

Going Against the grain: An FPDA of The Epic of Gilgamesh

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Abstract

The aspects of one's identity are positioned within a context prescribed by culture and they are according to cultural expectation. The present study aims to add/explore power dynamics which are embedded in the discourses of Ishtar and Shamhat. This study is concerned how in The Epic of Gilgamesh, the two female characters: Ishtar and Shamhat are received and perceived by their immediate audience. The present study through a Feminist Post Structural Discourse Analysis (FPDA) (Baxter, 2003) lens analyzes characters of Ishtar and Shamhat, the focus of the study is to inspect the ways through these characters negotiates their positions, identities and relationships in a society that is dominated by patriarchal traditional discourses. It is concluded that both female characters in their respective discourses are victorious in their persuasion of action and manner of speaking.

Key words: Discourse Analysis, Post Structuralism, Feminism, FPDA.

Introduction

Discourse performs a communicative purpose and this communicative goal is achieved through the each segment of discourse (Hovy, 1993). These segments are critically analyzed in the domain of critical discourse analysis, which shows how the relations of power and ideologies are built through discourse. Furthermore, the effects of power and ideologies on social identity, social system and belief are demonstrated in human action (Fairclough, 1992). The discourse analysis locates the hegemony which is (re)produced, by social dynamics. Discourse analysis indicates the withstanding of hegemony to continue domineering social relations. Therefore analysis itself is a form of "analytical resistance" which has a potential to make people knowledgeable

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about social standing and this knowledge develops resistance for change (Lazar, 2005). For Beauvoir “there is an ‘I’ that does its gender, that becomes its gender on such a model culture and discourse undermine the subject, but do not constitute that subject” (Butler, 1990, p. 143). Butler expands the argument and says that in any culture discourse is responsible for social change and positing of subject.

The epic of Gilgamesh

The epic of Gilgamesh dates from 3000 B.C. (Sandrars, 1972). After the understanding of cuneiform writing as early as 120 years the finest epic became known to the world of literature. Ancient text are available by means of secondary sources, either translation or transliteration (De Villier, 2005). The time Gilgamesh was written the genre of epic was not introduced. Since epic is poetry so I have taken the translated version of poetry by Andrew George (1999). This epic consists of 2900 lines and 11 clay tablets (Kovacs, 1989). The epic narrates the heroic quest of Gilgamesh the king of Uruk, his friendship with Enkidu and his final journey towards immortality.

Status of women in Mesopotamian society

In early Mesopotamian society women role was vital, apart from their domestic job elite woman played her part in every sphere of life (Nemet-Nejat, 1998). Cuneiform documents, visual arts and archaeological contexts were the only source of information about the Mesopotamian women (Bahrani, 2001; Gansell, 2012; Oppenheim, 1967; Steele, 2007). These evidences furnish the presence of elite woman in state affairs, politics, public rituals and priestesses of various ranks. Non elite woman is less known from these evidences of information so, it can be inferred that non elite were not parallel to elite woman in their participation of social affairs. In the Dynasty of King Ur III royal women were lyricist of songs and author of lullabies for princes. Women scribes were appointed for the recording of the transactions, but most of them were slaves.

Institutionalization of prostitution in Mesopotamian society

A German physician Iwan Bloch declares that societies where sexual activities are limited the prostitution develops among primitive people who are sexually licentious. However, institutionalization of prostitution resulted to regularization of sexual activity (Lerner, 1986). The circumstances under which prostitution institutionalized in a society can be trace out from ancient Mesopotamian history. Ancient Babylonians gods and goddesses were not symbolically represented in temple, they actually reside in temple. These personified gods were cared for and fed with day-to-day necessities. In some

cases these necessities of life includes sexual services (Oppenheim, 1964). Various kind of priestesses were appointed to perform different roles. Daughters of king were selected as high priestesses (en or entu). They were in charge of ritual management, temple affairs like male high priest. In ancient Sumer nin-dingir priestesses personating the goddess in sacred marriage. The ritual of sacred marriage was thought to bring richness of land and prosperity of people (Lerner, 1986). It resulted into separate group of prostitute. People considered these sexual activities beneficial and sacred (Lerner, 1986). Naditum priestesses were next in rank. Most of them were daughters of high rank bureaucrats. Naditum of the god of Shamash lived in cloister house within the temple. They were not allowed to marry. Qadishtum were lower in rank temple servants. During the temple services they were not allowed to marry but after spending a certain amount of time in temple they may live outside the temple and marry. Another possibility is that in the course of temple services they may have prostituted (Lerner, 1986). Slavery was also practiced in Neo Babylonian society. Slave women perform the parallel function to wives from children up bringing to house hold chores (Steele, 2007). These slave women occasionally works as prostitute when they were sold with the permission to sexual access by slave owner (Dandamaev, 1984). These are the few evidences of sexual activities in ancient Mesopotamian society. Mesopotamian women underwent to different changes in their roles with successive civilization.

