

In the Footsteps of Gilgamesh: The Classical Epic and its Contemporary Arab Poetic Offshoots

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims at shedding some illuminating light on the formidable effect *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (2100-1200 BC) still leaves on modern and contemporary poets, apart from a host of scholars, historians, archeologists and researchers. As creative writers, Arab poets find in the classical text of *Gilgamesh* irresistible temptations to explore that classical text from their own contemporary perspective and cultural and experiential viewpoints. The poetic extracts chosen here belong to different Arab countries and cultural orientations. The first is Ali Jaafar Al-Allaq (Iraq), followed by Mahmoud Darwish (Palestine) and finally Asma' Al Qassimi (UAE). All the three poets have perceived the classical text from their own distinct perspectives. Implicitly one can easily notice the diversity and multifacetedness *Gilgamesh* stirs in the minds and imagination of the poets in question. The approach used throughout is basically thematic: how the topics raised by the three poetic excerpts in this paper reflect the richness and depth of *Gilgamesh* and its capacity to address humankind, irrespective of time and place. Also, these three poets have used the character of *Gilgamesh* and his entourage as a means or clue for highlighting their own cultural situation and countless challenges.

INTRODUCTION: THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH AND ITS PERPETUAL ALLUREMENT

The Epic of Gilgamesh whose composition was thought to be in 2100 B.C. or earlier, was written on twelve clay tablets is a text marked by a multiplicity and diversity of themes and situations. Originally compiled by a priest called Sinn-Leqi-uninni, it offers a whole spectrum of readings and interpretations. Such is the flexibility of this classical text that its scholars and experts sometimes found themselves changing their minds as they got inextricably entangled in a very unsettled text, "the distinguished Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobson has changed his mind and proposed three different readings over the course of forty years on the epic clearly supports the notion that the epic admits multiple interpretations, even for the same scholar" (Patton & Deniger, 1996, p. 30).

One important aspect of this classical epic is that it ignited the collective consciousness of its auditors and encouraged them to fuse reality with imagination, the factual and fanciful or wishful. Scholars of this epic tend to strip the hero from his mythological and supernatural powers. The following view runs in this vein, "Gilgamesh was, as far as we know, a real person. His name was Gilgamesh, and he was the ruler of Uruk [...] Popular imagination eventually turned

him into a god, and two thousand years after his death he was still worshipped" (Fromkin, 2000, p. 31).

Although this is the common impression the epic gives and it is what the following poets in this paper share, the discourse of the epic highlights the common view that *Gilgamesh's* character is a combination of one third human and two thirds godly. Such duality of reading the hero's position has the merit of reconciling what the text states with what the reader comes up with. Indeed, the entire text is highly controversial and subject to different interpretations and judgments. It is in the words of Novins, "unlike many other epic heroes he (*Gilgamesh*) changes over the course of the epic, becoming mature and good where he begins the epic as a tyrant and abuser of men and women" (2017, p. 18).

This unique aspect of *Gilgamesh*, the main figure in the epic, is a point worth highlighting as it encourages a host of interpretations and judgments in accordance with the set of values and yardsticks used. If the contemporary reader-response theory stresses the reader's impressions and reactions as central points in figuring out the possible or implicit meanings and echoes of the text (as felt in the arguments, of Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish), the Sumerian epic enjoys such a privilege. One of the epic's scholars argues in this direction, "Much more than the Homeric poems,

Gilgamesh is provisional, and not—and never—a finished state by interpretation (Schmidt, 2021, p. 2).

What are the topics the epic holds which might be of interest to readers in the third millennium A.D.? Scholars have explored different dimensions of this great text. Ancient and fabulous as it is, *Gilgamesh* can address many issues in its time and any time. It has been viewed in the following terms:

The *Gilgamesh* Epic, aside from being one of the complete of ancient literary documents, is also known from parts of multiple copies. Clearly, it was a "best seller" of its day and scribes from any number of cultures would have been familiar with it [...] Not only that, but the epic can still be read today for guidance concerning the issues it addressed for ancient readers. (Wiggins, 2020, p. 11).

The most prominent topic in this text is the inevitability and inescapability of death as human lot, even though *Gilgamesh* is not thoroughly human (his father being Lugalbanda) while the other two are divine (his mother is goddess Ninsun). Initially, *Gilgamesh* appears as the greatness incarnation: physically he was very handsome and healthy. He was described in the epic as powerful as a bull. Described as "Wild bull of Lugalbanda, *Gilgamesh*, perfect in strength, suckling of the august Wild-Cow, the goddess Ninsun" (translated by Andrew George) (McInerney, 2010, p. 41). Manifestations of his physical strength are present everywhere in the epic but the most conspicuous one is the encounter with the wild Humbaba (Huwawa), guardian of the Cedar Forest. It exemplifies that unbelievable strength. Helped by his companion Enkidu, *Gilgamesh* showed the maximum of strength and fortitude:

