



## Foucauldian Power as a Means of Transformation : Gilgamesh's Journey to Immortal Deeds

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### Abstract :

This paper investigates the epic of Gilgamesh's profound moral and behavioural transformation, utilising Michel Foucault's theory of power. The study rejects sovereign or episodic models of domination and instead examines power as pervasive, relational, and productive, operating through discursive formations, techniques of subjectivation, and power/knowledge networks. The interactions with other subjects, divine actors, and cultural discourses lead to changes in Gilgamesh's selfhood and practices of rule, as evidenced by close readings of key episodes (the confrontation and subsequent friendship with Enkidu, Enkidu's death, and Gilgamesh's quest for immortality). The analysis demonstrates that Enkidu serves as both a site of resistance and a formative agent of subjectivation, while Gilgamesh's ethical horizon is reconstituted by encounters with the gods and the recognition of mortality. The paper contends that Gilgamesh's final transition toward legacy-building and just governance is most effectively interpreted as the consequence of distributed power relations that reshape his potential for action, rather than as a straightforward inward moral epiphany. This Foucauldian interpretation elucidates the productive operation of power in ancient epic narrative and contributes to the broader discourse on subject formation, authority, and resistance in classical texts.

**Keywords:** Michel Foucault, power, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh, transformation.

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## المخلص:

تبحث هذه الورقة في ملحمة التحول الأخلاقي والسلوكي العميق لجلجامش، مستخدمةً نظرية ميشيل فوكو عن السلطة. ترفض الدراسة نماذج الهيمنة السيادية أو العرضية، وتدرس بدلاً من ذلك السلطة باعتبارها شاملة، وعلاقاتية، ومنتجة، تعمل من خلال التكوينات الخطابية، وتقنيات التدويت، وشبكات السلطة/المعرفة. تؤدي التفاعلات مع الآخرين، والشخصيات الإلهية، والخطابات الثقافية إلى تغييرات في هوية جلجامش وممارساته للحكم، كما يتضح من خلال قراءات متأنية لحلقات رئيسية (المواجهة والصدافة اللاحقة مع إنكيديو، وموت إنكيديو، وسعي جلجامش للخلود). يُظهر التحليل أن إنكيديو يُمثل موقعاً للمقاومة وعملاً مؤثراً في تشكيل الذات، بينما يُعاد تشكيل أفق جلجامش الأخلاقي من خلال لقاءاته مع الآلهة وإدراكه لفنائه. تُجادل هذه الورقة البحثية بأن انتقال جلجامش النهائي نحو بناء الإرث والحكم العادل يُفسر على نحو أكثر فعالية كنتيجة لعلاقات القوة الموزعة التي تُعيد تشكيل إمكاناته للفعل، بدلاً من كونه إدراكاً أخلاقياً مباشراً. يُوضح هذا التفسير الفوكوي العمل المثمر للسلطة في السرد الملحمي القديم، ويُساهم في الخطاب الأوسع حول تكوين الذات، والسلطة، والمقاومة في النصوص الكلاسيكية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** ميشيل فوكو، السلطة، ملحمة جلجامش، جلجامش، التحول.

### 1.1 Introduction :

Culture and society are built on power dynamics. Philosophers, cultural scholars, social scientists, political theorists, and others have been attempting to understand the nature, role, and mechanisms of power that govern the dynamics of social life for centuries. The French postmodernist Michel Foucault has had a significant impact on how people perceive power. According to Foucault, power is distributed and ubiquitous rather than being used by individuals or organisations through "episodic" or "sovereign" acts of dominance or coercion. Since power "comes from everywhere" and "is everywhere," it is neither an agency nor a structure in this sense (Foucault, 1998,63). Foucault uses the phrase "power/knowledge" to indicate that "truth," recognised forms of knowledge, and scientific understanding entail power. Rendering to Foucault (1980), the self is not fixed; rather, it is positioned in society by social and cultural language patterns. The self may seem powerful in one discourse and powerless in another.

