

Fatima Meer's 'Train from Hyderabad': Diaspora, Social Justice, Gender and Political Intervention

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Abstract

Fatima Meer's memoir, *Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days, 1976* (2001), and the short story 'Train to Hyderabad' (Meer 2010) as an anthologised entity drawn from it, symbolise women's isolation under male scrutiny, male rage at female autonomy and the compulsion to gag female critique of male government whether domestic, provincial or national. Behind the historical fact of colonial pseudo-slavery termed indenture, which was not gender-specific, lies the surviving, wide-spread and less-recognised phenomenon of female subjugation which may be termed female indenture. This reading of 'Train to Hyderabad' re-enacts a liberatory process: freeing the text in a way which reflects Meer's own scripting of her work in a pattern of self-denial and socialist concern for the oppressed about her.

Keywords: Fatima Meer; diaspora; social justice; feminism; indenture; apartheid; socialism

Introduction

Fatima Meer's short story, 'Train to Hyderabad' (2010) is an extract from her *Prison Diary* (2001). The appearance of 'Train to Hyderabad' in *The Vintage Book of South African Indian writing* (Chetty 2010) provides it with a specific context and set of meanings. First, few texts by South African Indian writers were encouraged for publication under colonial/apartheid regimes. This publication accords a fresh, democratic context to Meer's tale. Second, this

short story, taken from Meer's *Prison Diary* (2001), necessarily invokes Meer's larger *oeuvre* and its significances. Third, 'Train to Hyderabad' recalls peer texts in the collection and exists in some sense with and within them as a whole. The introduction to the volume itself has an immediate intertextual exchange with the text under consideration: In his story, 'Ratunya Mochi', which also appears in *The Vintage Book of South African Indian writings* (2010), Ashwin Desai describes an example of the arrival in Durban of a young Indian woman. There are therefore two journeys concerning Hyderabad: Ratunya Mochi leaves Hyderabad in a 'forced journey' to South Africa and Meer, a respected sociologist, is on a visit to a conference in Hyderabad. The travels of these two women, though many years apart, are intertwined in various ways and intertextually linked at several levels. One of these being, how, the Indian Diaspora as a whole with its vast body of experiences, sufferings and adaptations, forms the much larger context of Mochi's and Meer's separate journeys.

The trials and tribulations of women were often at the centre of Meer's concerns, and she repeatedly focused on black women as a potential radical subjectivity (Desai 2010). In South Africa, discernible patterns of patriarchal hegemony were reified over a period of three centuries through mechanisms of colonial and apartheid structures in systems such as indentured labour and legislated racial segregation. Both systems have much in common structurally: both share the common element of white male colonial construction. Prerogatives of such patriarchy are frequently manifested in phallogocentric displays of power, dominance, wealth or privilege: egocentric or vertical aspiration which neglects horizontal/democratic issues of care and compassion. Womanist impulses, by contrast, countermand systems of male dominance in particular and solipsistic male intentions generally. Horizontal attitudes of community concern, social responsibility and public well-being are propagated *ipso facto* according to modes of thought evidenced in such thinkers as Olive Schreiner, Virginia Woolf or Fatima Meer. Schreiner exposes Rhodes's male greed and self-interest in her much-neglected tract 'Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland' (1897). In *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Woolf's anatomy of female concern for community is registered in Mrs Ramsay's bouef-en-daube dinner-party and in contrast to Mr Ramsay's egocentric concern with his writing career. His predatory sexual appetite is imaged in the 'brass beak'. The lighthouse itself is one of the most enduring emblems of male phallic aspiration and psychological dominance. *The Mis-Trial of Andrew*

Zondo: A Sociological Insight (1998) by Meer is a ground-breaking exposure of miscarriage of justice due to male-constructed legalities that fail to account for the social dimensions of the dehumanising strictures and their effect upon an individual of colour under apartheid laws. It is essential to realise how few women prisoners record their experiences in prison. Nagel (2008) points out that:

In most prison narratives women get relegated to the roles of stoic, heroic mothers ... However, all over Africa, rather than being passive bystanders, women also engaged in their own revolutionary struggles ... Yet few women write about their own ordeal. South African prison literature is an exception to this trend, as Fatima Meer, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Emma Mashinini, Ellen Kuzwayo, Ruth First and others engaged in autobiographical writings. (2008: 75)

