

AN EVALUATION ON NATURE-CULTURE CONTRADICTION IN EPIC OF GILGAMESH

GILGAMIŞ DESTANI'NDA DOĞA-KÜLTÜR KARŞITLIĞI ÜZERİNE BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Serdar GÜRÇAY

İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü,
Türk Halk Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı, s.gurcay@iku.edu.tr

İstanbul / Türkiye

ORCID: 0000-0003-1412-7910

Abstract

The subject of this study is the examination of the "Epic of Gilgamesh", which is the first known written epic text and belongs to the Sumerians, from the "nature-culture conflict perspective" by using "theory of contrasts" method of Claude L. Strauss. The Epic of Gilgamesh, dating from 2100 BC, is regarded as the earliest known written mythic-epic poem. It tells the adventures of Gilgamesh and his close friend Enkidu. Gilgamesh is a ruthless king at first, but over time he turns to be a hero. Enkidu, a primitive young man, becomes his companion and a bold connection forms between the two of them. In later times, Enkidu loses his connection with nature, gets weaker and then loses his life. After this event, Gilgamesh starts seeking eternal life, but encounters the realities of life itself. The purpose of this study is to reach to the relevant epic from the "view point of contrasts" by using the "theory of binary oppositions of Claude Lévi-Strauss" who is a French anthropologist, ethnologist and one of the most notable names of structural anthropology. By using sample passages, determinations regarding oppositions such as "nature-culture conflict and nature-culture harmony", "chaos-cosmos", "earth-sky dichotomy", "heaven-hell", "good-evil", "light-dark" and "sacred- profane" were presented. As a result of all this information, it can be said that the "life-death contrast" -which is the most fundamental contrast and can be determined with the difference of a breath- and "afterlife concepts" -which are detected in beliefs and promise hope- have deeply penetrated into the epic text. These basic opposites explained in the study and the dichotomous "principle of unity of opposites" help to analyze the context, heroes, time, places and socio-cultural symbols of the relevant epic.

Keywords: Epic of Gilgamesh, Claude L. Strauss, opposition theory, dichotomy.

Özet

Çalışmamız, bilinen ilk yazılı destan metni olan Sümerlere ait *Gilgamiş Destanı*'nın Claude L. Strauss'un karşıtlıklar teorisi yöntemiyle doğa-kültür çatışması perspektifinde incelenmesini içermektedir. Gilgamiş Destanı MÖ 2100'lerden kalma, bilinen ilk yazılı mitik-epik manzume olarak kabul görür. Gilgamiş ve onun en yakın dostu Enkidu'nun başlarından geçen maceraları anlatır. Gilgamiş zalim bir kralken, zamanla bir kahramana dönüşür. Enkidu isimli primitive genç adam ona yoldaşlık eder, aralarında derin bir bağ kurulur.

Enkidu ilerleyen zamanlarda doğa ile olan uyumunu yitirir, güçten düşer ve ölür. Gılgamış ise daha sonra ölümsüzlüğün peşine düşer ve hayatın gerçekliği ile yüzleşir. Çalışmamızın temel yöntemi Fransız antropolog, etnolog ve yapısalcı antropolojinin en önemli ismi olan Claude Lévi-Strauss'un ikili karşıtlıklar kuramı üzerinden destana zıtlıklar açısından yaklaşmaktır. En başta doğa-kültür çatışması/ uyum arayışı olmak üzere; kaos-kozmos, yer-gök dikotomisi, cennet- cehennem, iyi-kötü, aydınlık- karanlık, kutsal-profana vb. karşıtlıklarına dair analizler tespit edilen örnek pasajlar aracılığıyla sunulmuştur. Tüm bunlar ışığında denilebilir ki en temel zıtlık olan ve bir nefes çizgisiyle belirlenen yaşam- ölüm zıtlığı ve inanışlarda tespit edilen, bir umut ışığı vaat eden ölüm ötesi kavramları destan metnini büsbütün sarmıştır. Bu temel zıtlıklar ve dikotomik olarak karşıtların birliği ilkesi destanın bağlamının, kahramanların, zamanın, mekânın ve en önemlisi de sosyo-kültürel sembolik kodların çözümlenmesine ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gılgamış Destanı, Claude L. Strauss, karşıtlık kuramı, dikotomi.

