

## **Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Civilizing Mission: A Political Irony in the Gilgamesh Epic**

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### **IV**

The coming of Enkidu as Gilgamesh's 'partner' is intriguing because it unfolds further the "colonial" desire of Gilgamesh to subjugate others. According to the epic, Enkidu was created not as a normal human being. First, his birth place is not in a normal house, but in the steppe. Second, his appearance is different from other human beings. "Shaggy with hair was his whole body. He was made lush with head hair, like a woman. The locks of his hair grew thick as a grainfield."<sup>1</sup> In other words, he looked different. Third, his 'abnormality' is described in a social term that "he knew neither people nor inhabited land." He is basically depicted as isolated, detached, lonely, and remote. He is out of normal civilization. Fourth, because he is not a 'normal' human being, his behavior is equated to animals. "He dressed as animals do. He fed on grass with gazelles, with beasts he jostled at a water hole, with wildlife he drank his fill of water."<sup>2</sup> So, Enkidu is basically an animal in the account of this narrator.

Let me pause for a moment here, before analyzing the way Gilgamesh "civilizes" Enkidu, to offer another look to this ugly description of Enkidu. I want to turn around the table. What if we ask Enkidu to tell us who he is before meeting Gilgamesh? What if we let Enkidu tell his own story? What kind of "counter-discourse"<sup>3</sup> can we hear from him? The story could have been different. However, to borrow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's ironic question, "Can the subaltern [Enkidu] speak?"<sup>4</sup> Spivak's negative answer that "the subaltern... cannot be heard or read"<sup>5</sup> is probably applicable here as well. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to recover the voice of Enkidu. Enkidu cannot speak. Enkidu in this case is the subaltern who is not able to control the dominant discourse. To put it differently, Enkidu is very much like a colonial subject who live in the periphery and the discourse of his identity is controlled and dominated by the center. Nevertheless, if we allow him to speak for himself, the story might have been completely different.

Now, going back to the story of Gilgamesh, the way he "civilizes" Enkidu is quite interesting. A hunter encountered Enkidu in the steppe and after three days observing him, he gets scared of Enkidu. So, he went to report the incident to his father, and his father suggested that he should let Gilgamesh know about it. What did Gilgamesh do when he heard about Enkidu and his behaviors on the steppe? Interestingly, he did not go and fight him. Gilgamesh of course could have done it because he is a very strong man. He instead sent the hunter back

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<sup>1</sup> The Gilgamesh Epic, I.105-107.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., I.110-112.

<sup>3</sup> Counter-discourse is "a term coined by Richard Terdiman to characterize the theory and practice of symbolic resistance." It is a challenge to "a dominant or established discourse." See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, Key Concepts Series (New York: Routledge, 1998), 56-57.

<sup>4</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 308.

with a harlot, named Shamhat. The fight comes after the change of Enkidu. This is what Gilgamesh said to the hunter:

Go, hunter, take with you Shamhat the harlot,  
When the wild beasts draw near the water hole,  
Let her strip off her clothing, laying bare her charms.  
When he sees her, he will approach her,  
His beasts that grew up with him on the steppe will deny him.<sup>6</sup>

Shamhat, in a sense, is a representation of the Gilgamesh's civilized world. Gilgamesh's strategy is through bringing his civilization to Enkidu. Gilgamesh seems to know that fighting Enkidu is not the best way to subjugate him. Rather, the subjection of Enkidu is attained through civilizing him. This is precisely what Homi Bhabha calls *mimicry*, which is "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*."<sup>7</sup>

When Shamhat saw Enkidu by the edge of the water hole, she interestingly did not perceive Enkidu as an animal, but a "human-man." Shamhat seems to know right away her mission to change the uncivilized Enkidu into a civilized man. How did Shamhat carry her mission? First, it is through sex and loving relationship. The depiction of their sexual intercourse is quite vivid.

Shamhat loosened her garments,  
she exposed her loins, he took her charms.  
She was not bashful, she took his vitality.  
She tossed aside her clothing and he lay upon her,  
She treated him, a human, to a woman's work  
As in his ardor he caressed her.  
Six days, seven nights was Enkidu aroused, flowing into Shamhat.<sup>8</sup>

After six days and seven nights of sexual intercourse, the result is remarkable. Enkidu is dramatically changed. He somehow lost his wildness, and became slow. In spite of it, he also "had gained [reason] and expanded his understanding."<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Foster gives a helpful comment that the depiction of Shamhat's relationship with Enkidu in the Akkadian version of the Gilgamesh epic is not only sex, but also love. Both sex and love, for Foster, are "types of human knowledges." He further writes:

...sex belongs to the lowest common level of human knowledge – what everyone must know and experience to become human. Once this knowledge is attained, continued non-productive sex is no longer acquisition of knowledge or affirmation of humanity but characteristic of the street, or, at worst, reversion to the animal state. The import of this thematic on love is that love of one another person is the next higher order of knowledge and makes a human into a social being.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Gilgamesh Epic, I.162-165.

<sup>7</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 86.

<sup>8</sup> The Gilgamesh Epic, I.188-194.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, I.202-203.