Agency and Political Intervention

Contestation of social and national resources occurs in the ineluctable conflict of purpose between vertical elements of male self-aggrandisement and female desire to nurture community in all fields. Confrontation between female life-force and male power-force causes agents of hegemonic male structures to fear, suspect and punish women's refusal to respect the margins of male-invented social systems. Male dominance, when expressed in colonial exploitation or racial segregation, attempts to silence, isolate and humiliate the subaltern female. Writing by women, and especially black women in South Africa, was consequently policed: the voices of women critical of white male control were muffled by various means of censorship, ridicule or partisan neglect. Meer's *Prison Diary* (2001), and the extract 'Train to Hyderabad' (2010) as an anthologised entity drawn from it, symbolise women's isolation under male scrutiny, male rage at female autonomy and the compulsion to gag female critique of male government whether domestic, provincial or national. Behind the historical fact of colonial pseudo-slavery termed indenture, which was not gender-specific, lies the surviving, wide-spread and less-recognised phenomenon of female subjugation which may be termed female indenture. The purpose of this reading of Meer's, 'Train to Hyderabad' is to re-enact a liberatory process: freeing it in a way which reflects her own scripting of the

texts in a pattern of self-denial and socialist concern for the oppressed about her.

Meer diminishes the significance of her own writing but celebrates its existence in the reader's mind and actions in society. Procedures whereby a 'primary' text is released from its textual coherence or autonomy by means of continuous contextualisation and intertextual corroboration to the point that 'it' (the text) disappears, is consonant with Meer's socialist concern to lose herself in the agency of political intervention. This denial of self in the greater cause of social justice is at one with much of Phyllis Naidoo's (2007) writing which deliberately erases *écriture* in a desire to achieve community; an egalitarian ideal radically opposed in its Marxist vision to the logocentric, phallogocentric regime of materialist paternalistic hegemonies. By floating the 'text' on a raft of contextual and intertextual associative meanings, conventions of enclosure may be deconstructed or dissolved in order to recuperate Meer's concern for public disclosure of the myriad horizontal, womanist imperatives that rendered her life and thought socially responsible and nationally admirable. In this process the 'short story' 'Train to Hyderabad' dissolves in terms of peer texts, such as those by Ronnie Govender (2002) or Phyllis Naidoo (2002). By dissolving the 'short story' or rather excerpt from her *Prison Diary* in the course of such comparisons, broader, intertextual palimpsests are revealed in the overall liberation of author and diary.

Between the staccato style of Naidoo and the limpid habit of Meer's prose, there is much work to be done in recognising the rhetorical devices and skill of the two prison narratives. Meer's 'Train to Hyderabad', journeying out of her *Prison Diary* and snaking back in again is the proverbial 'nested' text, a story- within-a-story, juxtaposing the author's constructed memories of the temporal, spatial and visual spaces in Hyderabad with the in situ confined space of political incarceration in the Johannesburg prison. Although *Prison Diary* is boundaried by the four walls of her cell, Meer breaks the 'fourth wall' between writer and reader through vignettes such as the 'Train to Hyderabad', which create an inter-subjective platform for multiple others to take the stage as it were:

Vesta butted into my narrative, shocked (2010: 83).

Beyond engaging with both stories in a temporal capsule, Meer also creates a spatial capsule in *Prison Diary* which acts as a container for her narratives to breathe and live. This space, which is not 'black or white' but 'black and white'

invokes a 'third space' (Bhabha 1994) which enables new possibilities between the container and the contained, displacing the histories that constitute it (Bhabha 1994: 211).

In this third space of social, political and cultural possibilities, Meer's 'Train to Hyderabad' works as an under labourer for the very thing she is attempting to dissemble: black women as subjects of overt sexism, patriarchy, racism and classism under apartheid. Meer, as protagonist extraordinaire, demonstrates an immense ability to engage her subjects in the discursive space of the text by re-affirming or disrupting the essentialist ways that gendered roles are inscribed by social meaning (Butler 1990). By allowing Vesta into her narrative, she invites a critique of her own positionality and her choices. Through Vesta, the reader is nudged to question his or her own actions that reinforce or perpetuate these gendered roles.

... Vesta was aghast and I was aghast at myself.

As she 'performs' her train journey for her fellow inmates, she invites them, not just to listen passively but to participate in her narrative, which they do, even if this results in judgement of her choices regarding her son:

... You must have been crazy. You need to have your head examined (83).