For Foucault, power is not a resource, but a relation. It is strategically exercised, never "held" or "owned." Additionally, the accumulation of capital is not always implied by the logic of its distribution. Power is distributed unevenly, but it exists and is exercised throughout the social organism, similar to capital. Counter-power is invariably present in any situation where power is present. The positive effects of power are perhaps the most significant for Foucault. It is not repressive; rather, it is exceedingly productive. Additionally, its instrumentation is exceedingly specific and cannot be adequately represented by economic processes alone.



As the oldest piece of literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* depicts the concept of power through a story about a powerful king who was born into greatness, but a prideful king, reigned harshly and terrorized his citizens, who were subsequently turned by the gods in response to the people's continual groans. He slaughtered and overworked young men before the transition, and raped every lady he lusted after. Because he was the son of a goddess, he possessed extreme power. His new companion Enkidu, on the other hand, transformed him into a wise and great king who sought to leave a decent legacy after his death. Accordingly, This paper is an argument that aims to demonstrate how the king of Uruk evolved from a prideful, cruel, and immoral man to a man of good morals, Judicious, and wise. Relying on Foucault's concept of power, this paper argues the reasons for the dramatic transformation in the epic can be clarified by examining the techniques of subjectivation, discursive formations, and power relations as they are articulated in Foucauldian theory.

## 1.2 Power as a Means of Transformation:

Foucault describes power as "relations of force" and "action upon an action," meaning that power does not apply to individuals but emerges in their interactions with one another, in one's acting upon another's action.] This makes it an extensive, diffuse, dynamic, and capillary network that connects and passes through individuals and their actions.

Andrew George depicts a close and honest relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in "*The Epic of Gilgamesh*." Gilgamesh is portrayed by George as a wise and strong guy who is both a warrior and a builder. Wisdom encompasses not only one's own exquisite traits of knowledge, but also the ability to learn from experience. Gilgamesh validates his knowledge by demonstrating his intelligence, bravery, devotion, and ability to learn through a quest for immortality. "O Enkidu, [whom] your mother, a gazelle, and your father, a wild monkey, [did raise,]" George illustrates the scene of Enkidu's burial hosted by Gilgamesh in Tablet VIII: "O Enkidu, [whom] your mother, a gazelle, and your father, a wild monkey, [did raise,]" (Table VIII, pp. 3–4) Gilgamesh, as a superhuman who is two-thirds god and one-third human, did not look down on Enkidu; instead, he decided to appreciate Enkidu's nature and embrace who he was. Furthermore, George displays Gilgamesh's loving side later in the tablet: "After you are gone [mu hair will be matted in mourning,] clad in the hide of [a lion I shall wander] the wild" (Tablet VIII, 90-91). Gilgamesh expresses his grief for the loss of his honest buddy in this passage. Enkidu's shadow flashed into readers' minds after reading the action of running in the woods; in other words, it may indicate that Gilgamesh would lament for Enkidu and their great relationship by acting as if Enkidu was still alive. The



quotation also demonstrates Gilgamesh's bravery in running in the wild. Gilgamesh also gave gods his valuables, including "a flask of lapis," "a flute of carnelian," and "a chair of lapis lazuli," so that Enkido may have a happier existence when he died (Tablet VIII, 143, 147, 152).

As seen by Gilgamesh and Enkidu's repeated meetings with the gods, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* gives insight on both the good and negative human emotions of the gods. Shamash and Ishtar were the two principal gods with whom Gilgamesh and Enkidu interacted. Ishtar was the goddess of sex, love, and battle, while Shamash was the deity of the sun and fortune tellers. While all gods were strong, Shamash and Ishtar had extensive authority over Gilgamesh and Enkidu due to their previous dealings with them.

