

Encounter between Man and Nature in the Epic of Gilgamesh: A Study in Eco-Aesthetics

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Abstract

The conflict between man and nature is one of the major themes of Gilgamesh, the epic of the Mesopotamian civilization and a masterpiece of world literature. Gilgamesh arouses the curiosity of the modern readers not only for its intense and sophisticated treatment of ancient human civilization but also for the ecological concerns it shares. Among the ancient literary texts it stands out as the first literary work that critically addressed the issue of man's relationship with nature and foretells the disastrous consequences in no uncertain terms. The legend of Gilgamesh is about a mighty king, part human and part divine, who built the famous city of Uruk and sought immortal glory. The epic narrates the heroic feats of Gilgamesh and Enkidu who experienced bittersweet taste of success in establishing the supremacy of man over the wilderness. The invasion of the natural world for the sake of urbanization drew the wrath of gods as the hero and his companion killed the protector of the cedar forest and suffered divine retribution. The story of Gilgamesh is complicated and relevant as it deals with striking a balance between the demands of an urban civilization and preservation of the nature.

Keywords: man, nature, ancient civilization, urbanization, ecological concern

Introduction

The rapid depletion of the earth's green cover is one of the major concerns of our age. Every year millions of acres of forest land are destroyed. The consequences of deforestation are manifold namely flooding, erosion of soil, encroaching deserts and declining soil productivity. The burning of Amazon rain forests in Brazil in the recent past indicates the suicidal tendencies of mankind. However, the assault on forests began thousands of years ago as human settlements started to come up on the banks of Tigris and Euphrates. The process of uprooting forests for setting up urban centers of human civilization that started in Mesopotamia more than five thousand years ago is continuing till date. The wise people of the ancient era could foresee the disaster that awaits human society in case the destruction of forests goes in an irresponsible manner. Hammurabi, the great king of Babylon, known for his codification of laws, instructed

his officials to regulate the felling of timber and the distribution of its end products reasonably, discouraging mismanagement and profligacy. In ancient Greece, too, caveats were issued against mindless destruction of forests. Plato vividly warned Athenians in the *Critias* of the ruinous consequences of deforestation.¹ The epic of Gilgamesh stands out as the oldest literary work that critically addressed the problematic issue of man's relationship with nature and foretells the disastrous consequences of mindless exploitation of nature. However, despite such early cautions, the anthropocentric vision of universe dominated human civilization and the human society is paying heavy prices for it.

A brief overview of Mesopotamian civilization and its literary culture

Mesopotamia was the cradle of human civilization where human beings constructed an orderly world around important cities. Setting up urban settlements in an area surrounded by snow capped mountains and dense forest was a mighty task that was accomplished by the people of Sumerian civilization. This necessitated the exploitation of the natural resources, mainly forests which supplied them with timber for building houses, temples as well as boats. According to The Encyclopedia Britannica, 'In Uruk and probably also in other cities of comparable size, the Sumerians led a city life that can be more or less reconstructed as follows: temples and residential districts; intensive agriculture, stock breeding, fishing, and date palm cultivation forming the four mainstays of the economy; and highly specialized industries carried on by sculptors, seal engravers, smiths, carpenters, shipbuilders, potters, and workers of reeds and textiles'². The plundering of natural resources increased with the advancement of human civilization. It is very interesting to see how this relationship between man and nature was explored by the Sumerian literati. The Sumerian poet is concerned about finding a balance between growing needs of urbanization and the fear of backlash from the natural forces that are revered as gods. Gilgamesh, the earliest specimen of epic poetry, a marvel of Sumerian literary achievements, draws our attention not only as a sophisticated literary work but also for the ecological issues that it raises.

A short introduction to the epic of Gilgamesh

The conflict between man and nature is one of the major themes of Gilgamesh, the epic of the Mesopotamian civilization and a masterpiece of world literature. The epic recounts the exploits and adventures of Gilgamesh, the builder of the walls of Uruk and temple of Eanna. The present version of the epic contains more than 3000 lines. Of this total, however, barely more than one-half has been found among the remains of the great collection of cuneiform tablets gathered by King Ashurbanipal(668–626 B.C.) in his palace at Nineveh, and discovered by Layard in 1854 in the course of his excavations of the mound Kouyunjik (opposite Mosul in present day Iraq). In this paper, all the references to Gilgamesh are made from the translation by David Ferry.

