

Anfractuous Narratives, Human Rights and Precarity in Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary*

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Abstract

This article offers an analysis of South African writer and political activist Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days* and addresses the ways in which her creative imagination has been triggered by feelings of vulnerability and precarity within the context of racism and injustice. The analysis leans on Bryan Turner's notion of vulnerability and human rights and Judith Butler's thoughts on precarious lives. Meer's narrative is anfractuous given the many roles she played in society, resulting in a memoir that is replete with windings and intricate turnings. Her plots and paths as an academic, artist, sociologist, writer, prisoner, Mandela's biographer, political activist and human rights campaigner are anfractuous—they twist and turn but do not break. Turner notes that without an ethical commitment realistically to follow one's vocation or one's fate, a human being cannot achieve "personality." In Weber's ethical system, being a "personality" means having devotion to a cause or acting passionately in terms of a career or course of action that one has rationally chosen. Meer's politics, activism and commitment to social justice were never divided from her academic inquiry. Her memoir describes her 113 days' incarceration in the Johannesburg jail in 1976 during the Soweto uprising. The memoir is easily interpreted as a classic postcolonial text, yet this diary of imprisonment may well reflect random moments in the lives of different people—social connectedness of a less obvious nature, yet of significance in glimpsing a common global humanity.

Keywords: Fatima Meer; human rights; precarity; vulnerability; prison diary

Introduction

This article provides an analysis of South African writer, political activist and sociologist Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary* (2001). The analysis leans on Bryan Turner's (2006) notion of "vulnerability and human rights." I label Meer's narrative as anfractuous given the many roles she played in South African society resulting in a memoir that is replete with windings and intricate turnings. Her plots and paths as an academic, artist, sociologist, writer, prisoner, Nelson Mandela's biographer, political activist and human rights campaigner are anfractuous—they twist and turn but do not break. Turner (2006) notes that without an ethical commitment realistically to follow one's vocation or one's fate, a human being cannot achieve "personality." In Weber's ethical system, being a "personality" means having devotion to a cause or acting passionately in terms of a career or course of action that one has rationally chosen (Turner 2006, 596). Meer's politics, activism and commitment to social justice were never divided from her academic inquiry. Lorraine Code (2014) notes the significant role academics play (particularly critical for Meer being the only black faculty in a white university) in an era of fragile employment conditions. They must be wary of rocking the boat, and are overwhelmingly female, hence multiply vulnerable: to the force of sex/gender stereotypes (Code 1988), and to financial instability that is commonly race-, class-, and gender-related in interwoven ways that threaten their professional status, authority, and security, predominantly among feminist and antiracist epistemologists (Code 2014).

There are a wide range of prison memoirs of South African women activists incarcerated during apartheid, particularly in the interregnum between the Sharpeville 1960 massacre and the Soweto uprising in 1976. The more famous prison writings include Ruth First's *117 Days* (1965), Jean Middleton's *Convictions* (1998), Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989), Caesarina Kona Makhoere's *In Prison under Apartheid* (1988), Helen Joseph's *If This Be Treason* (1998), Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1996), Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69* (2014), and Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary* (2001). Meer's memoir employs a more self-reflexive and analytical tone and it may be ascribed to the fact that her memoir was published 25 years after her imprisonment in 1976, after the demise of apartheid and a few years into the democratic dispensation. In this sense, it reflects a more general tendency in memoirs published after 1994 to shift the focus away from the necessity of ending apartheid rule towards a more historicising, investigative inclination. I would imagine that the lives of female activists within a patriarchal society governed by a racist regime, the entanglement of their femininity with their roles as freedom fighters, and the rituals, rules, violence and anxiety of their prison experience have resulted in similar anfractuous life narratives. Hence, the tortuous windings and turns of Meer's prison memoir may not be a quality particular to Meer's text. However, my focus is on a single text, *Prison Diary*, and it is outside the ambit of this article to analyse the prison writings of fellow South African women activists. Similarly, although the anfractuousness of Meer's life as a mother, academic, community worker and liberation activist is

portrayed eloquently in her autobiography, *Memories of Love and Struggle* (2017), the discussion on her anfractuous life narrative, human rights and precarity is limited to an analysis of *Prison Diary*.

Meer was a prominent political activist during South Africa's era of apartheid, between 1948 and 1994, and received the highest national award posthumously in 2019, the Order of Luthuli (silver), for her contribution to the liberation struggle. In 1952 she was one of the first groups of activists served with a banning order, for a period of five years, which confined her to the magisterial district of Durban and excluded her from all gatherings and from being published. She was arrested on 20 August 1976 and served 113 days' detention in the Johannesburg jail. Meer is both a feminist and a postcolonial icon in South Africa's history: as an eminent sociologist working in the racially segregated University of Natal, she played her part in demolishing the structures of patriarchal white hegemony.

