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Myth, Form, and Theatrical Space: Psychological Poetic Drama as Cultural Analysis and Social Change in Modern Arabic Poetry

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Abstract

This article reads Saʿdī Yūsuf's *When in the Heights* as a case of psychological poetic drama in which Mesopotamian myth functions as a cultural technology for negotiating social change. Rather than treating legend as ornament, the play converts epic structures (Sidūrī/Utnapištim, the herb/serpent, *Enūma Eliš*) into theatrical spaces for inner action that recalibrate civic ethics—care, measure, and mortal sufficiency—in late-twentieth-century Iraq. Methodologically, the study combines comparative poetics with reception and performance analysis to show how formal choices—chorus, mise-en-scène, and semi-circular "events"—transform mythic memory into present-tense cultural critique and a usable social affect. Close comparison with Akkadian episodes clarifies where Yūsuf preserves mythic scaffolding and where he alters it to stage a modern psychology of anxiety, denial, bargaining, and measured assent. The final return to Sidūrī's tavern operates as ethical compensation: a civic acceptance in which form "thinks" by binding image, cadence, and value. In answering 1970s critical calls for elevated language, translocal theme, and renewed heritage, the play also models how Arab poets adapted world practices of poetic theatre to articulate inner conflict under historical pressure, offering a comparative category—psychological poetic drama—for cultural analysis and social change.

Keywords: Cultural analysis; social change; cultural memory; psychological poetic drama; performance and reception; Saʿdī Yūsuf; modern Arabic poetry; Mesopotamian myth; *Gilgamesh*; *Enūma Eliš*; and civic ethics;.

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Introduction

Modern Arabic poetry, particularly in Iraq, has long negotiated the intersection of myth, modernity, and theatre. When the free-verse movement (al-shiʿr al-ḥurr) expanded poetic form in the mid-twentieth century, it also created a new openness toward narrative and dramatic modes (Alwan 1975, 33–39). Yet prior to this period, ancient Mesopotamian myths—despite their geographical proximity and civilizational importance—remained largely absent from Arabic poetic imagination. This absence stemmed from cultural and intellectual factors: a critical tradition focused on social and political realism, weak engagement with world literature's mythopoetic revival, and limited access to newly excavated Assyrian, Akkadian, and Sumerian texts (Haddad 1986, 44; Hammouda 1999, 384).

It was only after the 1950s that Iraqi poets began to see myth as a productive form of consciousness rather than a relic of pagan cosmology (Sawah 2002, 18–23). Poets such as Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb and ʿAbd al-

Wahhāb al-Bayātī had already pioneered the mythic method in lyric poetry, but Saʿdī Yūsuf extended it into poetic theatre, where myth is not only narrated but enacted. His play *When in the Heights* stages the Gilgamesh epic as a psychological journey—an internalization of myth that turns action into reflection. As Al-Dulaimi (1998, 41) notes, this shift corresponds to a global tendency whereby poetic drama became a means of addressing "life's complexities through condensed symbol and inward motion."

Within this context, *When in the Heights* functions as both literary innovation and cultural commentary. It responds to what Al-Dali (1999, 52) identified as the shortcomings of 1970s Iraqi theatre—its colloquial diction, narrow realism, and limited dialogue with world dramaturgy—by introducing a lofty, transnational idiom rooted in Mesopotamian heritage. In doing so, Yūsuf joins a lineage that includes Adel Kazim's *The Immortality of Gilgamesh* (1927) yet surpasses it by transforming myth from narrative content into psychological structure.

This transformation marks the emergence of what may be termed psychological poetic drama—a genre in which the "event" no longer unfolds through external conflict but through semi-circular movements of the mind, where feeling encounters feeling and thought answers thought (Saliha 1982, 77; Ismāʿīl 1980, 115). Such a form arises from the stream-of-consciousness revolution in modern literature and resonates with Western innovations from Joyce, Woolf, and Eliot to later existential dramatists (Sartre 2008, 93; Badawi 1998, 64). Yet Yūsuf's work localizes these methods within the mythic consciousness of Mesopotamia, thereby creating a theatre that is at once introspective and civilizational.

Accordingly, this study situates *When in the Heights* at the confluence of three evolving discourses: (1) the recovery of ancient myth as modern cultural capital; (2) the rise of psychological and symbolic theatre in Arabic letters; and (3) the search for forms adequate to postcolonial anxiety and historical fragmentation. Drawing on comparative poetics and myth criticism, the following sections trace how Yūsuf re-imagines Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim, and the Babylonian creation myth as vehicles of self-knowledge, turning ancient narratives of fate into modern meditations on mortality, memory, and moral responsibility.

Situated within cultural analysis, this study treats myth not as historical residue but as a living repertoire through which societies articulate and recalibrate values under pressure. In When in the Heights, Yūsuf's staging of Sidūrī's counsel, Utnapištim's elder voice, and the herb/serpent episode relocates immortality talk to civic measure (the people of walled Uruk), translating epic desire into social ethics. Reading the play as a cultural practice clarifies how formal devices—chorus as performative memory, mise-en-scène as index of psyche, semi-circular "events" as inner plot—mediate between inherited narratives and contemporary publics, turning mythic memory into a present social resource.

