Jeremy Vuong

Professor Thoma

HRS 151

Women in Ancient Mesopotamian Myth and Society

Throughout the history of human existence, women were often viewed as subordinates to men. In ancient Mesopotamia, which was a patriarchal society, this was no different. Women in this early civilization were controlled by men. They were treated harshly and deprived of many rights and privileges that modern women enjoy today. These women had very few paths in life. Most women in this society were expected to get married at a young age and become housewives. Nonetheless, these women had many functions in this civilization. Not only did they have many functions, but they also had vital roles. Thus, they were very important figures for their society despite the unjust treatment they received. This positive view towards women is reflected in ancient Mesopotamian mythology. In many of these myths, women are portrayed as very powerful and influential figures who have significant roles in their respective domains. Implied in these stories are special connections that women have with life and civilization. These myths highlight the unique qualities of women and how they benefit society. These myths therefore reflect how this ancient society viewed and valued women.

In Ancient Mesopotamia, women were restricted of many freedoms. Men in this society treated women as if they were their possessions. For example, men in debt could resort to pawning his wife, daughters, or slave girls to their creditors. The creditors would put these women to work until the debt was paid off (Stol 136). Also, it was a customary practice for fathers to sell their daughters as brides. These young women were arranged to be married at an early age; typically, between the ages of 14 and 20. For comparison, men in this society married between the ages of 26 and 32 (Stol 125). After marriage, wives moved into the house of their husbands, and they were expected to have children. As wives, they were also responsible for household chores and duties. This was the central role of women in ancient Mesopotamia, but of course, some women, mostly unmarried women, were known to take on other roles. Women in this society participated in the workforce, but they had limited positions and were paid less than men. Most women worked in the textile business as weavers, or they assisted in their husband’s line of work. Many women in this society also became priestesses. There were other roles that women had, but they are not worth mentioning. The roles identified here represent the positions of most women in this ancient civilization.

The primary role of women in ancient Mesopotamia was to become wives. Being wives meant that they were responsible for childbearing, assisting their husbands, and most, if not all, of the household responsibilities. These household responsibilities consisted of duties like cooking and cleaning. Having and raising children was arguably the most important for these women. A woman who has produced a child for her husband and his family received great honor (Stol 129). Having children is also a necessary process in the cycle of life. In ancient Mesopotamian myth, women, specifically goddesses, are associated with fertility and the cycle of life. The myths associated with these goddesses imply that women were understood to be vital for the continuation of life. For example, in the myth of Ishtar’s descent to the Underworld, Ishtar, who is a fertility goddess, descends from earth into the underworld. In her absence, “no bull mounted a cow, no donkey impregnated a jenny, No man impregnated a girl in the street” (Dalley 158). Here, the implication is that Ishtar’s absence has caused infertility on earth since humans and animals are not reproducing. Eventually, Ishtar is rescued from the underworld and as a result, fertility is restored on earth. This myth infers that woman commanded power over all fertility and thus, it reflects the view that a major responsibility of women in ancient Mesopotamian society was to bear and raise children. This story also supports the idea that this society viewed women as vital figures for life; because the story emphasizes that without fertility, which is attributed to women, procreation would not be possible.

As stated before, women in ancient Mesopotamia could take on roles other than that of a housewife. Women often worked as flour grinders and textile weavers (Stol 137). Many women worked as weavers because the textile business brought lots of wealth to ancient Mesopotamia. The more desirable occupations for women in this society were specialized positions such as bartenders and midwives. These bartenders were known as “bar-wives”. Bar-wives were typically slave girls or wives who served beer that their husbands brewed. Lots of women were also priestesses. Poor families in this society were known to sell their daughters to temples where they became priestesses (Stol 137). There were many kinds of priestesses in early Mesopotamia. Different types of priestesses had different functions and responsibilities. The most infamous priestesses of ancient Mesopotamia were those who served as sacred prostitutes. These priestesses offered sexual services for and in behalf of gods and goddesses. It is important to understand that early Mesopotamian societies did not view prostitution as a bad thing, as these services were seen as sacred and beneficial to society (Lerner 239). There is also proof that profane prostitution existed in this society alongside sacred prostitution (Stol 137-138). Ancient Mesopotamian people believed that the fertility of people and land alike “depended on the celebration of the sexual power of the fertility goddess” (Lerner 239). There is evidence of sacred prostitution in the ancient Mesopotamian myth, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In this story, a sacred temple prostitute is identified. Her name was Shamhat, and she was a priestess of Ishtar, a fertility goddess. She was sent on a mission to deal with a wild man spotted by a trapper. This wild man’s name was Enkidu. On her mission, Shamhat seduces Enkidu by showing her body to him. After seducing him, she expresses her femininity and sexuality to him by making love with him. She continues this for about seven days and nights. In these seven days and nights, she also introduces him to alcohol and bread. These acts are depicted as sacred rites that led Enkidu into a spiritual journey which diverted him away from the wilderness. Ultimately, Enkidu’s experience with Shamhat’s cleansed him of his primal nature and brought him to civilization. In this story, Shamhat’s function in society as a sacred prostitute is displayed as she uses her sexuality to civilize a wild man. This myth suggests that sacred prostitutes had multiple functions. In this myth, Shamhat’ purpose as a sacred prostitute was to influence civilized behavior. Clearly, ancient Mesopotamian women were valued for their sexuality. This society understood women to have the ability to influence many things like fertility and civilized behavior in men. This suggests that they viewed women as necessary components for not only life, but for civilized life.

In ancient Mesopotamia, autonomy did not exist for most women. Men in this society had hegemony over women and they treated women as if they were their belongings. Women did not have many rights or freedoms. Despite this oppression, women in ancient Mesopotamia were able to coexist with men. Although they were limited in what they could do, they made important contributions to society. The main functions of women in this society were to be wives and mothers. It was the norm for fathers to sell their daughters as brides. After marriage, women were expected to have children, housekeep, and serve their husbands. Poor families often sold their daughters to temples where they would become priestesses. There were different types of priestesses who had varying responsibilities and functions, but the most notorious were those who offered sacred sexual services. These priestesses were considered sacred prostitutes. In this society, prostitution was not viewed in a negative manner as sexual services were associated with religious rites. There is also evidence of secular prostitution in this early civilization. Women had roles in the workforce, but they were limited. Most women worked as weavers because the cloth trade was very lucrative for ancient Mesopotamia. Although women in this society were mistreated and deprived of many freedoms, they were valued as essential figures in society. This is reflected in ancient Mesopotamian mythology. In these myths, women are viewed as very important and powerful characters. Shamhat in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Ishtar in *Ishtar’s Descent* are two mythological female figures who are portrayed to be of great significance. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Shamhat is valued for her ability to influence civilized behavior, and Ishtar, in *Ishtar’s Descent*, is valued for her association with fertility. Analyzing these mythological figures and their functions in their associated myths, we can make implications that women in ancient Mesopotamia society had the same functions and thus, valued for the same reasons.

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