Meer's journey is inflected at several levels by Ratunya Mochi's (Desai 1996) travels: historically, socially, financially, politically and, finally, from a feminist perspective. Mochi associates Meer with the particular pattern of indentured labour to South Africa as well as the larger global diaspora caused by British imperialist strategies. Mochi's poverty and suffering reference the Gandhian/Tolstoyan elements of Meer's own consciousness and writings. Lastly, both women are joined by the bonds of all mothers and sisters who wish for education, health and prosperity for their families which exist in a patriarchal universe of male ostentation, brutality and self-importance. The treatment of women as chattels or part of a male-dominated empire binds these two women and their lives in a unique way. The walls of Meer's cell are the concrete manifestation of such dominance just as the fading body of Mochi, shipped to an alien shore, is evidence of women made objects and exchanged by men in a global sale of 'other' people by colonialism. In either situation, of

colonial or apartheid origin, men such as Rhodes or Verwoerd devised complex political schemes to advantage their own race and gender and disadvantage women, especially those not of a white skin colour. The assumptions behind such control of women encrypt the role of men as thinkers, scholars or social engineers and that of women as useful servants. The most directive and determinative context of Meer's excerpt is rightly the refutation of male privilege: her woman's diary chronicling the effects and affect of incarceration by men who disapprove strongly of women thinking, speaking or writing.

Incarceration and Injustice

Meer's *Prison Diary* tells of phallic subjection and female reprisal at many levels. Lydia, a woman incarcerated with Meer, killed her badly behaved husband. Lydia's revolt against an imperious male runs parallel to Meer's minute replies to male control, or the continual attempt to enforce it. Meer's own painting on the cover of *Prison Diary* presents a wall and dominant phallic tower contrasted against the waving green of female life in the beautiful tree that Meer glimpses and gasps for each day (Mdluli 2010). Disobedient women, those who do not or will not conform to the male will, are, historically, immured. Richardson's (1962) *Clarissa*, writing first-person in her diary, is the classic study of the female asserting first-person subjectivity and independent will which provokes and insults men. Meer is walled in too and similarly asserts her autonomy by means of her prison diary. Mochi's entire life, like *Clarissa's*, is doomed in the same way by male dominance. Indenture applies not only to a white male-devised colonial system but to a primal male desire or urgency to subject all women to a system of forced labour and sexual exploitation which benefits men, and white men, in particular. The pain of displacement, illness, immurement and systematic humiliation appear in the suffering of all three women; yet their resistance and courage repudiate all such attempts as effectively as Lydia's hoe was used to kill her husband. They defy indenture, domestic, intellectual or historical. In *Women in the apartheid society* (1985), Meer writes:

In a society where the fundamental criterion for discrimination is race, it is unreal to consider the position of the one sex in isolation of the other. The enjoyment of the privileges of apartheid by white women differs only marginally from that of white men: likewise, while black

women suffer more than black men from the violations of their rights, the violations are gross in respect to both. It is this reality that accounts for the very peripheral impact of feminism on South Africa (1985:1).

In the light of Meer's statement, female indenture, whether designating domestic enslavement, marital rape or professional underpayment is a valid term. Intellectual and psychological subordination constitute possibly the most pernicious and fundamental form of female indenture. 'Train to Hyderabad' portrays this subjection dramatically as soon as the context of Meer's *Prison Diary* is invoked. The story of the train to Hyderabad, the fall of her young son from it and their recovery as a family exists within a prison diary. Meer is relating the incident from within a cell in her 113 day stay in prison in 1976, one of the most riotous years in South African black resistance to the white regime. She is narrating it to a group of fellow inmates including her fellow activist, Vesta. The invocation and consideration of the text within this context sharply highlights the issue of female intellectual/psychological immurement. The story itself laments a nearly tragic accident yet the journey is a celebration of Meer's intellectual and emotional fulfilment. She has at last been allowed to participate in an international forum and permitted a visa to travel to India after it being denied several times. She is accompanied by her family. This journey is the acknowledgement of a woman. Yet the text is imprisoned within the diary of a prisoner whose work is still neglected/imprisoned. This incarceration of the text and its author reflects the larger walling in of her community within an oppressive, political hegemony. Ironically, voices remain silenced within the larger new post-1994 South Africa despite the role women played in creating it. The figure of Meer once free in her motherland, recognised and fulfilled, now huddled in a cell, is emblematic of female indenture in all its manifestations.

