

## The absurd, exile and the beginning of ethics

“But the point is to live.”

- Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*<sup>1</sup>

There is, in the life of the human subject, a fundamental conflict between what he/ she desires of the world, and what he/ she finds or is given by the world, making the search for meaning inherently in conflict with the actual lack of meaning. This irreconcilable conflict constitutes the first principal of the absurd, which Sartre, in his explication of Albert Camus' novel *The Outsider*<sup>2</sup>, had characterized as “a state of fact and the lucid awareness which certain people acquire of this state of fact.” (Sartre 1955, 27) Faced with this, one is left with two options: a leap of faith, by placing one's hopes in a god beyond this world, which will restore some form of hope or meaning to life, or simply conclude that life is meaningless. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus' treatise on the absurd, opens with a consideration of where the second option might logically lead: suicide, being a confession “that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it.” (Camus 1983, 6) While the absurd is often regarded within the ambience of existential thought, there is a notable difference between the two, chiefly that the former believes in accepting the fact of the absurd, while rebelling against it by embracing what life has to offer. Choosing to live with the absurd however means life in exile: “in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land.” (Camus 1983, 6) This feeling of not being at home in the world, of one's self de-centred, is Sisyphus' lone destiny; it is also the lone destiny of many of Anita Desai's characters, whose description uncannily resembles that of Camus' absurd hero:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 65.

<sup>2</sup> *L'Étranger* in the original French, translated as *The Stranger* (US) and *The Outsider* (UK)

easy to flow with the current; it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out ‘the great No’, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (Desai, quoted in Asnani 1984, 13)

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see a man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock. (Camus 1983, 121)

Desai’s characters are the kinsmen and kinswomen of Camus’ exiles – the adulterous wife, the mute, the guest, Meursault, Sisyphus – who experience absurdity as the beginning of consciousness. Sinking under the weight of their despair, they remain determined to keep their heads above water at all costs, because the point is to live. Both writers are compelled by that moment of the absurd hero’s return, whether it is towards that “lower world [from] whence he will have to push [the rock] up again toward the summit,” (Camus 1983, 121) or a moment of turning about to face the current yet again, in order to struggle against its flow; this is the moment of conscious choice to live despite one’s contrary instincts to choose otherwise. This ambivalence, “the insurmountable dualism of mind and nature, between man’s drive toward the eternal and the *finite* character of his existence [...] the irreducible pluralism of life and of truth” (Sartre 1955, 27) lies at the centre of the absurd experience, and at the heart of *Fasting, Feasting*. The allusion to water and the flow of currents made by Desai has a particular resonance with the novel, given it is in the waters of the Ganges that Uma, the novel’s absurd heroine experiences her “definitive awakening,” (Camus 1983, 13) whence in her choice to return to MamaPapa, she experiences not just the beginning of consciousness, but also the beginning of ethics, understood

as “a keen sense of the humanity of the other,” (Doukhan 2012, 10) possible only with a de-centering of the self.

