

# Frog

By Mo Yan

Reviewed By Dr. Abdullah Shibli

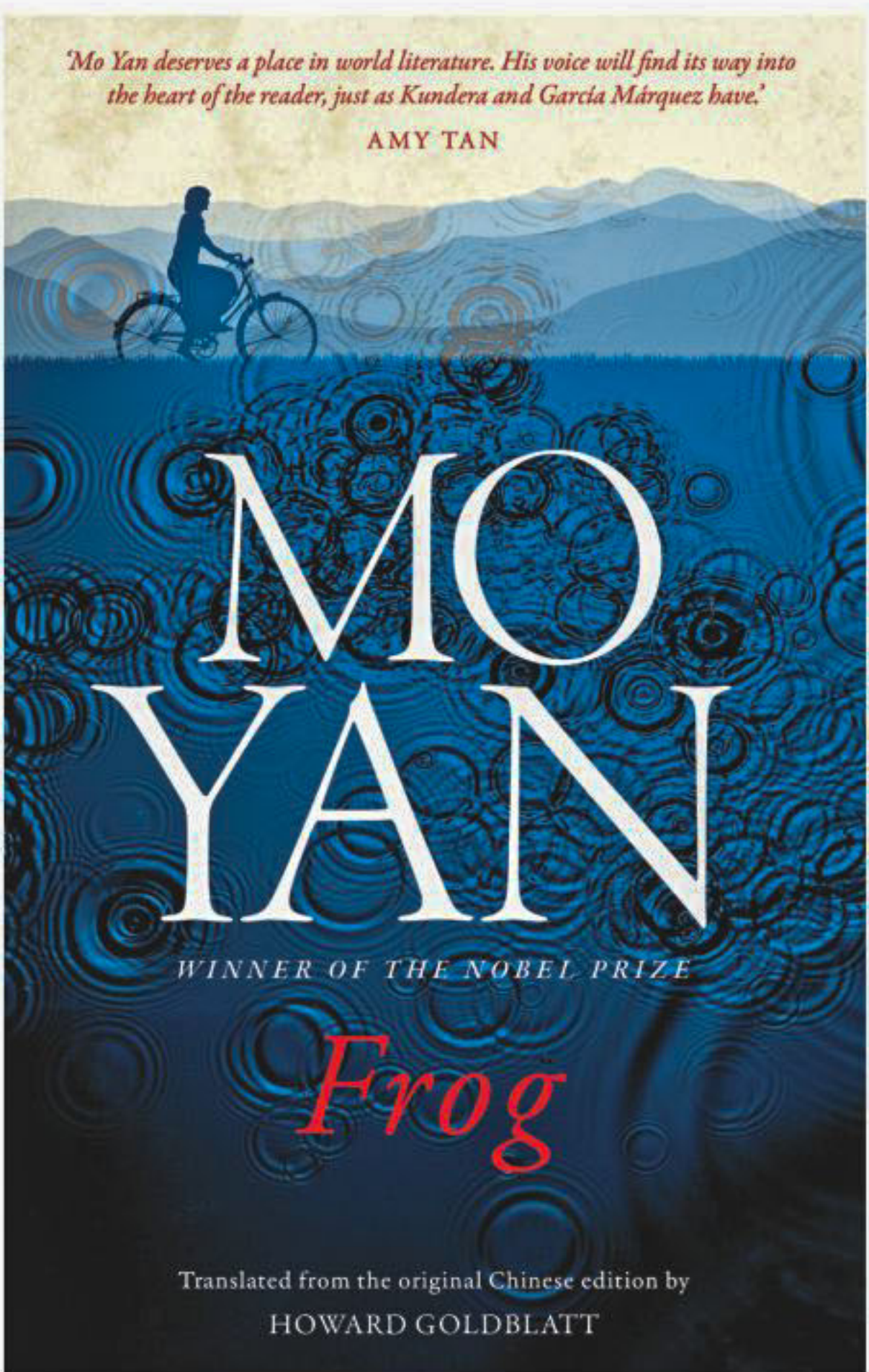
MO Yan's Frog is a first-person novel written in the epistolary form-- with letters (and a nine-act play)—narrated by a Chinese farmer turned soldier who witnessed the worst of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and lived to see the changes brought about by the free-market policies of the 1970s: free enterprise, phenomenal urban growth and mass migration from rural areas. Mo Yan (whose real name is Guan Moye) received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012 and, according to his award citation, is a writer "who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary". He won praise for his epic novel "Red Sorghum" where he highlighted the oppression carried out by the Japanese Army during their occupation of China in the 1930s and 1940s, and the war of resistance fought by the Red Army guerillas. "Frog", on the other hand, offers a birds-eye view of Chinese people and their everyday struggles, as well as a peek into the domestic life of the billion. Mo Yan himself grew up in on a farm near Gaomi township where the story is anchored and witnessed the excesses of the fifties and sixties. The pages are full of references to modern Chinese political history and its cultural and social practices.