Saʿdī Yūsuf and the Psychological Poetic Play

Saʿdī Yūsuf's poetic play *When in the Heights* was not the first modern Arabic work to mobilize ancient Mesopotamian myth. Long before Yūsuf, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī (1926–1999) and other contemporaries had already woven mythic figures and episodes into lyric and dramatic textures; what distinguishes al-Bayātī, however, is that he refused to treat myth as an exotic outside to Arab culture. Rather, he redeployed it from within his own cultural horizon and with demonstrable philological control—what Muḥammad al-Jazaʾirī terms "textual enrichment" (*al-ighnāʾ al-naṣṣī*)—that is, the employment of myth after examination, study, and scrutiny (al-Jazaʾirī 2000, 202–3). In the Iraqi dramatic field, one can also point to early mythic staging in ʿĀdil Kāẓim's play *The Immortality of Gilgamesh* (1977) and to the broader development tracked in accounts of modern Iraqi poetry and theatre (Alwan 1975; al-Dulaimi 1998, 48–55).

It bears emphasis that before the free-verse movement, myth was scarcely employed in Iraqi poetry. The reasons are well rehearsed: a critical culture oriented to topical (social–political) content, a relatively weak linkage with world literatures that had already re-opened a mythopoetic register, and the practical inaccessibility of Eastern antiquities (Assyrian, Akkadian, Sumerian, Babylonian) in the period before major archaeological publications (Haddad 1986, 77–78; Alwan 1975). In drama, the situation was similar: Iraqi theatre's modern development lagged and struggled institutionally to consolidate audiences (al-ʿAynī

1979, 20–26). Indeed, the audience crisis of the 1970s helps explain why many turned from prose plays to poetic drama once prose theatre faltered in transmitting ideas to its publics.

For Arab poets, however, poetic drama offered a supple outlet for complex life-themes: the form had drawn on myth since classical Greek stages, and its contemporary re-employment can be viewed as a cultural extension rather than mere imitation (Bowers 1990). Within this horizon, Yūsuf's *When in the Heights* saturates its dramaturgy with Babylonian materials (Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim/Flood, and creation motifs), using the mythic frame as a vehicle for reading Iraq's present social and political predicaments. As Assadi and Naʿāmneh argue, Yūsuf practices "the intertextuality of the mobile model"—coalescing past and present texts across three axes (myth serving present goals; the present reading the past; the present influencing another present) (Assadi & Naʿāmneh 2018, 53). In this sense, the play also leans toward meta-theatre—a play that speaks its own conditions of possibility: just as the Gilgamesh myth concludes by substituting human creativity for frustrated immortality, Yūsuf's play intimates theatre itself as an alternative to exile and to a difficult socio-political reality (Ismāʿīl 1980).

Contemporary criticism of Iraqi plays in the 1970s often lamented colloquial drift and a narrow focus on subaltern milieus even as productions were mounted before bourgeois audiences; many critics called for re-exposure to world dramaturgy and to the ancient heritage as a reservoir of forms and symbols (Sallūm 1977–1987, 173–74; Bowers 1990). Precisely here lies the distinction of Yūsuf's text: its elevated, eloquent diction, its translocal theme, and its deep mythic repertoire. The working hypothesis of this study, therefore, is that *When in the Heights* advances a new poetic-theatrical model—what we call the psychological play—whose specific poetics (semi-circular "events," inward conflict, choral memory) will be detailed in what follows.

World and Arabic theatres alike have long addressed Semitic and Greek myth, generating a distinctive relationship to mythology (Badawī 1998, 103–18; ʿAnānī 1985, 7). Yet surprisingly few studies isolate the "psychological play" in Arabic as a poetic dramatic form that employs ancient myth while cultivating its own devices and aims. Where the scholarship is fuller—largely in Western contexts—the Arabic case remains under-described; even surveys of the search for "self" in Arabic drama note three dominant vectors (ethical self-reckoning with political power; re-reading of heritage for usable pasts; and calls for a new Arabic dramaturgy) without thematizing this psychological-mythic subgenre explicitly (Ḥammūda 1999, 395). The pages ahead take up that task: to trace *When in the Heights*, to classify it among psychological plays, and to examine how ancient myth functions within its poetic theatre.

Therefore, this chapter examines Saʿdī Yūsuf's *When in the Heights* as a poetic text that participates in what has been termed the psychological play, a dramatic form that privileges interiority over external action. The psychological play (or psychological drama) is a modern trend in Western theatre whose conventions are still forming; its image, as ʿAnānī observes, "remains in the stage of crystallization and construction," developed initially to distinguish such plays from classical drama in its conventional Aristotelian sense (ʿAnānī 1985, 7).

The emergence of this type of play corresponds to the rise of the stream of consciousness in modern literature—a movement that redefined the representation of the human character. As Ghanem's extended study shows, writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf replaced linear narration with the continuous flow of thought, creating characters whose motives were no longer predictable or static. According to ʿAnānī (1985, 9), this literary turn rejected the notion of fixed and knowable characters; instead, characterization became an open field shaped by the movement of the mind itself. The same principle soon appeared in modern poetry and poetic drama, notably in the work of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, where identity is rendered as shifting consciousness rather than stable persona (ʿAnānī 1985, 9).

