

Ayla Kutlu's Kadın Destanı and the Modification of the Epic

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ABSTRACT

Ayla Kutlu's Kadın Destanı and the Modification of the Epic: Ayla Kutlu uses historical events in her fiction to make a correspondence between the past and the present, because she sees the historical background as the determining factor of what happens at present (Kutlu 9). Kutlu's work Kadın Destanı (Woman's Epic), published in 1994, is a rewriting of Gilgamesh from the viewpoint of a harlot who is abused by Gilgamesh. The female narrator of Kutlu's epic, Liyotani, talks about her suffering at the temple of Gilgamesh, while she narrates his story. Like Gilgamesh, Liyotani emphasizes the significance of writing, but their aim is different: while Gilgamesh desires to become immortal by engraving his story on clay tablets, Liyotani wants to finish writing her story before she dies in order to share her suffering with other women. In terms of form, Kutlu modifies the epic genre, which can be defined as "A long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in adventures forming an organic whole through their relation to a central heroic figure and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race" (Holman and Harmon 171). Although Kutlu's epic is a narrative written in the form of a poem, the main character is a harlot, not a hero of a nation. Kutlu changes some characteristics of the epic to include heroines and their suffering in a patriarchal society. The aim of this paper is to show how Ayla Kutlu rewrites Gilgamesh and modifies the epic genre to connect women's experience in the past with their present situation.

Key words: Gilgamesh, Kadın Destanı, epic, rewriting, female voice

ÖZET

Ayla Kutlu geçmişle günümüz arasındaki ilintiyi kurmak için eserlerinde tarihi olayları kullanır, çünkü ona göre tarih bugünün belirleyicisidir (Kutlu 9). Kutlu 1994'te yayınlanan Kadın Destanı adlı eserinde, Gılgamış destanını "yosma" karakterinin ağzından anlatarak yeniden yazar. Kutlu'nun destanındaki kadın anlatıcı, Liyotani, Gılgamış'ın öyküsünün yanı sıra onun tapınağında çektiği acıları ve

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kendi öyküsünü de anlatır. Gılgamış gibi Liyotani de yazının önemini vurgular ama amaçları farklıdır. Gılgamış öyküsünü tabletlere yazdırarak ölümsüzlüğü amaçlarken, Liyotani acılarını diğer kadınlarla paylaşabilmek için ölmeden öyküsünü bitirme telaşı içindedir. Nazım olarak yazılan *Kadın Destanı*'nda ana karakter destan türünde görüldüğü gibi ulusal bir kahraman değil bir "yosma"dır. Kutlu'nun destan türüne getirdiği yeniliklerin temel amacı, bu türün kadın kahramanları ve onların ataerkil toplumda çektiği acıları da içermesidir. Bu makalenin amacı, Ayla Kutlu'nun kadınların geçmiş deneyimlerini günümüzdeki durumlarıyla ilintirendirebilmek için Gılgamış destanını yeniden yazarak destan türünde yaptığı değişiklikleri incelemektir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Gılgamış, *Kadın Destanı*, destan, yeniden yazım, kadın anlatıcı

A Handbook to Literature defines the epic genre as "A long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in adventures forming an organic whole through their relation to a central heroic figure and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race" (Holman and Harmon 171). As this definition suggests, the main characters of epics are heroes, in other words men "of national or international importance, and of great historical or legendary significance" (Holman and Harmon 172). The earliest example in the oral tradition, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, narrates the story of the Sumerian king, who represents the characteristics of an epic hero with his power and adventurous deeds.

The Turkish writer Ayla Kutlu's *Kadın Destanı* (Woman's Epic), written in 1994, is a rewriting of *Gilgamesh* from the viewpoint of the priestess in Ishtar's temple, who was once a harlot. Written in verse form with an elevated style, Kutlu's story modifies the original epic by replacing the internationally renowned king with a disreputable woman. In her lecture at Baskent University on December 10, 2002, Ayla Kutlu explained the reason for this change as an improvement of women's position in literature. She argued that female figures in epics have been displayed as stock characters supporting men in their adventures. By writing the harlot's story, Kutlu wanted to show that women have epic stories to tell as well. Nancy Walker, in her book *The Disobedient Writer*, defines such texts as "'revisionary narratives', which expose or upset the paradigms of authority inherent in the texts they appropriate" (7).