Gilgamesh arouses the curiosity of the modern readers not only for its intense and sophisticated treatment of ancient human civilization but also for the ecological concerns it shares. It is the earliest specimen of heroic poetry that was written in around 3000 B.C, when the Sumerians used to fight, under the leadership of different kings, for possession of the fertile land of Mesopotamia on the banks of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Among the extant literary works of

these talented and creative people are fragments of narrative poems recounting the heroic deeds of their early kings: Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh. The legend of Gilgamesh is about a mighty King, part human and part divine, who built the famous city of Uruk and sought immortal glory. In order to check his uncontrollable passions a wild man, Enkidu, was created by divine will to challenge him. Enkidu first lived among wild animals, and then he was enticed to go to Uruk where he engaged in a trial of strength with Gilgamesh, who defeated him. The two mighty opponents became friends and set out on various adventures. The epic narrates the heroic feats of Gilgamesh and Enkidu who invaded the Cedar forest and established the supremacy of man over the wilderness. However, Enkidu represented as the “noble savage” had to bear the brunt of divine wrath as he sinned by leading Gilgamesh towards the mountain and instigating him to kill Humbaba, the guardian of the cedar forest, sacred to Gods. The story of Gilgamesh is complicated as it deals with striking a balance between the demands of an urban civilization and preservation of the natural world, among other themes of the epic. In the early phase of human civilization man had to clear forests to establish human settlements. The forests posed a challenge to the might of mankind that relied upon its heroes to accept the challenge and tame the wild nature. Gilgamesh, the hero of the eponymous epic succeeded in this task of establishing human control over the wild and untamed natural world. However, the terrible consequences of this feat transformed him completely and he became aware of the ephemerality of human glory.

An eco-aesthetic analysis of the epic of Gilgamesh

Cheryll Glotfelty states in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) that

...simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.³

Gilgamesh is clearly an ecocritical text as it explores the relationship between man and the physical environment. The Sumerian poet narrates the circumstances in which Gilgamesh and his ally Enkidu invade the Cedar forest, a forbidden territory for the mortals. *Gilgamesh* was written in an era when the frontiers of human civilization were expanding. In the thematic structure of the epic nature and civilization are presented as binary opposites. The nature appears as an awe-inspiring and forbidden territory which is invaded for its valuable resources, necessary for the growth of human civilization. *Gilgamesh* relates the epic hero's encounter with this wild nature and the consequences thereof.

The exceptional physical strength of Gilgamesh makes him confident about venturing into the wilderness. But for success in his venture he needs the assistance of Enkidu, who has been created by gods as a counterweight to him. Enkidu, ‘the stormy-hearted other’ created ‘out of earth clay and divine spittle’⁴ is a wild man of the grasslands, who lives in complete harmony with the natural world and is inseparable from the birds and animals among whom he lives. Enkidu shields the wild animals from the attack of the hunters from the city. His presence

frightens the hunters and they fail to kill the wild animals. Therefore, it becomes imperative for the city dwellers and their king Gilgamesh to either win over Enkidu by a stratagem or to physically overpower him for establishing human control over the untamed nature. Instead of subduing this wild man by force, they send a temple harlot to entice him and to wean him away from the wilderness. The seductress succeeds in her mission and Enkidu is entrapped by the agent of human civilization. This, as has been planned by the ‘civilized’ men, destroys the bond between Enkidu and the wild nature, forever. As the birds and animals refuse to acknowledge him as one of them, Enkidu leaves the forest and is led by the temple harlot towards the city. This transformation of Enkidu from a man of the forest into a city dweller marks the victory of civilization over nature and scuttles the divine plan that went into the making of Enkidu who, instead of protecting the forest betrays the trust of the gods and violates the divine will. The gods do not watch this betrayal by man silently. They take their revenge later.

Though Enkidu proudly proclaims that the strength of the wild man born in the wilderness cannot be withstood, Gilgamesh defeats him. However, the victor and the vanquished become friends as the aspirations of the victor can be accomplished only with the cooperation and active support of the vanquished. The friendship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh is the most important step towards establishing human control over the impenetrable forests.

The Cedar forest remained out of bounds for ordinary mortals till Gilgamesh decides to enter the forbidden forest and cut down the cedar trees for building the city of Uruk. He is determined to enter the forest with axes and other weapons despite hearing the frightening words of Enkidu: ‘Huwawa’s mouth is fire; his roar

is the flood water; he breathes and there is death.

He hears the slightest sound somewhere in the Forest.

Enlil made him the terrifying guardian,

whose mouth is fire, whose roar is floodwater.

Helpless is he who enters the Cedar Forest.’⁵

But Gilgamesh is dauntless and he declares with unwavering resolve:

It is Gilgamesh who will venture into the Forest

and cut the Cedar down and win the glory.

My fame will be secure to all my sons.’⁶

Enkidu, guides Gilgamesh efficiently through the perilous paths and provides him vital information about Huwawa, a monstrous nature god who is the guardian of the cedar forest. The forest is described by the author of Gilgamesh as a ‘forbidden dwelling place of immortal gods’.⁷ The destruction of forest is, therefore, the desecration of a holy place. Tablet V of Gilgamesh

reflects the aesthetic sensibility of the poet who describes the lush, green forests with great admiration

Beautiful is the forest;

Green upon green the cedars; fragrant the air

With the fragrance of cedar trees; the box that grew

Along the silent walks of the guardian demon,

Shadowed and still, utterly still, was fragrant.⁸

This holy and enchanted place is ransacked by Gilgamesh and Enkidu after Huwawa is killed mercilessly though he pleads for his life. Enkidu ensures that there remain no barriers between them and the forest. He provokes Gilgamesh to kill the demigod and they together slay the protector of the cedar forest. The tallest cedar tree is felled and a huge gate is hewn out of the trunk of the mighty cedar tree. The forest stands helplessly at the mercy of the ruler of Uruk and his friend. However, it is interesting to note that god Shamash has assisted the hero of the epic to win the battle between him and Huwawa by sending thirteen storms against the monstrous nature god. The ambiguous attitude of gods towards the conservation of forest is an important clue to the ongoing tension between the demands of an expanding civilization and the need to preserve primeval forests.