Gilgamesh struck Humbaba with a thrust of the sword to the neck, and Enkidu his comrade struck the second blow. At the third blow Humbaba fell. Then there followed confusion for this was the guardian of the Forest whom they have felled to the ground. (Sanders, n.d. p. 10)

However, this is not the only exploit the two friends have fulfilled. One of the outcomes of killing Humbaba was the rage of gods that was further exacerbated by *Gilgamesh*'s scorn of the advances of Ishtar, goddess of fertility. The result was vengeance of god instigated by Ishtar. The vengeance was in the form of Bull of Heaven that was sent as a final move to curb the turmoil made by *Gilgamesh* and Enkidu. The description of this encounter is graphic and pictorial:

The Bull of Heaven foamed in his (Enkidu's) face, it brushed him with the thick of its tail. Enkidu cried to *Gilgamesh*, 'my friend, we boasted that we would leave enduring names behind us. Now thrust in your sword between the nape and the horns! So *Gilgamesh* followed the Bull, he seized the thick of its tail, he thrust the sword between the nape and the horns and shook the Bull. When they had killed the Bull of Heaven, they cut out its heart and gave to Shamash [...]. But Ishtar rose up and mounted the great world of Uruk; she sprang on to the toner and uttered a curse," Woe to *Gilgamesh*, for he has scorned me in killing the Bull of Heaven. When Enkidu heard these words, he tore out the Bull of Heaven's right thigh and tossed it in her face" (p. 13).

All what has been stated above is concrete evidence that *Gilgamesh* was a figure of great authority, prowess and resolve. However, there is a serious and ignoble side in him which represented a ceaseless torment for his subjects: it was his tyranny and oppression of his people. Such was his cruelty and selfishness that all his people complained to gods to vanquish *Gilgamesh* and his repressive force. As scholar Cicero rightly puts it, "*Gilgamesh* is a mighty ruler, but one who has a penchant for acting in an arrogant fashion—he harasses young men and sleeps with their brides before marriage" (2016, p. 30).

One aspect of *Gilgamesh*'s cruel treatment of his people, was his insistence that when any wedding in his Uruk community takes place, he allows himself to consummate that marriage before the would-be husband. Despite its unbearable implications, *Gilgamesh* sees the other side of his outrageous act: there is something beneficial behind it. The following account finds extenuating circumstances for that,

After a woman approached him (*Gilgamesh*), asking him to give her a son with divine qualities, it occurred to him that he had something special to give his people. *Gilgamesh* decided upon consummating all new marriages with his godly seed." (Mccoy, 2008, p. 10).

Obviously, gods as represented by the epic appear to be very close to and sympathetic with human beings and respond positively or negatively according to the requirements of the situation. The way *Gilgamesh* has treated his people with a great measure of cruelty and arbitrary injustice are some of the points the reader cannot easily overlook. The response is prompt: Enkidu, the half man, half-beast, was sent by gods to Uruk to be the counterpart or adversary to *Gilgamesh*, the unkind king. Literally speaking, Enkidu "means a master of beautiful and pleasant place in Sumerian" (Burgin, 2021, p. 18). Before meeting *Gilgamesh*, Enkidu has to be tamed and humanized in order to be fit for the tasks awaiting him. His initial life in the steppe was marked by full assimilation with animal life. Before meeting his trainer, the prostitute Shamhat addresses him with these endearing words" You are handsome, Enkidu, you are just like a god, why do you roam the wild with the animals? Come, I will lead you to Uruk-the-Sheepfold, to the sacred temple, the dwelling of Anu and Ishtar" (Mobley, 2006, p. 51). Thanks to Shamhat, Enkidu gets rid of his animal life and gradually becomes King *Gilgamesh*'s assistant and confidante. If it were not for Enkidu's help, *Gilgamesh*'s expedition would not have reached fruition. At the end of the day, it transpires that both master and follower (*Gilgamesh* and Enkidu) were in the same boat as far as the question of thinking inconsiderately and rashly as seen through their imprudent act of cutting the Cedar trees. The last act along with the killing of the Bull of Heaven and insulting goddess Ishtar, the destiny of Enkidu was set----death, "One of the perpetrators, *Gilgamesh* or Enkidu, should pay with his life. Enlil humiliates Enkidu. Harsh words are exchanged since Shamash favors Enkidu. In the end Enlil prevails and Enkidu is fingered" (Schmidt, 2019, p. 74).

The painful practices of gods in dealing with human beings represented by Enkidu's fate do not end here. The flood

which engages a prominent position in the action of the epic is in fact further evidence that gods were not satisfied with the actions and practices of human beings: therefore, the flood is the means of bringing about the collective deaths of people and purging their place. This gloomy picture of the role assigned to gods in the epic is sometimes mitigated when the reader notices that there are gods or goddesses who are human-friendly, so to speak, as seen in the wise advice Siduri gives to Gilgamesh, for all his baffling state:

When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life if they retained their own keeping. As for you Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man (p.16).