Present study aims to trace the power dynamics that are apparent in Ishtar (goddess of love and war) and Harlot (Shamhat) character. It will examine speeches of Shamhat and Ishtar along with the responses of immediate audiences. First Ishtar obedience to Mesopotamian expectations and employment of powerful discourse will be discussed. Further I will discuss Ishtar disobedience to Mesopotamian expectations will be demonstrated. It will be revealed that how she utilizes her power in her role of Ishtar. To deconstruct the text I will use feminist post structuralist Discourse Analysis (Baxter, 2003) as a theoretical framework. As McLaren (2009) asserts FPDA allows researcher to recognize the voice of subaltern and and reflect upon it. This statement implies that “being reflexive is synonymous with being scientific”. (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 381) because reflectivity is significant phenomenon in CDA (Bucholtz, 2001; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

Literature Review

Judith Baxter (2003) in his book “*Positioning Gender in Discourse: A feminist Methodology*” introduced the FPDA as method of discourse analysis. The central idea of FPDA is the amalgam of Bakhtin (1981) formalism, Derrida (1987) poststructuralism and Foucault (1972) in relation to power, knowledge and discourse. Post-structuralists see no essential connection between the word

and its meaning, therefore meaning cannot be understood beyond event and its discourse but only with the help of language (Weedon, 1997). Davies (1989) analyzed gender positioning in feminism stories from the perspective of preschool children and moving beyond the fixation of hierarchical opposition on which gender is based. Thus the notion of deconstruction and decentralization of hierarchical opposition is the core of post-structuralism. Therefore Weedon (1987) insisted on joining the work of Derrida to the work of Foucault, as deconstruction curtails the prevailing social powers doing so may reassured the patriarchal status by non-fixing of meaning.

Complementing effects of Post-Structuralism on Feminism

According to Foucault (1980) self is not fixed, social and cultural pattern of language positioned self in society. In certain discourse self appears as powerful in another discourse it may appear as powerless. Francis (2010) presented four reasons of embracing Foucauldian post-structuralism by feminists. Firstly, Foucault gave the idea of “Enlightenment discourse” as socially constructed narrative. Secondly, post-structuralists contest feminists by describing power as socially constituted and inconstant phenomenon. It can not only exist between man and woman but among women, Blacks, working class and gay. Thirdly, post-structuralist theory discards the binary oppositions of male and female. Fourthly, idea of self as positioned and also as position itself is an encouraging clue for feminist.

Baxter (2002) drawn a study on speech of mixed-sex classroom. The use of feminist post-structuralist analysis allows them to show multiply positioned discourse of girls at times powerful at other times powerless in mixed sex class and this multiplicity in positioning of girls reveals the complexity of discourse. FPDA produces the powerful insight of discourse in educational practice and helps to transform the conventional practices in institutions.

Kamada (2009) explored the hybrid identities of multi-ethnic girls in Japan. She being the seventh participant of her own study used FPDA and discursive psychology to analyze the discourse of girls in three years ethnographic study. Kamada’s analysis demonstrated the nuanced mechanism used by girl to their discourse to giveaway to marginalized and privileged aspects to their identity. Three years of study exhibited, how the discourse that marginalized them skillfully deconstructed by these multi ethnic girls and celebrated their hybrid identity. Non-Japanese parents of these girls, who were basically white foreign born English speaking provided them opportunities for good jobs and better future.

FPDA as an approach to history subject has been employed (Schoeman & Fardon 2010) to identify the marginalized women in school history text. In their exemplar Schoeman and Fardon identified significant incidences, activities associated with female biasness through invisibility, stereotyping, linguistic bias, and cosmetic bias were quantitatively presented. Through the lens of FPDA Andromache's speeches in an epic Iliad were analyzed (Rowe, 2016). By studying marginalized character of classical texts, her study demonstrated that how strategically Andromache spoke out against social norms of that time through the available discourse. She applied certain discourse of Greek expectations such as pitiable wife, mourning widow which allow her to convey her thoughts as virtuous and aristocratic woman.