The novel, published in 2009 and translated in English in 2014, is a story of Gugu and her campaign on behalf of the Party to maintain birth control. Gugu, the narrator's aunt, was born in 1937 and became an obstetrician at the age of seventeen following some courses she took on birthing methods after China's Independence or the Red Army's victory over the KMT. Gugu's life and work, her dedication to the party and the various campaigns, particularly to limit family size and bring cohesion to the state's effort to modernize the country is described; and finally her coming to terms with the impact her relentless pursuit of the families who "broke the rule" on the many lives it ruined.

Mo Yan is candid, in spite of his Communist Party sympathies, in portraying the darker sides of the tactics used by the regime to keep the country moving forward following Mao's victory. The main theme running through this book is the devastation caused by the one-child policy and the strong-arm tactics used at the local level to ensure that ordinary villagers comply with the policy laid down by the party. One of the heart-breaking episodes of forced abortion involves the narrator, known as Tadpole, whose first wife dies after being coerced into undergoing the procedure.

With the benefit of hindsight, the author voices his reservations openly about the social costs of the policies carried out by the regime, and seems to be a repentant communist who sees how the excesses of the '60s and '70s destroyed many families, and also casts a critical eye on those who took advantage of the liberalization to set up enterprises and become rich. He also points to the influence peddling of the Party Apparatchik and is at times very critical of the party. The father-in-law of Tadpole's first wife, Renmei, was an educated man and had a good job as the head of a commune animal-husbandry station who lost his job and as sent back to this village because he was outspoken.

My Yan is a gifted writer and as an example let me quote from a love letter written by Wang Gan (a friend of Tadpole) to Little Lion. "... this heart of mine belongs to you only, and if you wished to eat it, I would unhesitatingly dig it out for you". He weaves through more than



thirty years of events which saw major changes in the countryside, government policies, and social norms and practices. Some of the most eloquent chapters paint heart-wrenching events that take place during the Party's Hundred Flowers and Great Leap Forward Campaign's and are clear attempts to shame the previous regime.

A brief account of the background for this novel is in order. The Hundred Flowers Campaign was launched in 1957 under the slogan: "Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting progress in the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land." However, within a few weeks, the regime withdrew the Campaign and unleashed a reign of terror. Soon thereafter, the Great Leap Forward campaign began in 1958. It has been estimated that of there were deaths in excess of 20 million during this movement. Another by-product of these policies was the Famine of 1960 when many survived by eating coal. Mo Yan's account of the practice of eating coal is very elegant and moving. He recalls an incident when Tadpole, as a young boy, found out from another fellow student that there was plenty of coal lying around and unguarded, and that once you get into the habit, it did not taste so bad after all and quenched the hunger.

But his most beautiful prose is evident as he describes the excesses of the birth-control policy. His own wife is a victim and so are many other families. Gugu and Tadpole's second wife, Little lion, are part of this campaign, and he seems to describe with words that are befitting a wedding or romantic episode. His comparison

of traditional China and modern China are strewn across the novel too. I offer short passages in the following on naming conventions and ancient rituals.

Tadpole offers insights into naming practices in China in a letter. "Sensei, an old custom in my hometown dictated that a newborn child is given the name of a body part or organ. ... I haven't looked into the origin of this custom, but I imagine it embodied the outlook of 'those who are badly named live long'. Either that or it evolved from a mother's thoughts that a child represented a piece of her body".

We also get a very detailed description of rituals. This is how Tadpole recounts the 'circle the grave' ceremony for his mother: "There were burnt paper replicas of horses and people, as well as a paper TV set. ...I was told to circle Mather's grave with raw rice in my left hand and unhusked millet in my right. Three counterclockwise revolutions were followed by three clockwise during which I let the rice and millet drop slowly.