Introduction

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), who pioneered structural anthropology, looked at structuralism from a completely different perspective and adapted this theory to anthropology. In doing so, he made extensive use of the methods of linguistics and psychoanalysis. In this sense, in Strauss's structuralism, a multiple exchange between language and psychoanalysis and the ability to use both elements constituted the point of origin of the structuralist understanding. As it is known, language constitutes the most fundamental point of people's lives in social and cultural terms. In this sense, language also has an effect that shapes human behavior. In this context, it forms people's cognitive structures and gives them the ability to give meaning to words. Therefore, it can be stated that psychoanalysis is the expression of all these expressions through gestures, mimics and thought structures. In other words, it can be said that all this interaction is an attempt to explain an abstract concept with a concrete concept. Here, at the focal point of structuralism is the interpretation of the totality of words and the unconscious.

On the other hand, structuralism is also thought to be related to the deep unconscious structures in consciousness. According to this, the individual can thus become an element of the structure, and the relationship between the individual and the unconscious gains meaning and presents a dichotomy. This means that the subject remains in the background and the structure is brought to the forefront. C. L. Strauss, in order to solve the cultural structuring, based this theory on the deepest structures of the individual's mind and based this analysis on the unconscious activities of the mind, the contrasts in the structure of language and the string of words arising from this. In line with this analysis, the unconscious structure of the mind is opposed to a theme or content, and this can be applied to socio-economic cultural characteristics. In this context, he prioritized cultural elements, arguing that "it would be most accurate to explain each community by finding its own collective unconscious concepts". With this assumption, the cultural characteristics of a community - stories, myths, tales, patterns of behavior, rituals, etc. - are identified with a meaning or tried to explain these characteristics based on the relationship arising from the principle of opposition of objects. In other words, according to this theory, cultural values are associated with words that have different or similar meanings. The first of these interactions is the nature (cultivation) opposition, which Strauss also treats as the first and most fundamental opposition. These binary oppositions are categorized as raw-cooked, long-short, us-other, big-small, woman-man, high-low and so on. Looking at the work of structural anthropology, Strauss states that all cultures have universal principles at their core, and thus all aspects of cultural life represent general laws that reveal these universal activities of the mind. On the other hand, according to Strauss, myths are the revealed symbols of the nature-culture opposition as a product of the unconscious structure of the human mind. Therefore, myths are generally composed of contrasts and express thoughts and messages that try to explain social behavior in these contrasts.

In this context, when we look at the opposites of nature and culture, human beings belong to nature, while the embodiment of society as a society belongs to culture. When we look at the functioning of nature, the positions and duties of living things are almost similar. However, if we look at social structures, it draws attention that society is in a defense against the power of nature. In a way, society is also a necessary institution against nature. Because while nature has a natural authority over living beings, society tries to dominate nature. Cultural authority is the production of the human mind. Therefore, there is a conflict between nature and cultural authority. In other words, we can talk about a parallel or successive cycle on the same plane.

The Gilgamesh Epic, which is the subject of our study, is a mythological epic of the Sumerian society in the Mesopotamia region in the Epic poetry genre. It is one of the first known written works of literature. It is also the first known written epic poem. Its writing dates back to 2100 BC (Epic of Gilgamesh, [2016]). It was written on 12 clay tablets in Akkadian cuneiform script. The study is based on the variant of the Gilgamesh Epic used by İsmail Gezgin in his 2009 book "Gilgamesh - The Mythic Hero of the Process of Acculturation".

Summary of the Epic Story

Gilgamesh is the king of the Sumerian city of Uruk. While he was a powerful but troublesome king, he learned friendship thanks to Enkidu, who was sent as a result of his people's plea to the gods; he was first defeated by Enkidu, then became his friend, went on various adventures with him and became a different person in line with his love for Enkidu. Enkidu was a wild man living in the forest, but when he went to the city to confront Gilgamesh, he turned into an urban man. Gilgamesh, on the other hand, is extremely adventurous and eager to test his strength.