Few studies on the epic of Gilgamesh has been done (Abusch, 2001; Gresseth, 1975; De Villiers, 2005; Edmunds 2005), these studies articulate the mythological aspects of the epic. Uçar-Özbirinci (2010) investigated the voice of women in retelling of Gilgamesh as a drama by a Turkish writer Avcı (1996). Avcı gives voice to the Shamhat and snake who steal the plant of immortality. Her play brings a female prospective in patriarchal epic. Present study argues that Shamhat is the strong character in the original version of the epic of Gilgamesh and this study presents the contrast of her character with the Ishtar the goddess of love and war. Through the lens of feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis this paper has presented the different discourse of Ishtar and Shamhat and tried to highlight that marginal character may appear dull, but by doing so, understanding of the reader to the culture and society ancient times will be enhanced, and that is the aim of my study.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) to analyze Ishtar and Shamhat speeches is chosen. This analysis is amalgam of traditional critical discourse analysis with feminist perspectives. According to Baxter (2003) feminist approach analyze the power position in a discourse that is negotiated according to the relationship and positioning of subject in society. That may involve verbal and non- verbal discourse of speakers who establish their identity according to their surroundings.

Analysis

The mythical journey of a hero is quest of wholeness to restore balance in his life. This awareness of the hero is often aided and progressed female characters in an epic. Thus union with female character leads hero towards totality and mastery over life. Another prototypal and representative character is of Shamhat. She depicts through her character that a woman who is more adhered with the traditional feminine can perform or exercise power. Shamhat is the

temple-prostitute she knows the religious ways to civilized society. She is not only connected to the sex to know the ways of man but she shows that she has knowledgeable manners to the ways of civilization and humanity.

In the beginning of the epic Gilgamesh is introduced as self-conceited and arrogant, to teach him a lesson gods has decided to make someone of his equal strength so Enkidu was created. Enkidu is living in communion with nature and unaware of civilization.

Fundamentally the role of Shamhat is introduced to bring transformation to Enkidu. She is the priestess of temple. Gilgamesh the king of Uruk called her to bring reformation in wild Enkidu, who was created to be the soul brother of Gilgamesh. Primitive man as Enkidu was considered savage by Mesopotamian literature (Tigay,1982) his uncivilized state was not like Mesopotamian civilization. However, the proponent to civilization were aware to the side effects of civilization (Abusch, 1986). The admirable and exciting city life of Enkidu ends up in suffering, illness and death (De Villiers, 2005). According to Damorosch (1987) the complex city life of Enkidu increases his knowledge and this knowledge is a compensation to loss of innocence. In this myth Shamhat personification is not as seductress but as a love and as a Delight to find a glory and have a sacred purpose that is gracious, impulsive and full of wisdom. She is represented as an icon of power. Her surrender to Enkidu is the surrender to love and is to be filled up by the universe.

She did for the man the work of a woman,

his passion caressed and embraced her (189-190).

Shamhat is send to jungle with trapper. She employs several discourses of guide, mistress, soother and mentor. In the very beginning her nonverbal discourse gives her authority to hold the wild thoughts of Enkidu. At this point of time she gets success to yield her body to Enkidu and make him to do what she wants. Her attempt to let Enkidu to seize her body is an act of giving power to Enkidu. In this situation his physical power gets over her. She bears herself for Enkidu and let him make love to her for six days and seven nights. In this discourse of sex we find Shamhat is in possession of power. Through this discourse she has yielded herself to Enkidu this is what she wants. Enkidu possesses her body but in fact it is Shamhat who gets hold of his mind. This purposeful shift of power is a tact which she utilizes to make Enkidu physically weak but knowledgeable. This woman possesses regenerative powers. She is shown as Anima figure. Sex is a vital part of Mesopotamian culture (Foster, 1997).

So she spoke to him and her word found favour,

he knew by instinct, he should seek a friend (209-10)

Shamhat physical beauty and prowess makes her inspirer. Enkidu's discovery of himself and the fleeing of his jungle wild creature from him compel him to go back to Shamhat. He finds comfort in her company. Wild animal and beast run away from Enkidu, he came back to her and sat at her feet. Here she speaks to him and asks him

You are handsome, Enkidu, you are just like a god!