Siduri's valuable advice to Gilgamesh about the best possible means of assuaging his woe-begone heart gradually proves its validity. Only at the realization of losing his dear friend (Enkidu), does Gilgamesh recognize the intolerable burden of death on him. Indeed, this topic of death has been overemphasized by many of the epic's scholars and specialists. One of these argues to this effect:

By the end of the epic, he learns what he has already stated at the beginning without full understanding. Only the gods live forever. Death is the lot of humanity. It is one thing to know about death in the abstract; it is another thing to affirm it after the death of a loved one with the parallel recognition that we must die. (Segal, 2010, p. 86)

The memorable relationship or friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu that was put to test in the different encounters the two passed through hinges on a kind of human-nonhuman relationship. When Enkidu appeared for the first time, he was just like an animal in habits and actions: eating, sleeping, and living with animals. However, Shamhat, who was the sacred temple prostitute, was asked by gods to tame him and humanize him in appearance and actions. Gilgamesh, as already pointed out, was a great king, feared by his people and enemies. His fate will be the opposite of Enkidu's. i.e., Gilgamesh's life and mode of living will undergo a great upheaval. He will appear like a beggar and live a wildlife, just like his dear friend at the beginning of his life.

Killing animals, wearing their skins, sleeping with them, Gilgamesh has come as close to the former life of Enkidu in the wild, gone as far from his former life in the city as he will. We understand the gesture as denial of Enkidu's death, as the king clings to his friend, and of Gilgamesh's immortality, as he passes against the boundaries of humanity in his attempt to transcend them (Nortwick, 1996, p. 31).

The central theme of the epic is known, of course: man's transient presence in this world, subsequent death and how some characters like Gilgamesh revolt against this fate altogether. It is a subject that has preoccupied Gilgamesh's thought and dreams at a late stage in his life. The unexpected death of Enkidu made Gilgamesh depressed and start roaming in different corners of the world in search of a solution for his ordeal. His own mother told him to keep away from

such thoughts but to no avail. When Gilgamesh reached Utnapishtim and his wife (the only human beings who won the privilege of immortality from gods) were kind to Gilgamesh and asked him to be patient and pass the test of remaining awake for six days and seven nights. If he succeeds in this test, he will be immortal. Gilgamesh could not overcome the need for sleep even in the first night and failed in that test. Utnapishtim suggested a magic plant which would rejuvenate man's youth. Although Gilgamesh got it but failed to preserve it as a snake took it away while he was washing himself in a pool. This explains the renewed life of the snake. In modern Arabic, the words for 'snake' and 'life' are very similar (*el-hayat* for life and *el-hayyah* for snake). [...] a gift for himself, a gift manifested every time the snake sheds his skin acquires "new life" (Morgan, 2008, p. 39). In other words, Gilgamesh is doomed to have the nightmare of death haunting him throughout the rest of his life.

Finally, the actual deaths of both Enkidu and Gilgamesh again raise many questions about the fates of human beings. The epic shows both as will-less and unable to change the status quo. Enkidu's death, as already shown, occurs as an outcome of the insult of Ishatar at the hands of Enkidu who hurled the thigh of the Bull of Heaven at her. As regards Gilgamesh's death, the situation was not clear as it was the case in Enkidu's. Obviously, Gilgamesh's mind has been fully engrossed with the notion of death ever since Enkidu's death. The fear of death and its power on man's very existence is something Gilgamesh's mind is unable to grasp, let alone recognize. This obsession with the nightmares of death eventually weakened his will and gave way to surrender to depression, sickness, and death. Siduri's advice, for all its validity and persuasiveness appears too fragile for a man of Gilgamesh's mindset. Here one is apt to refer to modern judgments of the sad king of Uruk, "Gilgamesh is a Faust figure who is disillusioned with knowledge that leads to neither happiness nor immortality; though Gilgamesh realizes that suffering is the price of salvation he is unable to devise a new faith." (Rosenthal, 1975, p. 221). This in itself is a reminder, or better still, a warning that one should keep away from his mind all gloomy and depressing thoughts and see life as a precious gift not to be wasted in absurd apprehensions. This is not a negative hedonism, but a responsible perception, since it is the only possible response to ontological challenges and mysteries continually facing man in this world.

Main Argument

Gilgamesh as a historical and mythical figure has become a rallying point for all types of arts and views. Iraqi singer, Kadhim Al Sahir sang the representative sections of the classical epic. Iraqi cultural Café in London (17/10/2017) presented a very impressive monodramatic performance of the epic. Actor, director, and artist Dr. Saadi Y. Bahri presented a show which impressed the audience. In Iraq, there were many attempts exerted in this regard (almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=176690). Also, the late Sami Abdul Hamed (died in 2019) used to direct and participate in the annual performances of Gilgamesh. The novelist and translator Lutfiyyah

Al Dulaimi (b.1939) who is living in Paris now had her interesting contribution when she wrote a dramatic work showing *Gilgamesh* from a feminist viewpoint. It was called *Sumerian Nights* (1995) wherein the writer deconstructs the female presence in the *Gilgamesh* epic and rectifies the prevailing male viewpoint. Critic Awwad Ali tells us that “it is not logical to find the image of woman only in the form of harlot or barmaid in a society that is fully urban and known for the invention of the wheel” (Ali, 2016, para2). Many poets, critics and academics have written on *Gilgamesh* and analyzed it from different psychological, cultural political and social viewpoints.