Her writing stands and is easily interpreted as a classic postcolonial text, yet her diary of imprisonment may well reflect random moments in the lives of different people—social connectedness of a less obvious nature yet of significance in glimpsing a common global humanity. She is also considered an important Gandhian scholar with the publication of two seminal texts: *Apprenticeship of a Mahatma: A Biography of M.K. Gandhi 1869–1914* (1994), and *The South African Gandhi: An Abstract of the Speeches and Writings of M.K. Gandhi, 1893–1914* (1996). Meer wrote the script for two movies, *The Making of the Mahatma*, directed by Shyam Benegal in 1996, and *Taj Mahal: An Eternal Love Story*, directed by Akbar Khan in 2005. *The Mistrial of Andrew Zondo* (1998) is one of her radical texts. Andrew Zondo was put on trial for a bombing that killed five people in Amanzimtoti, KwaZulu-Natal, in 1985. He was just 19 years old at the time and was hanged by the regime for this act of “terrorism.” Meer sought to dig deeper into Zondo's action and brings forth the full weaponry of her sociological imagination in the anfractuous text about a youth activist whose father was a Christian priest and who joined the military wing of the liberation movement to take up arms against the regime. She pointedly looks for the intersection between law and fiction, politics and reality, and the personal and social in her writings.

Meer had a strong sense of women's power. In 1955, she became a founding member of the Federation of South African Women, the organisation that led the famous Anti-Pass March on the apartheid government in Pretoria in 1956, remembered for its slogan, “You strike a woman, you strike a rock.” In 1956, Meer was appointed as a lecturer in sociology at the University of Natal, the first black woman to be appointed as an academic at a white South African university. She was detained along with Winnie Mandela and 11 other women of the Federation in the wake of the Soweto riots in 1976. *Prison Diary* was written during her incarceration at Johannesburg's notorious Fort Prison, where sections of her six-month detainment without trial were served in solitary confinement.

The neo-Nazi Nationalist party embarked on a systematic programme of white supremacy and large-scale social engineering between 1948–1994 in South Africa. The chief concern of this programme was to distinguish a white master class from a mass of indigenous black citizens. This endeavour failed eventually and flew in the face of racial mixing, which had begun almost as soon as Dutch settlers arrived at the Cape in 1652. The Nationalist party attempted to form a country of extremes—either white or black. This inhuman system of racial segregation drained the natural forces and energies of a multiracial society. Only in small pockets such as District Six in the Cape, Sophiatown in Johannesburg or Cato Manor in Durban was there residual evidence of the free and mixed population that could have been. But these small areas were bulldozed and the populations broken apart, as portrayed in the iconic works of the three communities: Richard Rive’s *“Buckingham Palace”, District Six* (1986), Es’kia Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue* (1959), and Ronnie Govender’s *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* (1996).

In protest against such a programme of social, political, economic and existential separation, Meer was arrested and incarcerated. Her instincts were not to pity herself or cut herself off from others. Instead, one of her first concerns was to have water paints smuggled in to allow her to record the conditions inside the jail. Her vibrant drawings are now the only record of these stark premises and are part of a permanent exhibition in the Johannesburg prison where she was incarcerated. The colours she chose to paint her own cell are bright and positive. She recalls the companionship and mutual support of fellow inmates in remarkably vivid shades and groupings. Her colouring of this bleak situation represents her own probity, resilience and vision of a multiracial society. The use of vibrant colour demonstrates not only her own stance against a brutal and wrong-headed regime but also contrasts the black and white depletion with her own prospect of life in a brightly coloured, free and open society. In anticipation of the free society, Meer’s drawings insist on the community, sharing and commonality of life and her use of colour articulates this belief in the colours of happiness, democracy and liberty. Meer colours the nation at a time when the landscape was being artificially reduced to the charcoal sparseness of white versus black.

Meer and Human Rights

For Nietzsche, general values such as “justice” or “righteousness” do not refer to an objective world existing outside language, and they mask or obscure the more important things of everyday life (1979, 66). It is for this reason that Nietzsche is seen to be compatible with pragmatism and utilitarianism. His response was to the falsification of life (not unlike the racial policy of the apartheid regime with its false value of white superiority); it was a reconciliation with rationalist patterns of life (Apollo) and the creative principles of life (the ethic of Dionysus) through a new creation of human existence that would overcome the sickness of modern culture, namely the birth of the *Übermensch* (Turner 2002, 558). The essence of Meer’s resistance to the racist regime as portrayed in *Prison Diary* was the critical question: Does the truth or value of justice

and equality or struggle of the liberation movement contribute to the “health” of the black populace as a group? From a sociological point of view, the meaning of any action or cultural phenomenon is deeply embedded in its social and cultural context. The meaning of actions is particular to a given context; meanings are bound up with and cannot be understood separately from cultural perspectives (Turner 2002, 593).