One day, to test his strength, Gilgamesh goes with Enkidu to challenge the giant Humbaba, the guardian of the cedar forest. Humbaba is a being who can kill even with his terrible voice. Humbaba has own secretive and protective auras (George, 1999: xxxii). Enkidu is startled by Humbaba's voice. Gilgamesh kills the giant. Then Ishtar, the goddess of love, falls in love with Gilgamesh and wants to marry him. Gilgamesh, however, dislikes Ishtar (because she has relations with everyone, even animals) and rejects her. The goddess is dishonored and sends the Bull of the Heavens on him in revenge. Gilgamesh defeats the bull with the help of Enkidu, but again in revenge Enkidu is cursed by the gods and dreams that he will die.

Enkidu falls ill and dies over time. Unable to bear the sorrow of this, Gilgamesh loses himself for a while and in order to keep Enkidu's existence alive, he wears animal skins and lives in the forest to look like he once did. He then seeks immortality. With the help of the sage Utnapishtim, he finds the herb of immortality. But while he sleeps, a snake steals it. That is why "it is rumored that snakes change their skin every year. This change is a symbol of renewal, rebirth and eternity" (Tokyay, 2015: 34). Thanks to the advice of Enlil, the god of the wind, he learns that true immortality is to be remembered as a good person in the minds of the living by doing good deeds (Gürçay, 2017: 70).

The Epic of Gilgamesh in the Context of the Theory of Opposites

The main number of creation is "2 (two)". First and foremost is the dilemma of life and death. From the moment humanity is born, its main goal is to survive. This theory, which we take as a method in our study based on the saying "Everything exists with its opposite", is the law of contrasts that has made its presence felt since the creation of the universe. Just as night is necessary for the emergence of daytime and the woman who complements the man after his creation is necessary, a contrast that eliminates the lack of opposites and makes them visible must always be in question. Starting from the chaos-cosmos contrast motif, which is the basic contrast of myths, even the introductory formulas of fairy tales, "bir varmış, bir yokmuş (once upon a time)", are built on contrasts. So, even in the creation of the macrocosm, the universe, and the microcosm, the human being, the unity of opposites is a concept that immediately catches the eye.

In narratives based on parable, the motif of individual transformation and maturation is frequently encountered. On the journey of initiation, we encounter various trials, tests, enemies and friends; on the journey towards the cave, we desire to return to the safe place in the mother's womb and hope to reach paradise. Then we put on the shirt of fire by engaging in an arduous struggle with the monster we call the enemy, a cruel ruler, or our own primitive self, the ego. Beyond the satisfaction of the hero, the victories we win are basically the victory of the whole society. The reward we receive as a result of this victory is sometimes an elixir, sometimes a magical object, and sometimes a piece of advice that is the legacy of centuries of experience. As a matter of fact, Gilgamesh lost his prize to a snake just as he was about to receive it, and this made him internalize his advice even more. In the end, we return to our old routine world. But nothing will ever be the same again in this world. The symbolic resurrection has taken place.

Nature refers to the universe corresponding to the macrocosm, which is formed as a result of the intervention of a supreme being without human intervention, while culture, in its most general definition, is all kinds of human intervention. The nature-culture conflict has prevailed since the earliest ages of history. In the early times, man, unable to cope with nature, considered it sacred and created cults by acting with a sense of respect mixed with fear. Later, man, who was able to make tools with the power of thinking and had the ability of complex communication, struggled with nature and tried to hold power and authority in his hands. The epic text analyzed in our study is remarkable in that it reveals this conflict.

In the text that begins with the sentence **“He built a wall around Uruk and the unique treasure of the sacred Eanna”**, the building of a wall around a large area by the people expresses the cultural authority/power against the power of nature. In the sentence **“He opened the passes of the mountains, he opened wells in the neck of the hills, he crossed the vast sea up to the place where the sun rises...”**, Gilgamesh is again referred to as the god king in human appearance. This well/passage he built can be characterized as an indicator of his authority over nature.

