


## Beyond *The Waste Land*: A Critique of Maja Herman Sekulice’s “Out of the Wasteland” and Poetry of Dr. J. S. Anand

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the strategies of interaction with—and moving beyond—the text in two contemporary poets: Maja Herman Sekulic and Dr. J.S. Anand, looking at their invoking Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a way that turns both works on medium level reminders or allusions by adapting them to (their) respective othernesses. The research aims to answer the following questions: In what ways do these two poets make use of *The Waste Land* in their poetry, and for which reasons are such allusions employed within contemporary praxis? The texts that will be analysed are Sekulic's "Out of the Wasteland" and Anand's *The Dominion of the Netherworld*, with a mention to “Ground Zero.” This essay argues that Sekulic's "Out of the Wasteland" functions both as an homage and a parody to *The Waste Land*, suggesting how contemporary life has formed into decay Eliot never could have envisioned. The first stanza disparages the mimesis of *The Waste Land* yet questions anyone remembering modernist poetry to be able to capture a fractured and disenchanting contemporary existence. Using suggestive imagery and an even heavier reliance on Eliot, Sekulic makes the point that there is no need to represent modern life (a lesson its critics appear yet unwilling or unable to comprehend), with her tone subtler than ever in leaving readers be subjected only by sorts of ridiculousness. On the other hand, Anand's work is also examined in relation to how he confronts *The Waste Land* with what epitomizes all that is awful about existence today. Both poets are shown to use Eliot's text as a base from which they not only critique and reflect upon the escalating disaster of contemporary existence but also remake *The Waste Land* in terms relevant to current global anxieties.

**Keywords:** *The Waste Land*, Maja Herman Sekulice, J. S. Anand,

Significantly, there are allusions to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Eliot 1987) in the poetry of two of our highly acclaimed contemporary poets, Maja Herman Sekulice (1949- ) and Dr. J. S. Anand (1955- ). In a wish to find out the two poets' diverse approaches to *The Waste Land* and how in their poetic frenzy both of them have tried to move beyond *The Waste Land* in their

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unique ways or in other words, have adapted *The Waste Land* to our contemporary times, the author wishes to undertake a comparative study. For the present purpose the author has selected Maja Herman Sekulice's "Out of the Wasteland" and Dr. J. S. Anand's *The Dominion of the Netherworld* (there are passing references to *Ground Zero* as well). Methodology comprises an analytical study of the above mentioned texts to explore how these two poets have invoked *The Waste Land* in their poetry and what purpose does it serve in context of today's horrendous realities.

"Out of the Wasteland" in the words of the poet, is "a tribute, and by the very nature of its date of birth and the content, a parody of *The Waste Land*" (Sekulice 2020). The poem opens with a reference to "The Liberty Theater", the setting for the performance of *The Waste Land*. "Director Deborah Warner and lighting designer Jean Kalman transform the bare stage of this once-elegant theater into an environment of shadow and light to illuminate Fiona Shaw's brilliant performance of the T.S. Eliot poem" (<https://variety.com/1996/legit/reviews/the-waste-land-land-2-1117437013/amp/>). The poem takes its birth out of the bowels of *The Waste Land*. Appropriately, the "run down Liberty Theatre" reminds the poet of "The absurdity of /Stage productions of /Modernist poetry" (35). According to the poet, there's no need to take a recourse back to *The Waste Land* to examine the re-presentation of modern life as our contemporary life and living has undergone further deterioration than perceived by Eliot. Referring to Ezra Pound and Eliot's dedication of *The Waste Land* to the master craftsman (it is actually Pound who gave the poem its present shape), the poet avers that life is so fragmented in contemporary times that it is beyond the power of any pattern poetry, precisely fragmented poetry to present its realities (*The Waste Land* is ill-famed for its structural fragmentation). "No need to Unreal City" is again a direct reference to *The Waste Land*. The poet here once more puts emphasis on the irrelevance of re-presentation of modern life through literature. It is not that the "brown fog of a Winter dawn" (Eliot 1987:73) is what invests the city with its unreal features but as per the poet, since our lifeless, robotic, hypocritic, homogeneous and alienated existence is perceptibly evident all around us, it needs none to reiterate the unreality of it through poetry/literature.