Ali Jaafar Al Allaq; Man, Writer and Professional Experiences

The poet, critic, academic and editor –in-chief of journals in Iraq and UAE, Ali Jaafar Al Allaq is a distinguished figure in the literary scene in his country (Iraq) and other Arab countries. He was born in 1945 in one of the suburbs of city of Waset to the southern east of Iraq. He got his Ph.D. in modern Arabic poetry from the University of Exeter, United Kingdom, 1984. He published a number of volumes of poetry and some critical books. He received a number of awards, the most the most prominent of which is Al Oweis Creative Award in 2019.

The classical Sumerian epic, or rather myth of *Gilgamesh*, that was written more than two thousand years ago represented a topic for Al Allaq’s poetry and meditations. Traditionally, this time-honored work has been seen as a fruitless endeavor to get immortal life by searching for a certain rejuvenating plant or herb. This effort was doomed to fail for all his arduous search for life. Although the primary task *Gilgamesh* undertook was to attain eternal life, but it did not materialize, he got a lot of things pertaining to his life and dealing with others. Siduri, the keeper of the temple, expresses her wisdom, summed up this valuable lesson in her advice to *Gilgamesh*:

to try to understand others in our lives, what their motivations are and how we see things from their perspective. If we wish to follow Siduri’s ancient teachings, we should make every effort to live with understanding in our lives, and make sure that our colleagues, friends, and family feel that we appreciate their point of view. (Dyr, 2013, p. 4)

In his poem ‘*Gilgamesh’s Return*’, عودة جلامش Al Allaq subjects this classical text to adverse or deconstructive reading and comes to the conclusion that for all *Gilgamesh’s* brilliant mind and great will, he could not achieve the dream of immortality, even though he had godly elements. The questions raised by Al Allaq’s poem are not only confined to *Gilgamesh* and his heroic deeds, but also they are a miniature of any one whose dreams transcend what is reasonable and feasible:

عودة جلامش
هكذا
عدت وحدك
لا مركبات الغنم
لا مطر العازفين
فاين خيول الفجعة

او عشبة الوهم
اين هي العربية
هل حملت
الينا الندى
ام نشيدا من القش
والجثث المترية
هل حملت البيارق
ام انهرا
خربه

Gilgamesh’s Return

Thus
You returned
Alone
No booty carriages
No musicians’ instruments
Where are the horses
Of the tragedy?
Or the delusion plant?
Where is the carriage?
Have you brought us the dew or song?
Of straw
and the dusty corpses?
Have you raised the banners
Or desolate rivers? (The Complete Works, Vol 11, 2013, pp. 49-50)

As seen in this short poem, Al Allaq’s perspective is that of a disillusioned or even cynical man, who suffered from actual states of displacement and homelessness. It is no surprise to find him judging *Gilgamesh* from a gloomy viewpoint that highlights his own different priorities. He was dreaming of the ‘dew’ that has “a double significance alluding to spiritual illumination since it is the true forerunner of dawn and the approaching day. The clear, pure water of dew is, according to some traditions, closely connected with light” (Cirlot, 1990, p. 81).

Thus, *Gilgamesh* turns into a mask for the poet’s own ego as he expounds his frustration and disillusionment, although ostensibly he is talking about a mythological hero. The poem uses *Gilgamesh’s* ill-fated enterprise as a parable about the futility of groundless human dreams and irrational ambitions. No doubt, Al Allaq gives an exceptional judgment of the classical epic and its main figure (*Gilgamesh*) where he highlights the other side of *Gilgamesh’s* character, i.e., an individual who dreamed of things which are inaccessible (immortality). Instead of attaining that dream, he found that death snatched his dearest friend (Enkidu) and he himself is going to have the same lot. This ambivalent image of what is painful and joyful, physical and psychological is what bestows complexity and diversity upon *Gilgamesh*. Thus, Al Allaq has chosen only one aspect of *Gilgamesh’s* character that is in tune with the poet’s own hard experiences.

Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) and his Empathy with Enkidu

A major name in Palestinian literature, Darwish started his career as a political writer. He lived very harsh circumstances of imprisonment and exile. In his early writings, his poet-

ry was simple, clear, and ideological. He was a prolific writer who wrote more than forty volumes of verse.

However, in his years of maturity, his poetry became more and more subjective and abstract. When he had two heart operations between 1984 and 1998, his poetry assumed a totally different tone and his language tended to be philosophical and meditative. Indeed, in the second heart operation, he was on the verge of death and he felt that his days were numbered. Thus, he devoted the entire year (1999) to writing his milestone, *Mural Painting* (2000) الجدارية. The pivotal theme in *Mural Painting* is death, the poet's own death and the details of the poem are simply masks or forms of intertextuality enhancing and elaborating that theme.

