

**Elements of Literature and Creative Communication**  
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**Week – 03**  
**POETRY: A Tryst with Imagination**  
**Lecture – 11**  
**Tracing the Roots of Poetry**


Hello. Welcome to the 3rd week of the course Elements of Literature and Creative Communication. During the last two weeks, we have had an interesting discussion on the origins of literature and in the second week, we discussed various ways through which we can read a literary text. This week, we are going to focus on poetry. So, as part of that, we can call this week POETRY: A Tryst with Imagination. In the first class, we are going to discuss the origins of poetry; what does poetry begin with? Of course, any linguistic activity that you can trace human civilization back to must have been really poetic. At its source we have already discussed this; language at its source is generally poetic. Therefore, any significant linguistic activity of human beings must have also been poetic. And generally speaking, literature; be it poetry or drama or any other form of literature has its oral roots before the writing system was invented, and literature was coded in that oral system. Literature was basically a medium of expression. This medium of expression is an oral medium of expression. So, keeping that broad perspective in mind, let us go ahead and see and take a closer look at the origins of poetry.

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**The Exaltation of Inanna**

Though I bore the offering basket, though I chanted the hymns,  
A death offering was ready, was I no longer living?  
I went towards light, it felt scorching to me,  
I went towards shade, it shrouded me in swirling dust.  
A slobbered hand was laid across my honeyed mouth,  
What was fairest in my nature was turned to dirt.  
O Moon-god Suen, is this Lugalanne my destiny?  
Tell heaven to set me free of it!  
Just say it to heaven! Heaven will set me free! [...]

The almighty queen, who presides over the priestly congregation, She  
accepted her prayer.  
Inanna's sublime will was for her restoration.  
She was lovely as a moonbeam streaming down...  
To you, who can destroy countries, whose cosmic powers are bestowed  
by Heaven. To my queen arrayed in beauty, to Inanna be praise!



So, here I have with me an interesting poem. Before we discuss the origins of poetry, or what are the sources of poetry; let me read this brilliant short excerpt. And later maybe I will connect you with why I chose to begin this lecture by reading this poem. So, you can call this excerpt, *The Exaltation of Inanna*. It is an excerpt from a larger work. We are going to discuss that work in a short while.

Though I bore the offering basket, though I chanted the hymns,

A death offering was ready, was I no longer living?

I went towards light, it felt scorching to me,

I went towards shade, it shrouded me in swirling dust.

A slobbered hand was laid across my honeyed mouth,

What was fairest in my nature was turned to dirt.

O Moon-god Suen, is this Lugalanne my destiny?

Tell heaven to set me free of it!

Just say it to heaven! Heaven will set me free!

The almighty queen, who presides over the priestly congregation, She  
accepted her prayer.

Inanna's sublime will was for her restoration.

She was lovely as a moonbeam streaming down...



To you, who can destroy countries, whose cosmic parts are bestowed  
by Heaven. To my queen arrayed in beauty, to Inanna be praise!

We have every reason to begin our discussion of the origins of poetry with this particular piece because you would be surprised if I tell you that what you heard just now, is probably one of the most ancient poetic pieces that human history has discovered. In other words, what you have read just now, what you have heard just now is probably the first known poetic work attributed to a writer in entire human history. Who is this writer? What is this work? We will get to know it in a short while, but meanwhile, though it is the first of the known literary pieces attributed to a writer, it is very easily 4500 years old poetic piece. Look at its beauty, look at its elegance, look at how beautifully lines flow. Of course, we have access to it only through translation, but translation let us remember does not add anything more than what is already there. So, through this translation, the poetic beauty the poetic genius of the writer is quite evident and let us remember, this work is at least 4500 years old.

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This is How it all Began...

- Poetry is a form of verbal art
- The earliest forms of poetry did not exist in written form as it dates back to a time when no written texts were available
- Back in ancient times, poetry was either recited or sang
- The tradition of poetry is closely related to music
- Poetry served and continue to serve several purposes, including religious, historical, instructional, entertainment, etc



Going ahead, let us quickly take a look at how poetry began. We have already discussed in one of our introductory classes that poetry is a form of verbal art ok. It is a representation of one's inner feelings emotions and experiences using the medium of language using the medium of words; therefore, it is a verbal form. The earliest form of poetry did not exist in

written form. This we already know, because poetry like any other significant linguistic activity, has its origins in the oral traditions of human history. Therefore, you have an oral background in poetry. It began as part of orality in that human history or in the history of human evolution. So, during the earlier times of ancient times, poetry; when it was not written, how was passed on? It was learned. It was sung basically recited sung. Most of the times literature before the invention of the writing system is folklorish in the sense that it is the collective property of an entire race or culture that produced it. Therefore, we do not exactly know who has authored a particular piece ok. So, it belongs to the collective wisdom of culture the collective repertoire of a culture. So, poetry served various purposes during those times. Poetry of course predominantly was meant as a medium of pleasure and enjoyment it has to be. It had to be learnt, sung, recited and thus passed on from generation to generation. So, whenever there was a religious occasion a historical moment or something that needs to be even instructed or something that needs to be recorded, all this happened using the medium of poetry. Therefore, poetry while serving the need to create pleasure need to create enjoyment also acted as a tool as a custodian to pass on the ethos of generation ethos of a particular culture from generation to generation. So, it was also used as a medium to pass on information, knowledge, belief systems and things like that is where you have the origin of poetry.