In the second stanza there's reference to death (references to death are strewn across *The Waste Land*) but the poet here uses an evocative image (where life merges with death) that verges on the grotesque. "Burning" (Eliot 1987: 84) desire is hinted at -" Everybody staring at the

panties/ And clumsy legs/ Made of rags/ As if they are part of / A peep show"(35). The poet satirizes our civilization where in death even a woman fails to transcend her sexual identity. At the beginning of third stanza, there's again an allusion to *The Waste Land*: "Sunday Winter did keep us warm, covering/ The city in fog "(36). Here the poet quotes Eliot, to point towards the contradictions of our life. But "...we saw the sun at last" is expressive of hope that is nowhere in "Unreal City"(Eliot1987: 73). Eliot's description "Those are pearls that were his eyes"(Eliot1987: 72 ), gives way to new mode of expression:" His eyes were like jade"(36). On the other hand "Buried too long in the papers"(36) reminds one of "Burial of the Dead"(Eliot1987:70); simultaneously it indicates the busy lifestyle of today's world. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot refers to "Dog" (Eliot 1987:73) remembering a particular fertility ritual.

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?  
Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,  
Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!

In the post *The Waste land* era, we are technologically so sound (and at the same time unkind) that we have learnt to send our friend far away from us: "...E mailed my dog "(36).

"Game of Rereading", the title of section II is again a reminder of *The Waste Land* ("Game of Chess"). Once more here is a befitting image of hope and disappointment (as it is in our life). "The rainbow touch us, I on this side/ You on that" (37). Rainbow bridges the two ends and at the same time it symbolises hope. The poet uses the image wonderfully to comment on the failure of our communications (in spite of technological developments indicated towards the end of the first section): "Vastness of space spread flat between us,/reaching/ Across the waters. I cannot reach that far"(37). "Reread. Reread the lines"(37) brilliantly conveys two meanings simultaneously. On the one hand the poet pleads an individual to attempt further to build productive communication and on the other hand it indicates towards the fact that any number of reading/ rereading the lines of *The Waste Land* hasn't contributed in initiating any positive change in our life. Failure of the message of *The Waste Land* brings us close to the poetry of Dr. Anand.

In the next two stanzas of this section there's reference to the conflict in 90s Yugoslavia. The "Orthodox Christmas"(37) is celebrated amid "peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations ..."

(Sekulice 2020). That we have learnt to grow indifferent to our neighbours is again evident in the way the whole world shows indifference to Ukraine-Russia war in recent past. In the similar vein the poet mentions "indifferent New York air"(37) in context of Serbia's "fight for democracy "(37). The poet's ironic reference to "Information highway"(38), "cyberspace"(37) again brings her close to Anand's crusade against artificial intelligence because of its various shortcomings. In "Each man fixed his eyes above the crowds" (38) the poet consciously does the parody of Eliot's "Each man fixed his eyes before his feet"(Eliot1987: 73) to indicate the robotic demeanour of mankind. In context of pro-democracy movements in Serbia, the poet questions if any extent of activity can "undo history "(38). In the third stanza of the second section, the poet alludes to *The Waste Land* profusely. "Cities were falling: the old bridge fell"(38) echoes Eliot's "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down"(Eliot1987:89). In "...the land's heart bled, broken. The dead/In the meadows lay undisturbed, /Frozen./Fine bones crackling like branches burning"(38) we hear the reverberations of "White bodiesnaked on the low damp ground/ And bones cast in a little low dry garret,/ Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year"(Eliot 1987:80). "Mad generals were biting their short nails"(38) reminds one of " broken fingernails of dirty hands" of *The Waste Land* (Eliot1987: 84). "Blood sprinkled the barren land (38) is a comment on massive massacre of life worldwide that results into its barrenness. Here we are close to the Arthurian legend. The critic observes: "The Fisher King, whose portrayal as an angler accounts for his title, is blighted by a wound that will not heal and, because of this injury, the land he rules wilts into a wasteland"( <https://daily.jstor.org/t-s-eliot-and-the-holy-grail/>). "Pale Complexions grow in the cellars(38)" and "The corn did not spring up as it should" (38) are directly quoted from *The Waste Land*. The poet's "Hyacinths were his very self"(38) can be traced back to Eliot's "You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;/ "They called me the hyacinth girl." —Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth Garden,"(Eliot 1987: 72). Perhaps these quotations and extensive references to *The Waste Land* are to indicate towards the unalterable human situations though "centuries, erased, long way back"(38). Eliot says: "I can connect nothing with nothing"(Eliot1987: 84). Our contemporary poet "cannot reach"(38) just like Iris, the messenger of God, fails to light the darkness in the abode of sleep. The dead cannot be brought back to life. The poet laments: " We buried them all"(39).