Meer painted scenes from the period of her incarceration. Her drawings have recently been shown in a major exhibition in Durban. Meer had to hide her drawings and materials: using toilet paper and secreted inks. In this defiance and resourcefulness she joined the ranks of many legendary fighter-writers such as Kenya's Ngugi. Williams (2016) remarks in a recent interview with Ngugi: 'But even prison did not stop him from writing. Using toilet paper, he wrote Caitani Muthaiabaini (later translated into English as *Devil on the Cross*)' (2016: 92). Meer's own drawing of the many bricks that wall her in signifies much of the male desire to control women ('protect' in male-speak).

A dominant phallic tower, like Woolf's (1927) lighthouse, looms over the scene, re-iterating male attempts to govern the ungovernable female. The blue sky and fresh leaves of Meer's beloved tree recall freedom, not only from a particular, ignorant and racist regime but the assertion of female autonomy, the right to achieve, express independent thought and question society openly. The journeys of two women, Mochi and Meer, embody the life-journeys of many women seeking to escape the prison walls of male-architected society; men who fear women's vivacity, love of life and commitment to its sacred values.

Meer occupies a unique position in the social structure of her ancestral land. She still speaks Gujarati, her mother tongue, yet she is foreign in other ways. In the excerpt she discovers her son has fallen from the train and calls out, in the language of her motherland, 'Mera baccha! Mera baccha! Train se gier jaya' (2010: 120) but she is no longer a part of any particular stratum of Indian society. This anomalous situation is exacerbated by Meer's authority and authoritative status. She and her family are educated and prosperous South Africans.

Her claims upon the best medical practitioners of the day go unquestioned: 'Their advice was that we should take the evening train to Madras and have Rashid seen to by India's renowned neuro-surgeon, Professor Ramamurti, who also attended to the President of India' (2010:122). We suspect that this privilege would not have been accorded to every villager around Hyderabad. Meer's status could only have been established in the first place by her parents' travelling on the same journey that Mochi took from a small village out across the 'kala pani' (black waters) to a distant, unknown place. Meer's return journey is a part of both voyages out. The meanings of this short story are therefore complex and highly significant of the many ironies and contradictions of the diaspora condition.

Meer's identity as upper-class is registered early on in her account of the trip from Hyderabad:

The children and my sister Gorie joined me in Hyderabad, where I had attended the All India Sociology Conference, and we took a train from there to Madras. We had our own coupe, separated from the other compartments, with its own toilet and washbasin. The only door in the coupe opened out onto the station platform (2010:119).

The privacy of the coupe alerts us at once to the financial exclusivity marked

out by Meer. Her intellectual pre-eminence is established by attendance at an international conference. Meer distinguishes between the vendors and herself: she is the well-to-do purchaser and not a servant anxious to sell to any white colonial in a carriage. This elite returnee is the occupant of a full suite with a door opening directly onto the platform; not into a common passageway. Similarly, she uses the elevated term 'attire' to describe her matched nightwear. The emblem of her comfort and difference from the impoverished state of her forebears is her handbag: 'I asked the attendant to go back to the train and return with my handbag. I would need money' (2010:121). Local Indians find the phenomenon of well-to-do South African Indians curious: 'They were quite clearly intrigued by us' (*op. cit.*, 122). It would be interesting to question Meer's train journey in Hyderabad with regard to its alignment to Gandhian prerogatives, as she is considered one of the earlier Gandhian scholars in South Africa.

Gandhi's home in South Africa was called Tolstoy Farm: by his own admission, few other thinkers had as great an influence on his thought as that of Tolstoy, the Christian anarchist. Tolstoy's *Letter to a Hindu*, sent to the revolutionary, Tarak Nath Das, in 1908, provides a startling synthesis of pacifist principles from Hindu and New Testament sources. Love alone, both men believed, could dissolve the bonds of enmity which enslaved human beings. Belief in such egalitarian ideals was evidenced in the early socialist ambitions of the post-independence government in India: such as the nationalising of banks. Meer's own writings on Gandhi include the highly-acclaimed *Apprenticeship of a Mahatma* (1970). Her knowledge of Gandhian principles was extensive: in fact the extent of her familiarity with them appears at first to be at odds with a luxury trip through India. It seems equally out of place with the journeys of extreme pain made by villagers such as Mochi. Meer's book about the Indian diaspora, *Portrait of South African Indians* (1969) demonstrates her knowledge of liminal slavery and seems to render her indulgence on the train even less coherent.