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A Brief History of Poetry ...

- Poetry was sung as religious chants, prayers, hymns, love songs, etc...
- It also narrated histories, tales and ways to lead life
- The rhythmic repetitions of poetry made it easier for people to remember important things like oral histories, genealogies, and law, as back in ancient times, no written texts were available

Gnomic poetry -- meaningful sayings put into verse to aid the memory. In Greek, gnomes; genre of wisdom poetry

- A little later, poetry was carved on monoliths, runestones, and stealers




So, therefore, many of the songs that we sing many of the hymns that we raised to god today many of our prayers have been passed on to us like that. Even our epics that we keep reading

today that we keep going back to for all our practical needs and philosophical needs, they were also first they also appeared in oral tradition as oral poetry as oral epics ok. So, sometimes as we said it is a part of narrated history. It is a kind of an invented tale. It is a way to, it is an instruction manual wherein you get to know how to lead life; all this happened through an oral medium. Well, this is where we arrive at the concept of gnomic poetry. In fact, gnomic the word gnomic has Greek origins, that means. Earlier, let us say between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century BC In Greece, gnomic poetry was popular. So, here poetry again was used as a way to memorize things, because. Well, those of some skills of memorizing, it very well right when you whatever you need to memorize, if do it taking the help of rhythmic patterns of sounds or rhythmic patterns or words, then it is going to remain in your memory for a longer time. You would be committing to your memory if you commit it first to the rhythmic sequence of language. So, gnomic poetry was used for that. Through the help of gnomic poetry, many things were passed on. So, afterwards, it is only later that poetry was curved onto monoliths or runestones and stealers and even written on papyrus and other modes. So, gnomic poetry slightly predates the appearance of poetry on stone addicts, monoliths and runestones alright.


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**Poetry's High Priestess, Enheduanna!**

- The Sumerian priestess **Enheduanna** from the 23rd century B.C.E. is regarded as the earliest known poet
- Enheduanna** left a great influence on Sumerian literature
- She composed forty-two hymns; the collection was titled as *The Sumerian Temple Hymns*.
- Best known for her works Inninsagurra, Ninmesarra, and Inninmehusa, which translate as 'The Great-Hearted Mistress', 'The Exaltation of Inanna', and 'Goddess of the Fearsome Powers'.
- She is not only the first known woman poet but also the first known author in the world history!



Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon of Akkad, circa 2300 BC



This is where we can connect our first slide with. The first slide discusses an extract from one of the ancient written works of poetry is written by the Sumerian priestess, Enheduanna. She lived during the 23<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. approximately 4400 years ago or 4500 years ago.

She is not just the first known woman poet, but also the first known author in the entire human history. The poem that we read at the beginning of this class was written by Enheduanna. In Sumerian, it meant high priestess or the darling of the heaven something like that. Enheduanna is she was a daughter of the king of Akkad Sargon of Akkad who ruled during 2300 BC ok. She has left an indelible mark not just on Sumerian literature, but on the entire world of literature itself. The collection of poems is now available to us as The Sumerian Temple Hymns. And the poem that we read in the beginning is an excerpt from there. She seemed to have composed about forty-two hymns scattered across several stone tablets; now they are available to us. Her works are known as Inninsagurra, Ninmesarra, and Inninmehusa, which you can translate as ‘The Great-Hearted Mistress’, and ‘The Exaltation of Inanna’. Of course, the first slide was an excerpt from this particular work and the third one is the ‘Goddess of the Fearsome Powers’. So, as human history knows it, she is the first known author in entire world history, and that is where we can call her the high priestess of poetry.