In the third section of *The Waste Land*, "The Fire Sermon" mindless sex as the destroying agent of Western civilization is criticised sharply. Maja satirises the carnal desire of today's populace

by saying "Psychics were flooding the scene/ Call us now for free"(40). The question "when you slept with him last?"(40) strikes by re-emphasizing the same aspects of love and sex. The "long fingernails"(40) of this section contrasts with "broken fingernails" of Eliot's poem and "short nails" at the previous section of Maja's poetry, indicating towards the mild possibility of a sight of beauty and love in the barren land. We remember "Lilacs out of the dead land"(Eliot1987: 71). Lilacs are related to young love and passion. Eliot describes love as a futile attempt to avoid the cruel realities of life. Likewise, Maja says: "The blood red anemone, the windflower,

Was blooming again. I cannot reach.  
I remembered when I kissed him,  
The dark blood flowing down his skin of  
snow.  
He knew not that I kissed him as he died.... (41).

As per Christian religion, red anemone symbolizes the blood Christ shed on Cross. According to Greek mythology, blood red anemone stands for death and forsaken love. Maja conceives beautiful imagery to point towards failure of human communication, futility of love and death, unchanging realities of modern life. However, the hopelessness that pervades the poetry of Eliot, is at times contrasted with Maja's oscillation between the light of hope and the dark alleys of disappointment and hopelessness.

The fourth section by its very title reminds the reader of "Death by Water"(Eliot 1987: 85). Alluding to the myth of Scylla (daughter of Nisos, later transformed into a nymph) the poet grieves the futility of love. "I, mad with passion, ran to the shore"(29) is a further allusion to Hieronimo, "Hieronimo is mad again"(Eliot 1987: 90); madness is wisdom. "I, Scylla, though blind can see" both parallels and contrasts with Eliot's "I, Tiresius, though blind..." (Eliot 1987:81). Tiresius throbs between two lives, two civilizations and Scylla, the very name symbolises a choice between two similarly dangerous situations (metaphorically a reality of our lives). "By the waters of Singidunum/I sat down and wept .../Sweet Hudson, run softly till I end my song"(44) is again a direct reference to "sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song"(Eliot1987: 79), thus implying the unchanging quality of human predicaments. The fifth section begins with the pathetic image that underscores failure of love and death. "He who was living is now dead/ We who were living are now dying"(45), can be traced back to Eliot again. The reader expects "shantih" to prevail " After the Storm"; no holy water but "blood/sprinkled the barren land" (38). The message of "shantih" functions like droplets of holy Ganges water

sprinkled on the dead bones and rocky barren land in hope of the full blooming of a new civilization. Contrarily, “Out of the Wasteland” ends with Iris' speech. We get the answer to Eliot's question “Will it bloom this year?” (Eliot 1987: 73) and it is for obvious reasons in negative. The purple anemone "... did not bloom as it should this Spring"(46). We are not protected from evil (purple anemone symbolizes protection from evil) . Therefore, the only thing we can expect Iris to share with us is the " road to Hades"(31).

Interestingly, to another most eminent poet of our contemporary world, Dr. J.S. Anand, “We are living in hell” (Anand 2023). J. S. Anand's *The Dominion of the Netherworld*, the publication of which coincides with the centenary year of *The Waste Land*, seems to be the doctrine of the poet's disillusionment, disenchantment and disgust with our times - "The dark epoch" that has started by the end of 20th century. *Mahakaal Trilogy* presents the poet as a seer who lives in the present as well as the past and can foresee future; Tiresias of his poetic world, the poet seems to transcend time - present in 'Treta,' in the 'Dvapara,' in the 'Kalyuga' and can visualise man's return to 'Satyayuga'. He reveals his internalised understanding of the present era to be communicated through the prophetic omniscience of Tiresias and what Eliot says in his “Notes on *The Waste Land*”- “What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem” (Eliot 1952:68), is true to *The Dominion of the Netherworld*. At the beginning of “The Prelude” the poet challenges the effectiveness of the message of *The Waste Land* to the inhabitants of today's world by saying:

What the thunder said was too abstract  
Humanity would not have come  
To such a pass  
Had they read the writing on the grass

There used to be times, I rue,  
when people understood  
What the trees said,  
To the winds in their easy tread.