Power/knowledge is one of Michel Foucault's central concepts. Normally, we consider power and knowledge to be two distinct concepts, one political and the other epistemological, or possibly educational. However, according to Foucault, power and knowledge are intricately intertwined, and it is impossible to talk about one without the other. As a result, he combines power and knowledge into a single idea he refers to as "power/knowledge." All knowledge, according to Foucault, is possible and occurs only within a large network or system of power connections that allow knowledge to emerge, assertions regarded as "true" in any context to be said, and what counts as knowledge to be formed in the first place. To comprehend Foucault's idea of power/knowledge, it's vital to realize that he doesn't just imply top-down power interactions like those seen between a monarch—such as a king or queen—and his or her subjects. For Foucault, power interactions are not only top-down; they may also be bottom-up, lateral, overlapping, or bidirectional. When Gilgamesh understands he is scared of death and craves endless life, the importance of knowledge and wisdom becomes clear. He realizes that life is not about avoiding death, but rather about making the most of the time we have. He spends his time pursuing and completing the most challenging jobs.

Power, according to Foucault, is defined by the interplay of relationships between persons (or groups). Power, according to Foucault, is exerted indirectly, when it acts on the activities of people or groups, or action upon action. The notion of Foucault emphasizes that "the exertion of power may generate as much acceptability as may be desired." (1982) . That is, it may have little effect on some people yet have a large impact on others' activities. This indicates that power is wielded over free subjects, i.e. people, organizations, or institutions who are presented with a variety of options for how to act or behave. As an example, Foucault uses slavery. When a guy is enslaved, there is no power connection.



There is no face-to-face clash of power and freedom, and they are mutually incompatible.

Michel Foucault claims that power is inherent in all social relations and that all social relations, whether in the family or in government and other social organizations, are power relations. Accordingly Gilgamesh was an unique child from birth, possessing both extraordinary power and beauty. "When the gods created Gilgamesh, they gave him a perfect body." (Sandbars, 1964,p.1). As a result, it is evident that he was destined to be unique from the beginning. He exploited the power bestowed upon him to cause harm to others without a care in the world. The persecution he inflicted on his citizens turned him intolerable. He was conceited, disrespectful, and immoral. "His lust leaves no virgin to her lover. " (Sandars, 1964,p.2) This demonstrates how nasty he was. He abducted virgins who were about to marry and forcibly slept with them. People lamented to the gods as a consequence, and a new man was made in his image. Enkidu was as strong as the king and as beautiful as he was. Even in strength, Enkidu was his equal. Their character, on the other hand, was a sharp contrast. They became fast friends after their first battle. "So Enkidu and Gilgamesh embraced, and their friendship was sealed. " (Sandars, 1964,p.6). They would subsequently fight in the same war. After Enkidu's death, the king understands that death is his biggest enemy, and he fights to discover a means to defeat it.

The value of power remains at the center of Gilgamesh's tale. Gilgamesh embarks on his heroic adventure in order to gain authority over the people both outside and inside his country. Gilgamesh meets others who challenge his authority along the journey. Power can be used in either a positive or negative way, depending on an individual's intentions. The capacity or ability to direct or affect the conduct of others or the course of events is defined as power. Enkidu, Gilgamesh's companion and friend, gains a power that is greater than Gilgamesh's might in The Epic of Gilgamesh. Power, according to Foucault, "is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."( Foucault, 1983, p.93) He admits that "no power is exercised without a set of goals that emerge from the choice or decision of an individual subject." He also admits that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet...this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in regard to power." He also admits that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet...this resistance is never in an exteriority in relation to power."( Foucault, 1983, p.93). Meanwhile, Gilgamesh was supposed to realize that immortality was reserved for the gods. On his journey back, he realizes that he has lost his immortality and that the most important thing he can do now is to alter the way he has spent his life and leave a legacy. He decided to be remembered as a good person rather than a bad one. "Gilgamesh, the son of Ninsun, rests in the



tomb" (Sandars, 1964,p.24), even on his deathbed, history has been changed, and a good legacy has been left behind. As a result, the king had evolved from a man who did whatever he pleased to one who was dedicated to altering the way he treated his people in order for them to remember him as a good person and a great ruler.