The central incident of the text, her son's fall from the train, seems to deepen the incongruity of a social activist and Gandhian disciple relishing bourgeois privilege. Meer unaccountably allows her son Rashid to sit at the open doorway of the coupe with his legs dangling out over the edge. Her only defence for the irresponsible, and potentially fatal, action is that, first, 'Indians were travelling like that all the time, travelling on top of the train and hanging from the doors of the train' (2010:120). Second, she felt that 'Rashid was so

happy. I thought I shouldn't spoil his pleasure' (*ibid.*). Meer wishes to live out the egalitarian ideal by letting her son do the same as ordinary Indians do all the time: travelling on top of trains or hanging from the doors. Similarly, and in line with Tolstoyan/Gandhian ideals, she wishes for individual happiness: so she does not wish to break into her son's moment of joy. Yet the terrible truth which Meer may be hinting at is that she cannot be at one with the proletariat; however attractive this identification with universal brotherhood may appear. She and her family have become middle-class: the smug antithesis of the Trotskyist student that Meer once was.

The short story changes entirely when considered as a narrative told to entertain fellow female inmates in prison. Meer's prison friend, Vesta, enjoys hearing the family drama: 'Vesta butted into my narrative. You must have been crazy. You need having your head examined' (*ibid.*). To which Meer replies, with her customarily disarming candour, 'I agree with you. I was stark mad' (*ibid.*) Meer's presence in prison, her writing from there, and her establishment of a caring community with other prisoners within the high walls, testifies to her probity and reconstructs an ethically coherent tale. Buntman points out that Meer's *Diary* shows her respect and concern for the habits of community, even in prison:

... this memoir records exuberance more than suffering, pleasure as well as pain, delight as well as denial. Meer's five months in detention caused fear and worry as well as disruption, inconvenience, and expense for her, her husband and family, friends, and fellow activists. They were times of deprivation and of course her detention was completely unjustified under any meaningful rule of law. And yet Meer's account stresses the sense of community, friendship, solidarity, shared food, and the love of family and friends as much as, and arguably more, than she does the inherent injustices, indignities, and sheer unfairness detention occasioned (Buntman 2005:664).

Stanley (2003) differs from Buntman (2005). In a review of Meer's *Prison Diary* (2001) and Suttner's *Inside Apartheid's Prison* (2001), Stanley regards both diarists as privileged:

Details of prisoners' experiences are frequently disregarded in favour of official rhetoric of punishment, 'crime' and justice. The neutrali-

sation of prisoner voices is a practice undertaken across space and time; however, its intensity increases under state repression. These two books, detailing the experiences of individual confinement under South African apartheid, demonstrate the personal and political costs of human rights struggle and the consequences of resistance to the state. Both books are written from a privileged perspective, by academics who have the availability of skills and material circumstances to write and find a publisher. As such, they are books to be read alongside accounts from those whose lives and experiences are commonly ignored (Stanley 2003:333).

Meer is concerned about the gross injustices in apartheid South Africa, and especially among women. The difficulty with Stanley's (2003) view of the privileged Meer is that it fails to account for the general neglect of South African Indian writing and of South African Indian women's work in particular. Stanley seems to ignore the fact that Meer demonstrates humility and community during her time in jail. It must be asked whether the lot of Indian women in South Africa at that time could be considered 'privileged' in any real sense.

The moment of madness, allowing her son to dangle his legs from a moving train, almost cost her son's life and creates the central theatre of the story: hurricane lamps leading women across railway tracks in the dead of night to find an injured boy from South Africa; ambulances, hospitals and professors of medicine called to attend. Rashid recovers and the train of life moves on at its proper pace. Yet something in Meer's too ready admission of maternal insanity causes the reader to hesitate before condemning this social activist as a troubled fraud or bourgeois hypocrite. Meer the narrator seems to suggest the ineluctable strain between these poles of the human condition just as Meer the mother and activist in the tale seems to mourn the collision of them. The reality of incarceration allows the personae of Meer as narrator and Meer as activist to slip past each at several crucial points. This deft, fluid structuring reflects Meer's love of life's uncertainty and perils, the risks that freedom brings. The polarity between ethical/political concerns is not dogmatically resolved but illuminated by fictional exploration.

The inconclusive nature of this excerpt is consciously crafted within a womanist paradigm which mirrors Meer's perceptions of life in many ways. She refuses to be cornered by male determinacy. Her thinking is constantly

adjusted by the human concerns of the moment. Between the poles of flux and stasis, her energy and wisdom favour the former. The indeterminate nature of her conclusion points to a fundamental questioning of knowledge, the knowability of things:

Vesta listened enthralled by our adventure, but at the end of it she said she couldn't get over the fact that I allowed my son to sit in the doorway of the coupe. 'How could you?' she asked, and I admitted I could not understand it either (2010:124).