In the sentence **“... His arms are more brawny than an Anu rock...”**, the strength of the human body is compared to the strength of natural objects and the strength of the human being is praised. This is also an indication of contrast. On the other hand, while Enkidu acts in herd psychology with animals in nature and symbolizes nature, Gilgamesh symbolizes culture that challenges nature with its power, authority and actions. Gilgamesh's having dreams and telling this to his mother is a human characteristic. “While myths are expressions of the social unconscious, dreams are defined as expressions of the personal/individual unconscious” (Gürçay, 2017: 65). The social unconscious is intertwined with the individual unconscious (Gezgin, 2009: 255). Dream perception is revealed in detail when mythology, epic, folk tale, fairy tale and legends are analyzed. The dreams in these genres have many functions. Foretelling the future, giving warnings, providing guidance, making people fall in love, making people build places and structures, and making people change their religion are the most common functions of dreams. These functions of dreams create a relationship between dreams and culture. This relationship between dream and culture is shaped by mutual interaction. In other words, the dream appears as an element of culture. The fact that Enkidu is with a prostitute named Shamhat and submits to her, obeys her, leaves his wild life and becomes civilized is actually a nature-culture opposition. Because while Enkidu symbolizes nature in terms of his animalistic characteristics and lifestyle, the prostitute appears before him as a cultural authority belonging to the city life from civilized life. Shamhat, the prostitute mentioned here, can be equated with anima, one of Jung's subconscious archetypes, symbolizing lust, danger and fear. Enkidu finds balance and blends into civilized life thanks to Shamhat, his anima. This masculine-feminine combination ensured integrity.

Enkidu did not know how to eat bread, drink and bathe; these are the characteristics of a civilized person. Learning these is again an indication of cultural authority. **“In Uruk, sacrifices were always made so that people could be purified...”** This behavior can be seen as a cultural feature in the sense that it is a ritual and a form of behavior that people put forward.

Rituals are more belief-centered repetitive behavior patterns that people (culture) perform in order to get closer to the sacred from the profane sphere. Therefore, through the symbolism of commemoration and worship through ritual, feelings of fear and curiosity are suppressed. The reason why these rituals are performed and myths are told at the beginning of each year is that they purify the environment of chaos. In the narrative, the fight between Enkidu and Gilgamesh stands out as an example of nature-culture conflict. Enkidu symbolizes nature in terms of upbringing and Gilgamesh symbolizes culture in terms of creation and speech. However, what is noteworthy here is that one of the two cannot prevail over the other and they continue to live in friendship. Therefore, in essence, this inability to prevail points to the fact that no matter how much humanity today thinks that it has been successful in its struggle with nature, in fact there is no winner in this war and therefore balance and harmony win. Enkidu's fatherlessness, his spontaneous existence in the wilderness, and the fact that he was not cared for or raised by anyone can also be considered among the main qualities that symbolize nature.

“I would like to go up to the mountain of the cedars, which is in the middle of the great forest; where I cut down the cedars and where Humbaba (the watcher of the cedar forests) is...” Here the trees and Humbaba belong to nature and nature is fighting to protect itself. However, Gilgamesh's desire to cut down the trees with the human characteristics of striving for superiority and the desire to dominate reveals the opposition of cultural authority over nature. "Okay, I'm going with you, I'm going with you to cut down the cedar trees, let's go with me to the brother blacksmiths..." The fact that they make axes to cut down trees shows the authority of culture over nature. Blacksmiths and alchemists were considered semi-sacred figures in ancient times, just like shamans. One of the reasons for this is that their ability to dominate nature, their ability to heal the sick through magic and sorcery, their ability to communicate with mystical powers, their ability to shape iron, an element that is very difficult and time-consuming to shape, and their creation through alchemy have made them almost sacred, and they have gained a divine identity. Therefore, from the human perspective, this event, which is seen as a struggle with the beast, is in essence nothing other than a nature-culture conflict with an ecocritical approach.