Why with the beasts do you wander the wild?

Come, I will take you to Uruk-the-Sheepfold,

To the sacred temple, home of Anu and Ishtar,(201-204)

Here she once again holds the powerful position in the persuasion discourse, she gets success in her motive to drive him and his thoughts away from the wild creature. She is strategic in her discourse and in her action as well. She takes Enkidu to the shepherd to introduce him with the civilized world. The shepherds—fellas who have one foot in civilized society and one foot in the natural world. In this way she finds help to change his cloths, gives food to him and ale to drink at this point Enkidu transformation is completed. Representation of Shamhat's sexuality in a cultured manner signifying the civilized culture of Uruk. Institutionalization of prostitutes were the development of civilization. Significant role of Shamhat furthered Gilgamesh expedition by giving him a companion of his equal. She uses her sexuality by humanizing Enkidu and bringing him to the civilized life of Uruk. Enkidu experience of sex with Shamhat crowded him with wisdom and totality which helped Gilgamesh to further his journey. Shamhat throughout in her discourse of teaching and guiding possesses an upper hand over Enkidu. She uses verbal and nonverbal discourses to establish her powerful position. Shamhat is an example how woman does not necessarily need to be deviated to one's role or space. She depicts through her character that a woman who is more adhere to the traditional femininity can exercise power.

In tablet 3 of The Epic of Gilgamesh, the conversational narrative of Ishtar with Gilgamesh is drawn upon several discourses such as the discourse of an independent woman and the discourse of an aristocratic woman who unwaveringly voices her likeness for Gilgamesh. The first scene sets Ishtar in

a powerful and domineering position where she herself offers a marriage proposal to Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh returns to Uruk as a victorious warrior, the defeat of Humbaba in hands of Gilgamesh makes him an undefeatable conqueror. Ishtar admires, appreciates Gilgamesh and she yearns for a relation with him.

At the pulchritudinous and valiant Gilgamesh Lady Ishtar looked with longing:
'Come, Gilgamesh, be you my bridegroom!

Grant me your fruits, O grant me!

Be you my husband and I your wife! (6-9)

Here her free will makes her powerful over Gilgamesh. As asserts Gill (2003) there is a shift to presenting woman sexually autonomous, desirous and dynamic subject. They are no more in a position of sexual objectification rather sexual subjectification in the territory of sex, where woman is no longer exploited.

Wealth and power has nurtured Mesopotamian culture, the relation of phallus with wealth and power gives strength to structure of patriarchy, where man are given more right than women. Like Greek civilization, the role of woman in Mesopotamian civilization was defined by patriarchal boundaries and it was strictly defined. The woman's identity is subjected to patriarchal identity, she was either the daughter of her father or wife of her husband. Women worked as dependent family member within the context of families and rarely acted as an individual. From childhood, women were brought up to assume familial and subjective roles of mother, wife and housekeeper. They were trained to cook, wash and weave. They were taught to make beer and beverages, spinning and weaving for making clothes and if they were supposed to work outside they could only sell what they had manufactured at home. Most of their jobs were related to household matters and household tasks, they could work as caretakers at inns and pubs, and they could perform as midwives to deal with issues of childbirth and prevention of childbirth. After puberty, it was the family and parents who would decide marriage of the daughter, the parents of bride and groom would arrange a marriage with all customs and rituals. (Khafajah, n.d.)

Stol (1995) maintains that in Mesopotamians the future wife becomes a permanent part of grooms family and she is the passive object of all family transaction. The groom family pays bride price and the girl acquires the status of wife. Whereas Ishtar acts the other way round and she herself boldly praises and selects a man for marriage. Despite the fact that Ishtar is a woman, though from an elite class, acting from the position of powerfulness. She negotiates

her independent identity and power position, here the sense of agency which is given to Ishtar makes her strong and empowered. The authority to propose a man in a patriarchal society and deemed herself to choose a man of her own choice shows the authoritative discourse. It is very interesting to note that she does not follow the ritual of bride price rather she herself offers to be groom her own plenitude. Instead of demanding, she entices and offers him wealth and power, she exercises her preeminent position. Despite this Ishtar is acting from the position of powerfulness. Here the sense of agency which is given to Ishtar making her strong and empowered her. The authority to propose a man in a patriarchal society and deemed herself to choose a man of her own choice shows the authoritative discourse. She offers him wealth and power, she utilizes her dominant position:

'Let me harness you a chariot of lapis lazuli and gold,

its wheels shall be gold and its horns shall be amber.