Given this solid background about death and its ravages, it is not surprising to find that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* receives the priority in the poet's argument and visualizing and it is thematically linked to the topic of his poem. Interestingly, he refers very casually to Gilgamesh himself while the overriding emphasis is laid on Enkidu's death and its long-term effects on Gilgamesh:

فنحن القادرين على التذكر قادرون
على التحرر سائرون على خطى
جلجامش الخضراء من زمن
الى هباء كامل التكوين

As we who can remember are able
To be free, marching in the green steps of
Gilgamesh from a certain time to
Total dust. (2000, p. 77)

The rest of the references centers on the absence or death of Enkidu and its far-reaching impacts on the speaker in the poem (Gilgamesh). The poet, Darwish, has the ability to empathize with Gilgamesh and see the world from his own perspective:

يكسرني الغياب كجرة الماء الصغيره
نام انكيدو ولم ينهض. جناحي نام
ملتفا بحفنة ريشه الطيني. الهتي
جماد الريح في ارض الخيال. ذراعي
اليمنى عصي خشبيه. القلب المهجور
كبنر جف فيها الماء. فاتسع الصدى
الوحشي. انكيدو! خيالي لم يعد
يكفي لاكمل رحلتي. لا بد لي من
قوة ليكون حلمي واقعيًا. هات
اسلحتي المعها بملح الدم. هات
الدمع انكيدو ليبيكي الميت فينا
الحي. ما انا؟ من ينام الان
انكيدو؟ انا ام انت؟

Absence smashes me to pieces, just like a small water jar
Enkidu slept, and did not wake up. My wing slept
Wrapped by its muddy feathers. My gods are
Inanimate wind in a fancy world.
My right hand is a wooden stick,
The heart is forlorn,
Like a dried –up well. Thus the wild echo expanded
Enkidu! My imagination is no longer capable of
Pursuing my journey. I should have power
To render my dream true.
Fetch me my weapons so as to polish by blood salt.

Shed your tears, Enkidu, so that the dead one might mourn the living,

What am I Enkidu? I or you? (2000, p. 78)

Darwish assumed the persona of Gilgamesh as he bemoans the loss of the only friend he has trusted and considered as a brother. Why is this particular emphasis that Darwish has laid on that figure whose short-termed existence and death were decreed by gods? The absence of Enkidu represents a dividing line in Gilgamesh's own career and perhaps it might be considered as a radical juncture in his life and perception of things in it. The great vacuum left by Enkidu's death is seen through Gilgamesh's persistence on visualizing Enkidu even after his death," Gilgamesh refuses to surrender his body to decompose. Gilgamesh recites a long poem of lamentation for his friend, strips off his royal finery, and orders a statue of Enkidu to be made of precious stones and metals for display in Uruk" (Holland, 2009, p. 145)

The obsessive feeling of death, i.e., the poet's own death, which is imminent, made him realize and sympathize with the pain of Gilgamesh as he experiences the sudden death of Enkidu. Thus, the meaning and significance of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* remain incomplete if Enkidu's presence and end are not there. Already Al Allaq's poem devotes its emphasis exclusively to Gilgamesh as king and man. His perspective is only one –man show: other agents in the epic, gods, men and women, are virtually excluded from his viewpoint. The reason behind Darwish's selection of the secondary character in the epic (Enkidu) is the similarity or rather identification between the poet's current position and Enkidu's. One of Darwish's critics finds that the nature of death and its mysteries is a remarkable trait in Darwish's poetry:

If death means for sure the decay of the body, it does not mean the termination of the self. The poet feels this dichotomy between the body and soul before death and realizes that his own vanishing cannot take place unless it passes through the other world. Therefore, he asks death to take him toward the light as he looks forward to seeing the new form the self can take (Trush, 2019, p. 113).

Darwish pursues his speculations about man, universe and the divine in a way that carries many ontological reverberations. This is not surprising once we recall that the present poem (*Mural Painting*) is actually a dirge, elegy of the self as it approaches its end. The poetic lines above pursue Darwish's great interest in the character of Enkidu and his indispensable role in the life and enterprise of king Gilgamesh. That he is now dead, it is expected that Gilgamesh's reactions are marked by despondency and mounting depression. In fact, the main reason behind Darwish's sympathy and even empathy with Enkidu is that his very presence is not natural: he is there as the gods decreed and the same gods would put an end to his vibrant life as he trespassed their authority and sovereignty. He has no family, no children who might preserve his memory. As one of his critics suggests, "part of the bitterness of his death is that he died without a family of his own, with none but Gilgamesh to leave behind him—the very fate that Humbaba wished upon him with curse" (Clarke, 2019, p. 110). As the alter ego of Gilgamesh, Darwish highlights the shift from animal life of

Enkidu to urban one as a drastic error since this new life has stripped him of his innate strength and power to do exploits and heroic deeds.

