

Jernail S. Anand's "Lustus: The Prince of Darkness" A Universe of Magic Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Lustus: The Prince of Darkness, the first book in J.S. Anand's Mahakaal Trilogy, is said to be a living picture of a nightmare, apocalyptic, postmodern world that has been torn apart by the evil-incarnate Lustus, who is Satan's successor, and his destructive artefacts. Satan anoints Lustus, whose evil plans are the underground forces that move human civilization toward its destruction. The poet focuses his lens on horrible and blatant social, political, ethical, religious, and moral decadence of the modern world, which makes for a fascinating and engrossing study of evil and a fascinating and engaging look at the modern human condition. Anand has skilfully dealt with the moral problems of the war between good and evil. He has done this by using a lot of metaphors, symbols, and multiple layers of identification. For example, Ravana is the head of the postmodern corporate world, Adam wears postmodern clothes, and Lustus is the Satan of postmodern times. These characters are well-versed in modern science, humanities, technology, and artificial intelligence.

Keywords: *Mahakaal Trilogy, Celestial Reign, Satan, Satya Yuga, Ravana.*

Lustus: The Prince of Darkness by J.S. Anand, the first book of the Mahakaal Trilogy, avouches to be the living picture of a nightmarish, apocalyptic postmodern world torn asunder by anarchy, apostasy and destructive artefacts of evil incarnate Lustus, the successor of Satan. Satan anoints Lustus, whose evil machinations are the subterranean forces that manoeuvre the trajectories of human civilization towards destruction. The fascinating study of evil and the insightful and captivating investigation into contemporary human condition is revelatory as the poet trains his lenses on the horrid and blatantly naked social, political, ethical, religious and moral decadence of the contemporary world. While John Milton in *Paradise Lost* aims to "justify the ways of God to men," Lustus, its sequential sibling, manifests the "suzerainty and power of Lustus who wants to justify the ways of man to God." Hailed as the epic poem, *Lustus* compels the readers to think deeply about the dichotomies, dualities, binaries and dialectics that obtain in life, triggers off new myth-making through an intermix of Eastern and Western

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Received 04 Sep. 2022; Accepted 21 Sep. 2022. Available online: 25 Sep. 2022.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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myths, and assumes the form of a timeless world classic. Book I under review is part of the Mahakaal Trilogy comprising *The Dominion of Netherworld* and *The Ultronic Age: The Celestial Reign*. Books I and II present the workings of devils in their most intense power play. Lustus, who has replaced Satan and his son, Mayan supported by so many evil forces, has taken hold of the entire universe. Avi's description of Lustus epitomizes his all-pervasive impression on human beings and their ways of life:

Lustus is a feeling,
A sentiment,
A reigning passion,
Which possesses every heart.
Even the best of people carried
A lot of Lustus in their hearts.

Book II is a conspicuous description of the world of decay and death which is popularly known as "Kaliyuga" and is presided over by the king of Darkness" (*The Dominion of Netherworld*, 11). At the same time, it is "a wake-up call for the contemporary human world to wriggle out of the supremacy of Lustus" (Prof. Shiv Sethi, hansindia.com, August 21, 2022). Here, there is no direct war but "A battle of ballots between gods and devils" (202) takes place (this can be viewed as a parody of contemporary democratic exercise) and fortunately towards the end of the book, the Angels "once again get the control of the Universe and Lustus is exiled for a million years," thus, paving the way for Satyuga with the blessings of Mother Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge. River Saraswati symbolically re-emerges on the earth's surface in *The Ultronic Age: The Celestial Reign* heralds the Satya Yuga all over again, under the dominance of the Goddess of Knowledge, Ma Saraswati. This is a Utopian world, a 'New Heaven,' the post-technology, post 'experience,' post-religion world. In the words of the poet: "This is the Neo-Aden whose inhabitants are not in a state of ignorant bliss. It is also not the pre-knowledge estate. This is the post-technology scenario in which humans have been placed all over again, to start a new experiment with humanity" (Introduction, *The Ultronic Age: The Celestial Reign*). The subtle poetic touches signal the world of the impossible dreams of humanity wherein everybody is in a state of reinventing himself. In the words of Prof. K.B. Razdan, "Dr. Anand's super-creative mind and imagination spin out a fairy tale like Utopian-cum-Heavenly world of Ultronia, a world in which sin and damnation have no place, only Ecstasy, Innocence, Purity form the Triumvirate of human existence. Alienation, contradiction, and Disorder have

become extinct, replaced in Ultronia by Innocence, Purity and Heroism” (Foreword). One is reminded of Blake’s concept of true innocence that can be attained only after one’s exposure to experience. Unlike Adam and Eve, the new couple Arshit and Eva are forbidden to eat knowledge. In the Ultronic Age, the new men and women are found capable of maintaining their purity, nobility, divinity and innocence even after going through the world of experience in Kalyuga. From this point of view, it can be said that the first two books of the Mahakaal Trilogy, are Anand’s “Books of Experience” and The Ultronic Age is his “Book of Innocence.”