Despite its early literary precedents, the psychological play did not gain wide popularity until the late 1960s and 1970s, when the dominance of socially and intellectually oriented theatre began to decline and new forms of inward drama came to replace it (ʿAnānī 1985, 10; Sāliḥa 1982). In such plays, the event migrates from the stage to the mind of the character: the dramatic action no longer consists of sequential external acts but of internal oscillations and moments of conflict. As ʿAnānī explains, the psychological play

"transfers the event to the inner world of the characters, making their selves unstable and unbalanced" (1985, 10).

From a structural perspective, this transformation produces a distinctive rhythm. Traditional drama moves chronologically toward a climax through successive, causal incidents; the psychological play, by contrast, revolves in semi-circles—each a self-contained encounter between two feelings or two ideas. The reader or spectator cannot advance through linear time but instead circles repeatedly through mental states, returning again and again to the same emotional origin. Each half-circle begins with a potential relation that could form an "event," yet it breaks off before completion (ʿAnānī 1985, 10–11). These semi-circles, then, serve as the play's substitute for plot. Through them, the audience gradually infers the psychological condition of each character and approaches the space of their consciousness.

What, then, is the relationship between myth and psychological drama? In modern Arabic works that enlist ancient myth, the first experiential constant is anxiety—a sustained fear of the unknown, of fate, and of everything that threatens death or annihilation. This affect marks both the contemporary poet and the ancient hero at the myth's source; it supplies the dramatic pressure that turns outward narrative into inward action (Sāliḥa 1982).

In such plays, the problem is existential as well as formal: an individual suffers on behalf of—or as a figure for—the collective. His salvation or failure stands as a verdict on the community, and the "cause" that frames his struggle is frequently national or civilizational (Sartre 2008, 46–58; al-Ghadāmī 1993, 144–48). This same structure already animates the Epic of Gilgamesh: the king's quest for eternal life reads as both personal deliverance and the destiny of Uruk. Here lies the functional link between ancient myth and modern psychological poetic theatre: myth supplies an archetypal plot of fear, loss, and measure; psychological drama re-times that plot as a sequence of inner conflicts.

Working within this frame—and drawing on modern psychological paradigms—Saʿdī Yūsuf converts life-experience into theatrical thought, employing myth as a tool to articulate an interior crisis. This specificity helps explain his distinctiveness among modern poets. The rise of such plays has also generated a corresponding criticism often called the "psychological approach to psychological theatre," which proceeds in two complementary ways: (1) close-read a given play to infer elements of the poet's psychological profile; or (2) read an author's dramatic corpus to derive general psychological conclusions, then test those conclusions against particular texts (ʿAlī 1997, 142–43).

Within the psychological play, the psychological dimension of character becomes primary, while other familiar dramatic dimensions recede. In classical handbooks, characters are often analyzed through three lenses: physiological (body and outward features), sociological (cultural, religious, class location), and psychological (mood, drives, deficits, moral standards, goals, failures, creative capacity, temperament, introversion/extroversion, conflict, surrender, complexes). The psychological play foregrounds the third of these—internal states and their fluctuations—so that characterization is built from shifts of mind rather than external dossiers (al-Nādī 1987, 46–48).

Formally, this has consequences for plot and ending. Because action migrates inward, the "event" no longer unfolds as a linear chain toward climax; instead, it revolves in semi-circles—each a moment where feeling meets feeling or idea meets idea. The reader/spectator cannot advance chronologically; rather, they circle back to an originary point, again and again. Attempts to "stitch" the final semi-circle to all that precedes often yield open or indeterminate endings—a structural outcome of the form's inner rotations (ʿAnānī 1985, 13–17).

Yūsuf turns to this genre because it can instill, indirectly and without external theatrics, a mature psychology of refusal—a way of mobilizing instincts and dispositions through form rather than declamation (al-Dālī 1999, 211). The following readings show, in practice, how *When in the Heights* deploys Mesopotamian myth to stage anxiety, test refusal, and convert external saga into a theatre of the mind.

In three theatrical scenes from the collection of poems *All the Taverns of the World from Gilgamesh to Marrakesh*, Saadi says:

):

Scene One: Sidūrī's Tavern—Staging Inward Action

(Sidūrī's tavern by the sea. Trellised grapes. Sidūrī looks just like Ishtar.)
Gilgamesh: *(enters; hair long and disheveled; untrimmed leather; sunburned face; resembles Enkidu of the wilderness)*
Sidūrī: *(rises to welcome him)* Welcome, you who have come from a long and harsh journey. Sit down. For **I am your spirit**, and the tavern is your home.
Gilgamesh: *(sits)* (Yūsuf 1992, 114).

Yūsuf opens on a visual scene—tavern, sea, trellised grapes, Sidūrī "like Ishtar"—that pre-loads atmosphere before dialogue begins. This is characteristic of the psychological play: the scene supplies inner cues that speech alone cannot, preparing the spectator to read event as inward motion rather than external action (ʿAnānī 1985, 7–10). Gilgamesh's entrance—a body marked by exhaustion (dust, leather skins, sunburn)—announces a psyche already in crisis; Sidūrī's welcome ("I am your spirit") frames the tavern as psychic shelter, not mere location (Yūsuf 1992, 114).