The assumption that power is held by people or organizations through 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of dominance or coercion is challenged by Foucault, who sees power as distributed and pervasive. Because 'power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere,' it is neither an agency nor a structure in this sense. However, it is not until he realizes that death is unavoidable that he notices the most profound shifts in his values. Following a loss of the plant that ensured immortality, he resolves to change his ways. Gilgamesh's life was turned for the better by a huge transformation that occurred in his life. The changes are noticeable, starting with his acceptance of Enkidu as a friend rather than an enemy. When he stopped him from sleeping with the maiden who was about to be married the next day, we anticipated him to have him murdered. On the other side, he welcomes him and develops a friendship as a consequence. He changed principally in order to create a legacy that would last forever. (Michael, 1980, p.189).

After realizing that he would never be able to avoid death, he developed this urge. The loss of a buddy was another factor that caused him to change his mind. He was upset since Enkidu had been his confidant when he "touched his heart, but it did not beat, nor did he lift his eyes again" (Sandbars, 1964,p.15). He transformed first by being Enkidu's true friend, and then by altering how he treated his people. His fear of dying was the driving force for the latter. He wore rags and tore his garments. He also caused everyone to grieve his wonderful friend. All of this helped to demonstrate how changed he had become. When they were heading to fight, he had fought with him and supported him. "All living things born of the flesh shall at end sit on the boat of the West, and when it sinks, when the boat of Magilum sinks, they are gone, but we shall walk forward and fix our eyes on the monster," (Sandars, 1964,p.81). When they went to find Humbaba, the monster, Enkidu told him all of this in an attempt to cheer him up. Gilgamesh's metamorphosis was a result of his grief for his comrades, along with the realization that he would never be immortal.

There are two significant times in the epic, where the metamorphosis occurs. The first was when he chose to befriend Enkidu rather than kill him since he appeared to be a competitor. In terms of strength and beauty, the epic plainly demonstrates that he was on par with him. This is the start of a lovely friendship that would lead to his transformation. When his companion dies, he travels to Utnapishtim in



pursuit of immortality in order to avoid the same fate. When he realizes that he will die, though, he undergoes a full transformation. As a result, it is at the moment of his realization of his impending death that he decides to make a positive change. When he realized the value of living a moral life, he pledged to leave a legacy. He found that we are evaluated based on how we lived our life after we die.

### 1.3 Conclusion:

The processes that undergird Gilgamesh's transformation from a tyrannical sovereign to a reflective, legacy-minded ruler are illuminated by the application of Michel Foucault's formulation of power—distributed, relational, and productive. A Foucauldian interpretation emphasises the interaction between power/knowledge, techniques of subjectivation, and discursive formations across human, divine, and institutional actors to generate novel forms of subjectivity, rather than viewing his transformation as the outcome of a single sovereign act or moral awakening that is independent of social forces. Enkidu's arrival serves as a disruptive node in the network of power, influencing Gilgamesh's self-understanding and conduct through repeated interactions, shared practices, and affective connections. Gilgamesh's knowledge of mortality, authority, and legacy is further reconfigured by his encounters with the gods, the experience of loss, and the pursuit of immortality, which in turn reshape the relationships through which he is governed and governs others.

The epic's demonstrations of resistance and constraint are also reinterpreted in this Foucauldian perspective. Gilgamesh's previous excesses of power invoke social responses (lamentations, divine intervention) and generate counter-forces that are never external to power but rather integral to its operation. His subsequent turn toward wisdom and concern for posterity should be interpreted as a rearticulation of subjectivity that was produced within the same sphere of power, rather than as its simple negation. In this manner, the epic demonstrates Foucault's assertion that power is both productive and coercive: it generates new social identities and ethical orientations while disciplining bodies and behaviours.

Ultimately, the interpretation of ancient texts is significantly expanded by the study of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* through the lens of Foucault. It promotes the examination of micro-level practices, embodied relations, and discursive regimes—how they legitimise knowledge, constitute subjects, and facilitate social transformation—rather than focusing solely on institutional or sovereign explanations. This methodological approach not only enhances our comprehension of Gilgamesh's moral development but also provides a framework for the examination of power and subjectivity in other literary and historical contexts.



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