

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Week – 03
POETRY: A Tryst with Imagination
Lecture – 12
Origin of Poetry

Hello, welcome again to the Origins of Poetry, this is the second class in that series. In the earlier class, we discussed the origins of poetry and we even came face to face with the first known literary work. And we discussed the oral origins of poetry in African, Egyptian cultures, and Sumerian cultures in the Mesopotamian region. In this class, we are going to discuss the origins of poetry, especially in the context of Chinese literature and Indian literature they too have rich traditions of literature. But before that, before we go and discuss the Indian origin of literature and the Chinese origin of literature, we have an extraordinary epic. In fact, all of us know what our epics are, we know what major Greek epics are. So, if there is one epic that acts as a kind of a prototype for all the epics that epic is going to be the Epic of Gilgamesh.


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The Epic of Gilgamesh:

- The Story of Gilgamesh. The king of Uruk and Enkidu, their friendship and separation; search for the secret of eternal life
- Epic clash between the titans and gods; Goddess Ishtar, Sacred Bull and the holy Cedar Forest (prototype for Homeric heroic epics)
- It begins with five Sumerian poems about Bilgamesh (Sumerian for "Gilgamesh") dating from the 3rd Dynasty of Ur (2100-1800 BCE)
- The epic was combined during 18th BCE; "Old Babylonian Tablet"
- Final Lesson: "Life, which you look for, you will never find. For when the gods created man, they let death be his share, and life withheld in their own hands"
- The epic is written in Cuneiform in ancient Mesopotamia, one of the earliest written forms



The Deluge tablet of the Gilgamesh epic in Akkadian



Again this epic of Gilgamesh is a product of Sumerian culture, please remember Mesopotamian culture or the Sumers, Sumers are very well known for their artistic innovations their use of language and even the writing system. In fact, one of the earliest

known writing systems we have is cuneiform and that is again a product of Sumerian culture Mesopotamian civilization. So, the epic of Gilgamesh is also a cultural product of that region and this too has a history of over three and a half thousand years. So, the picture that you see is a stone tablet, it is called the Deluge tablet of the tail of Gilgamesh Gilgamesh epic in Akkadian. So, it is a photograph of that stone tablet. So, among all the national epics that we have, the epic of Gilgamesh is the most ancient of them all - it deals with a popular and able king of Uruk of the region of Sumers where he was called Gilgamesh. So, it is an epic that deals with the eponymous hero Gilgamesh and his friendship with Enkidu and their separation from Enkidu, Enkidu dies and that death leaves Gilgamesh very devastated and then unable to bear the loss of his close friend he embarks on a journey. A journey in search of a secret that was only privy to gods, the secret of eternal life. Whether he succeeds in that or not is the story of the epic of Gilgamesh. The epic of Gilgamesh provides you with a riveting clash between the titans called Gilgamesh and Enkidu they are titans because they have the capacity to defeat gods. So, the gods have every reason to be scared of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, therefore they find a way to separate both of them. In fact, even how Gilgamesh and Enkidu also came to be friends is another interesting story. Unable to withstand the popularity of Gilgamesh gods send Enkidu to destroy Gilgamesh, but being a powerful king, Gilgamesh takes on Enkidu and defeats him. Nevertheless, a kind of friendship blooms between them and that lasts for a lifetime. Now, Gilgamesh alone was invincible, now added to him you have Enkidu and the duo together is a kind of a deadly force, therefore now gods are fearing. So, they want to overthrow both of them. So, in their plot goddess Ishtar was in fact rebuffed by Gilgamesh she was spurned by Gilgamesh and unable to bear that insult. She sends the sacred bull a very mighty powerful divine bull to fight Gilgamesh and Gilgamesh almost single-handedly defeats and almost tears down the bull into 2 different pieces. So, this is kind of an extraordinary epic where you have all the features of great epics. So, the tale itself begins with five different Sumerian poems that talk about Gilgamesh. So, the entire thing seemed to have happened during the 3rd Dynasty of UR somewhere between 2100 and 1800 BC. So, approximately let us say 3200 to 3300 years ago. The epic of Gilgamesh as we now have it was compiled sometime during the 18th century BCE until then it was scattered across twelve different stone tablets and during the 18th century BCE they were almost clubbed together and they were called the Old Babylonian Tablet.