Reading Darwish's poem more than once gives the impression that Gilgamesh's life would have been entirely different, had Enkidu not intervened and collaborated in Gilgamesh's expedition. Part of the magic of Enkidu's character as seen through the perspective of Darwish is his wild and spontaneous life which has got nothing of the artificiality of the cultural life. Gilgamesh, as represented here, appears regretful at the sudden death of his loyal friend and supporter. One of Darwish's critics points out the success of the poet in turning a classical work into a present-day concern:

The poet has managed to employ the myth or myths within his *Mural Painting* and create a mystified dramatic image within the poetic texture so that you can see while you are reading or meditating the mural. It does not only bring the interrelation within the poetic texture of the epic but also the teleology that moves the poem and places it within the text. (Al Masawi, 2007, p. 111)

Judging the poetic lines about Enkidu's absence from Gilgamesh's life forever leads the reader to see existence as simply a fleeting moment that one can hardly get hold of. No doubt the tone of the Persian poet, Omar Khayyam, is unmistakable here since the principle of *carpe diem* is strongly felt in Darwish's poem. Here is an example of Khayyam's Rubaiyat:

XXXV11

Ah, fill the Cup:--what boots it to repeat
How time is slippery underneath our Feet:
Unborn TO-MORROW, and dead YESTERDAY
Why fret about them if TO-DAY be sweet! (Khayyam, 1889, p. 21)

In short, Darwish's success in presenting his version of Gilgamesh is in line with his own convictions about cultural, social and ethical questions the classical epic has raised. His poetry is not for entertainment or passing time. It is full of cross references to religious books, history, mythology, culture and foreign literatures. Thus, his poetry provides the reader with a wonderful tour of knowledge and means of enlightenment.

Asma' Al Qassimi: Gilgamesh from a Female Viewpoint

Asma 'Bint Saqer Al Qassimi (born in December 1971, Sharqa Emirate, UAE). She is a famous poet who has written nine volumes of poetry. She is a member of World Poets Movement in Chili and the sponsor of Great Encyclopedia of Arab Poets in its first part, 2009. She got her B.A. in political sciences and economy. She is interested in philosophy and comparative religions. She is the daughter of the ex-governor of Sharqa, Sheikh Saqr Al Qassimi. She is a member of the Phoenix literary Association and the boss of the board of Sadana Foundation. She is also concerned with honoring distinguished figures in the Arab countries whether in literature, art or scholarship. She sponsored a number of international conferences devoted to poetry and Arabic literature in the Arab countries, European countries and India.

In her poem titled 'البعد عن الخلود القرب من الموت' (Far Away from Immortality, Close to Death) Al Qassimi poses her answer to Gilgamesh's long pursuit of immortality and inevitable defeat. She judges life and its glamor, not by the length of years, but by their meaning and significance:

بين يديك جلجامش
أفاق السؤال العتيذ
المعتق بالدماء وبالقصيد
الرمز حرّ يا قديم
الرمز حرّ كما لصباح
تبدأ رحلة الإغواء
، تحتفل النجوم
ترقص للخصوبة
للنماء ، وللموت المؤجل
سبعة أيام تكفي لأخلد
للشعر يا جلجامش
عل الشعر يقتلني ببطئ
ولا يُبقي لي رسماً ولا اسماً
..عل الشعر يكون أنكيدو
أويكون عشترًا.
او يكون سؤالاً بحجم الكون
والموت حرّ ك الرماح
ولو تأجل يا قديم
ماذا سنخسر لو أفقتنا
ذات يوم دون جسد؟

Between your hands lie
The horizons of the ancient question
Which are saturated with blood and poetry.
The symbol is free, O my old friend
Free like the morning
The journey of seduction begins.
Stars turn festive,
Dance for fertility,
For growth, and deferred death.
Seven days are enough, Gilgamesh,
For me to be immortal for poetry.
So that poetry might kill me slowly.
And does not leave for me any picture or a name.
...So that poetry might become Enkidu
Or Ishtar.
Or might turn into a question as big as the universe.
Death is as free as spears.
What will happen if it is deferred, my old friend,
What shall we lose if we wake up
Some day without a body? (Al Qassimi, 2008, p. 11)

The lines above herald the distinct approach al Qassimi employs in handling a topic that has been exhausted by all types of viewpoints: mythological, historical, anthropological, theological, structural, linguistic or feminist. The initial lines of her poem reveal her philosophy of life. It is summed up in the above lines: a week is enough for her to enjoy the great pleasure offered by poetry, even though it might end her or any relic of her. Indirectly, she is confessing the great love she cherishes for poetry and readiness to sacrifice many things for it. In an interview with *Al Nahar Newspaper*, Al Qassimi expounds this great interest in poetry and what it can offer:

Interviewer: You have so many obligations by virtue of your social position. So does the evil spirit of poetry affect your entire work, or is there some time for each field?

Al Qassimi: It is not exactly an evil spirit: there is something wrong in this nomenclature. It is a hybrid, spiritual creature that comes into being through the spiritual conformity between the poet and all the entities around him/her which concern him. Poetry is a window through which I pass to the furthest spotlight in me. Therefore, poetry is my third lung, as it gives me a new sense of the world even if it sometimes causes a new pain. What matters is that it is a permanent vitality (Al Asaad, 2002, para3).