Among the many fascinating episodes he recounts is how Tadpole finally is able to give "birth" to a boy. His wife is aware that she is infertile and has reached post-menopausal stage. However, she takes his egg and finds a surrogate mother for a fee. The author provides a fascinating account of the monetary exchange between the surrogate mother and Tadpole's family. For example, the going rate was a 20% down payment on 30 thousand yuan for a girl and 50 thousand yuan for a boy; and, 20 thousand for a still-born. Chen Mei, whose mother died giving birth to her while being forced to have an abortion was a surrogate mother for Little Lion, Tadpole's second wife. She herself and her sister sustained burns from a fire at a clothing factory and was working in the Bull Frog Farm which apparently was a front for illegal surrogate mother industry. It takes quite a little bit of mental gymnastics to understand how much of this was magical realism and how much was a criticism of the rush to modernization. One can easily see that Gaomi Township has some similarities to Macondo, where which he mentions in the play. "Yan has a half-streak of Gabriel Garcia Marquez in him, offering a world that is, by turns, magical without the realism or grimly real and stripped of all magic," says Jason Sheehan, a well known critic.

Among the weaknesses of the "history of modern China" that Mo Yan provides, while some of the gross excesses of the Party are highlighted, many are swept under the carpet, e.g., commune and forced labor, mass eviction, agricultural and industrial policy. Also, some of the references are hard to follow. He begins an event with the line, without any reference to the significance of the timing: "It was the sixth day of the sixth lunar month".

Finally, a word or two on the title of the book. Frog is a metaphor for Gugu's nemesis. She was frightened by frogs. But the last episode of the book takes place in a bullfrog farm, and the enterprise and its many secrets offer a critical snapshot of modern China. Tadpole's son was born at Bull Frog farm. But, we also learn that Mo Yan uses frog as a reference to the aborted fetuses that are metaphorically likened to it. The final nine act play is somewhat like a summary for the many twist and turns in the life of the surviving protagonists. Last, but not the least the translation by Howard Rosenblatt has received widespread acclaim.

Dr. Abdullah Shibli is a frequent contributor to these pages.

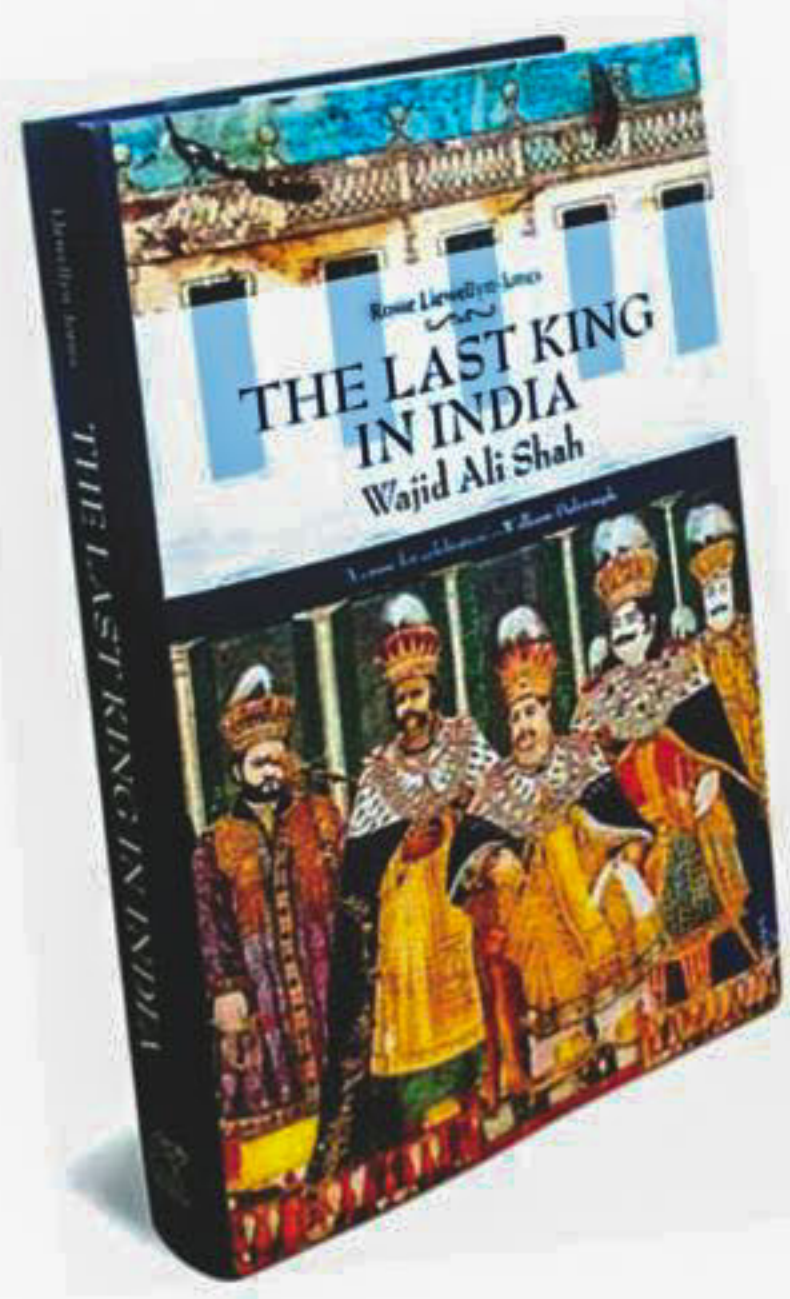
# The Last King in India: Wajid Ali Shah