When the authority passes from a hero to a heroin, the content of the story changes from male adventure of fighting and killing into women's suffering and pleasures. Also, while *Gilgamesh*'s story is told in third-person narration to maintain objectivity, a characteristic of the epic (Holman and Harmon 172), Kutlu prefers to use first-person narration to illustrate the secret confessions of a woman to her readers. As Walker argues "The autobiographical form of the first-person narrative is a reminder that if [...] one feels shut out of the themes and forms of what is regarded as 'literature' there always remains one's own story to tell" (Walker 121). The aim of this paper is to dwell on the differences between the two epics to show how a woman writer recreates the epic tradition to include heroines. Before discussing Kutlu's changes in detail, I will give a brief synopsis of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to show the diverging points.

Throughout the epic, Gilgamesh is described as a mighty and valiant ruler in search of immortality. Born of Ninsun, a goddess, two thirds of Gilgamesh is god and one third is man. (*Epic of Gilgamesh* 2), and “he has no equal when his weapons are brandished” (*Epic of Gilgamesh* 3). However, the people of Uruk are annoyed by the brutality of their king, as he obliges men to become his warriors, and sleeps with brides on their wedding day. When people pray to the gods to create a counterpart to Gilgamesh to challenge the tyrant, Enkidu “the child of nature / the savage man from the midst of the wild” (*Epic of Gilgamesh* 7) is created. After the harlot, Shamhat, makes love to Enkidu and teaches him the ways of civilisation, he is brought to the city to fight with Gilgamesh, and save the brides from his abuse. When Enkidu meets Gilgamesh, they embrace and become comrades. To “establish forever a name eternal” (*Epic of Gilgamesh* 20) they fight with the forest giant Humbaba. The adventure in the Forest of Cedar, which results in the slaying of the giant and felling timber, could be explained with man’s nature of killing and demolition to show his power.

Following this heroic deed, Ishtar, the goddess of love, proposes marriage to Gilgamesh. However, he rejects her on the grounds that she would betray him, as she did to her previous lovers. Gilgamesh’s refusal could be interpreted as a king’s rejection of being ruled by a woman, even if she is a goddess. This act of Gilgamesh results in a fight with the Bull of Heaven sent by Ishtar, and Enkidu, who fights alongside his friend, dies in the end. Lamenting the death of his friend, Gilgamesh sets off on an epic journey to the land of Utnapishtim to search for immortality. When he comprehends that everlasting life is impossible for human beings, Gilgamesh wants his story to be engraved in order to immortalize his name.

Apart from adventures and the quest for immortality, one of the themes that is foregrounded in this epic, and in most epics, is male friendship, which “excludes women and the domestic sphere. Men are most manly when they are fighting side by side in a world without women” (Hammond and Jablow 282). The relative insignificance of female characters in the epic suggests “the exclusion of women from cultural power” (Downes 206). Thus, there are very few female figures with minor roles in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*: Ninsun, the nurturant mother, Shamhat the seductress, Ishtar, the goddess of love, Siduri “a tavern-keeper by the seashore” (*The Epic of Gilgamesh* 76), and Utnapishtim’s unnamed wife. These female characters “are regarded positively only when they assist Gilgamesh (and Enkidu) in their activities, when they nurture, advise in maternal fashion” (Harris 80). However, a female figure, such as Ishtar, who “assumed an intolerable role for a female” (Harris 85) by betraying men, are condemned. The good woman versus the bad one reminds one of Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert’s classification of female roles as angels and monsters in men’s writing. Those who confirm to the rules of patriarchy and remain in the domestic sphere are angels, and those “who rejected the submissive silences of domesticity” (79) have been regarded as monsters. Hence, in this epic, women appear as types with no individuality and voice. The text, for instance, does not mention what Shamhat feels, when she meets Enkidu.

