Demystifying Gender Inequality in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

By Alexander Harless

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the representation of Mesopotamian women seems alien in comparison to the modern or contemporary literary representations of westernized women. The narrative often represents women as objects of sex, but also works to oppress women in different ways. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* never entertains the notion of representing women as equal to their male counterparts, nor does the language signify that any trace of equality existed in Mesopotamia. Although this was written in a different time, it is important to understand the socio-cultural implications of gender inequality so that readers may better understand how those inequalities may still be in effect.

From the start of the epic, the language representing women is, in modern standards, offensive. One of the first representations of women involves that they are like objects. As Gilgamesh tells his mother a dream, he claims that he loved an axe as he did a woman. If he could love an axe the same way he could love a woman, then the value of women must be low considering that he compares them as equals to objects. The language representing women demonstrates the privilege gap between the sexes and it continues throughout the epic.

Referring to a specific woman called a harlot; contemporary readers may be shocked at the language. However, the harlot as a female character isn’t truly oppressed by her title as such. The context does not seek to offend the character, or reader, by calling her “harlot” because this was her occupation or role in Mesopotamia. The absence of this woman’s name not only marginalizes her as a character but also allows the narrative to objectify her. The text represents this female character without an identity. The only important aspect known about her is that she has an art, or a skill, of seducing men. Concerning the plot, the only reason the harlot exists is to sexually please Enkidu. Not only does the plot force her into a position where she is viewed as just a sexual object, but she offers no protest to this unequal treatment. The normalcy of objectifying and oppressing women in Mesopotamia can be shocking for readers especially since it is occurring on a rhetorical level.

There are some women in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* that do have names, but this doesn’t grant them immunity from the patriarchy at work within the text. The only women with names besides Siduri are the goddesses. A reader may presume that goddesses would be privileged enough to resist gender inequality, but this is not the case for Ishtar who is severely disrespected by Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and she was also made out to be a villain. Gilgamesh resists marriage from Ishtar because she has been with other men. Ishtar is represented as impure, or dirty because of her past relationships, but if held to the same

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2. Gilgamesh, 63.
3. Gilgamesh, 64.
4. Gilgamesh, 64.
5. Gilgamesh, 100.

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standards Gilgamesh would be guilty of the same accusation. The double standard on women has been around for much longer than anticipated, but Ishtar suffers Enkidu’s disrespect as well. Throwing flesh from the bull he and Gilgamesh slayed, Enkidu publicly ridicules Ishtar also threatening physical violence against her. As a goddess, Ishtar should be privileged enough, in contemporary reader’s perceptions, to contend with Gilgamesh and Enkidu but the epic represents her as weaker than the men because she is held to double standards as a woman.

Ishtar wasn’t the only woman in The Epic of Gilgamesh who was threatened with violence. Siduri, who was forced to aid Gilgamesh, was physically threatened by him. He badgers her into helping him by telling her all of the brutal conquests he had undergone. The coercion was startling because it was Gilgamesh who was in need of Siduri’s knowledge about everlasting life. The shift in roles proves that the men were the more privileged sex. Even though Siduri was the one with the power of knowledge, Gilgamesh still threatened her with violence and coerced her into submission.

Another character that Gilgamesh mistreated was his own mother, Ninsun. She aids the representation of women as sexual objects by putting on a dress and jewels to make her appear more sexually attractive. She represents the superficial beauty standard that plagues even contemporary society. Throughout the epic, Gilgamesh consults his mother on several occasions, but she admits that she isn’t the one in charge. Shamash controls everything and Ninsun only pleases to him. She subverts herself even though she is a goddess and mother of Gilgamesh. She represents a powerless and dependent woman that has to ask a man for help.

The text of The Epic of Gilgamesh oppresses the female characters and supports a male-dominated gender bias. The men are the only ones with names, power, respect, strength, and heroism while the women, if not sexually objectified, are represented as lower beings. It is important for readers to understand the Mesopotamian context of the epic, because it serves as a reminder of how gender inequality used to be. Modern gender inequality still exists but it isn’t as blatant, ruthless, and oppressive as it once was. Since the women’s liberation movements, gender equality has been on the rise. The Epic of Gilgamesh, in this sense, serves as a window through which to view the past for an understanding of how gender equality has evolved to improve civilization.

Bibliography


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8 Gilgamesh, 88.
9 Gilgamesh, 101.
10 Gilgamesh, 74.
11 Gilgamesh, 74.