In the nights,  
What the stars did say,  
And the sun, behind the clouds,  
Or out of them, suggest.

....



Now they have faked the thunder,  
And what the thunder now says,  
Is what they want,"(38-39).

Dr. Anand seems to deliberately avoid the complex pattern woven by images and symbols, the intricate interplay of allusions and all other stylistic measures that contribute to form the “abstract” nature of *The Waste Land*. In verse that bears the qualities of prose poetry he ruthlessly exposes the barrenness of our decaying civilization. Tiresias, in *Oedipus* was able to understand the message conveyed to him by grass, trees, birds, nights, stars, thunder, sun and such other natural objects. But the present inhabitants of the world are hypnotized by evil so much so that they have lost the said capacity that their forefathers had. The poet laments that "God's proclamations remain untaken" and in today's world which is only the extension of Lustonia, the holiness of the texts including the sermons and gospels have just evaporated in the cacophony of interpretations. As the message of *The Waste Land* is lost to our generations, it necessitates the re-creation of it in our century. *The Dominion of Netherworld* is an epic poem of monumental significance focusing on human misery and social suffering prevailing in the dismal socio-political scenario globally. The following extract is revealing in this regard:

Aimless jealousy is what brings  
The downfall of good men.  
This is a passion  
Which burns holes into the heart of Unsuspecting victims,  
And brings them down,  
Leading them to murders.  
...  
Who is not afflicted with ambition?  
And who has not suffered?  
Instead of being an object lesson,  
Macbeth is here to further flame the fires of lust.  
...  
So, this is the Brave New World of Monsters.  
I see blood dripping from their minds.  
And flooding the entire earth."(45)

In *The Waste Land* Europe's spiritual decay is summed up in the following lines in the voice of St. Augustine: "To Carthage then I came Burning burning burning" (Eliot 1952: 307-8). According to Eliot the fire of sexuality and erosion of moral discipline have nearly destroyed

modern European civilization. Fire is declared to be the Demons' "best friend." Mayan's proposition: "Our apparent kindness should travel to the skies . . . Fire is our best friend, most trusted. Fire their imagination. Fire their minds. Fire their bodies. Fire their thoughts. Fire them up with passions . . ." (143) and mankind's meek surrender to Lustus and Mayan remind of the futility of Buddha's preaching for abstinence from lustful passion cited in "The Fire Sermon" section of *The Waste Land*. Uninhibited run of sexual perversion is the bane of modern: ". . . Even sages are not free/From allegations of rape/And maltreatment of the opposite sex" (145). Moral corruption knows no bounds. What is perhaps more painful is that the poets who are hailed as the conscience of society, have in fact, bartered away their pristine duty. Dr. Pointfull says: "Dirt is a part of human existence" (147). *Ground Zero* again portrays the cursed plight of our present civilization: "We are the electromagnetic poor/ Bred on talk of millions/ But denied peaceful/Rest under the shade of a tree in trance" (Anand 2023:35). The poet perceives "wisdom's excess" (Anand 2023: 50) as the root cause behind our decadent civilization.

*The Dominion of the Netherworld* projects Dr. Anand's doctrine of global suffering without sacrificing the finer poetic flavour. *The Waste Land* may have been written in a "sudden fit of emotional release" from the excruciating sense of suffering in a nightmarish world, the "best part" of *The Waste Land* is "enormously moving" (Bush 1985:73). However, one does not harbour any doubt about the noble intent behind *The Dominion of the Netherworld* as the poet avers in "The Prelude" that evil must go and so should go the good that do not muster the courage to resist it:

Those who were evil deserved death.  
And those who were good, also deserved death,  
Because they did not have the courage  
To stand up for the good.  
So, they were as good as dead.  
Losing such people makes no difference (200).

The 'Dark Era' replete with layers of social deprivations, moral and spiritual decay at times seems to be beyond redemption. Nevertheless, a meticulous reading of *The Waste Land* reveals that the decay and degeneration that had crept into society was not beyond redemption. *The Dominion of the Netherworld* ends with a sense of progression which offers glimpses of hopes and new possibilities. Here, says Heaney: "the poetic imagination seems to redress whatever is wrong or exacerbating in the prevailing conditions offering an alternative, a revelation of



potential untapped and constantly threatened by circumstances” ( Astley 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com>).Lustus is banned for million years as God comes back to the Centre of the Universe.