<sup>10</sup> Foster, "Gilgamesh: Sex, Love and the Ascent of Knowledge," 22.

Foster, I think, is correct here. The relationship between Shamhat and Enkidu goes deeper than just sex. Tablet II of the epic begins with a strong indication of love: “While Enkidu was seated before her, each was drawn by love to the other.”<sup>11</sup>

The mission of civilizing Enkidu does not stop in sex and love. The second thing Shamhat does to him is to teach him how to live like a ‘civilized’ person. The epic describes that Enkidu does not know how to eat bread and he never learned to drink beer. Shamhat tells him: “Eat bread, Enkidu, the staff of life, and drink the beer, the custom of the land.” In other words, Shamhat tries to explain to Enkidu that for a “normal” person eating bread is necessary for life, and drinking beer is his habit. Not only eating and drinking, Enkidu also began to bath, wear clothes, and anoint himself.<sup>12</sup> He was dramatically changed from a “wild animal” into a “wakeful man.”<sup>13</sup> Tigay rightly points out that “Enkidu is humanized and civilized through contact with other human beings who are already civilized.”<sup>14</sup> In short, Gilgamesh’s civilizing mission, through Shamhat, was obviously a big success.

## V

Shamhat finally brings Enkidu to Gilgamesh. After a small fight, Enkidu is completely ‘tamed’ in the hand of Gilgamesh. As I have pointed out above, Gilgamesh’s desire to subjugate others is not only expressed in his oppression of the people of Uruk, but also in bringing Enkidu under his power. The civilizing mission works well to achieve this purpose. Enkidu then becomes Gilgamesh’s partner in war. They both go to fight and kill Humbaba. After Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar’s request to be his wife, Ishtar sent the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh. Again, Enkidu and Gilgamesh together fight against the Bull of Heaven. Furthermore, the epic shows a peculiar thing which I think a postcolonial theory can explain very well. Gilgamesh, who is supposed to be the king and the oppressor, has turned to be very dependent on Enkidu. The relationship between those two is extremely close. Leela Gandhi has pointed out an important reality of colonialism, which she gets from a French author Albert Memmi, that “the colonial condition, ‘chained the colonizer and the colonized into an implacable dependence, molded their respective characters and dictated their conduct.’”<sup>15</sup> In other words, we can see a sort of “reciprocal behavior of the two colonial partners”<sup>16</sup> in the story of Gilgamesh. The relationship is not only colored by domination of one to another, but also interdependence. The oppressor Gilgamesh is dependent, both socially and psychologically, on the newly civilized and colonized Enkidu. This is truly a sign of a colonial irony.

After the sickness and death of Enkidu, we can see more clearly how Gilgamesh is very attached to Enkidu. The description of Gilgamesh’s broken heart in Tablet VIII is painfully dramatic. He cries out:

Like brothers may they weep for you,  
Like sisters may they tear out their hair for your sake  
[...] Enkidu, as your father, and your mother

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., II.1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., II.41-50.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., II.49.

<sup>14</sup> Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, 206.

<sup>15</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University press, 1998), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

I weep for you bitterly.<sup>17</sup>

Gilgamesh covered the face of Enkidu “like a bride’s” and decided to build an image [statue?] to Enkidu. The burial of Enkidu is described painfully, yet beautifully, this way:

I will lay you down in the ultimate resting place  
In a perfect resting place I will surely lay you down  
I will settle you in the peaceful rest in that dwelling sinister  
Rulers of the netherworld will do you homage  
I will have the people of Uruk shed bitter tears for you  
I will make the pleasure-loving people burdened down for you  
And, as for me, now that you are dead, I will let my hair grow matted  
I will put on lion skin and roam the steppe!<sup>18</sup>

Gilgamesh is expressing his deep sorrow to the extent that he wants to imitate Enkidu by wearing lion skin and roaming the steppe, i.e. acting like an animal. The beginning of tablet IX also echoes similar tone: “Gilgamesh was weeping bitterly for Enkidu, his friend.” This is definitely a considerably different picture Gilgamesh from the oppressor regime we have in Tablet I. His relationship with Enkidu has changed him dramatically. The rest of the story is the journey Gilgamesh finding out the answer for his deep question concerning mortality. Just like Enkidu, Gilgamesh also is undergoing, to quote Jack Sasson, a “metamorphosis toward civilization” as well.<sup>19</sup>

To sum up, the story of Gilgamesh is admittedly a very rich narrative-poetry. One can learn so much from this epic. This paper is aiming to see the relationship between the characters of Gilgamesh and Enkidu from a postcolonial perspective. The concept of civilizing mission particularly is employed to analyze the interaction between them. The agony of an oppressor in the face of the death of the oppressed and colonized is a remarkable picture of colonial irony. The colonizers often do not realize that through the process of civilizing mission and colonialism, they have become deeply attached and dependent to the colonized people. The Gilgamesh is an epic of the colonial irony.

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<sup>17</sup> The Gilgamesh Epic, VII.37-40.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., VII.71-79.

<sup>19</sup> Jack M. Sasson, “Some Literary Motifs in the Composition of the Gilgamesh Epic,” *Studies in Philology* 69, no. 3 (1972): 272.