This main tableau will branch into shorter micro-scenes—brief exchanges that function like semi-circles of feeling and thought. Each micro-scene begins a relation (host/guest, question/answer, desire/limit), then breaks off before a traditional "action" can complete—Yūsuf's signature way of substituting inward turns for plot (ʿAnānī 1985, 10–11).

Gilgamesh: How beautiful this tavern is!
How sweet the cups are!
And how splendid the grapevines are…
Sidūrī *(smiling)*: And me?
Gilgamesh: My words were about you.
Sidūrī: Strange…Gilgamesh hasn't changed (Yūsuf 1992, 115).

Here, nothing "happens" in the classical sense; instead, astonishment becomes event. Gilgamesh's praise of cups and vines disguises the address to Sidūrī; her prompt—"And me?"—forces him to name the concealed addressee. The exchange reveals a tired psyche that still registers beauty, even after hardship. It also foreshadows the play's central problem: Gilgamesh's tendency to deflect from the thing feared (death) to proximate, more bearable images (wine, vines, the host). The scene thus externalizes inner instability without requiring physical action.

A quick comparison with the Akkadian episode clarifies Yūsuf's method of mythic alteration. In the epic, Sidūrī sees the approaching hero, bolts her door, and Gilgamesh threatens to smash the gate; her first response is fear, and his rhetoric is force. She interrogates his altered face and exhausted body (Sawah 2002, 203–6). Yūsuf retains the iconic markers (the sea's edge, skins, sunburn, sorrow) but reverses the interpersonal geometry: Sidūrī welcomes rather than barricades; Gilgamesh's *first* words are aesthetic wonder, not threat. These deviations are not slips; they are purposeful reframings to serve a psychological theatre in which Sidūrī functions as enabling psyche-voice instead of obstacle (Sawah 2002, 203–6).

Two craft points follow:

1. Scene as inner index. The tavern's sensual plenitude (grapes, cups, sea) is not decoration; it measures Gilgamesh's capacity to notice life after catastrophe. In psychological drama, such mise-en-scène stands in for external incident.

2. Dialogue as micro-event. The Sidūrī/Gilgamesh repartee stages recognition and naming as action: who is being addressed, what is being avoided, what desire is being displaced. Each turn is a half-action—a semi-circle that starts, breaks, then returns at a higher register (ʿAnānī 1985, 10–11).

Finally, Sidūrī's line "I am your spirit" quietly repositions the mythic counselor into a dramatic principle: she is the voice that turns travel into listening, motion into measure. In the Akkadian text, her counsel

comes as a philosophical hinge; in Yūsuf, it becomes the first station in a chain of interior stations—the shape of the psychological play itself (Sawah 2002, 203–6; ʿAnānī 1985, 7–11).

In the following passage from the first scene, we read:

Gilgamesh: How did you recognize me—disheveled, dusty, sun-burned,
in leather clothes, come from a remote home?
Sidūrī: No woman would fail to know you, Gilgamesh! *(offers him a cup)*
Gilgamesh: *(sips)* But I have **missed** one woman…
Sidūrī: Which woman, Gilgamesh?
Gilgamesh: The one called "Life" in the tablets. (Yūsuf, 1992, p. 118)

Gilgamesh's surprise at being recognized despite his ragged state introduces a first half-event (ellipsis)—"I have missed one woman"—that points to a second, implicit half-event supplied by the mythic hypotext (Epic of Gilgamesh, col. I–II). In that source, Gilgamesh's notoriety is explicit: he "left no virgin," "knows everything," and "is our strong, handsome shepherd," etc., which makes Sidūrī's immediate recognition psychologically and socially plausible (al-Ṣawwāḥ, 2002, pp. 109–111). Reading "the woman called 'Life'" as a symbolic object ("life" that defeats him) captures Gilgamesh's initial disorientation: after conquering every "real" woman, an imaginary woman (Life) conquers him. The line stages the onset of his death-complex—he is already circling the signifier *life* as the mask of *death*. (Yūsuf, 1992, p. 118; al-Ṣawwāḥ, 2002, pp. 109–111)

Gilgamesh: Enkidu taught me to ask—
Sidūrī: What?
Gilgamesh: About the meaning of the woman called "Life" in the tablets—
which is **Death…**
D-eath, explicitly—
filthy, rapist, and ugly.

(Yūsuf, 1992, p. 114)

The broken utterance ("which is Death… D-eath") dramatizes verbal avoidance: he cannot pronounce death smoothly. The staggered articulation signals horror and somatic recoil, consistent with a psyche overwhelmed by mortality salience after Enkidu's death (the essential missing event supplied by the epic's source text). The harsh epithets ("filthy, rapist, ugly") externalize fear as moral revulsion, letting us track a mind that converts existential terror into ethical disgust—a classic defensive re-coding.

Sidūrī: The gods of the universe willed it so—that we live to die,
while the gods remain immortal.
Gilgamesh: Is this just?
Sidūrī: It is the law of the universe—
whether we accept it or not.
Gilgamesh: I will not accept.