Unlike the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Ayla Kutlu attributes a major role to a woman, and to her burdensome life in her epic. As opposed to a hero with national importance, the main character of *Woman's Epic* is not a celebrity of Uruk: she describes herself as an “insignificant character” (80).¹ She is not of noble birth and remembers nothing of her past and parents. She has two names and identities: her real name is Liyotani, whose mother Akkasi-ya is murdered right after her birth, and she is raised by her mother's friend Dicle. Then she is brought to Ishtar's temple, where she becomes a harlot at the age of eleven after being raped by the priest of the temple. She is chosen for the task of teaching Enkidu how to make love, and bears children from Gilgamesh, Enkidu and others. On her return to Uruk after Gilgamesh slays Humbaba, she becomes the head priestess of Ishtar's temple with a new name Nippukir meaning “white swan”, because the people fail to recognize her as Liyotani. Her son from Gilgamesh is appointed as the head priest of the temple. Eventually, unable to stand his cruelty, she poisons herself and her son. Dilek Direnç, in her article on how women writers revise myths, claims that the split identity as harlot and priestess in Kutlu's epic displays “the polarization in traditional cultures of female attributes of flesh and spirit [...] implying their inevitable complementarity” (178). The spirit represented by Nippukir recounts the story of Liyotani, the flesh, and of the women of Uruk.

The woman's perspective changes the focus of the epic: while the original epic celebrates male power, Nippukir foregrounds the suffering of women. As she narrates, some women are sold as slaves in the market place, and wives are beaten by their husbands. To avoid male abuse at night, women of Uruk again have to appeal to a male authority: they pray to the sun god Shamash, not to leave. The images of maternity and nurture, with which Kutlu's book abounds, are also associated with male power. Liyotani, who bears many babies from her unwilling affairs, is not allowed to nurture her babies, as they are taken away from her right after birth, and she is compelled to endure their loss.

In Kutlu's epic, Gilgamesh is shown as the epitome of male brutality and therefore instead of his exploits as a great fighter or as the builder of walls, his ruthlessness is emphasized. He uses his power to kill living beings, and to rape women. Nippukir detests tyranny in general, considering the kings as symbols of male oppression. She knows that the gods ordained Gilgamesh with such power, and that exploitation will last for thousands of years (210). Thus, Kutlu's changes in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* illustrate what Jeffrey Downes asserts in his discussion of the twentieth-century epics and the changes in the epic tradition: “Epic poetry produced by women [...] serves as a powerful tool for rewriting [...] women's position with regard to patriarchy” (212).

The journey to the forest is a manifestation of male sovereignty and ill-treatment of women. The soldiers who accompany Gilgamesh and Enkidu will be rewarded with gold and women: each will have seven wives, and will kill those they dislike (190-1). Nippukir evaluates this journey not as a sign of glory but a harm to nature, as the soldiers cut the trees.

¹ The passages quoted from *Kadın Destanı* are my translations.

Instead of the fight scenes, Nippukir prefers to recount her intercourse with the soldiers and how her body is treated as an object. Thus, she represses her own bodily desires while sleeping with men: “Men can only possess the body... / But the spirit, ideas and feelings will be free, / Prostitution is bearable... when you know how to count” (195). She believes that time will bring about women’s salvation from male oppression.

In line with male brutality and women’s suffering as a consequence of it, Nippukir also narrates women’s rebellion against male aggression, which is non-existent in the original epic. Dicle, who gives information to Liyotani about her mother, underlines a woman’s suffering under man’s rule. Like her daughter, Akkasi-ya was sold as a slave at the age of seven, was trained to weave, clean, sew, sing, and dance. After she was raped, she served men. Her elopement with a warrior brings the couple’s end, as this is considered as a subversive move against Gilgamesh and the rules of his temple. Thus, the women of Uruk react against the murder and the exploitation of male rulers:

It was women’s day.
A stream was formed rapidly.
They went up the narrow streets, with their babies in their laps [...].
Showing their fists and shouting.
The cry of those who were silent was in their eyes, bodies, and bare feet
trampling the ground. (106)

However, this revolt does not last long, as patriarchy subdues women by killing or raping them.