The absurdist thread running through Desai’s work has received much attention; less so the dualism and ambivalence central to the absurd experience, which Desai sustains through a masterful manipulation of certain literary forms. These include tragicomedy, the genre most associated with the absurd, as well as those of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and its aesthetic counterpart, grotesque realism. Especially relevant to *Fasting, Feasting*, dualism is immediately apparent in its title, often assumed to refer to opposing ideas that divide the narrative into its two sections. When the novel first appeared in 1999, responses were largely ambivalent. Most reviews generously praised Desai’s adroit handling of her craft, one going so far as to claim it “so well-crafted, almost to a fault. [...] in *Fasting, Feasting* with its careful counterpointing, beginning with the dichotomies of the title itself and the preoccupations within the story, Desai seems to have taken this technique further than it can be stretched.” (Mahadevan-Dasgupta 1999) There is, however, a discernible dissatisfaction – perhaps even bewilderment - lurking beneath the praise. Indeed, the same reviewer continues into the next paragraph: “It is that no place is made here for the opening of at least one window, if only as wide as a crack, through which rays of hope can steal in. It is that this book totally neglects human dignity, the fire that burns – however feebly – in almost every person.” (Mahadevan-Dasgupta 1999) Another reviewer could not reconcile “the novel’s half-baked denouement” with the first section of the novel: “Desai’s sudden shift in the last chapters from Uma’s Gangetic plains to her brother Arun’s experiences in suburban Boston takes away from an otherwise heartfelt, sobering story.” He prefers that Desai had not written the second section altogether, and conjectures that “perhaps a little more complex fleshing-out of Uma would have proved a more subtle and effective way to infuse the story with human breadth and universal appeal.” (Aldama 2000, 240) Similarly, a separate reviewer observes that while Desai knows Boston, having served as Professor of Writing at MIT since 1993, “her footing here does not seem as firm”: “The Pattons speak an oddly anachronistic American (“India — gee!”) and exist largely to flesh out the metaphors of surfeit and want that are at the heart of Desai’s careful creation.” (Brownrigg 2000) Ironically, the effectiveness of crafting absurd situations and developing absurd characters, depends on maintaining an ambivalence throughout, since the absurd is characterised by a deep ambivalence towards living.

Desai's narrative requires that our dichotomous responses be integrated or at least displaced, an expectation buttressed by her appropriation of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which sees not only the integration of opposites, but a suspension of hierarchical thinking altogether. Even the terms in the title *Fasting, Feasting* do not refer to dichotomous experiences, as Mahadevan-Dasgupta suggests. We are not meant to understand or to respond to them exclusively, but along with Desai's aesthetics, to appreciate being both starved and full at the same time, to experience the incongruous effects of the comic and the tragic, to feel the draw of the beautiful and the ugly, all the while maintaining the tension between these apparently dichotomous states. Rather than divide the narrative into two neat sections based on distinctions in location, culture and tradition (the first set in India centred on Uma, the second set in America centred on Arun), the terms "fasting" and "feasting" inhabit a structurally chiasmic relationship with India and America. Countless ceremonies (births, weddings, Arun's acceptance into MIT) involving elaborate preparations of food take place in the Indian section of the novel, and food lies at the centre of many communications between MamaPapa and Uma. Mourning the passing of Anamika, Uma and Mama find comfort in and bond over "puri-alu" (*FF* 155). Similarly, while America is associated with abundance and excess to the point of sickness, feasting on its Burger Kings, Belly Delis and Dunkin' Donuts, it is also depicted to be devoid of life and depth, starved of any meaning, which accounts for the two dimensional, "ineffectual cardboard cut-out" (Aldama 2000, 240) characters in this section. Beginning with its title, the novel goes on to maintain this ambivalence and tension throughout.

It is this ambivalence that Aldama misses, when he fails, for instance, to recognise that Desai's characters at home take on equally stereotypical "cardboard cut-out" qualities as their American counterparts; they *are* cut-outs. MamaPapa resemble the absurd characters of Beckett's plays: Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell, or Gogo and Didi. While they wield considerable power over their household, and command the respect of the community, they are in fact a ridiculous pair. The novel opens with an insipid domestic scene, where the pair is introduced in the bathetic style of Beckett:

The parents sit, rhythmically swinging, back and forth.  
They could be asleep, dozing – their eyes are hooded – but  
sometimes they speak.

‘We are having fritters for tea today. Will that be enough?  
Or do you want sweets as well?’

‘Yes, yes, yes – there must be sweets, too. Tell cook. Tell  
cook at once.’ (FF 3,4)

The dialogue is ascribed to nobody, which matters little because MamaPapa are one and the same: “It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences, that they had been separate entities and not MamaPapa in one breath.” (FF 5) Preferring to present “the same indecipherable face to the world,” (FF 13) both find comfort in the other, and locate their identities in the other. Their lack of individuality and depth is testament to the banal lives they lead, affirmed by their pointless talk of tea, somewhat reminiscent of the pointless bourgeois existences at the heart of Eliot’s poetry. MamaPapa is the face of Desai’s intuition that “*nothing really ever happens* in man’s existence.” (Esslin 2001, 403) This face sets the stage for Uma’s emergence as a conscious, thinking being attempting to assert a desirous, autonomous self against the tyranny of MamaPapa. For as Uma slowly awakens to thought and consciousness, “the stage sets [begin to] collapse”:

But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. “Begins” - this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery. In itself weariness has something sickening about it. Here, I must conclude that it is good. For everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it. (Camus 2001, 12-13)

Uma lives and has lived, for some 40 years, according to the unvarying rhythm of MamaPapa’s orderly world. Forced to leave school at a young age so that she can look after her youngest brother Arun, she is also forced into marriage twice, both times failing. Finally, she is left to

take on the duties of caring for MamaPapa, as Aruna secures an advantageous marriage and moves to the city, while Arun pursues his further education in America. “One day” (the novel is deliberately vague in its treatment of time, perhaps because in a world where *nothing really happens*, time is of little consequence), the “why” arises, and she begins questioning MamaPapa’s decisions. Why, for instance, does she have to leave school to look after Arun, when Ayah could do it just as well, having looked after her and Aruna as babies. Uma’s questioning is shot down by Mama who simply replies that Arun requires “proper attention.” (FF 30) Uma also begins to be aware of other possibilities open to her, an awareness most intensely perceived when Dr. Dutt asks if she would like to take up a post at the nurses’ dormitory. Uma is amazed at the prospect of paid work, something she had previously contemplated, but never thought possible. Her hopes of leaving home are however thwarted (not for the first time) by her mother, who feigns illness to keep Uma with her.

While the novel’s formal properties share much with the literary traditions of the absurd and tragicomedy, the notions of the carnivalesque and its aesthetic counterpart of grotesque realism that emerged from Bakhtin’s reading of *Rebalais and His World* have a particular resonance with the dark comic vision of Desai’s world. Indeed, as Esslin remarks in his critical study of absurdist theatre, the literary carnival shares much with the absurd, both being “grotesque, frivolous, and irreverent.” (Esslin 2001, 402) The carnival is “the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalised and complete,” (Bakhtin 1984, 10) In moments when existing hierarchies are displaced, alternatives are glimpsed, and possibilities entertained. But as we shall see, this glimpse into an other world does not preclude the erasure of either previous or present worlds, but holds them together in an irreducible tension. As identified by Stirling, ambivalence is one of the defining features of the carnivalesque, and it is the image of grotesque realism that “captures the ambivalent duplicity of the carnivalesque aesthetic – its negative and affirmative quality.” (Stirling 46) Bakhtin also describes the grotesque body as one “in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming,” and as such is entirely different from “ready-made, completed being.” (Bakhtin 1983, 24-25) Uma is a grotesque literary character, capable of inducing both empathy and disgust, because of how strange she is, to others, and to herself. She evokes a combination of repulsion and pity from those around her. She is represented as an

infantile adult, stunted in her growth and maturation, and is often described in non-human or (specifically wounded) animal terms. She is dim-witted, unattractive and almost blind. Her failed attempts to escape are a source of comedy, not least because she is reduced to an object of ridicule each time. The laughter she evokes is carnival laughter: “ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding.” (Bakhtin 1984, 11-12) She first plots a daring escape from home to school, only to be immediately sent home by Mother Agnes, but not before pleading desperately to be allowed to stay:

She was a messy weeper: her face was wet, her hair distraught. Her mouth was twisted and her eyes and nose ran. She knotted her hands in Mother’s skirts and girdle. All the time she howled. ‘Mother, oh Mother,’ she wailed, and when Mother Agnes tried to pluck her off her skirts and hold her aside, she flung herself down at the nun’s sandalled feet and lay on the floor, abjectly wailing. (*FF* 27)