(Yūsuf, 1992, p. 120)

The scene opposes Sidūrī's sober acceptance of cosmic law to Gilgamesh's defiance. Psychologically, we move from anxious avoidance (earlier) to reactive protest (now). The argument's coherence depends on the ellipses your discussion names: only if Enkidu's death is presupposed (from the epic) does Gilgamesh's revolt read as a next step in grief (from shock → avoidance → protest).

Sidūrī: You will be perplexed for a long time, Gilgamesh,
and you will travel long, and face horrors.
Circumstances will pass… but you will return—
to the tavern—to me;

for I am your soul, Gilgamesh,
and the tavern is your home.

(Yūsuf, 1992, p. 114)

Sidūrī casts herself/tavern as psyche/home, forecasting the futility of the quest: he will come back empty-handed. "Perplexity" (*ḥayra*) functions as a psychological topos—a spatialized state (his "personal space," as you note) in which time stretches and events blur; narratologically, the dialogue uses non-chronological sequencing (ellipsis and prolepsis) that presumes the mythic hypotext to fill the half-events. (Yūsuf, 1992, p. 114).

In Saadi Yūsuf's first scene, Sidūrī the innkeeper turns the hero from the mirage of immortality toward the fullness of mortal life. She speaks in a cadence of ordinary joys:

"Eat your bread, Gilgamesh
And be merry day and night
And dance
And play
Day and night
Wash your face
And swim in the water
And pamper your child
And let your sweet wife be glad in your arms
O Gilgamesh…" (Yūsuf, 1992, p. 121)

These lines closely echo the Akkadian counsel in the epic—fill your belly, rejoice, keep clean, bathe, let a little one hold your hand, and let your wife delight in your embrace (al-Sawāḥ, 2002, pp. 201–202)—but Yūsuf condenses and revoices the injunctions so that the ancient ethic of immanence sounds immediate and tender. The emphasis falls not on transcending the human condition but on inhabiting it: food, festivity, bathing, the child's nearness, the wife's gladness.

When the scene turns to departure, Yūsuf accelerates the quest without obscuring its aim. Gilgamesh insists that he must go, and the exchange is pared to its essentials:

Gilgamesh: Sidūrī, the journey must be made…
Sidūrī: Where?
Gilgamesh: To Utu-napishtim, the distant man... my grandfather.
Sidūrī, show me.
Sidūrī: I'll see.
If the boatman passes by…
(Yūsuf, 1992, p. 114)

In the epic, Sidūrī does not ferry him but directs him to Urshanabi, Utnapishtim's ferryman, and warns that the route is barred by the Waters of Death; the Akkadian narrative lingers over a technical crossing accomplished with one hundred and twenty poles, each used once so the hero's hands never touch the deadly water (al-Sawāḥ, 2002, p. 207). Yūsuf deliberately omits these logistics. The compression is dramaturgical: it keeps the pressure on the mind and heart of the seeker rather than on the mechanics of passage.

Read in this light, Yūsuf's adaptation functions as an objective correlative in T. S. Eliot's sense. By selecting and reshaping the myth's materials—Sidūrī's litany of the everyday, the streamlined turn toward "the distant man," the elided difficulty of the crossing—he externalizes a modern affective truth: salvation is not a conquest of death but a practiced attention to mortal goods. The result is fidelity of argument with a redistribution of emphasis, so that the ancient counsel—dance, play, bathe, hold the child's hand, gladden the wife—speaks in the present tense, and the journey that "must be made" reads as the insistence of a psyche rather than a nautical itinerary.

In the second scene (Yūsuf, 1992, pp. 124–125), the stage opens on a reed hut; Utnapishtim appears as "a tall, thin old man with delicate features," the place "exuding sanctity," with "a gentle ripple of waves" and "the sounds of water birds." Gilgamesh enters with the boatman and says, "You have come at last, my grandfather…." Utnapishtim asks, "And how did you come to us, Gilgamesh?" He answers, "The boatman took me. We crossed the Sea of Death in his boat." "And where did you see him?" "In Sidūrī's tavern." Utnapishtim concludes, "So, she seduced him, so he would bring you!" and the boatman adds that his heart inclined toward the hero. The passage presents Utnapishtim as a reassuring, sanctified elder and prepares the audience to assent to Gilgamesh's quest. Gilgamesh, for his part, lowers his pride and addresses Utnapishtim as "my grandfather," a choice that highlights the hero's psychological vulnerability and need for guidance.

Set against the Akkadian epic, several details in Yūsuf's scene are purposeful compressions. In the epic, Sidūrī does not ferry Gilgamesh; she directs him to Urshanabi (Urshanabi), Utnapishtim's ferryman, and warns that the route is barred by the Waters of Death. The crossing itself is technical: Urshanabi and Gilgamesh use one hundred and twenty poles, each once, so the hero's hands never touch the lethal water (al-Sawāḥ, 2002, pp. 207–208; see also George, 2003; Foster, 2019). Yūsuf omits these logistics to keep attention on the psychological encounter with the "distant man." He also introduces the kinship idiom "grandfather," which does not appear in the epic but effectively frames Utnapishtim as a moral elder rather than simply a survivor granted life—an interpretive move that aligns with reception studies noting how modern adaptations re-voice epic material to externalize contemporary affect (Abusch, 2001; Pryke, 2019).