The old council of wise men said to Gilgamesh, **“Why would you attempt such a thing? It is an attack on Humbaba's hearth!”** but Gilgamesh says, **“Brother, I should say: I am afraid of him, will I ever go? No, no, I will go to the Cedar Forest, I will go to fight the notorious Humbaba!”** Old sages are symbols of guidance, experience, intelligence, intuition, morality, skill. Therefore, the old sages express that they do not find this unwarranted war against nature logical. However, Gilgamesh's perspective here is that of the human being who wants to have authority over nature, that is, the perspective of the cultural authority that sees itself as superior. **“Then their ammunition was brought before them, axes, huge daggers, bows, quivers of arrows...”** As can be seen, they are all elements of culture and symbolic objects that are products of the collective memory of humanity.

In terms of gender-based oppositions, Gilgamesh is male, Enkidu is created male, power is attributed to men, and as has been known since time immemorial, women have identified with the land and nature due to their fertility. In addition, the fact that the hero is male is an indication of a patriarchal society. But here, Gilgamesh's possession of women on the first night of their marriage without their consent or his attempt to dominate over nature symbolizes a cultural authority and creates a contrast. In addition, waging war against nature without being attacked is an attitude of cultural consciousness. **“I was struggling with a wild buffalo, it was bellowing so loudly that the earth almost split open, the dust it raised darkened the sky...”** Here the buffalo is an element of nature. Man is at war with nature and this is a conflict between nature and culture. Here, there is a contrast between the buffalo's shouting and the element of the earth - the earth represents nature - and the dust it raises and the darkening of the sky in the context of high and low. In the sentence **“The white cloud became black”** there is a contrast of colors.

White represents day and black represents night. In this respect, daytime symbolizes life, energy and hope, while night symbolizes fear and chills. Darkness, emptiness, vortex, subconsciousness symbolize the endless chaos in the beginning, while light, on the contrary, stands for the wholeness, energy and consciousness in the beginning. In creation, too, there is a movement from darkness to light. There is a nature-culture opposition here. There are also oppositions such as life and death, war and peace. **“North wind, south wind, east wind, west wind, blowing wind, killing wind, frost wind, storm, tornado! Thirteen winds swooped down on him, blackened his face, he could neither go forward nor backward...”** In these phrases, too, multiple contrasts stand out. Although culture has created the symbolic equivalents of directions, the contrasts related to directions belong to nature.

“Bro, we felled a great tree, so high that its tip was piercing the sky. Make a door leaf out of it, ninety feet tall, two feet thick...” Here again, there is the presence of a cultural authority. Considered sacred by many cultures and considered the axis mundi connecting the sky and the ground, trees are the fixtures of nature. The relationship between an earthly object and nature has been severed and a man-made tool/door has been created, clearly demonstrating the authority of culture over nature. **“Gilgamesh gave a great feast in his palace...”** Feasting and eating is an element of the human mind and therefore an authority belonging to culture. Especially in rituals and celebrations, eating and drinking is one of the most important elements such as music, games-entertainment, conversation, spectacle and carries the codes of culture.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu's killing of the bull shows the authority of culture over nature. In other words, the fight between human power and intellect and the bull, a creature belonging to nature, reveals the clearest example of the nature-culture conflict here. **“Anu gave the Sky Bull to Ishtar, and Ishtar took it and brought it down to the earth.”** As it is known, Ishtar is a goddess, but she has a human body and here she appears as a symbol. In addition to this, the Goddess Ishtar's bringing down a celestial element to the earth also contains a contrast. There is a contrast between earth and sky, heaven (uçmağ) and hell (tamu) or high and low. Another noteworthy aspect here is the motif of sacrifice. While Gilgamesh kills the Sky Bull, Odysseus kills the Cyclops, and in the Book of Dede Korkut, a creature, Tepegöz, emerges as a result of the shepherd's rape of the fairy girl and is sacrificed as a scapegoat. Therefore, the struggle with the outside world in Sufism and the turning inward can be interpreted as the hero's struggle with the monster in the narratives. The concepts of hero and monster are also archetypes (Campbell, 2013: 49). The monster here represents chaos. The hero and the monster are complementary characters in stories. Without one of them and not the other way around. A monster can be a human character (Campbell, 2010: 26). The Monster Grendel in Beowulf, the 12 tasks that Hercules must accomplish in Greek mythology, the great dragon Illuganka, the rival of Teşub, are examples of chaos that we encounter in the narratives. The test of being a hero is to fight the monster and eliminate chaos.