Despite the conundrum about the genre of Lustus (Lustus, 134), Anand has adroitly negotiated the moral dilemmas that spring from the war between good and evil through extensive use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, symbols, and multiple layers of identification as Ravana heads the postmodern corporate world, Adam wears postmodern attire and Lustus is Satan of postmodern times adequately aware of modern science, humanities, technology and artificial intelligence. The use of literary devices such as satire, fantasy, and representation of abstract ideas (for example, all the vices here take on human shapes and are endowed with human features) contribute to project Lustus as a postmodern allegory which critiques contemporaneity, decadence, crisis and predicament of the “Corporate Evil” (141). In brief, Lustus can be termed a dystopian allegory. In the postmodern era, Lustus, to whom Satan transfers his evil mission, represents humanity in all its "variegated essence" (21) and not God. All the characters - God, Lustus, Brahma, Vishnu, Indra, Durga (Gods of Hindu mythology), Greda (Chanchal Ma), Amazinia (Satan's daughter), Beelzebub, Lucifer, Fear, Conspiracy, Tensonia (employees of the Devil), Kal, Narad and Kuru (characters from Indian mythology), Sita, Rama, Lakshman, Samuel, Lesbia (Drama artists), Adam, Eve, Time, Chorus, Cosmic voice, Oracle, Singer, William Wordsworth, Santez, Denzy, Garilla and Witches - metaphorically dramatize the "continuance countdown of good and evil making insistent claims on human mind" (137), thereby unveiling the contemporary social and political issues, reveal the abominable misdeeds of politicians, Corporates, Scientists, Technocrats, Academicians, Sportsmen, Businessmen, Government officials and Journalists, men devoid of "nobility, divinity, sanity, sacrifice and humanity" (142). In this chaotic world which is Devil's workshop, "empire of darkness" (3), where people [Devil's plenty] are fed on ambition and "an exalted passion for selfhood," Lustus almost half win the battle since almost the entire mankind is part of his grand legion. Though God wins the battle, Anand's implicit message is that Lustus' unending plans to create moral, spiritual and social anarchy and to disturb the cosmic pattern

of God, cannot be stopped permanently as "Lustus is a neo-mythical being, who is a most natural evolution in the evil ranks. The fight is metaphorical, and it is my faith that Lustus cannot be finished; only he can be silenced because good and evil co-exist and man must learn how to maintain a balance of the twin impulses which determine human conduct for better or worse" (146). Thus, the battle between God and Lustus metaphorically represents the archetypal tussle between virtue and vice. Considering these aspects, Lustus is a contemporary narrative that shares many resemblances with dystopian allegories.

Variouly hailed as a "contemporary mock-heroic-cum-mock-poem" (Lustus, iii), "neo-mythological epic" (Lustus, 122), "postmodern Mega Epic" (Lustus, 159), "mock-heroic epic" (Lustus, 159), Lustus embodies some features of epic poetry as its grand style, the proposition or Invocation, characters and deeds of superhuman qualities, involvement of ethereal forces, presence of the omniscient narrator, the theme of the clash between virtue and vice, the final triumph of good over bad, melding together of myths and the underlying moral message. Though intended to be the sequel to *Paradise Lost*, the absence of epic similes strikes one. The plot of Lustus is not episodic as a traditional epic. Yet, the structural design of Lustus and the lofty heroic style of the classical epic poem to a subject where the "unheroic" character of the postmodern era reflects the sterling qualities of the true classical and tragic hero, the sarcastic tone and Invocation proclaiming Lustus's aim to justify the ways of man to God, fortify the conception of the text as a mock-epic: "O Muse, lend me power to describe/How this sacrilege takes place/ How Devils make this world/A fief of the Empire of Darkness"(3). The epic conventions and elevated style are used to narrate no trivial matter. Professor Chakraborty wisely leaves it for readers to take part in the construction of the text, which is not final. The poem is neither an epic nor a mock epic in the fullest sense of these words. The term 'epic in drama' certainly brings us near to what it is, but no final answer will be there to such questions. Is Lustus a protagonist or an antagonist? With all the dramatic conventions employed here (setting, spectacle, plot construction, action, contrast, conflict), which form...does the dramatic art conform to?