Later, Yūsuf gives Utnapishtim a gentle, domestic welcome: "Go, Gilgamesh, and wash now. Here is a robe from me, so wear it. And come back so we can eat something. And speak to me…" (Yūsuf, 1992, p. 127). As Gilgamesh departs to bathe, Utnapishtim muses: "What a time! What a terrifying, wild journey… He waded through and around the dead; he crossed the Mountains of the Sun and the haunted forests and the golden orchards." The lines mark Utnapishtim as a figure who stands slightly outside human time, contemplating the extremity of Gilgamesh's path and registering it with quiet awe. The epic's corresponding dialogue is roughened by lacunae but clear in thrust: Gilgamesh marvels that Utnapishtim looks ordinary—"I see you as I am"—and asks how such a man "became one with the gods and attained life"; Utnapishtim replies by promising to reveal "a hidden secret" and begins the flood narrative that explains his survival and the grant of life (al-Sawāḥ, 2002, pp. 213, 216–218; see also Dalley, 2008; Tigay, 2002).

In sum, the differences arise less from error than from dramaturgy. Yūsuf condenses the nautical mechanics and fills the textual gaps with intimate, legible moments that externalize the play's inner concern: the seeker's need for a humane elder and a comprehensible account of life. The sanctified setting, the "grandfather" address, the bathing and robe, and the recollection of the perilous road translate the epic's wounded, fragmentary arrival into a scene an audience can inhabit without losing the epic's essential claim. Read alongside critical editions and major translations (George, 2003; Foster, 2019; Dalley, 2008), Yūsuf's choices exemplify how adaptation can remain faithful to narrative argument while rebalancing emphasis—much as reception scholars describe when myth is repurposed to stage modern psychological truth (Abusch, 2001; Pryke, 2019; Tigay, 2002).

In the second scene (Yūsuf, 1992, p. 128), Utnapishtim voices the questions that frame Gilgamesh's inner life: "What winds carried him here? / What obsessions released the body / From its confinement behind the walls?" The term "obsession," cast as a rhetorical question, points directly to the psychological engine of the quest—death-anxiety transformed into motion. In Yūsuf's dramaturgy the questioner is no longer the hero but the elder who reads the hero, turning the scene into a compact act of diagnostic care (cf. Abusch, 2001).

Shortly before, Gilgamesh re-enters "wearing a loose white robe." Utnapishtim bids him, "Sit down, Gilgamesh, and eat of my bread" (Yūsuf, 1992, p. 114). Addressing him with reverence—"My grandfather"—Gilgamesh confesses a shattered expectation: "I thought you were a giant, / Armored, / rushing, like a raging bull. / But you, my grandfather, / are thinner than I, / more delicate, and more beautiful…" When Utnapishtim asks why he imagined a giant, Gilgamesh answers: "You have attained

immortality like a god." The surprise is faithful to the epic's core effect: the "distant man" looks ordinary, undermining heroic fantasy and forcing a conceptual correction—immortality is not a visible physique nor the trophy of force (al-Sawāḥ, 2002, pp. 213, 216–218; see also George, 2003; Foster, 2019).

Yūsuf sharpens this correction in the dialogue that follows. Utnapishtim explains that his life was granted "when all the gods of the universe acknowledged" it, in the aftermath of the Flood (Yūsuf, 1992, p. 114). Gilgamesh presses: "And what about me… if I were to attempt immortality, my grandfather?" Utnapishtim answers with a structural impossibility: "Who would gather the gods of the universe?" The point is both theological and dramaturgical: immortality of the Utnapishtim type is a singular, unrepeatable dispensation, not a reward on demand (Dalley, 2008; Tigay, 2002). Gilgamesh's distress peaks in a line that returns the poem to its psychological ground: "Should I die as people die? / Will worms eat my eyes, like Enkidu, / and I am two-thirds god, my grandfather?" (Yūsuf, 1992, p. 114). The appeal to his fractional divinity, set against the image of Enkidu's decay, stages the paradox that drives the quest: heroic self-concept collides with mortal fact (Foster, 2019).

Moved by this grief, Utnapishtim pivots from the impossibility of god-given life to a consolation of a different order: "Only the Circle of Secrets remains, / Only the herb remains." He reveals "a herb… at the bottom of the sea… If you taste the herb, you will become young again, O Gilgamesh." Gilgamesh immediately extends the hope beyond himself—"And the people in walled Uruk?"—and Utnapishtim repeats the rule: "Whoever tastes the herb will become young again… Look for it at the bottom of the sea there, / And take the boatman with you…" (Yūsuf, 1992, p. 114). Here Yūsuf is close to the Akkadian narrative in substance while simplifying its logistics. In the epic, the plant is explicitly a rejuvenation plant—Andrew George renders it "Old Men Are Young Again"—and it offers renewal, not immortality (George, 2003; Dalley, 2008). Yūsuf's choice clarifies the ethical distinction: what can be offered to a mortal is restorative time, not endless life.