Exaggeration and distortion are used to great effect here to sustain the tension between opposites. The contrast between Uma’s state of physical distress and Mother Agnes’ dispassionate attempts to remove Uma from her skirts as one would an insect, provides comical relief understood “not so much [as] a release from tension as it is an understanding of that tension and that release.” (Brater 1974, 122) Such laughter calls us to feel both impulses of the tragic and the comic simultaneously, so that we are reminded how “the comic spirit contains a potential for danger far more threatening than any tragedy may impose.” (Brater 1974, 114) This ambivalence characterising tragicomedy is shored up by Desai’s appropriation of the grotesque here: Uma’s twisted mouth, face smeared with a mixture of tears and snot, wailing and howling like a wounded animal. In keeping with the essential principle of grotesque realism, whose principle is “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity,” (Bakhtin 1984, 19-20) Uma is thus brought down, figuratively in her degraded and ridiculed state but also literally to the ground, grovelling at Mother Agnes’ feet. Laughing at Uma, we discover too the tragicomic situation of the modern human subject, “the tragic or derisory condition of man.” (Ionesco, cited in Brater 1974, 122) Her other escape attempts are no less ridiculous, and

continue to paint her as an eager, thwarted character of genuine pathos, the object of both our sympathy and ridicule. Her sojourn with Mira Masi to the ashram, which she looks forward to as an escape from MamaPapa, is brought to an unwanted close by her cousin Ramu and brother Arun, who are sent by Papa to bring her home. Even her marriages find her back home: the first never actually happens even though the dowry has been paid; the second does happen, but is exposed to be yet another scam, for the man she marries is already married, and Papa is forced to fetch her home. Then there are the two times she is nearly swept away by the current of the sacred Ganges river, only to be saved, to her dismay, by passing boatmen.

As an outsider, Uma finds easy companionship with other odd characters, such as her aunt Mira Masi, a pious woman and religious zealot, and Ramu, her club footed cousin who is the black sheep of the family. These odd characters contribute to the rendering of the grotesque, in addition to introducing Uma to unfamiliar worlds beyond MamaPapa's. Incidentally, Ramu and Mira Masi are nomadic characters, travellers that show up without announcement and leave just as abruptly. Doing so, they turn MamaPapa's, and by extension Uma's world, upside down. Ramu, with his club foot and orthopaedic boot, clomping and clumping about, with an air of "restlessness that is almost like a physical itch," (*FF* 48) recalls the giants of Rebelais' work. He is loud, irreverent, and has little regard for hierarchy. MamaPapa respond to his visit with indignation, "draw[ing] their feet together as if to avoid a gutter that runs too close." (*FF* 46) When he gets off the rickshaw at MamaPapa's, he is described as an awkward "dishevelled figure," "his eyebrows and hair are clay-coloured with dust; his khaki clothes are blackened with soot." (*FF* 45) Mama insists he take a bath immediately, a suggestion he brushes off callously. He appears larger than life as he "lowers himself into a creaking basket chair and spreads out his legs and throws back his head," (*FF* 46) with a recklessness that offends when he suggests taking Uma out to a bar and restaurant, amidst cries of opposition and indignation. While their relationship is innocent enough, the fact that they go to a restaurant and bar together, an unmarried man and an unmarried woman, returning home well into the night, is enough for MamaPapa to feel scandalised. It is however Uma's relationship with her elderly aunt Mira Masi that contributes most significantly to the novel's development of its absurdist themes. Mira Masi is a distant relative, "the second or possibly even the third wife of a relative Mama preferred not to acknowledge at all." (*FF* 38) Her status as an outsider is firmly sealed when her husband dies.

This however has its privileges; she roams the countryside alone, quite free and safe in her widow's garments, "like an obsessed tourist of the spirit." (*FF* 38) Completely outside of the rules of social propriety and patriarchy, thriving in her autonomous existence, Mira Masi appears as a desirable role model for Uma.