So, as I said earlier the entire epic is written in cuneiform which is a remarkable and highly scientific Mesopotamian writing system and of course, this is one of the earliest written forms



that we have. So, as I said gods conspire to break up the friendship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh. So, they somehow succeed in killing Enkidu and unable to bear the loss of his friend Gilgamesh embarks on a kind of epic journey in search of a secret that grants him eternal life. Unfortunately, of course, eternal life is something that is been denied to the mortals we know the truth. So, he learns this bitter lesson towards the end of the epic of Gilgamesh he learns this lesson. Life, which you look for, you will never find. For when the gods created man, they let death be his share, and life withheld in their own hands. So, death was sent as a kind of companion to life anything that is born must die. Therefore, no point in hankering after the dead friend we must learn to move on, make amends with the losses and move on that is a kind of an epic lesson that Gilgamesh learns and that is a kind of an epic lesson that entire humanity can learn and benefit from. This is the story of Gilgamesh the epic of Gilgamesh the oldest epic of all the epics that we have this is the oldest epic.

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The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor

- Oldest surviving speculative fiction poetry of Egyptian Voyage
- It was written at around 2500 BCE in the Hieratic language
- It is a tale of Ancient Egyptian voyage to "the King's mines"
- the papyrus having the story written upon it is located within the Imperial Museum in St. Petersburg.

Frame Narrative: The tale begins with a sailor announcing his return from a voyage at sea. He is returning from an apparently failed expedition and is anxious about how the king will receive him. An attendant reassures him, advising him on how to behave before the king, and repeating the proverb, "The mouth of a man saves him". To encourage his master/sailor, he tells him a tale of his own previous voyage in which how he overcame danger, disaster, including meeting with a god and the king.



From the epic of Gilgamesh we can go to the Tale of Shipwrecked Sailor, today the epic of Gilgamesh is considered one of the oldest epics. But technically speaking the Tale of Shipwrecked Sailor though it is not as popular as the epic of Gilgamesh, predates the epic of Gilgamesh at least by a couple of 100 years at least by 500 years. So, if the epic of Gilgamesh was composed during 2100 BCE. So, this must have been written around 2500 BCE ok and the story of how we chanced upon it is also very interesting. During the 19th century, somebody came across a piece of papyrus on which the story was written and today that piece of papyrus is stored in the Imperial Museum in Saint Petersburg.

So, that is how we have come to receive this tale of the shipwrecked sailor and unlike other epics let us say for instance the Tale of Sundiata that we discussed in the previous class or the tale of Gilgamesh, is based on historical personalities. They were based on their protagonists where they at least resembled if not exactly historical pictures these tales depicted personalities who existed in history in some form or the other. But the tale of the shipwrecked sailor in that sense is not historical, it does not belong to a historical narrative genre, it belongs to speculative fiction poetry it is it forms it is narrative poetry on a fictitious sailor a fictitious ancient Egyptian sailor who takes a voyage to the King's mines. And here this is very interesting because the tale of a shipwrecked sailor makes use of many interesting and riveting narrative strategies. According to modern narrative theories we have frame narratives, box narratives and many other narrative strategies through which a plot unfolds stories taken from stage to stage. So, this particular piece written more than 4500 years ago, makes use of all these narrative strategies, the tale begins with a sailor who is returned from his voyage in the sea. And unfortunately, his voyage in the sea is not a very fruitful venture it is a kind of a failed venture, a failed expedition. And this expedition was undertaken by the sailor at the behest of the king. Now, that he has come back rather not very successfully the sailor is very anxious to meet the king he is very apprehensive as to how his king, who has sponsored the entire expedition would receive him. So, this is when one of his attendants or maybe friends consoles him saying not to worry and he advises the sailor to downplay his misfortune and almost reassures him with the proverb, The mouth of a man saves him.