Two framing notes align the scene with the canonical tradition. First, the nautical mechanics—Urshanabi (Urshanabi), the Waters of Death, the one hundred and twenty poles used once each so that flesh never touches the lethal water—belong to the epic's technical passage and are purposefully compressed by Yūsuf to keep the focal length on the mind of the seeker and the voice of the elder (al-Sawāḥ, 2002, pp. 207–208; George, 2003). Second, Gilgamesh's question about "the people in walled Uruk" registers the civic turn already latent in the epic: the king who once oppressed his city becomes the king whose labor, losses, and knowledge—won through Enkidu's death and his own failed pursuit—return as care for Uruk (Foster, 2019; Tigay, 2002). In this light, the "obsession" that released the body from its walls is not merely self-regard; it is the raw fear of death refined into a humanized kingship, a movement Yūsuf renders through intimate, legible exchanges without losing the epic's argument about what mortals may—and may not—receive.

Between the second and third scenes, the chorus chants a compact narrative (Yūsuf, 1992, pp. 130–134):

"Gilgamesh
Gilgamesh
Lover of the Walls of Uruk
Dived to the bottom of the sea
And brought that herb
The poor man did not eat of it
And said, I will plant it in the Walls of Uruk
For all people to eat of it
And I will be the prince of lovers
Gilgamesh
Gilgamesh
Gilgamesh slept by the shore…
And the serpent smelled the herb
And ate it and slipped away

Gilgamesh!
Gilgamesh!
Gilgamesh by the shore rose…
He did not find the herb
Woe to the serpent
Oh, your youth, serpent's skin!
Gilgamesh!
Gilgamesh!
Oh, your tears, Gilgamesh!
Oh, lover of the Walls of Uruk…"

The choral voice anticipates and condenses events into a lyric plot: Gilgamesh retrieves the rejuvenating plant, resolves to replant it for Uruk, falls asleep, and loses it to the serpent—whose shed skin emblems renewal that the hero himself is denied. This is faithful in essence to the Akkadian narrative, where the plant restores youth rather than confers immortality; after Gilgamesh bathes, a serpent steals the plant and sloughs its skin, signaling the transfer of rejuvenation to another creature (George, 2003; Foster, 2019; Dalley, 2008). Yūsuf's chorus functions as diegetic narrator and commentator rather than a conveyor of new action, translating epic sequence into rhythmic exposition. Such choral mediation illustrates how theater—and, by analogy, other narrative arts—can "plot" by song, image, and repetition rather than by continuous action (Bal, 1984).

In the third scene (Yūsuf, 1992, pp. 136–138), the tavern returns as a civic, human scale. Sidūrī greets the traveler; Gilgamesh answers that he comes "from the land of death," and the patrons remind him that he returns to "mortal men." He confesses a revision of belief: once he imagined death as a personal enemy and life as the mere sum of his years; now he sees life and death as two faces of the same reality, remaining in conflict like night and day. Sidūrī repeats her welcome—"you have returned at last, wise, free, and a prince"—and invites him to sit among the people and drink the "cup of return." The sequence is not in the epic; it is Yūsuf's deliberate coda. In the cuneiform tradition, the loss of the plant is followed by the homecoming to Uruk and the renewed attention to its walls, the durable work of the city (George, 2003; Tigay, 2002). Yūsuf preserves the argument while shifting the place of recognition: the insight arrives not at the battlements but at the tavern table, where acceptance is socialized into convivial ritual. The "return" becomes less a heroic triumph than a re-entry into ordinary time—the very human sphere Sidūrī counseled from the start.

Read against the epic scaffolding, the dramaturgical choices are coherent. The chorus compresses the rejuvenation episode, highlighting the ethical pivot from private possession to civic intention ("I will plant it in the Walls of Uruk"), only to stage the thwarting of that intention by sleep and serpent—an emblematic loss that the epic also insists on. The final tavern scene then translates the canonical homecoming into a communal rite of recognition: Gilgamesh accepts mortality, yet finds a durable form of continuation in the people, the city, and the shared cup. Scholarship on the epic's ending underscores precisely this turn—from the quest for god-given life to the human work of making and remembering (Abusch, 2001; Foster, 2019; Tigay, 2002). Yūsuf's adaptation, while reordering and simplifying, remains faithful to that argument: immortality is singular and unrepeatable; rejuvenation is precarious; what endures is the city, the companions, and the name carried in common speech (George, 2003; Dalley, 2008).

In *When in the Heights* (Yūsuf, 1992, pp. 115–117), Saadi Yūsuf stages a mythic prologue that re-imagines the Babylonian *Enūma Eliš* as a dialogue between gods and chorus:

Before there was a holy house for the gods
In a holy place,
Before the reeds were created in the water,
Before the branches of the trees turned green,
Before the brick and the mold were invented…
Before the great cities

And the stature of men,
There was nothing but the sea.
And we, the gods,
We appeared suddenly
And dwelt in our holy house,
And there were no men on the earth.
So why does the chorus ask that we bow down in gratitude to men?
Chorus:
When the earth was formed and stood…
Gods were sacrificed so that man might be created…
Man was not created from crumbling clay.
One of the Anunnaki:
We created him to serve us…
To live in the trenches or die…
Chorus:
Alas! What an unjust god is this…?