The use of the flashback technique is another unique feature of Lustus. The scene from Ramayana narrating Sita's abduction by Ravana in the beginning of Canto I generates tension and helps to unfold the plot - ruthless exposure of decaying civilization, from Canto I to Canto X. The reader is taken back in time only for a better understanding of the present age characterized by the predominance of evil. The hoary epic and the contemporary Lustus are

connected to underscore the poet's observation that man's co-existence with evil is an archetypal truth. Moreover, the flashback highlights the difference between Satya Yuga and Kal Yuga. Sita is abducted but not physically violated by Ravana. Towards the end of Canto X, Wordsworth is in mourning - in line with the larger narrative thread of the epic - as Lucy Grey is abducted, gang-raped and dead. Again, at the beginning of Canto IV, a sudden dip in the past, interrupting the chronological flow of the story, makes the present picture more realistic. Here, Oracle describes a "huge procession of Passions/Marching towards the sacred shrine" (30). The flashback mirrors the world of Oedipus as innocent Thebans move in procession to the King's abode to seek protection, while the present inhabitants of earth proceed towards the shrine where devils have gathered to anoint Lustus. The flashback gives rise to sardonic humour and further intensifies the readers' perception of the all-pervasive decadence. The poet's adroit use of 'cut-ins' in Lustus serves as advertisements which are extremely focussed and potent ammunition for the satirical comments on the dismal prevailing scenario. In reply to Lustus' question to poor women, young men and sages as to "What they want,?" the fast, succinct and penetrating responses are "We want to live, we don't want to die. Hunger and need are real, God is only an abstraction. Life is not an abstraction" or "We want power. And power comes from the Barrel of the gun. And only politician holds the gun" (104). These devices enrich the text and probably appeal to the human heart too.

Instead of getting embroiled in 'ceremonies' of pattern or form, the poet is engaged with the pressing moral issues. Consequently, the pattern emerges from the internal logic of the contemporary chaos that rattles the human consciousness, albeit "Titling sequels has been a generally acknowledged problem" (Kundu, 84). Nevertheless, Anand can claim success in choosing a phrase - 'A modern Epic'- that defines the generic identity of his book/sequel at the very outset. The title tag seems to be the most appropriate one to specify the text's form that mirrors the contemporary age. Characters like Ravana and Lustus are hybrid as structurally as the text is. Lustus, in its hybrid form, is the modern rendering of an epic poem in its traditional form; an epic would have failed to portray the difficult, different and disturbing times. The primary difference between Lustus and other epic poems like Faerie Queene and Paradise Lost lies in the fact that in its predecessors, we get an affirmative world view, a settled world order threatened by evil, whereas in Lustus, the streaks of evil are all-pervasive. The author's intent is implicit in the assertion that Lustus is an afterpiece, a continuation of the anterior text. Thus, intertextuality allows Anand, to have a polyphonic perspective. So, Ravana of Ramayana is

connected to our times by his "pride in his learning," "lust for power," his "lust for women", and his "inordinate lust for domination" (7). The poet says, "Ravana is ... an entirely postmodern creation who commands great powers of knowledge. And his Lanka was an ancient version of our modern cities like New York and Rome" (7). Adam is a postmodern man who reflects on the postmodern situation with a set of questions (for example, "Was I delivered on this earth/Barely to measure time, Grow old,/And one fine day say bye bye" (9), emblematic of the Absurd philosophy. Thus, while commenting on the predicament of human beings on earth, the Singer in Canto I remembers Beckett and his *Waiting for Godot*: "He is born to die. Simply to die. Doing nothing" (13). The chorus and cosmic voices remind one of Greek tragedy, the Singer by alluding to Faustus, Lear and Macbeth, "accommodates the paradox of continuity" (Kundu, 7). Textual interweaving takes place through the mode of perpetration. Beginning from Canto I, we see the poet reassembling the fragments from other texts to create a collage. Thus, transsexuality is one of the most significant features of *Lustus*. Vignettes from Ramayana, Bible and Greek tragedy underscore the ironic worldview of the poet to satirize the contemporary times in which love is considered as an infecting virus, confession an oddity, and forgiveness a sin "legalized" (27). The intertextual mode of criticism enables Anand's ultimate objective of opening up a never-ending play of signifiers. *Lustus* assumes the form of a postmodern text. The location of Canto II is the gate of Hell that reminds one of the castle of Macbeth, more specifically, the "Porter scene" of Macbeth. In Canto II, Kal, Narad and Kuru are introduced- characters respectively from Hindu philosophy and Sankhya Darshan, Hindu Purana and Mahabharata. They reflect modern times when there is 'No passion in any affair/books carried only ashy content and no learning/degrees were drained of knowledge and adorned only their files'(17). Here, the shocking revelation of the "strange times" and the account of the "strange dream" remind one of the descriptions of strange happenings in Macbeth, the night the most sacrilegious act, King Duncan's murder, takes place. Canto III narrates the Anointment ceremony of *Lustus*. Here, the presence of witches corresponds the situation in Macbeth and the pronouncements of *Lustus* echo the witches in Macbeth: "when fair is foul and foul is fair/There is nothing to despair/There is no hope for anyone Except that today, we move more firmly/On the path of depravity" (26). The trans textual reference to Greek tragedy Oedipus occurs in Canto IV with the advent of Oracle. Being powered and blessed by Greda (Chanchal Ma), *Lustus*, the new corporate head, the neo-colonizer, targets to "revolutionize and corporatize evil" and his target is not only the visible world but the "virtual mind" and the cosmic order. Whereas in Canto IV, we hear the detailed plan of Faustus (again