During their pilgrimages, Uma undergoes several mystical experiences that awaken her to a world outside her thus far restricted existence. The first of these takes place at the holy river Ganges, significantly a site of ambivalence. Worshiped as the goddess Ganga in Hinduism, the Ganges is the most sacred river to the Hindus, serving as a lifeline to millions of Indians. The Ganges is also considered to be purifying, as the swiftly moving water (Uma almost gets swept away) is believed to remove spiritual impurity. High levels of pollution caused by civilian and industrial sewage, in addition to bones and ashes of the cremated, and half burnt body parts allowed to decompose in the river, however also make the Ganges an ideal site for the spread of disease. The paradox of being both unclean and cleansing, a source of life and disease, the place of death and rebirth, makes the Ganges the focal point of the narrative's carnivalesque paradigm, and the focal point of Uma's transformation. As Uma wades into the water for the first time, with "thoughtless abandon," (*FF* 43) she is nearly carried away by the current, but for a boatman who drags her out by her hair. The prospect of drowning never occurs to her, for she had assumed that "the river would sustain her." (*FF* 43) At her next visit to the sacred river, she finds herself submerged once more, except this time, instead of fear or danger, she experiences "something much darker, wilder, more thrilling, a kind of exultation – it was exactly what she had always wanted, she realised." (*FF* 111) What she experiences is the draw of death, the pull finally being freed of the burden of living, and freed of MamaPapa. Her experience is however short lived, as she is rescued again, much to her dismay, and is instantly brought back to inhabit once more "the sphere of earth and body." (Bakhtin 1984, 20) After being rescued, she is described rather grotesquely as "gasping and flopping and trickling like a grounded fish," (*FF* 44) and later, "flailing her arms and choking like a big, wounded water bird." (*FF* 111) An insect, a grounded fish, a wounded water bird; Uma is the body in the process of metamorphosis, and one is reminded of Kafka's Gregor Samsa.

These insights continue to be fleshed out in Uma's trip to the ashram with Mira Masi. While Mira Masi is "in her element," (*FF* 54) Uma has to fight the urge to vomit by reminding

herself of the “unfamiliarity”, the “uniqueness” and “adventurousness” of the situation, “which would never have come up in the world presided over by MamaPapa.” (*FF* 55) Ironically, it is rather the unfamiliarity and strangeness of the situation that makes her want to throw up. Kristeva associates the desire to throw up with the state of abjection, where the abject refers to the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between self and other upon which subjectivity depends. It is essentially a response to the de-centering of the self, and the subsequent fragmentation of subjectivity. Associated with the ejection of bodily fluids, the abject breaks down the borders separating the inside from outside: “What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” (Kristeva 1982, 4) The bus journey exemplifies this in-between state, wherein Uma experiences an estrangement from her self, since her self has always been defined in relation to MamaPapa, the centre which anchors her subjectivity. Riding on the bus with Mira Masi, journeying away from MamaPapa (the centre that anchor her sense of self), enticed by the possibility of an alternative world, it is little surprise that she reacts by vomiting.

Uma experiences a similar dissolution of her subjectivity at the ashram, when Mira Masi pronounces that she is the chosen one, “the Lord’s child” (*FF* 59). This pronouncement terrifies Uma, since she has only ever known a single parental unit all her life: MamaPapa. This is when Uma experiences her first epileptic seizure which everyone at the ashram interprets to be a sign that she is possessed by the Lord. Epileptic seizures, which involve an altered state of consciousness and sometimes even a full loss of consciousness, have been described as out-of-body experiences; some sufferers of the medical condition describe them as mystical experiences. As an out-of-body experience, seizures present a threat to self-enclosed and self-centred subjectivity. She is revived by a pilgrim, who happens to be a gynaecologist, and is described to be “delivering an absent woman of a reluctant child.” (*FF* 60) The construction of the syntax lends itself to multiple interpretations: Is Uma the “absent woman” (absent because of her out-of-body experience; absent because she has failed to meet society’s standards of what constitutes womanhood) giving birth to a “reluctant child”? Or is Uma the “reluctant child” (reluctant because despite her oppressive life under MamaPapa, it is familiar, known and safe and bears putting up with) giving birth to the “absent woman”? Either way, Uma is delivered of the other within her, the abject par excellence; her revival as labour also speaks to what is

grotesque: “the ever unfinished, ever creating body [...] One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born.” (Bakhtin 1984, 26) Through the analogy of birth, what might be construed as a spiritual or ecstatic experience, is once more undercut. What the onlookers at the ashram believe to be spiritual possession and a privilege, is undermined by the fact that no one else outside the ashram believes it to hold important spiritual significance. Her seizures in fact prove to be a nuisance and a source of embarrassment to her family. Outside the ashram, Uma is forced to suppress and deny them.