Meer refuses to account for herself and bathos is used to sabotage any crisis of conscience, over-zealous critic or melodramatic action in the plot. At the critical moment of discovery, when it is found that her son has fallen from the train, Meer is told to reach for the emergency chain to stop the train: she reaches instead for the chain to the toilet – another kind of emergency. As a socialist, Meer's refusal to submit to crisis is registered repeatedly by her commitment to the everyday, the mundane business of life. She is after all, like her sister in arms Phyllis Naidoo, a hard-boiled socialist. Her final line to the short story under analysis here is a typical inversion of any thrill of adventure or the sort of privilege that Stanley (2003:333) points to. Bathos brings us back to the socialist concerns for daily life: 'The bucket was used liberally throughout the night' (2010: 124).

Conclusion

Meer's *Prison Diary* (2001), like Phyllis Naidoo's (2010) account of her ten days in Central Prison in Durban, chronicles the experience of incarceration. Both pieces are highly politicised and exist in the literary continuum of struggle writing and prison writing both in South Africa and internationally: wherever political detainees are held without warrant or just cause, or tortured. Naidoo's record of prison life and wrongful detention is as much about herself as it is about Bobby Sands, Oscar Wilde or inmates of Guantanamo Bay or Bergen-Belsen. It is a quintessential prison text.

Whosoever opened the door usually had an endless number of keys and you heard them all the time whenever a door was opened or closed. It was always the noise of those keys that you heard while washing,

eating, and sometimes while sleeping. You were awakened with those keys, you were locked in with those keys, and they protruded into your thoughts, work and sleep. Keys, keys, keys (Naidoo 2010:125).

The cumulative rhetorical force of the passage gains in momentum from the full syntactical structures at the start to the single bursts of repeated nouns. 'Keys, keys, keys' mimics not only the jangling sound of keys but also suggests the obsessive drive to control, the *ius dominandi* that jangles in the heads of those in charge of the keys. Naidoo (2010) encapsulates this manic fascination with control of the other, the exotic or the different in the superbly crafted climactic force of her rhetoric.

The marginalisation, however, of texts such as Naidoo's and Meer's does not occlude their power to demonstrate that textual meaning cannot be controlled in the same way as political prisoners. Meaning defies textual imprisonment because it is not some abstract quality residing in the text; rather, it depends on the context, situation, conventions, and social and political relations evoked by the text. The writer and audience come together and inform one another (Denzin 2001), opening up generative and relational possibilities for the reader to engage with textual meanings in ways that transcend the confines of literary pages. The agency accorded to both text and reader is what made/makes struggle and protest writing a force to contend with.

The social conventions that naturalise and normalise cultural identity are disrupted by Meer's choices on the train which are deemed deviant of her gendered role as mother, social activist, and comrade. This interplay of positioning, displacement and re-positioning invites the reader to critically reconsider self-inflicted or ascribed boundaries that make us complicit in reproducing social and cultural inequalities, reminiscent of male freedom fighters in conflict with their own embodiment and enactment of patriarchy and paternalism.

Similarly, the psychology of writing in prison, the many cross-currents of horror and expiation afforded by writing, merit close scrutiny and re-formulate the nature of the texts separately and together. The systematic exclusion of black writings was twofold; founded on racist ideas of superiority and fear of printing or supporting protest literature. The attempt to silence these writings, however, simply means their beauty and probity is more pronounced than if they had been as freely aired as Coetzee's (1980) texts. The fact that apartheid authorities failed to silence these texts changes their reception today

and, consequently, their meaning. All of these contextual and intertextual tides float the individual texts and alter their currency in significant ways.

Sustaining many of the distinctive similarities between Meer and Naidoo is a gritty, acerbic woman's wit, a kind of female endurance humour which is quite different from the salty, male anger of Govender (2002). There is little outrage in Meer or Naidoo, although there is every reason for it. Instead, there is a slow pity for the dullness and sadness of racist stupidity. In both writers there is an observable sorority which resists the more retrograde instincts of patriarchal hegemony. 'Fatima had a strong sense of women's power. In Chatsworth she inspired women, telling them that they would have to take the lead, that the men were cowards. She told them in the liberation struggle women were one step ahead of the men. It was said with a twinkle in her eye and a rare naughtiness' (Desai 2010:123).

Meer's writing gains a particular identity from its correspondence with the feminist stridency of this resilient sisterhood.

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