By Rosie Llewellyn-Jones

AN affectionate biography of a much-maligned king who had the misfortune to be on the throne when the East India Company decided to usurp him.

**Description:** The Last King in India is the story of an extraordinary man whose memory still divides opinion sharply today. Was he, as the British described him, a debauched ruler who spent his time with 'fiddlers, eunuchs and women' instead of running the kingdom? Or, as most Indians believe, a gifted poet whose works are still quoted today, and who was robbed of his throne by the East India Company?

Somewhere between the two extremes lies a complex character, a man who married over 350 women, who directed theatrical events lasting a month and who built a fairytale palace in Lucknow. Wajid Ali Shah was written out of the history books after his kingdom was annexed in 1856. Some even thought he had been killed during the mutiny the following year. But he lived on in Calcutta where he spent the last thirty years of his life trying to recreate his lost paradise. He remained a constant problem for the government of India, with his extravagance, his menagerie and his wives — in that order. For the first time his story is told here using original documents from Indian and British archives and meetings with his descendants.



**Author:** Rosie Llewellyn-Jones (PhD) graduated from SOAS in Urdu and is now an acclaimed historian of the colonial history of India from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. She has published extensively on this period and her particular interest is in the political interaction between the colonial British and their then Indian subjects. She is also Secretary to the British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia (BACSA) and editor of its journal Chokhidar. She is the only British Historian to be awarded with an MBE by the Queen.

**Succinct Reviews:** '... a compelling book, by perhaps the world authority on 19th-century Lucknow.' — Andrew Robinson, History Today

'A great deal of research has gone into this book ... Rosie Llewellyn-Jones presents an honest and balanced portrayal of the legendary emperor who was often misunderstood and has remained an enigma extraordinaire even today.' — The Hindustan Times

'Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, the greatest living authority on Nawabi Lucknow, has written a wonderful appreciation of the most under-appreciated of its Nawabs. She shows how Wajid Ali Shah should be remembered as one of the most important cultural catalysts of his day, and brings back to life the memorable last days of the great city whose ebullient creativity he represented. A cause for celebration.' — William Dalrymple, author of The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty and Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan

'Rosie Llewellyn-Jones has produced the richest picture of the last king of Awadh we have had so far. Focusing on his interactions with the British, she shows him to be a considerable man of the arts but also a man who treated his numerous wives badly. Llewellyn-Jones is the leading historian of Lucknow; this book is a major addition to her achievement.' — Francis Robinson, Professor of the History of South Asia, Royal Holloway, University of London

'A deeply researched and brilliantly told story of the legendary last Nawab of Awadh, as he valiantly sought to recreate his lost world as a pensioner of the English on the outskirts of Calcutta for the last thirty years of his amazing life. An excellent read.' — Shahid Amin, Professor of History, Delhi University

'In this pioneering biography of Muhammad Wajid-'Ali Shah, Dr Rosie Llewellyn-Jones treats the many complex characters and events of a turbulent period in Indian history with her usual skilled analysis and originality. In assembling new information from private, state, and colonial records, she succeeds in drawing critical attention to the colourful life of a controversial ruler. In doing so, this major study deserves commendation.' — Saqib Baburi, Department of the Study of Religions, School of Oriental and African Studies