However, this forcible dominion over the natural world and cruel beheading of Huwawa prompt divine retribution in future. Enkidu pays for his life as he betrays the trust of the gods and helps Gilgamesh to invade the forests and take away the cedar trees. On the other hand, Gilgamesh wounds the pride of gods by his invasion of forbidden abode of immortal gods. rejection of the seductive advances of Ishtar, the love goddess and the slaughter of the Bull of Heaven with the aid of his friend Enkidu. Among these three affronts to gods, the greatest importance is given to the violation of the forest and killing of the guardian Huwawa. This is very significant because this gives a divine sanction to the protection of forests. But at the same time the difference of opinion between god Shamash and supreme deity Enlil on this issue give ample suggestion to the future adventures of man in the dark forests under the possible assistance of a god sympathetic to humanity's needs. But there is no doubt that the disastrous consequences of plundering the forest are the most enduring impact of this epic on the human mind. Enkidu, the marginalized who has been brought into the main stream for removing obstacles in exploiting the resources of the forest, is made to suffer for a sin for which both of them were equally responsible. Enlil, the god of earth, wind, spirit and destiny decided to spare Gilgamesh as he was more gifted and was allowed to live. The prospect of imminent death fills Enkidu's heart with inconsolable sorrow and despair. He curses the hunter and the harlot who have been instrumental in bringing him to the city of Uruk. Gilgamesh mourns the death of his dear friend and consoles him by saying that the wild nature as well as the city-dwellers will weep for him. Enkidu is a martyr for the cause of urban civilization and the king orders a statue to be built in his honour. Unnerved by his companion's untimely death, Gilgamesh tries to seek knowledge about life and death by undertaking journey to the underworld. He is allowed to visit the realm of death and understand

the limitations of mortal beings, who, however strong they seem to be, are always at the mercy of the unearthly powers. The poem ends with describing the glory of Uruk, the city Gilgamesh built. Though the epic proclaims the glorious life of a valiant king there is an undercurrent of sadness, generating from the awareness of the futility of all human endeavors.

This journey enlightens him about the brevity of human life and human glory. Even at the time of describing the agonizing journey of Gilgamesh the poet shows his sensitiveness towards the beauty and bounty of nature. The poet is full of praise for the wonderful garden that Gilgamesh sees after he emerges from the dark tunnel he had to pass through to seek Unapishtim, the eternal father who saved different species of living beings from the Great Flood. In the words of the poet:

Gilgamesh looked at the garden and wondered at it.

The fruit and foliage of the trees were all

The colours of the jewels of the world,

Carnelian and lapis lazuli,

Jasper, rubies, agate, and hematite,

Emerald and all the other gems the earth

Has yielded for the delight and pleasure of kings.⁹

Apart from expressing the poet's sense of joy, this passage also refers to the contemporary practice of cataloguing the living beings and non-living objects. Systematic exploration of the natural world was marked by careful listing of the natural resources that were beneficial for human civilization. Scribes in ancient Sumerian civilization kept a record of all known natural objects in order to demonstrate their knowledge of the world around them as well as the power of the human intellect to confront and control the natural world. The poet of Gilgamesh does this to show his erudition as well as to proclaim man's dominion over the earth's resources.

The city of Uruk survives the death of Enkidu and proclaims the glory of Gilgamesh. The underlying appeal of the poem lies in its subtle and powerful treatment of the relation between man and nature. The epic suggests that the conflict with natural world can cause immense harm to mankind and though the poem ends with Gilgamesh's indication to the boatman about the greatness of the Uruk, there is an undercurrent of melancholy in this heroic poem.

Conclusion

Those who are familiar with the topography of present day Iraq, Lebanon and Syria will find it hard to believe that lush, green forests would have ever existed there as tracts of barren land greet the eye. However, before the advent of human civilization there was a vast expanse of woods in Southern Mesopotamia. Civilization spelt doom for the forests and ironically the rampant felling of trees led to erosion of soil and increasing salinity in the soil to such a great

extent that the Sumerian civilization declined due to these natural causes. The prosperous cities of the Sumerian empire turned into nondescript villages and the glory of the civilization was extinguished as a consequence of the destruction of forests undertaken by the mighty rulers like Gilgamesh to build their favourite cities. At present, the problem, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community. This is what ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal tendency that is embedded in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature. The conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities-the human and the natural-can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere. The epic of Gilgamesh offers a caveat about the necessity of observing restraint while exploiting the natural world.

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