In order to convey even your misfortune, even your failed expedition, and make the king would forgive you, it all depends on how you present it. And then in order to alleviate his fear and to encourage his master or friend this attendant narrates a story of his own previous voyage and how his voyage was beset with lot many dangerous disasters and how in the process he met god, a king and even a serpent and how he rescued himself from all those traps and came back and things like that. So, this is how the narration of the attendant begins within the frame of the narration of a sailor who has just begun narrating the story that is why we can call it a kind of a frame narrative. You can even go ahead and call it a box narrative also because then this attendant whose narrative forms a part of the narrative again is a part of another narrative that the serpent who he comes across during his expedition narrates. So, there is a kind of a tail within a tail within a tail. So, what is a tail becomes a narrative point for another tale and what is the narrative point becomes a tale for the other narrative point something like this. So, it has thus it makes use of some interesting narrative strategies and it

is now of course available in English translation if the story interests you can as well take a look at it.

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Ancient Wisdom from the Land of Dragon: Early Records of Chinese Poetry



- Shijing (The Book of Songs) dated to early 1st millennium BC is the earliest existing collection of Chinese poems and songs
- It is a collection comprising 305 works (1046-771 BCE); one of the 5 classics attributed to Confucius; popularized during the Han Dynasty
- The poems of China are preserved in written form and constitute its poetic literature
- Besides the written, there were parallel traditions of oral and traditional poetry also known as popular or folk poems or ballads, some of which have been preserved in written form



So, from here, of course, we go to the Chinese origin of literature especially poetry the Land of the Dragon. So, here the early records of Chinese poetry can be found the earliest records of Chinese poetry seem to have been written during the 11th century BCE. So, something like again more than 3000 years ago or let us say yeah about 3000 years ago. So, the first known Chinese poetic book is called Shijing or you can call them the book of songs or book of words or just songs something like that composed during the early part of the first millennium BCE of course. And this is the earliest collection of Chinese poems that we have.

So, it is a collection that comprises about three hundred 305 works scattered across 5 different books and one of them is Shijing, one of the 5 classics that is available to us today this classic is attributed to Confucius one of the earliest and most influential Chinese philosophers. In fact, the Han dynasty a little later officially followed the doctrine of Confucius across their kingdom and adopted Confucianism as their way of life or as their official religion and they popularized all these works of Confucius. And interestingly in china, of course, we find the existence of their poetry both in their written form and in their oral form ok. So, in the earlier cultures the earlier civilizations if the origin of poetry is found in only oral forms, oral traditions in China it's available as we have them now. They simultaneously existed both in oral traditions and written traditions. As we have it now

probably we still may not have access to purely oral poetry, but as we have it now they existed simultaneously. Apart from these works, of course, the poems of China are preserved both written and oral, which constitutes the poetic tradition of China. Apart from these works we also have other folk poems or ballads and all these folk poems are ballads are sung and there they again constitute a part of a formative oral tradition that we know now.

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A presentation slide with a light orange background. The title 'Ancient Chinese Poetry continued' is in blue text at the top left. To the right of the title is a large red Chinese character '和' (He) with a smaller black character '猴' (Hou) next to it. Below the title is a list of four bullet points in red text. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset showing a man with glasses and a brown shirt speaking.

Ancient Chinese Poetry continued

- Most of the folk are anonymous and are interpolated
- Another early poetry collection/genre is the Chu Ci (dated to the Warring States period about 475–221 BCE); These poems from the State of Chu are among the most important of all Classical Chinese poetry
- China has a rich tradition of poetry and have witnessed various experimental forms over the dynasties and decades
- Classical Chinese poetry has immense influence on poetry worldwide

Apart from, of course, the works of Confucius and most of these folk works are anonymous we do not exactly know when and how or where by whom they were composed and there is a scope for a lot of interpolation. In fact, the interpolation again in textual editing, textual criticism and of course text editing interpolation is a term that we use for later additions.