Yūsuf reworks the *Enūma Eliš* creation myth into political and psychological allegory. Before the reed, the brick, or the city, "there was nothing but the sea," echoing the cosmogonic waters of Apsû and Tiamat (Dalley, 2008; George, 2003). The dialogue among gods, chorus, and Anunnaki reproduces the myth's essential structure—the divine sacrifice that yields humankind—yet alters its moral valence. In *Enūma Eliš* VI, Marduk fashions humanity from the blood of the rebel god Qingu (Tigay, 2002; Lambert & Millard, 1969); Yūsuf's chorus protests that this act inaugurates injustice. The gods in his scene speak as masters; the chorus becomes the poet's conscience, naming the oppression implicit in creation.

By transforming a cosmogony into a moral argument, Yūsuf converts epic narrative into psychological theater. The "event," in Aristotelian terms, dissolves into semi-circles of meditation and response. No climax is reached; instead, the dialogue revolves around existential awareness—creation as servitude, divinity as exploitation. This circular form mirrors the structure of *psychological drama* in which meaning accrues through repetition and reflection rather than through action (Abusch, 2001; Bal, 1984).

The subtext is unmistakably historical. Yūsuf's chorus, lamenting "what an unjust god is this," extends mythic protest to the social sphere. In the late-twentieth-century Iraqi context, the "gods" stand for political authority, and humankind for the citizen compelled to "carry the basket and the pickaxe." The ancient cosmogony becomes a mirror for modern servitude—a "myth of origins" recast as a critique of the state's creation of its subjects (Pryke, 2019; Foster, 2019). The poet's voice emerges through the chorus: if divinity itself is unjust, then resistance must take the form of remembrance and speech.

Comparison with the Akkadian text reinforces the intertextual design. In the myth, "When the heavens above had not been named, nor earth below had been called by name, Apsû and Tiamat mingled their waters together" (George, 2003; Dalley, 2008). Yūsuf keeps the primordial sea and the spontaneous birth of the gods, but condenses the theogony into a modern idiom of awakening. His gods "appeared suddenly and dwelt in their holy house," a paraphrase of the moment when the elder deities emerge from the mingled waters. By inserting the chorus as moral interlocutor, he relocates the myth's tension from divine succession to ethical accountability.

Across *When in the Heights* and his *Gilgamesh* sequence, Yūsuf draws on three Mesopotamian sources—the *Gilgamesh* epic, the Flood myth, and the Babylonian *Enūma Eliš*—to craft what might be termed a psychological mythology of modernity. The poet fuses historical and inner drama: the gods' ancient labor becomes the psychic and political labor of humankind. In this hybrid form, myth functions not as ornament but as diagnostic structure—an ancient pattern through which a modern poet reads both the collective and the self.

Conclusion

This reading yields three linked implications for cultural analysis and social change and, taken together, they frame our closing judgment. First, myth as cultural memory is actionable: by re-timing epic structures as inner stations, the play reframes "heroism" as civic care. Sidūrī's counsel—eat, bathe, hold the child's hand, let the wife be glad—is not private resignation but a social ethic that privileges durable practices over unattainable transcendence. Second, the chorus functions as a collective voice that compresses plot into memory work (the plant, the sleep, the serpent), modeling how communities narrate loss without nihilism; the serpent's "youthful skin" marks renewal as redistributed, not ownable, aligning with the play's civic turn where what endures is work, walls, companions, name. Third, form itself is social method: mise-en-scène and semi-circular events operate as cultural techniques that convert anxieties of death, exile, and power into measured assent. In late-twentieth-century Iraq, this amounts to a quiet but clear politics—exchanging the fantasy of immortality for ordinary continuities of repair, hospitality, and remembrance, performed in a common space (the tavern) rather than on the battlements.

Within this frame, Saʿdī Yūsuf turns Mesopotamian myth into theatrical space for inner action: he preserves the epic scaffolding (Sidūrī's counsel, Utnapištim's lesson, the herb and the serpent, the *Enūma Eliš* prologue) but re-times it from outward quest to inward recognition. Scene and chorus carry the argument—mise-en-scène as index of psyche, choral reprise as performative memory, dialogue pared to ellipsis, repetition, and rhetorical question—so that "events" arrive as semi-circles of hesitation, protest, bargaining, and measured assent. Writing as three readers/writers, we judged the tavern ending truer than any triumphal finale for the way it honors limit without cynicism; we were persuaded by the civic emphasis that rescues the text from solipsism and keeps faith with the epic's end-value (work, memory, companions) even when episodes are reordered; and while one of us missed some of the epic's rough texture (the poles, the ferryman, the Waters of Death), we concede that the compression yields psychological clarity and that the chorus carries the lesson of the lost plant with memorable force—renewal is transferable, not ownable.

Taken together, these findings suggest that *When in the Heights* succeeds not by reproducing the epic but by redeploying it. Myth becomes a present-tense instrument for reading fear, accepting finitude, and returning the hero to his city with a workable ethic—care over conquest, measure over infinity. In our collective estimation, this achievement justifies the term psychological poetic drama and gives it explanatory power beyond this single play, showing how aesthetic form can mediate historical pressure and make myth a working instrument of cultural transformation rather than a museum piece.

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