an intertextual reference to Marlowe's Dr Faustus), to destabilize the cosmic plan of God, in Canto V, the reader is privy to horrible, naked, ruthless criticism of today's "fast forward" generation given to 'Non-stop working,' 'non-stop worrying,' non-stop movement" (48) and perhaps non-stop tension. No wonder that Macbeth and Faustus are Lustus' counsellors; Lustus is far more overreaching than Macbeth and in evil potential Lustus far surpasses Macbeth, and hunger for power more than Dr. Faustus. Lustus is an open text where Lear's utter the lines of Hardy (98). The characters in Canto V - Conspiracy, Fear, Interviewer, Interviewee, Tensonia, Lesbia - appear to be the personifications of abstract concepts, like the characters in Morality plays. While Canto VI portrays the hypocrisy that pollutes our "religious establishment," the following Cantos reflect confusion and missing priorities that characterize academicians, philosophers, politicians, bureaucrats, teachers of schools and universities, feminists and those in loveless sex. Lustus celebrates the unification of Eastern and Western religious philosophy; Brahma, Vishnu, Narad, Indra and God have joint effort to plan for Lustus' end. God utters the names of Narad, nine Gurus, Osho, Buddha, Mahavira, Vivekananda and finally, to save this world (where true innocence is perhaps lost forever – Wordsworth's Lucy Gray is even gang raped and dead) God needs the help of Goddess Durga.

Lustus is, to a great extent, a deconstruction of Paradise Lost. The poet breaks open the old text to foreground the difference/s and to instil new meanings into it. Lustus promises "absolute loyalty" to the great master who is 'sick.' Who could have ever imagined the immortal fiend of Paradise Lost to be old, powerless and sick? In Lustus, the poet employs parody for its potential in the process of deconstruction. The literary universe of Paradise Lost is evoked with the objective of subversion, as Lustus's utterances reveal:

Amazinia,
We spread so much consternation
Which has for centuries
Gripped human imagination
Milton never visited the purgatory
Half-truths he did spread
Go and see among our ranks
He lies buried and dead.
Here we justify
The ways of Man to God

As a counterblast

To what Milton and his ilk have taught.

Paradise Lost is revived in Lustus' recapitulation to 'old times.' Thus, we hear about 'Great Satan,' Garden and the Sky,' 'forbidden fruit' and 'the Fall' but here lies the "paradox of continuity through erasure" (Kundu, 7). The much stable world order as seen in Paradise Lost happens to be damaged by our times as "men and women dream of targets even when asleep," yearn for "inordinate passion for power and luxury," in the vicious grip of "Anger, revenge, competition for more, and fight to own and, then store" (34). This intertext is a palimpsest and a contradiction to Paradise Lost, contradictions initiated by the unquestioning surrender of modern human beings to evil. The speech of Lustus leaves nothing to doubt about the contrasting times that the contemporary age has ushered in:

You want my road-map.
Satan's times were good times,
The world was ruled by religion
It was the religious people who
Were invited to supervise the actions of Kings
And most of the times,
The rulers would abide by their wisdom.
Those were the times when the world
By and large was made of godly stuff,
People loved nature,
Believed in gods, feared them,
Kept their foul instincts charmed
And visited shrines out of veneration.
But ours are inverted times,
When the people have no faith in God.
Which indirectly means they have fallen in our trap.
They visit shrines, but only to show it off.
They go to Universities, only to fake knowledge.
They are good, only in name.
They have no faith in Christ.
Forgiveness, Charity, Confession,

Everything has been converted into a fashion.
This is a ruthless world of relentless ambition,
Religion, led by the nose
By the smart politician
Goodness, Ideas, Ideals,
Have no relevance at all.
It is free for all.
The Pandemonium once encountered
In the Milton's 'Paradise Lost'
Has come to stay in the world's Parliament,
Where people have a vote, but no exalted sentiment.