Obviously, Gilgamesh and Enkidu in this poem, are the means of empowering the poet to show her view of life, which is marked by self-satisfaction with the simplest things, including life-expectancy. She does not hold ambitious and ostentatious dreams like those of Gilgamesh:

قليل من الحزن يكفي
لأدرك أبعاد قلبي
بحجم السفر البعيد
عن متناول الأيدي والعيون
ولحن قريب ، سيكفي لأعرف
ماذا يدور ببال الخلود
الخلود المرعب
والموت المترقب،
ربّما...
شتاء قريب سيكفي
لأعرف أين يمتد وجهي
ويكفي لأتفرض عن
الجرح فوضى الحواس
وأرهن ، للعابرين ، التماسي
أحفظه في ذاكرتي
أو في الوجوه
خاص أو مباح

Some sorrow suffices,
To know the dimensions of my heart.
As big as the distant travel
Within reach of hands and eyes.
Nearby tune will be enough.
What goes on in the mind about immortality,
Dubious immortality
And impending death,
May be...
Nearby winter is enough
To know where my face turns.
And enough to shake off the wound,
The injury of the chaos of senses
And I pawn my request to the passersby,
I keep it in my memory,
Or on the faces,
Private or accessible.
(Al Qassimi, 2008, pp. 14-15)

The main assumption of the poem is that in contrast to Gilgamesh's unfulfilled dream of getting immortality, Al Qassimi's simple concept rests in the modest and reasonable life, irrespective of its time span. This type of argument recalls the important views of the Roman stoic philosopher, Seneca, whose criteria of a good life overlook its excessive length or immortality as Gilgamesh imagined:

Living is not the good, but living well. The wise man therefore lives as long as he should, not as long as he can. He will observe where he is to live, with whom, how and what he is to do. He will always think of life in terms of quality, not quantity (Battin, 2005, p.4).

And this is what al Qassimi opts in her poem and suggests as an answer to Gilgamesh's dilemma as he faces the void left by death. Many studies have already shown that *Epic of Gilgamesh* can be summed up in one statement: "a revolt against death, but a revolt that inevitably fails" (Altman & Wohlwill, 2013, p. 214). This is what Al Qassimi highlights in her argumentative poem about the choice between unattainable immortality and short but meaningful life. The two main characters of the epic, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, die without having families to keep their memory. One of the mythological stories shows the irony of having immortality without its integral part, i.e., good health, and how the first wish becomes inadequate or rather meaningless when it is not accompanied by good health:

a woman asked the gods for one wish—immortality for her lover. The gods asked if she had any other wishes and she answered no, this one wish was all she wanted. Tholonious, her lover, was granted immortality. Later, she realized that she had forgotten to ask for good health for him. So Tholonious aged and became increasingly frail and weak till he was as small and feeble as cricket, but he would never die. Immortality may not be a blessing. (Tirrito, 2003, p. 94)

In this poem Al Qassimi shows inarguably that she is not only a poet of tender feelings, but also she has zest for other social sciences and humanities such as religion, myth, nature, philosophy and mysticism and their vital role in human thinking. By means of assimilation and mask, the poet has managed to raise serious issues pertaining to man's puzzling existence and the various challenges he/she faces perpetually. The most important element in her poem is her fresh and even deconstructive perception of the topic of immortality which has caused continuous and unabated scruples for people throughout the centuries. In contrast to her arguments, modern science opens up new vistas for people to live this long-awaited dream of longevity." In 2010, a special issue of *Time Magazine* about longevity announced that 'elixirs' of youth sound fanciful, but the first crude-aging drugs may not be so far away" (Gollner, 2014, p.10). It is quite obvious that poets deal with the question of immortality from different viewpoints, a thing which is the exclusive merit of poets, writers and artists.

Findings and Conclusions

--What differentiates the Sumerian epic, *Gilgamesh*, from other epics like Greek Homer's *Iliad* (8th century B.C.) and Roman Virgil's *Aeneid* (1st century B.C.) is that *Gilgamesh* does not concentrate on battles and heroic deeds except only in one situation (how Gilgamesh and Enkidu succeed in slaying the Terrible Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest), i.e., modern Lebanon. The other fight, this time it is sinful as it runs counter to the will of gods, which is the killing of the Divine Bull, enraging gods. Instead, the emphasis of that epic is laid on exploring the ordeal of king

Gilgamesh, who is not fully a human being or full-fledged god. As such, he is preordained to have the same tragic fate of people, i.e., death. After a long and strenuous search for overcoming his pathetic situation, Gilgamesh finds solace in constructing his city and reconciling himself with the eternal facts of life—death.

--The character of Gilgamesh himself remains a riddle as he represents two contradictory views. The account given by the different judgments of scholars and the poets chosen in this paper indicates that Gilgamesh, after all, is a human being. However, the epic's details highlight the central postulate that Gilgamesh's character contains one third human and two thirds godly.