Mystical experiences have a place, next to suicide, in Camus’ work on the absurd. Camus views “losing [oneself] in [one’s] god” and “turning toward death”, as merely different sides of the same coin. Those choosing either religion or death merely “*feel* free with regard to themselves [...] released from everything outside [he] enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules.” (Camus 2001, 59) Religious experience and death give access to freedom that is temporary and illusory. To the extent that neither of these can be solutions to the absurd, Camus explores the potential of a third option: to face the absurd and to struggle against it, all the while maintaining a constant awareness of the fundamental contradiction of life. Desai appears to share Camus’ skepticism, seen in the way each time Uma soars beyond the physical, towards the spiritual (at the Ganges and at the ashram, both of which can be described as mystical experiences), she is brought back down to the sphere of the earth and body, to face the absurdity of her existence. One might see this as proof that the novel “totally neglects human dignity,” as Mahadevan-Dasgupta insists, but only if one overlooks the concepts of rebirth and renewal that accompany these experiences. Not all is lost, for even in Uma’s most undignified, degenerate state of despair, there is hope. The de-centering of her subjectivity (the subject bereft of a world of which it once had certainty and was in possession of), and her exilic status can be understood in the way Levinas understands it: as “an ethical gesture on the part of the self toward the other.” (Doukhan 2012, 18) This is realised when Uma encounters the death of an other, her cousin Anamika.

Anamika is the intelligent and beautiful cousin of Uma, and sister to Ramu the club footed black sheep of the family. She is adept at pleasing everyone, can never bring herself to contradict her parents: “a lotus, with her deep, creamy, still beauty – that was what she was. Or a

pearl, smooth and luminous.” (FF 68) She receives an offer to study in Oxford, but is forced into marriage as per Indian custom. She has no say in the matter, and no one hears from her, or sees her, after she marries. The narrative is equally silent about her marriage, but hints, mostly through conjecture, that she might be living an unhappy life in an abusive marriage. In fact, Anamika utters not a single word throughout the narrative. Towards the end of Uma’s narrative, news of her death arrives, with the strong suggestion that she might have killed herself. This estranged object of beauty, objectified in life, fulfils its goal in death:

At five o’clock her mother-in-law woke to hear a whimpering sound. Earlier she had heard a tin can fall and thought it was a stray dog nosing through the garbage outside the kitchen door. At the whimpering sound, however, she got up and went into the kitchen to investigate. Through the screen door she saw a small fire flickering on the veranda. She went and found Anamika charred, dying.

That was what she said. To the police. To Anamika’s family.

What some of the neighbours said was that she herself, possibly in collusion with her son, had dragged Anamika out on the veranda at that hour when it was still dark – possibly before four o’clock – and they had tied her up in a nylon sari, poured the kerosene over her and set her on fire.

What the husband said was that he had been away on a business trip and returned only that afternoon on hearing the news.

What the mother-in-law said was that she always had Anamika sleep beside her, in her own room, as if she were a daughter, her own child. Only that night Anamika had insisted on sleeping in her own room. She must have planned it, plotted it all.

What Anamika’s family said was that it was fate, God had willed it and it was Anamika’s destiny.

