wall. He destroys the native's identity and establishes his mark upon the colonized.

Another instance of cultural hegemony is Gilgamesh's authority over sage Uta-napishti. At first, the scorpion-men surrender to him. He slays Ur-Shanabi's Stone Ones who supposedly row the boat that takes the dead to the Netherworld. He asserts his right to information over Shiduri, the goddess of wisdom and forces her to reveal Uta-napishti's home. All these people are from outside his monarchy who he considers beneath him. Gilgamesh's search for immortality is actually historical hegemony or the remaking of history to make his own deeds seem heroic while others are depicted as slaves and cowards. Gilgamesh aspires to live forever but Uta-napishti gives him a remedy for ageing. Uta-napishti is fooled though he considers himself a wise sage – Gilgamesh gets exactly what he wants. He loses the plant of agelessness but builds the Wall of Uruk, a deed for which he is remembered in all Sumerian epics and ballads. The Tale of the Deluge spurs him to help mankind continue their domination over other species and even people of different races.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is an ancient record of antediluvian civilization lorded over by a tyrant who loves immortality – the making of history according to his wishes. Uta-napishti uses the art of myth-making and compels him to learn from the Tale of the Deluge. But Gilgamesh's heart is set on reality. He will have his name remembered for ages to come and thus began the task of constructing the wall and writing the epic. Centuries after the cuneiform composition, scribes and scholars of the ancient world had to memorise and inscribe the epic to prove their



knowledge. Mesopotamian rulers like Hammurabi proudly referred to Gilgamesh as their ancestor. Tales of Akkad and other neighbouring zones were suppressed. Gilgamesh managed to achieve immortality that is historical hegemony.

Metahistory designates the death of Enkidu as the colligative thread that links Gilgamesh's tyranny of the past and his ambition to be immortal in the future. The gods do not want Enkidu, a wild man who is racially equivalent to Humbaba, to be an equal to Gilgamesh. This could lead to a change in the seat of power and dominion. Enkidu could become a threat to the existence of the gods themselves. So poor Enkidu is used to betray his own kind and then killed to ensure Sumerian domination. Enkidu is not rewarded with immortality for slaying Humbaba or assisting Gilgamesh in slaying the Bull of Heaven. Humbaba is not rewarded for guarding the Cedars of the gods all those years.

Hayden White implies that the historical field is a "Chaos of Being" (144[1]) where the historian or chronicler assumes the position of both observer and agent of its process. The scribe who inscribed the clay tablets mourns for the people of Uruk doubly segregated by both their king and their gods. The past abandons them and the future is closed to them. Gilgamesh's predecessors left the city in ruins and Gilgamesh has literally closed up their future with the Wall of Uruk. The religious and aesthetic tendencies mixed up gods and heroes to create legends. This is to evoke the "Edict of Destiny" (White 146[1]) and is impossible to reduce into order. The narrative is a process of an endless struggle of the mob against the exceptional god-like man. The chaotic field is a horrible void that will dominate over those who seek to triumph over it. All this is represented by Gilgamesh's voyages across the Sea of the Dead, a horrible void that would devour his historical supremacy if left unexplored.

The different elements in the historical field must achieve a symbolic fusion to make the narrative a whole. To achieve this fusion, all historical objects must move towards a particular goal leading the Edict of Destiny all along:

... the historian must write his histories in such a way as to promote the realization of the unity that everything is striving to become. And the other is that everything appearing in history must be assessed finally in terms of the contribution it makes to the realization of the goal or extent to which it impedes its realization. (White 150[1])

This is why Enkidu falsely interprets Gilgamesh's dreams to push him towards Enkidu's goal – the death of Gilgamesh. But it is Enkidu whose life is taken just because he is not Sumerian and not the worshipper of Uruk's gods. The goals of Gilgamesh are quite different. He does not strive for progress but he is the first Sumerian king to dig for water in the desert, first to fell cedars and construct a temple on Mount Lebanon, and the first king to preserve his own culture. He did not only preserve it but strove to make it appear better than the others' around his



domain. That is where he establishes his own ascendancy – the right to wield history as a powerful weapon that would change the future of his generations and expunge that of the others.

Works Cited

- [1] White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe*. John Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- [2] *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Translated by Andrew George, Penguin, 2003.
- [3] Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Second ed., Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2002.