Probably when the text may have been edited at a later time, there is a chance that someone else may add his or her own part to this and that is how the text must have been expanded. So, most of the ancient folk Chinese poetry that we have is interpolated in that sense, of course, all literature is interpolated all oral literature when it is passed on from mouth to mouth, generation to generation each generation will have added their own ethos right; each generation will have added its own ethos it is own sensibilities.

So, all products of oral culture are interpolations to a large extent, including our epics the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Another important early poetry collection is Chu Ci it is again dated to the 5th century and 3rd century BCE. So, they are from the state of Chu and they again constitute part of Classical Chinese poetry.

So, China too has a rich tradition of poetry, both the oral tradition of poetry and written tradition of poetry and they again constitute an interesting study for scholars of poetry. And Chinese poetry too like other earlier ancient poetry from across cultures Chinese poetry too has had a significant impact on world literature.

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From the Cradle of European Enlightenment: Ancient Greek Poetry

- The earliest surviving works of ancient Greek literature are the two epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer (800 BCE)
- The *Iliad*, also referred to as *The Song of Ilium* is set during the Trojan War and narrates the quarrel between the King Agamemnon and the warrior Achilles, the ten-year siege of the city of Troy (Ilium); it also alludes to Greek legends
- *Odyssey* was composed in and around 8th and 7th century BCE and narrates the story of the Greek hero and King of Ithaca Odysseus and his 10 year journey back home after the Trojan War



So, from here we can go to Ancient Greek Poetry, of course, Greece is sometimes called the cradle of European civilization. In fact, the European enlightenment owes its debt to Greek civilization and Greek culture. So, the earliest Greek poetry again in oral tradition, but later, of course, preserved in the written form is traced back to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* written by Homer.

Historians believe that they are the epics representative of Greece - *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Of course, when it comes to epics though the epic of Gilgamesh's the most ancient when it comes to the popular epics that the world has seen and known the Greek epics are the ones. In fact, the most popular epics that the world has read probably and have their influence on other epics as well.

So, they must have been composed during 800 BCE, the *Iliad* which is an earlier work refers to it is also called *The Song of Ilium*. It is set during the Trojan War you must have even watched this movie *Troy* right; of course, it is based on this epic *Iliad* forms a kind of an epic template for epics of other generations and other cultures ok.

So, it deals with the Trojan War and also narrates a kind of an epic quarrel between King Agamemnon and Achilles. The story also discusses the 10 years of siege of the city of Troy and it is a treasure house of a lot many Greek legends. So, all of us will have heard of the story of Troy or the Trojan horse at least we must have heard of Trojan horse right. Troy was a kind of an I mean you could not penetrate into the city of Troy impenetrable city. So, despite giving their best the Greeks cannot enter their city, because the city is well protected by an extraordinary wall and as long as they do not gain entry into the city of Troy they cannot win this war. So, therefore, what do the Greeks do? They create a huge wooden horse and leave it behind and they pretend as if they have left the scene and in fact, some of them leave as well. But what has happened again is this Trojan Horse is an epitome of Greek sculpture and carving, and all that. So, very cleverly the Greeks and some of their soldiers have hidden in this huge Trojan Horse and then when the people of Troy take it assuming victory they take this huge wooden horse to their city and that is when of course they come out and open the gates and they give a signal that is when the Greeks reenter and then win this war. So, the entire war lasts for about ten years the story deals with this in all its detail and the Odyssey refers to a little later of course, after the Iliad the story of Odyssey deals with the return of Odysseus. One of the wisest Greek heroes and Greek kings, he is a king of Ithaca one of the wisest guy blessed by gods. Only Odysseus, among the major kings, succeeds in returning to Greece. And the travels and travails of Odysseus and this 10-year journey back constitute the tale of the epic Odyssey. So, these are extraordinary Greek ancient Greek poetry.