What Uma said was nothing. (FF 151)

The manner in which the narrative runs through a list of what-he-said-she-said, while seemingly callous, masks a critical edge that alerts us to Anamika's lack of voice, her lack of self-representation and her absence. We get no insight into Anamika's subjectivity during this crisis point, when she is at her most vulnerable, just we have not done throughout the narrative. Levinas' notion that ethics refers to a sensible event (being able to sense another's need) rather than a rational one (being able to know of another's need through moral deliberation), where the point is to *see* and *hear* differently<sup>3</sup>, is particularly relevant here. The call to sense her vulnerability is highlighted by the fact that no one sees her now (she is dead, burnt beyond recognition) or hears her now (her story dies with her), just as no one has seen or heard her for the past twenty-five years. For the first time, Uma has nothing to say, but is simply struck by a strange inverted parallel between both their lives: "She had been married for twenty-five years, the twenty-five years that Uma had not." (FF 152) Uma realises that this might have been her own fate, from which she was serendipitously delivered, twice. That Uma says nothing, perhaps indicates too that she is beginning to *see* and *hear* Anamika differently. Encountering the death of an othered being, Uma is exposed to Anamika's mortality and her vulnerability, which is also what constitutes her humanity, or what makes her human. This humanity is moreover unrepresentable, and must remain so, if an ethical relation is to be established:

For Levinas, then, the human is not *represented* by the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give. (Butler 144)

Butler's observations regarding the unrepresentability of what constitutes our humanity resonates strongly with this part of Desai's narrative, but also presents a paradox, for how is the self to relate to the face of the other, if the other cannot appear within the world of objects and

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<sup>3</sup> Doukhan 2012, 16.

representation as proffered by Levinas. Here, Anamika embodies the unrepresentable, literally having no face, having been burnt beyond recognition. She also remains outside of representation, and the narrative *shows* its failure to represent by repeating what everyone else says. What is human about Anamika is precisely what her family denies, and what the narrative denies – her subjectivity. The narrative, in being purely circumstantial, emphasises that no one, including us, can see or hear her. She is the absolute other, the truly unrepresentable other, whom we must see and hear differently. If the other cannot appear outside the world of objects which constitutes consciousness, then it is the exiled subject, the one who has been de-centred from its self, from its world, who can encounter it: “Namely that for the self to awaken to the dimension of the other, it must be jolted out of its self-complacency. This other’s manifestation in the world of the self thus necessarily passes through a rupture in the hereto complacent and solipsistic stance of the self in the world.” (Doukhan 2012, 32) The growth of Uma has played out thus: her ecstatic experiences that take her out of her self, out of the world she finds oppressive yet familiar and safe, to experience a de-centering of her self, is the precondition necessary to relate to the pain and suffering of another exiled being. Encountering the truly unrepresentable other, Uma is able to sense not only Anamika’s need, but also her mother’s loneliness and fear. Desai’s novel conceives of an intrinsic connection between exile and ethics, in the creation of a subjectivity capable of relating to an other that is external to itself, one that comes with the condition of one’s own exile. Uma chooses to stay with MamaPapa not because she is resigned to living in bad faith, but rather because she senses her mother’s vulnerability. Whereas at the end of chapter two Uma, upon being coaxed into giving up school to care for Arun, had “wrenched her hand free” (FF 22) from Mama’s grasp, here she not only squeezes Mama’s hand back, but allows Mama’s grip to tighten.

And so, while Anamika chooses death, Uma will choose life: “Uma dips her jar in the river, and lifts it high over her head. When she tilts it and pours it out, the murky water catches the blaze of the sun and flashes fire.” (156) Uma’s actions mimic those of Anamika dousing herself with kerosene and lighting herself on fire. Here, death is transformed into a birth into ethics. Uma is now “no more a subject capable of deliberating over right and wrong and acting wilfully, but the exiled, the de-centred subject susceptible of being affected by the suffering of another human being.” (Doukhan 2012, 9-10) The exiled subject’s birth into ethics signals a

significant departure from the absurd and the existential as Camus and Sartre conceived it. The sense of alienation and exile felt by Uma, experienced initially as violence, leads instead to an opening up of the self to the other, that is, into an ethical relation with the other. This is prefaced by the many instances of dualism and ambivalence sustained through Desai's appropriation of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and the grotesque, in the notion that there is always within the one, traces of its other: fasting/ feasting, self/other, high/ low, tragedy/ comedy, sympathy/ derision. And just as "one must imagine Sisyphus happy," (Camus 1983, 123) one must imagine Uma equally happy in her choice to live, knowing "[herself] to be the master of [her] days." (Camus 1983, 123)

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