--The Sumerian epic (Gilgamesh) is one of the oldest cultural texts whose popularity is worldwide and never abates even in our highly sophisticated world.

-- The study has highlighted the main issues in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and its position in world literature and heritage. By means of dramatic actions, dialogues and monologues, impressive descriptions, the main protagonist of the epic, Gilgamesh, shows very remarkable traits of heroism and ambition, but he has his own flagrant weaknesses. In terms of sexuality, he was lascivious and corrupt as seen through the way he dealt with the wives of his countrymen for different pretexts. Thus, they repeatedly complained to gods concerning this issue. The response was prompt. Enkidu represents the solution to the ordeal of the inhabitants of Uruk. Enkidu was half beast, half human. He lived a wildlife in the steppe and enjoyed the company of animals. However, this was a deviation from the task to which he was brought. Therefore, a harlot spent a week with him in a successful attempt to tame and humanize him through sexuality. When he reached this state, he was introduced to king Gilgamesh. At the beginning, they clashed with each other and obviously Gilgamesh was superior. After the victory of Gilgamesh, a great friendship ensued between the two that only Enkidu's death would disrupt. Together they defeated the monster of the Cedar Forest (Humbaba) and the Bull of Heaven. Killing the latter and mutilating its body was a great insult to gods that retaliated by choosing the human individual for death (Enkidu). Depressed and disillusioned, Gilgamesh has won a very important trait: wisdom and self-reliance as the only means of survival in those precarious circumstances. Accordingly, in the prologue of the epic, Gilgamesh was praised as being wise: "This was the man to whom all things were known [...] mysteries and knew secret things" (Sanders, p. 2).

The unexpected death of Enkidu is a turning point in Gilgamesh's career. From that moment onwards, Gilgamesh has become fully obsessed with death. His search for the herb of immortality ends in failure as a snake steals it from him while he is washing his body. Thus, the snake has become the emblem of immortality as seen through the logos one comes across in medical and pharmacological centers.

-- The first poet in this paper who tackled the ordeal of Gilgamesh is Dr. Ali J. Al Allaq who considers Gilgamesh's rash adventure as a hopeless case. In his poem, Al Allaq does not rationalize or explicate the deep reasons that drove Gilgamesh to his miserable and pathetic end. Instead, he finds

that Gilgamesh's enterprise is doomed to fail from the very start as it runs counter to the cosmic rules and conventions. Al Allaq's poem titled 'Return of Gilgamesh' subjects the Sumerian text to rigorous quizzing and dissection about the self-inflicted pains of Gilgamesh when he surrendered to ontological and metaphysical pressures. They led only to the labyrinth. According to the argument of Al Allaq's poem, the unhappy ending of Gilgamesh is philosophically valid since as a half man, Gilgamesh too is subject to the laws of mortals: he is an earthly figure and his ethical and behavioral weaknesses are conspicuous, at least at the beginning of the epic.

--Darwish's paramount emphasis is laid on the victim of gods' intervention in earthly affairs (Enkidu) when Gilgamesh has gone too far in his arbitrary rule. The total stripping of Enkidu of his will is a question that Darwish has unraveled in addition to the death of Enkidu in accordance with gods' verdict. In other words, the shaky position of this secondary character in the epic is a point Darwish has over-emphasized in *Mural Painting*. Darwish's interest in Enkidu lies in the fact that he is a shadowy and unlucky person. His actions are devoid of any ambition or any expectation. His main function, as Darwish perceives, is to serve his master and friend, Gilgamesh, an act that has caused many troubles to Enkidu, including the wrath of gods and its fatal catastrophe (death). Darwish is paying homage in this text to Enkidu and consequently to Gilgamesh as they have done their utmost best to keep away from earthly strains and entrapments.

--The intellectual and aesthetic postulate of Al Qassimi's poem revolves around the real meaning and value of time in human life. As a woman, she seeks to seize the fleeting moments of life. Though she does not disapprove directly of Gilgamesh's narrow judgment of life as he judges life in terms of quantity, not quality, Al Qassimi has her own reservation about such a narrow perception of life. She prioritizes the essence of the valuable moment in human life, not its length Al Qassimi implicitly finds fault with Gilgamesh's vain search for immortality. She does not see any point behind the frantic pursuit of immortality as it runs counter to the norms of the universe. Instead, she offers the faculty of appreciating and enjoying the gift of life, no matter how brief or transient it may be.

--Which of these readings is correct? Well, the answer could be that all of them are correct and valid, each in its own terms. The reason is simple enough; the epic has a very flexible structure and rich content so that it can easily lend itself to different readings and interpretations. It is an open text and a highly suggestive one. Consequently, it accommodates a host of perspectives and points of view simultaneously. Such striking diversity encouraged the three poets in question to view Gilgamesh from different cultural and epistemological backgrounds.

N.B. All the poetic excerpts in Arabic are the researcher's translation.

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