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Ancient Greek Poetry *continued*

- The lyric poets Sappho, Alcaeus, and Pindar were highly influential during the early development of the Greek poetic tradition
- Sappho, the 10th Muse (630 – 570 BCE) was an important Greek poet from the island of Lesbos
- She is one of the greatest and revolutionary lyric poets and has been the muse for great many poets
- Besides her poetry, Sappho is held as an icon of love for her diverse portrayal of the theme



A nineteenth-century painting by the English painter Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema depicting the poetess Sappho gazing on in admiration as the poet Alcaeus plays the lyre



From here we go to other Greek poets and other Greek poetic forms after the Homeric epics we have the odes of Sappho odes of Pindar which are well known throughout the world now. Sappho is also considered the 10th Muse in the Greek tradition, she is considered the 10th Muse who lived between 630 and 570 BCE and she is a very major Greek poet from the island of Lesbos. Her poetry is basically lyrical, and she along with Alcaeus and Pindar they are they form a kind of an influential poetic circle during their times.

And her poetry is also marked by revolutionary lyrics and she is also well known for her being considered even as a kind of an icon of love for her diverse and radical portrayal of the theme of love. So, this painting of Sappho by 19th-century painter English painter Sir Lawrence depicts Sappho along with her close friend watching poet Alcaeus reciting his poems or playing his lyre.


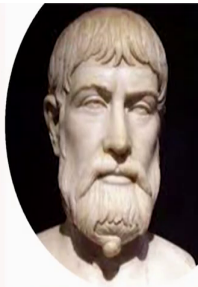
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Pindar and the Pindaric Ode

"Of the nine lyric poets, Pindar is by far the greatest, in virtue of his inspired magnificence, the beauty of his thoughts and figures, the rich exuberance of his language and matter... he is inimitable"

Pindar (from Thebes) is one of the greatest lyric poets of all times and is also known for his reflections on the nature of poetry and the role of a poet

- Pindaric ode is a poetic form named after the eponymous poet
- Other important later writers included Apollonius of Rhodes, who wrote *The Argonautica*, an epic poem about the voyage of the Argonauts


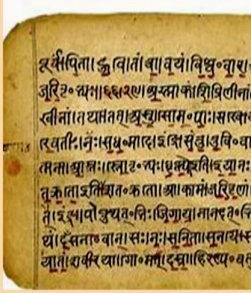


So, from ancient Greece again we have Pindar and Pindaric Odes. Today ode is again a form of poetry some type of poetry and they have their origins in Pindar. So, you have Pindar, a major poet who seems to have created a kind of a unique form. Therefore they are called Pindaric forms a major figure this is something that we will have to keep in mind.

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Lores of our beloved land: Ancient Indian Literature

- Rigveda is the earliest known Indian literature
- It is a collection of 1028 hymns written in Vedic Sanskrit
- The Rigveda was followed by Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda
- The exact date of composition of the Vedas could not be determined, however, 1500-1200 BCE is considered as the most probable time
- The Ramayana and Mahabharata are the two ancient epics written in Sanskrit in ancient India; these are integral to the Indian literary tradition of India and are held in high regard even today



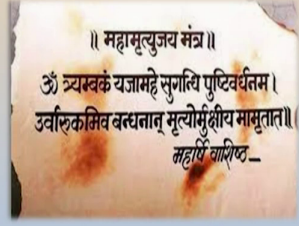
So, from the Greek civilizations, we come to the Lore of our own beloved land; Ancient Indian Literature with a discussion of ancient Indian poetry. We would be closing our series on the origins of poetry, but this list is not exhaustive. But I am sure having discussed African origins of poetry, Mesopotamian origins of poetry and Chinese origins of poetry, European Greek origins of poetry and Indian origins of poetry we will have covered representatively all major civilizations. Of course, many significant ones are left, but that is for maybe some other course. So, coming to ancient Indian literature, again our ancient poetry belonged to the oral tradition. So, the earliest known work in Indian literature is called the Rigveda, of course, one of the four major Vedas- like the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda, and the Atharva Veda. So, this is one of the earliest Vedas. So, composed in Vedic Sanskrit and it is credited to have had 1028 hymns. So, again the exact date of composition of the Vedas is unknown, but historians determine that they must have been composed somewhere between 1500 and 1200 BCE. So, approximately again 3500 3600 years ago. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are also our ancient epics, they are from around the 10th-century or 11th century BCE something like that. Again, the exact dates we do not know. They too are our national epics written in Vedic Sanskrit and they constitute together with the Vedas the Upanishads and these epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata they constitute the great Indian literary tradition and are considered and are held high even today.