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“Her compositions, though only rediscovered in modern times, remained models of petitionary prayer for [centuries]. Through the Babylonians, they influenced and inspired the prayers and psalms of the Hebrew Bible and the Homeric hymns of Greece. Through them, faint echoes of Enheduanna, the first named literary author in history, can even be heard in the hymnody of the early Christian church”:

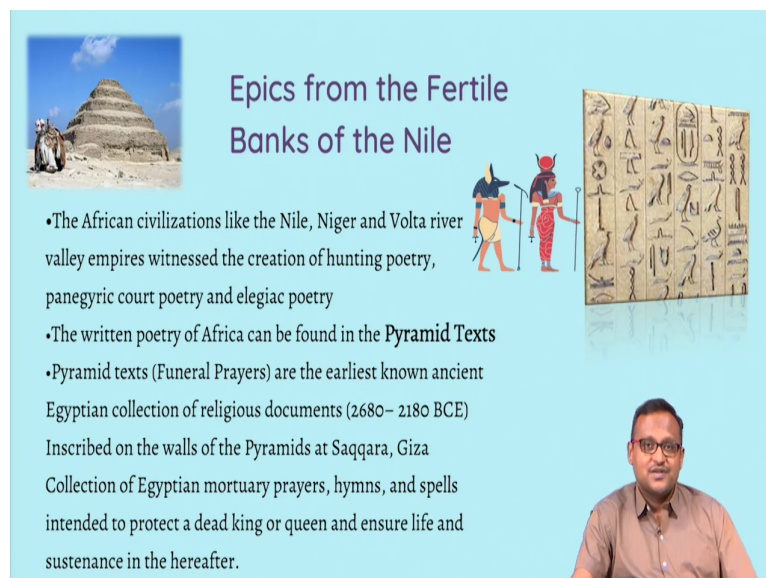
Paul Kriwaczek (Author of *Babylon*)”

She herself writes in *The Sumerian Temple Hymns*.  
“The compiler of this tablet is Enheduanna. My King, something has been created that no one has created before.”

Looking at her influence and studying her influence on the literature of other world cultures; Paul Kriwaczek, author of *Babylon*, a known historian and a journalist, writes: Her compositions, though not only rediscovered in modern times, they remained models of petitionary prayer for centuries”, because it was a kind of a fervent prayer to goddess Inanna. When an individual feels helpless against the forces that she cannot see, her only recourse is the divine force that she believes in. So, as a last resort, you find in that prayer Enheduanna,

making a devoted prayer to her goddess and requesting her almost urging her to come out of her heavenly seat and rescue her and restore her. And later, of course, the second part of the poem that you read shows how effective her prayer was as a result of her prayers, the goddess herself comes and blesses her and restores her to her original glory and power and position. Therefore, her poetry serves as a kind of template for petitionary prayers; all our works are some kind of prayers, whether it is in ancient Greece, ancient China or even ancient India. Why even our Rigvedic chants, our Vedic chants; all these things are our prayers put in the form of a verse put in the form of poetry. So, her work acts as a kind of a template for the later cultures to follow and compose their own prayers psalms and hymns. So, that is her influence. Through them, faint echoes of Enheduanna; the first name literary author in history we can even hear the hymns of the early Christian church even the hymns of the early Christian church owe a lot to the prayers of Enheduanna. This is again an excerpt from what she writes. After having completed it, this is how she ends her book. The compiler of this tablet is Enheduanna. My King, something has been created that no one has created before. This is how she ends her book the book of prayers The Sumerian Temple Hymns; something that nobody has created in history before. So, she creates a kind of a torch mirror for human literature.

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### Epics from the Fertile Banks of the Nile

- The African civilizations like the Nile, Niger and Volta river valley empires witnessed the creation of hunting poetry, panegyric court poetry and elegiac poetry
- The written poetry of Africa can be found in the **Pyramid Texts**
- Pyramid texts (Funeral Prayers) are the earliest known ancient Egyptian collection of religious documents (2680– 2180 BCE)  
Inscribed on the walls of the Pyramids at Saqqara, Giza  
Collection of Egyptian mortuary prayers, hymns, and spells intended to protect a dead king or queen and ensure life and sustenance in the hereafter.

Moving ahead from that Sumerian cultural piece to the riverbanks of the Nile; the African civilization, the Egyptian civilization ok. So, this is again the roots of poetry in Egypt. So, including I mean a broad term could be African civilizations the flood in the river valley



empires of Nile, Niger, and Volta rivers. So, here they created hunting poetry or panegyric court poetry and even elegiac poetry. Panegyric poetry is praising the king praising the patrons, who have provided shelter to the poets and all that and elegiac poetry, of course, sad songs. We are going to discuss these different subtypes of poetry in our subsequent classes, but for time being we need to know that elegiac poetry deals with sad songs we can call them. And panegyric praiseworthy praise songs of praise. The earliest written poetry of Africa is found in the Pyramid. These are the latter names that we have given them. Earlier they were written using different names and there they were scattered across different stone addicts and stone tablets and other places. And now we have collected them together and called them pyramid texts. Pyramid texts are also called funeral prayers; please remember where have we got this how do we know; I mean where were these pyramid texts written how have we received them. The pyramid texts were written in the pyramids. Especially, if you can see the pyramid there on the inner walls of the pyramid, we first discovered these pyramid texts. And we believe that they must have been written somewhere during the 27th century BC and the 21st or 22nd century BC, a rough timeline please remember these are not exact lines and there is a huge gap between them at least some 500 years. So, we cannot exactly pinpoint the date of their composition, but this must have been a broad period in which they must have been written. So, they were inscribed on the inner walls of the pyramids at Saqqara it is a village in the Giza region that is well known for the pyramids of Egyptian kings and pharaohs. So, in one of those pyramids, we discovered these pyramid texts. And they are religious documents in the sense they are religious prayers, they are mortuary prayers you can call hymns; including some mantras or spells that were intended to protect the pharaoh and ensure life and sustenance even after their death. So, the book of the dead that we hear has its origins in these kinds of pyramid texts. So, this is where we can find African civilization expressing its earlier poetic expressions through pyramid texts.