Unlike Shamhat who is silent/silenced in the omniscient narrative of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Liyotani in Kutlu’s epic can express her own feelings. For instance, when the head priestess tells her that she is chosen for the frightful task of luring Enkidu with her femininity, she asks: “Why is woman chosen to take orders? / Why would she offer herself for the demands of others?” (79) Unlike Shamhat, Liyotani also openly expresses her bodily desires, when she sleeps with Enkidu (148), because she teaches the naïve Enkidu how to make love, and for the first time in her life, does not feel the brutality of male power. This scene illustrates a woman writer’s use of a distinctive language about the female body. As Helen Cixous asserts in “The Laugh of the Medusa”, through writing woman will regain “her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty” (351). Apart from seducing Enkidu, Liyotani also acts like a mother to Enkidu, as she is worried about the future of the wild man in the city. She would like to sacrifice him to the gods instead of sending him as a prey to Gilgamesh. (151) Liyotani’s pleasure lasts very short, because Enkidu learns to act like other men, after he is brought to the city: in Nippukir’s words, “the prey turned into a hunter” (155). Still, Enkidu remains the only man Liyotani loves, and the death of Enkidu with the crocus flower

blooming from his mouth (214) is an indication of this love, because in the original version Enkidu suddenly becomes ill and dies in bed.

Nippukir is very selective in telling Gilgamesh's story: she does not dwell on his adventures and does not give details of his search for everlasting life, because she believes that he wants to be immortal not for the good of his country but in order to rule the country forever. She regards kings as self-centred, saying "Kings do not have to consider their citizens. Whatever they do is for themselves" (31). On the other hand, Nippukir's act of poisoning herself and the new priest, who is her son, displays her lack of ambition to become immortal. She sacrifices herself in order to save the women of the following generations from his son's brutality, because he blames his own mother for being rebellious and a threat to Uruk. He says:

The greatest danger is you, the head priestess.
First we should destroy you, the enemy can be defeated anyway.
Because you challenge the submission of women.
You divide the people of Uruk and Kullab.
A woman never rejects. She does not think.
She obeys. (254)

The son's words reflect the male view of the female sex. Since Nippukir is brave enough to defy the patriarchal order, she becomes a heroine in the eyes of the readers. According to Masaki Mori, one of the motives for epic grandeur is the central character's "extremely difficult duty of overcoming a community-oriented problem" (51). With her aspiration to save women from male oppression, Nippukir tries to liberate women's community.

Before Nippukir literally sacrifices herself, she rebels against male primacy by committing her final years to writing the story of women. Writing is an important issue for both Gilgamesh and Nippukir, but their aims are different: while the former wants his story to be engraved in order to be immortalized, the latter writes in private and in a hurry at the age of 90 to awaken the women of posterity. Since, unlike Gilgamesh, Nippukir does not have a companion, she can only share her feelings with the readers. Writing "by using women's language" (*Kadın Destanı* 17) - the language of the female body and desires - for Nippukir, is a way of changing the world order through disobedience to men, as she has observed that women are silenced and estranged to their bodies in patriarchy. Her last words are a plea to Ishtar, whom she refers to as "the source of love / the womb of life" (271), to save women from barbarism. She claims that "no pen will write a woman's epic" (20). Kutlu uses the word "kamuş" for pen, which in Turkish means the reed pen as well as the male sexual organ. This word play brings to mind Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's discussion of the relationship between authority and authorship in their famous book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They claim "In patriarchal Western culture [...] the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative

power like his penis” (6). By grabbing the pen, in other words, the power, from the male domain, Nippukir actually changes her identity as head priestess secluded in a temple into a public figure. As Walker argues, writing “suggests an emergence from a private into a public self” (121). Nippukir uses the power of her pen to criticise *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, saying that the engravers exaggerated the king’s deeds and thus “the real Gilgamesh was forgotten” (242). What Nippukir means by “the real king” is not the benevolent ruler, but the aggressive tyrant.

In conclusion, Ayla Kutlu plays with the fixed characteristics of the epic genre, retaining an elevated poetic style to tell the story of not a hero with international repute but a lower class woman who starts life as a harlot and becomes a heroine in the end. Mary Jacobus claims that women writers, who employ “‘male’ discourse [...] would work ceaselessly to deconstruct it: to write what cannot be written” (217). Since the focus of the epic shifts from man to woman, the content of the story changes as well. As opposed to the glorification of male power, adventure, and friendship, *Woman’s Epic* highlights women’s suffering, loneliness, and bodily pleasures in the first person. By using this autobiographical and confessional mode of narrative, Kutlu suggests that the definition of the epic, which tells “the history of a nation or race” (Holman and Harmon 171) should be expanded to include the issue of gender as well.

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