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Let's immerse ourselves for a moment in the timeless inquisitiveness of the Rig Veda through these lines

"Who knows for certain?
Who shall here declare it?
Whence was it born, whence came creation?
The gods are later than
this world's formation;
Who then can know the origins of the world?
None knows whence creation arose;
And whether he has or has not made it;
He who surveys it from the lofty skies.
Only he knows-
or perhaps he knows not."

— From Rigveda



So, having come to know about our origins of literature Indian origins of literature let us immerse ourselves let us go a little deeper and immerse ourselves in a couple of it is just to give us a taste of our ancient literature. The piece on my right is in Vedic Sanskrit this sloka or a hymn is taken from the Rig Veda and there is another significant to this mantra is called Mahamrityunjaya mantra. Recently this Mahamrityunjaya mantra was in great circulation, especially after the pandemic. So, this mantra is considered one of the most powerful mantras, this is of course dedicated to Lord Shiva. And the reason behind its circulation recently was that it's believed its belief that if you chant this mantra a couple of times a day it is going to cast a kind of a protective layer around us.

Whether it is in Greece or in Africa or Mesopotamian cultures poetry has its roots in prayers songs hymns and prayers. So, any prayer comes with a certain belief. So, here too people believe that if you recite this, it will have an accompanying positive effect. So, the purpose here is, of course, to give you a taste of how it sounds how it sounds Mahamrityunjaya mantra. And later we have another excerpt from the English translation of another mantra. So, it means that it is a prayer to Lord Shiva. So, we are praying to Lord Shiva to cast a kind of a protective spell around us and spare us from untimely death. Rig Veda though is highly religious is one of the most inquisitive Vedas. There is a scope for questioning our gods here there is a scope for quarrelling with our gods here not believing it then reconciling with it.

So, let me read from Rig Veda in English translation :

Who knows for certain?
Who shall here declare it?
Where was it born?
Where came creation?
The gods are later than this world's formation;
Who then can know the origins of the world?
None knows where creation arose;
And whether he has or has not made it;
He who surveys it from the lofty skies.
Only he knows - or perhaps he knows not.

Such an extraordinary agnostic philosophy is embedded in the core of religious hymns. Most of the cosmogony works, religious works that deal with the origin of the universe, whether it is the old Bible or not they attribute the creation of this universe to god. You must have heard these stories from the Bible where God creates the universe in 7 days and all that. Most of the other original works also talk about it, but here is Rig Veda that says that this universe itself predates the arrival of god who knows for sure what this universe is from where it came and where it will go. The gods are later than this world's formation. This universe came first, gods are a later formation than that. And who made it, how it was made all these things we do not know, he who surveys it from the lofty skies probably he knows it or he too may not know because he too may have been a later formation in this universe. Look at the philosophy of agnostic philosophy embedded in the core of a religious text. So, these things make Rig Veda an extraordinary literary piece and a great read. So, with these things we can conclude of course, in this class we have discussed the epic of Gilgamesh one of the oldest epics, we discussed the tale of the shipwrecked sailor, and we also discussed origins of poetry in China, Greece and India.

With these things, we can conclude our discussion on the origins of poetry. In the next class probably we can come up with different types of poetry, and elements of poetry and continue our preoccupation with poetry and its extraordinary world of creativity and imagination.

Thank you.