'Rosie Llewellyn-Jones paints a vivid and poignant portrait of the wonderfully eccentric but woefully misunderstood last king of India, Wajid 'Ali Shah. A meticulously researched and illuminating book.' — John Zubrzycki, author of The Mysterious Mr Jacob and The Last Nizam

'This is the most thorough account in English to date of the much mythologised King Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh, which uses intensive archival research to trace the complex political chess game in which he was engaged by the British East India Company and which led to his ultimate deposition.' — Justin Jones, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Oxford

'A fascinating and insightful book. It's not just history or biography, it's also a fruitful investigation into the mind and character of a monarch who was not quite a monarch but who had his own ideas of how to conduct himself in a world which was fast becoming alien to him and to practically every colonial subject in India. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones reinstates Wajid Ali Shah into the realm of modern history. She presents him without pity or patronization and he comes out as a remarkable person, for all his real or imagined flaws of character.' — Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, critic, poet and fiction writer.

Courtesy: Waqar A Khan  
Founder, Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies

# Classics Corner



## The Epic of Gilgamesh

Translated into English by N K SANDARS

Penguin Classics

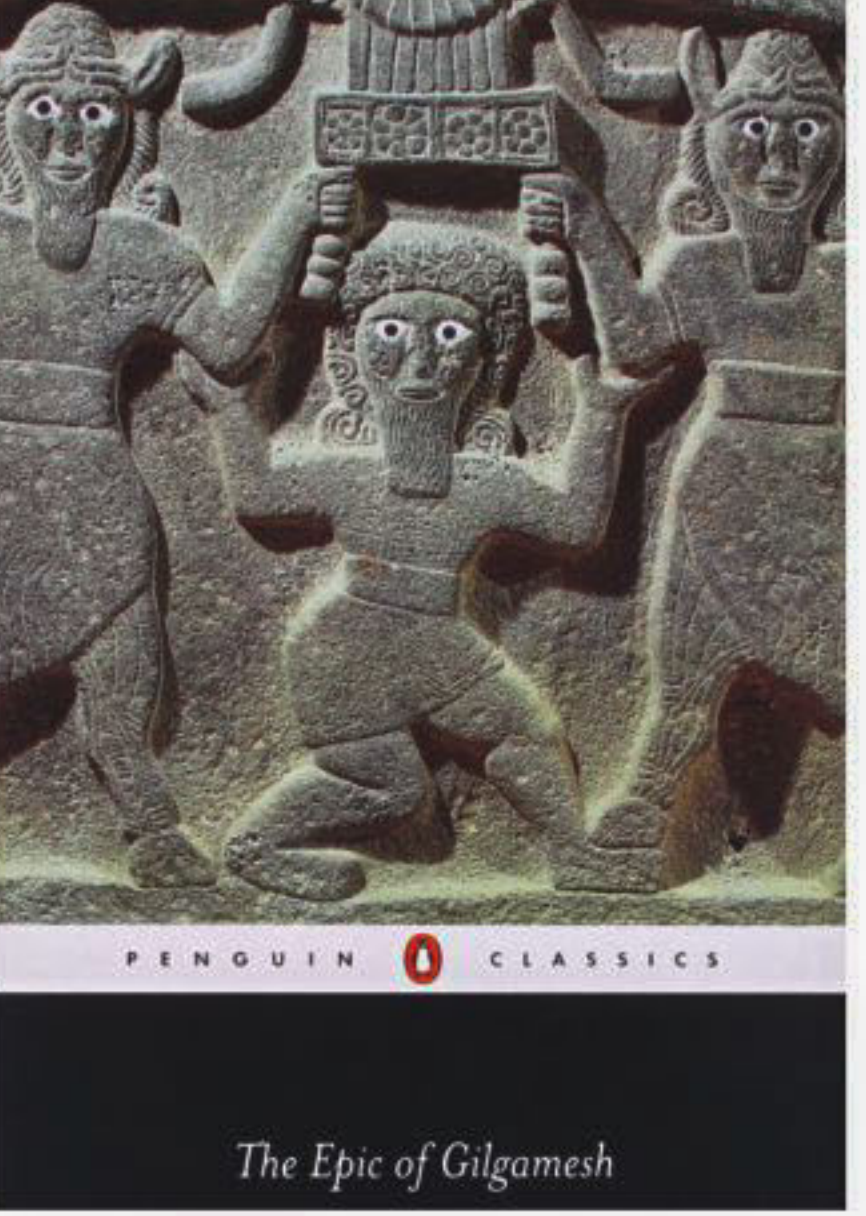
Reviewed by Rash-ha Muntaqaa

Unlike the heroes of Greek or Celtic mythology, the hero of The Epic of Gilgamesh was an actual historical figure, a king who reigned over the Sumerian city-state of Uruk around 2700 B.C. Long after his death, people worshipped Gilgamesh, renowned as a warrior and builder and widely celebrated for his wisdom and judiciousness. One prayer invokes him as "Gilgamesh, supreme king, judge of the Anunnaki" (the gods of the underworld). Called Erech in the Bible, Uruk was one of the great cities of ancient Mesopotamia. The historical King Gilgamesh probably raised its walls, which archaeologists have determined had a perimeter of six miles. Today its ruins rest near the town of Warka, in southern Iraq, about a third of the way from Basra to Baghdad.

Dozens of stories about Gilgamesh circulated throughout the ancient Middle East. Archaeologists have discovered the earliest ones, inscribed on clay tablets in the Sumerian language before 2000 B.C. Other tablets tell stories about him in the Elamite, Hurrian, and Hittite tongues. Over time, many of those stories were consolidated into a large, epic work. The most complete known version of this long poem was found in Nineveh, in the ruins of the library of Assurbanipal, the last great king of the Assyrian empire. Assurbanipal was undoubtedly a despot and a warmonger, but he was also a tireless archivist and collector—we owe much of our knowledge about ancient Mesopotamia to his efforts.