“He always carried roasted meat, cooked bread and deep water to the gods Anu and Enlil...” Here, the fact that objects such as roasted meat, cooked bread, meat and flour belonging to nature are cooked with fire, which is a human / cultural production, reveals the raw-cooked opposition and thus the nature-culture conflict. **“...As he said, in Uruk, when I was fighting, I was afraid, he encouraged me...”** The opposites of being afraid and encouraging are subconscious products of human beings and appear as contrasts belonging to culture. Apart from these, the concepts such as "day and night, right and left, happiness and mourning, sunrise and sunset, life and death, front and back, heat and frost, getting up and going to bed, wealthy and poor" and the contrasts mentioned above are also listed one after the other.

“I was just about to fall asleep when you nudged me and woke me up!” Although sleep and wakefulness are human characteristics, they are in fact a natural process due to human nature, so they can be considered an element of nature here. Because the unconscious is the one that is awake during sleep.

It does not seem possible for a normal person to act with their consciousness when they are asleep. Therefore, we can characterize the sleeping state as chaos and the waking state as cosmos.

“If you want to go underground, listen carefully to my words...” In the epic, elements such as the motif of traveling to the underworld or reaching the sky through the sacred tree of life are related to the challenge of human beings against nature (the earth). Therefore, we can say that this state of reckoning stems from man's desire to overcome the limits in the face of nature. The resistance here corresponds to the treasure in the darkness. It creates an oxymoron as "order in chaos, the unity of opposites". It is possible to see the power struggle of cultural authority here. "He embraced the dead wife he loved, he beat the dead wife he did not love..." Here again, loving and not loving are creations of the human mind. Therefore, they are oppositions belonging to culture.

CONCLUSION

As is well known, the Epic of Gilgamesh is the first literary product of humanity. The epic is the oldest known oral creation of humankind. In this sense, there is of course more than one variant of the epic. In this study, the contrasts that create tension in the context of "Nature and Culture" in the Gilgamesh Epic, which was first embodied in our oral culture and then in written culture, and on which many ideas have been expressed since the first day it was known, and explanations on how these contrasts occur are given through the examples identified. Because one of the natural processes of life is the contrasts between beings. Through contrasts, beings and thoughts gain meaning. Here, the contrasts that exist in this narrative are reflected from the essence of life and embodied in this work.

SOURCE

- Campbell, J. (2010). *Kahramanın Sonsuz Yolculuğu*, İstanbul: Kabalcı Yayınevi
- Campbell, J., Moyers B. (2013). *Mitolojinin Gücü*, İstanbul: Mediacat Kitapları.
- Deveci, Ü. (2017). *Dede Korkut Anlatılarında Doğa ve Kültür*, Atatürk Kültür Merkezi Yayınları.
- Epic of Gilgamesh, [2016], https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic_of_Gilgamesh.
- George, A. (1999). *The Epic of Gilgamesh – The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*, Londra: Penguin Books.
- Gezgin, İ. (2009). *Gılgamış– Kültürlenme Sürecinin Mitik Kahramanı*, İstanbul: Alfa Basım Yayım.
- Gürçay, S. (2017). “Gılgamış Destanı ve Titanların Savaşı’nda Kahramanın Yolculuğu”, *Folklor/Edebiyat*. C. 23, S. 89: 63-84.
- Koçak, A. (2016). “Mit ve Ritüel Dünyasından Gılgamış Destanı’na Boğa Kültü”, *Frankofoni*. C. 29: 174, 176.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (2012). *Yapısal Antropoloji*. İstanbul: İmge Kitabevi.
- Nar, M. Ş. (2014). “Yapısalcılık Kavramına Antropolojik Bir Yaklaşım: Lévi-Strauss ve Yapısalcılık”. *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih- Coğrafya Fakültesi Antropoloji Dergisi*. S. 27: 29-46.
- Tokyay, N. (2015), *Perseus’un Yolculuğu – Mitler, Arketipler ve Semboller*, İstanbul: Pan Yayıncılık.