*Ground Zero* again presents a poet lamenting: “Men after men after men/Are losing the original glow/ Although creation from dead matter/ Presents a splendid show” (Anand 2023:37). What distinguishes Dr. Anand is his cosmic consciousness. He says: "This earth is a Commonwealth /Of us all/ Belongs equally to us all"(Anand 2023: 17). *Ground Zero* portrays his remarkable awareness of the destructive instinct of mankind and its loss of sympathy for the larger animal world which further causes its barrenness. "We lose our honour/ And our dignity/ When we play with / Nature's virtuosity“(Anand 2023: 7). Though humankind is termed as " failed crop" sowed by God, he beseeches us to be thoughtful as to be able to answer his question: "How many people, birds and animals/ Are paying with their lives/For the pleasures/ That we enjoy"(Anand 2023: 39) .For the poet, the human face of humanity is lost which predicts the destruction of this civilization("...there is nothing to heal" ). He wonders, how in search for " our ends", we "... kill trees/ Hate waters/ Molest winds/ And think they are their vassals” (Anand 2023: 53). According to the poet, we are "in a trance' and " passing through the dead of night"(Anand 2023: 74). The poet is uncertain of our fate as we continue to ignore the crucial aspect such as "the loss of balance"(Anand 2023:61): "I wonder where you shall reach"(Anand 2023:96.)

Dr. Anand is seriously engaged in the holy mission of saving mankind from abysmal depths of despair and destruction through the power of poetry that may not only “reflect” but “provoke or invoke change” (Wilkinson 2020). Such poetry as says L. Rosenblatt “must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It is an occurrence, a coming together; a co- penetration, of a reader and a text” (Rosenblatt 1964:123). "What the thunder said is not necessarily/What we had heard, /And what we reproduce/Can be entirely different stuff" (38-39). The poet ruthlessly points out: “We do good not to do good, / But to be labelled good... We want to be called good/ Without actually doing any good to society” (Anand 2023:77-78). Dr. Anand’s poetry is direct in its strong appeal:

“We love the half truths  
We love the lies told from gen to gen  
We peer not into the facts

We never face ourselves.  
We touch the holy fire at the end  
And say good bye  
In utter confusion  
Without knowing why we had suffered it all  
And was it an end to that suffering?

His poetry appeals to the cerebral selves of the readers to seize their minds of the urgency to lift them from the morass of suffering and sullenness triggered by waning human values, misplacement of priorities, erosion of morality and the anarchy loosed in the polity. Whereas Maja's poetry presents the dwindling status of a poet dangling between hope and hopelessness, *Ground Zero* points towards the fact that Dr. Anand though aggrieved, never loses his faith in humanity: "There is no reason to despair/ If from ignorant sleep/ Eva's sons and daughters awake/Sun will shine, there will be a break" (Anand 2023:50).

Dr. Anand portrays on a grand/universal scale the pain and sufferings of human community and adds a unique dimension to the Indian English poetry by buttressing the point that human suffering is largely caused by human beings themselves and a "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love" (Wordsworth 2002: 15) are needed to tow humanity back to its glorious and sinless ways of life. 90s "panic stricken" Yugoslavia seems to be the setting of Maja's "Out of the Wasteland". Unlike Dr. Anand, her poetry bears direct references to the history of her own country, against the setting of which she visualises no hope of mankind's redemption. Much like *The Waste Land*, the central message of her poem is largely presented through images and mythical allusions and here her poetry directly contrasts with Dr. Anand's. "Out of the Wasteland" affirms the poet's standpoint that it is at once a tribute and a parody of *The Waste Land* whereas Dr. Anand's poetry based on the central perception that mankind has failed to follow the message of *The Waste Land*, attempts to analyse the causes underlying our debauched, barren civilization alongside conforming to the final message of *The Waste Land*. Dr. Anand with his scrutinizing eye and predilection for analysis of evil, much like a social scientist serves mankind by bare representation of realities; hope and mercy, the two sisters seem to be the poet's muses at whose alter his poetry is a humble offering sans ornamentation and philosophizing. On the other hand, intertextual study reveals that like Scylla( as per one version of the myth, the princess transformed into a nymph), Maja spreads her wings across the waters of civilizations, past and present, and the mythical undertone of her poetry with a

gentle knock on the door of our senses, reminds us the central truth that “nothing will come out of nothing”(Shakespeare 2005 ).

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