Driving lions in a team and mules of great size,

enter our house amid the sweet scent of cedar! (10-13)

From her conciliatory moves, allurements and solicitations, it can be concluded that Ishtar's character judiciously exercised language by incorporating bold discourses of an independent woman. Epic is contextualized with the heroic expenditure of protagonist, bravery, heroism, strength and power are the salient traits that are depicted within the character of that very protagonist.

Her character manipulates the narrowly defined role in society. In a way she challenges the set social narratives for women, she asserts her identity through a powerful discourse of self-attained, determined, individualistic and self-ruling lady. She goes beyond the permissible status of Mesopotamians for a woman and the role Ishtar adopts, finds limited acceptance. Moreover the response of Gilgamesh makes a shift of power discourse from Ishtar to Gilgamesh. The derogatory rebuff of proposal from Gilgamesh asserts a rejection to the independent identity of women. Gilgamesh like all other nobles of the tribes favours the discourse of a virtuous, upright and guiltless lady. His turning down of Ishtar's offer, onslaught on her past affairs and her character shows the shift in power dynamics. In first stance Gilgamesh talks about her past relationship with other male and their wretched ends failing to please goddess Ishtar. Women's vulnerability is deeply rooted in this very episode of Ishtar refutation by Gilgamesh. As he announces his love for Enkidu, the loneliness of woman in patriarchal alliance is vividly depicted. His charge of fickleness to goddess of natural cycle is more indication to impermanence this

impermanence is the center theme of epic and sole discomfoting notion throughout the epic.

Gilgamesh asserts his completeness he feels inside his soul. The bond between two male cannot be supplant by heterosexual bonding with Ishtar. The idea of homosexuality alludes the powerlessness of woman within patriarchy. Hardman, (1993) introduced another term homoaffection, which may not include the sexual conduct between same sex but bounding between them is strong. In his immediate second demonstration his inclination towards Enkidu, Gilgamesh holds a standard and not honoring the petition he holds the power discourse but at the same time he fails to play a gender role in heterosexual relation with Ishtar instead he prefers to adhere with the familial role of homosexuality with Enkidu. Though we find the power position in the interactional discourse that Gilgamesh maintains. Ishtar asks his father Anu to give her Bull of heaven here we find a conflict in the discourse of revenge and discourse of request. De Villiers (2005) suggests that the discourse between Ishtar and Gilgamesh refers to the theme of immortality. Later on in epic, Gilgamesh realizes the finiteness of life. Ishtar proposal contains in itself marriage and funeral in both states Gilgamesh would have been entered into the Netherworld, if he had accepted her proposal. Those nobles and princes that will kiss his feet are inhabitant of new world. In this way Ishtar is deceiving Gilgamesh (Abusch, 1986).

In both discourses women are victorious in their persuasion of action and manner of speaking. Gilgamesh who sent harlot to Enkidu shows his dependence on women. Ishtar exercised her power over men that loved her. She dominated and hurt them and eventually led them to loss their independence. Though Gilgamesh rejected her proposal yet Ishtar in retaliation asked her father to send down Bull of heaven to defeat Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Eventually Gilgamesh lost his friend in consequences of slaying Bull of heaven.

Conclusion

When I first encountered the epic of Gilgamesh, my understanding was limited to the presentation of the heroic deeds and expeditions of the protagonist and his quest of immortality. However, through my study, Shamhat the priestess and Ishtar the goddess of love and war shows their position in marginalized society how they use their position and working through the opportunities they have been given. These strategies use through the discourses available to them at that time. Therefore it is worth discovering what purpose these marginalize character serves and what lesson we can still learn today. Interpretation is situational, shaped and constrained by the historically relative criteria of a

particular culture; there is no possibility of knowing the literary text as it is (Eagleton, 1983). Language can tell the deeper meaning, Ishtar and Shamhat speeches provide the example of spaces created by the writer for the reader for more nuance reading. Through the lens of FPDA instances of contradiction became apparent. Thus we will finally be able to comprehend ancient views and from the broader perspective see ancient Mesopotamia which is separated from our modern world in time and space. This is what I want to convey to my readers.

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