An earnest perusal of *Lustus* reveals how the inversion of world order (ever since the composition of *Paradise Lost*) has probably left us waiting for an epic to encapsulate our age when “. . . there is everything /Wrong with the world” (59).

What distinguishes *Lustus* from *Paradise Lost* is the trenchant criticism of the modern world marked by irony, sarcasm, banter and dark humour as the main threat to *Lustus*' kingdom springs from the power of love, and the differences between “good old times” and “our inverted times” (72). Such inversion of world order turns Christ to be “too meek and too humble” (79) and allows *Lustus* to proclaim that "God is in the ICU and his world, nearly dead" (81). Furthermore, it leads the poet to deconstruct the old epic to reconstruct the new one of today's world where to defeat evil, it is not wise to send Christ on Earth, but we hear that "God" is planning to send Lord Krishna or someone like him to save the earth" (83). In other words, what necessitates the creation of a new myth that promulgates Anand's philosophy of cosmic consciousness is the objective to defeat the neo-mythical being *Lustus*. Through the deconstruction of old myths, Anand creates a new myth centred on *Lustus* and the great war. Here, we hear for the first time that earth is rocked by thunderbolts from both sides and Gods are found repentant (110) afterwards. Parody is here again employed for its assumed potential for deconstruction.

Besides, old myths are revived in the postmodern intertext, and the readers are invited to discover their own meaning. As the lack of glue in human relationships has resulted in people being caged in loveless relationships, we need to revisit the legendary folk love tale of Heer and Ranjha. The abduction of Sita mirrors the abduction and gang rape of Lucy Gray; purity is

trampled and ravaged by evil. T. S. Eliot says: "Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is . . . a step toward making the modern world possible for art" (Kundu, 278). Myths are seen as "symbolic representations of profound truth. Their irrationality is no longer a barrier to taking them seriously- in fact, in an irrational and chaotic modern world it guarantees their significance and value" (Miles, 16). No wonder that in modern epic Anand embraces "myth as a way of imposing significance . . . on a chaotic and shabby modern world" (Miles, 16). In search of a form that would revitalize his art and impose meaning on a chaotic world, Anand explores the mythic inner world, the heritage he carries within him. By exploring the inner world of myths, the poet can find a pattern by discovering the interconnectedness of Eastern and Western myths that are interlaced with transtextuality, enabling the poet to create a modern epic in its unique form. Dr. Dalvinder Singh Grewal hints at the "global dimension of the epic by observing that the poet has successfully tried to marry the West with the East, Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained with Guru Gobind Singh's Chandi di Vaar and the Mahabharata" (sikhnet.com April 5, 2022).

J. S. Anand, an alumnus of Panjab University, is currently an honorary Professor Emeritus at the Institute of European Roma Studies, Belgrade (Serbia) and recipient of Franz Kafka International Literary and Artistic Award 2022 (Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic) and Naji Naaman Literary Award (2020). Besides his eventful career as Principal of D.A.V. College, Bathinda (Punjab), India, he has authored 145 English Poetry, fiction, non-fiction and spirituality books, especially the trendsetter nine epical works and the Mahaakal Trilogy. Maja Herman Sekulic, a Serbian poet, novelist, essayist and translator, regards Anand as the greatest philosopher of the 21st century whose oeuvre exudes his deep commitment to the realms of spirituality, environment and humanism. J. S. Anand could have only written Mahaakal Trilogy; the visionary endowed with an unearthly combination of knowledge, wisdom, love, spirituality and powerful imagination. The third and final book of the trilogy celebrates the homecoming of man, God's favourite creation, in more than one sense. Suppose the first two books epitomize to what extent we are distant from our heavenly abode from where we have started our journey in The Ultronic Age. In that case, we see that all the denizens belong to God. This broad theme of homecoming is a metaphor too. Epical literature is already in vogue in the cinematic world like "Star Wars". Mahaakal Trilogy is to be considered as Anand's supreme contribution in world literature as it redirects literature to the lotus-land of best literature, epical poetry(homecoming); like three-headed Brahma, the grand creator, Anand in

Mahaakal Trilogy creates a universe of magic poetry by unifying epic traditions with technical innovations such as "flashbacks ", "cut-ins", "whisper" as a mode of slick communication etc. so that interests of adventure seeking modern human race may be redirected from cinema to poetry, a grand service to ma Saraswati.

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