TWO-thirds god, one-third man — Gilgamesh, King of the Sumerian city of Uruk, with an enviable physical structure, transcendent valor, and unparalleled wisdom holds the prelude of the most ancient epic written; built stupendous ziggurats, temple towers; surrounded his city with high walls, and laid out its orchards and fields. But this godly King was a malicious tyrant and womanizer whose Kingdom always whimpered under his despotism. The gods, as planned to unwind him, sent a feral being — Enkidu, as bravura as Gilgamesh. They turned out to be bosom chums. Together they thieved trees from cedar forest prohibited for mortals slaying the guard, devotee of god Enlil, the petrifying demon Humbaba. The goddess of love, Ishtar sent the rampaging Bull of Heaven with seven years of starvation down to earth as vengeance for Gilgamesh's scorn to her spilling lust. They slaughtered it. But Enkidu was sentenced for their contravention incurring Ishtar's ire. Gilgamesh's world smashed into smithereens. Forlorn and tormented about own demise, he trekked to the periphery of the earth. He found immortal Utnapishtim (the Mesopotamian Noah) beyond Mashu, the two-peaked mountain braving scorpion-monsters; and implored his pursuit. Utnapishtim induced and sent him back. But eavesdropping on Utnapishtim and his wife's chat, he found the astounding plant of youth that was stolen by a snake one

night while camping. The serpent had slinked away; it molted and received adolescence. Empty, Gilgamesh returned to Uruk but at last merged to mortality. The city his own, drowned in terror, came to his sight as an enduring triumph as desirable as immortality. This perilous yet cathartic journey of learn-



ing: "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." granted Gilgamesh intransience by sealing his name in humans' hearts for his numerous building works, his preaching of

story about the time before inundation and all the godly clandestine undisclosed.

This is the inner of The Epic of Gilgamesh discovered by Hormuzd Rassam in 1853 in 'cuneiform' on twelve plates as an emblem of time 3200 BC predating even Homer's Iliad by roughly 1500 years. Its influence was later found in biblical and classical literature. Many of the Epic's characters also have myths allied indirectly with close biblical resemblance. The intimacy between Enkidu-Shamhat could be recognized as Adam-Eve in the Garden of Eden; the snake stealing the plant of youth came up with another parallel. Conspicuous is the way the Genesis flood story follows the Gilgamesh flood tale. Even its influence on Homer and in popular culture, literature, art and music was marked. But the image of the hereafter was austere, according to Enkidu, souls (represented as humans covered in scruffy bird feathers) cringe in a bleak city of dust, eating clay to survive; this contrasts with the views of other ancient religions such as the Egyptians and the Greeks which assured their adherents 'paradise' though it is vague from the Epic what role the gods themselves serve in the Sumerian afterlife.

To sum up, The Epic of Gilgamesh is both a spiritual treatise and a decisive effort of ancient literature.

Rash-ha Muntaqaa is schooling with University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, Department of English.