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*"we are vessels of speech ... which harbor secrets many centuries old":*

**The Epic of Sundiata** (An oral historical epic)

- It is an epic poem of the Malinke people that tells the story of the hero Sundiata K'eita
- Sundiata Keita was a prince and founder of the Mali Empire (an empire in West Africa from c. 1235 to 1670)
- There are debates that the tale might be fictitious or partly historical
- The tale was oral historical narrative and hence provides a political and cultural insight into the 13th BCE Mali Kingdom and Mande Ethnic Group



Going ahead we have another interesting literary piece again from the same region. It is called the epic of Sundiata. It is an oral historical epic alright. So, this is again from the region of Africa. It is an epic poem of the Malinke people and it tells the story of our hero Sundiata Keita. It is it belongs to the genre of poetry called historical poetry or historical epic an oral historical epic. And in fact, look at the superscript. We are vessels of speech that harbour secrets many centuries old. Here, human beings are called vessels of speech. So, it is a kind of a beautiful metonymy, it is a figure of speech. Again, we are going to discuss many of these figures of speech in our subsequent classes, but look at how beautifully human beings are called. We are vessels of speech and what do we do? We harbour secrets many centuries old. In fact, here human beings have been called vessels through which secrets divine secrets, secrets of life; are passed on from generation to generation. How beautifully it is felt. This is a quote from that particular text Sundiata Keita; he was a prince and founder of a Mali empire that seemed to have existed in West Africa, somewhere between 1230 to 1670 B.C.E. ok. So, roughly about 3000 300 years or 3500 years something like that. So, there are a lot of debates in the scholarly circles, their debates concerning whether Sundiata was an actual historical figure or whether it is just a fictitious tale whether it is whether he is a fictional hero or whether he was a fictional hero. Leaving aside these debates, what we can safely say is that it belongs to an oral historical narrative. Nevertheless, it provides us with an insight into the socio-political, and cultural life of the Mali kingdom and also the Mande Ethnic Group in West Africa; this is something that we have to keep in mind. The Epic of

Sundiata in that sense is one of the precursors of an oral historical epic and later probably, it takes on the form of historical epics. Of course, we have already discussed this. So, it paves the template for other historical epics for composition.

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### African Performance Poetry

- The performance poetry in ancient Africa was rooted in theatrics and served several purposes like political, educative, spiritual, and entertainment
- During the theatrical performances, songs were accompanied with traditional musical instruments such as drums, cymbals...

Apart from the pyramid texts and the tale of Sundiata, African poetry is basically performative. The early African poetry of course, poetry, in general, itself is performative, but early African poetry was basically performative like the early poetry in other generations or in other cultures such as ancient India, ancient Greece, ancient Mesopotamian cultures it was performative in nature. It is rooted in theatrics and again, it serves various socio-cultural purposes and political purposes. It is meant as a tool for education, spiritual purposes, and entertainment reasons. So, they would gather together maybe around the campfire and go on reciting poems after poems; thereby, entertaining people around passing on the wisdom of lore. So, that is how these are certain oral origins of poetry that we can keep in mind. Whenever such performances took place, remember these songs were accompanied by musical instruments; such as drums, symbols, and other things. So, that is we need to know this is a part of the performance. Earlier, poetry was not just poetic it was as we said it was a part of an entire show, an entire performance was done through this. So, even before the form of drama was introduced, poetry served the purpose of drama, poetry served the purpose of novels. So, poetry was the be-all and the end-all of literature. Therefore, it was much more comprehensive than we know the term poetry today. So, these are some vignettes of the origin of poetry. Especially in this class, we have covered the origins of poetry, especially in

the context of Mesopotamian culture, Sumerian culture and Egyptian culture and African cultures. And we have also come face to face with the first known author that is available in human history. We have even read excerpts from her work and how her work exerts an enormous amount of influence on other writers later and even on other cultures and other traditions. In the next class, we are going to discuss the origins of poetry. In the other parts of the globe may be, in we can even go to ancient China and even we can discuss the origins of poetry in India and other places alright.

Thank you. See you in the next class.