Meer, like Nietzsche, did not argue that any form of life is as valuable as any other, or that we cannot choose between them; truth is a matter of perspective, not fundamental reality. Perspectivism is the philosophical position that one’s access to the world through perception, experience, and reason is possible only through one’s own perspective and interpretation. Nietzsche insists that there are no rules for human life, no absolute values, no certainties on which to rely. If truth can be achieved at all, it can come only from an individual who purposefully disregards everything that is traditionally taken to be “important.” Perspectivism understands truth as efforts to know (or a will to truth) and thus a will to power. Nietzsche asserted that knowledge is a matter of perspective, and perspective a matter of personality, which is intrinsically threaded in life itself. If life is thus conflated with knowledge, the question that remains is what kind of life leads to a joyful wisdom. The will to knowledge is constituted by the efforts of particular people to live particular forms of life for particular reasons (Nehamas 1985, 73). Turner notes that Nietzsche’s value critique was reflexive: it is incumbent on the philosopher or sociologist to apply this insight to his/her own work (2002, 588).

Nietzsche’s views on religion are relevant to the context of Meer’s memoir given the role of the Calvinist church in propagating apartheid philosophy. Nietzsche rejects the Christian God, but is not “anti-religious.” Rather, he views Dionysian pantheism as a solution to the problems of pain and death, and argues for the flourishing of a new “festival” based on a humanity-affirming religion modelled on that of the ancient Greeks (Young 2006). It was absolutely clear to the Calvinist apartheid regime that people were not, in religious terms, equal. The overwhelming majority of black people (87%) were already condemned to eternal damnation; only a small and (white) elite, the faithful, would pass the final test of Calvinist redemption.

The political authoritarianism of the apartheid regime was the silent or implicit resolution to the cultural crisis of modern society in which pluralism and diversity are inevitable consequences of the rise of global capitalism, of which a dynamic and fluid labour market is a necessary condition (Turner 2002, 595). In South Africa, black labour mobility from the rural areas into urban spaces and particularly the mines produced new anxieties about the coherence and integration of the national community. As the Afrikaner state became more powerful with the authoritarian fascism and draconian laws of the 1950s, followed by the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, there was a greater need for ethnic coherence among the white English and Afrikaner communities as a bulwark against the black majority. Powerful nationalist ideologies expressed the growth of the nation state through the vision of a pure white society. These romantic and nationalist communities required a unified ethnic foundation of the state, alongside

literacy, a national language and a common culture (Turner 2002, 596). Nationalism as an expression of authoritarian politics in South Africa can be interpreted as a political and cultural response to the threat of ethnic, religious and linguistic pluralism largely driven by the Afrikaans language as a bulwark against the English of the British colonists and African languages of the black populace.

Prison Diary

Meer presents many voices in *Prison Diary*: she makes no attempt to create a commemoration of her own time inside jail only nor does she make herself the heroine of political struggle. She in fact displaces her self through her accounts of the lives of those about her; it is an aftractuous narrative that represents the windings and roundabouts of the fellow women activists incarcerated with Meer, and it disrupts the Western notions of a memoir as the story of an individual. Yet she is audible and becomes voluble as a woman, an articulate subject who sheds much of the socialised, engendered self that was built about her as a human rights activist. Her transcendence of an inherited and expected self marks her emergence at this point as a South African first and a member of a powerful anti-government Indian minority community with its roots in indenture and sugar slavery second. The polyphonic quality of Meer's *Prison Diary* is unique compared to many of the examples of private records within the genre of diary writing from Samuel Pepys onwards (the eventual publication of Pepys's diary revealed an exceptionally skilled recorder of the political events of London during the mid-seventeenth century). Unlike Pepys, Meer does not present reported history as her primary concern, although her writing is valuable in that regard; rather, the polyvalence or bonding, her anxiety for the welfare and survival of those around her, is reflected in her intensely personal yet distinctly public work. In so far as a diary is in many ways an autobiographical form of self-expression, this duality, of emergent self and shedding of a persona engraved in the male framework of her past, touches on the liminal determinants of being. As Judith Butler points out:

The constitutive identifications of an autobiographical narrative are always partially fabricated in the telling. Lacan claims that we can never tell the story of our origins, precisely because language bars the speaking subject from the repressed libidinal origins of its speech; however the foundational moment in which the paternal law institutes the subject seems to function as a meta-history which we not only can but ought to tell, even though the founding moments of the subject, the foundation of the law, is as equally prior to the speaking subject as the unconscious self. (2002, 91)

The analysis of *Prison Diary* is put into conversation with Butler's (2004) thinking on precarity to argue for the importance of studying communities at the intersection of different spatial, political and ethical practices and discourses. Bourdieu (1963, 361) is credited with first using the French term *précarité* in his 1960s research in Algeria where he explored the social divide separating permanent workers from contingent or casual workers and noted that the latter were *précarité*. In the late 1970s and 80s precarity entered academic vocabulary as a notion connected to poverty rather than employment

(Waite 2009, 416). Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004) is significant in the analysis of *Prison Diary* as it links precarity to the fragility and powerlessness of human existence in the face of oppressive governments. Meer's memoir provides an opportunity for a spatially attentive reading of Butler's (2004) ideas and this in turn assists to conceptualise the different ways in which oppressed communities did political and ethical work. In her later writings, Butler (2012, 148) alerts us to the notion of "antagonistic ties, wretched bonds, raging and mournful modes of connectedness." In the case of South Africa, people considered as blacks (African, Coloured and Indian) lived with each other on contested and colonised lands, which, together with the stereotypes and racism practised by the British empire and later Afrikaner regime, produced aggression and hostility in the midst of that cohabitation (Butler 2012, 148). Hence, the precarious lives of the oppressed are complicated as there was not only resistance to the regime, but also violence among the oppressed races concomitant with the struggle against patriarchy.

Meer in her despondent moments recalls episodes from her securely male hegemonic childhood, girlhood, and married life, but these nostalgic recollections are frail, imperfect retrospectives which correspond to that distant meta-history which Meer feels compelled to recount when isolated, humiliated and haunted by fear. Through the self-reflective passages of *Prison Diary* the collated writing self negotiates the priorities of Meer as "speaking subject," in this instance authorised woman, and "unconscious self" who falls back unexpectedly almost upon the assurance of the male patriarchy. Which of these contending selves is antecedent must be ascertained through the voices of the sisterhood that surrounds Meer when she flags and which Meer herself galvanises when able to. The fluctuations, the ebb and flow of what organically becomes a vigilant and mutually attentive matrix, mark in many ways the receding tide of male dominance and the progressive imminence of autonomy and vocality as subject.

The first of these surveillant presences is that of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela who provides the opening foreword to *Prison Diary*. Madikizela-Mandela herself wrestles with the same hegemonic forces as Meer and parallels several aspects of Meer's concern to speak, be and act independently, which is particularly difficult when married to the iconic leader of the national democratic struggle. Both women are becoming in at least two major ways as they struggle to expose the falsity of the white male facade and to set aside their identity mandated by marriage in order to demarcate an autonomous self-expression. In prison becoming this woman is projected forward precipitously and undergirded by these parallels between the two leading women activists. Meer acknowledges the acuity of this moment in the very first line of her account: "This is a turning point in my life" (2001, 11). Similarly, Madikizela-Mandela immediately dissolves the trajectory of her own life in the context of the present political struggle: "In mid-1976, following the pupils' revolt in Soweto, eleven women—largely members of the newly-formed Federation of Black Women—were detained under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act and placed in solitary confinement." The coagulation of politics and engenderment, the intermittent signalling of the self amidst political realities, recalls

core questions about women's anfractuous narratives in South Africa, which Butler sets out for women generally as follows:

But is there a political shape to "women" as it were, that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of their interests and epistemic point of view? How is that identity shaped, and is it a political shaping that takes the very morphology and boundary of the sexed body as the ground, surface, or site of cultural inscription? Or is "the body" or "the sexed body" the firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsory sexuality operate? (2002, 175)

Madikizela-Mandela's own endurance and the threat that her body posed to the fragile veneer of what was made to appear to be a secure white regime caused her to suffer particularly harsh maltreatment from those who claimed to be the torchbearers of civilisation and Christianity:

Our treatment in 1976 was relatively humane when I compare it with the brutal treatment I suffered during my eighteen months of detention in 1969. Throughout that period, I was interrogated, tortured and kept in solitary confinement. (Madikizela-Mandela 2014, 7)

The black female body in a frenetic state to proclaim its whiteness and disclaim the rich mixing of all races that had gone on since the first landing of Dutch settlers provokes a remarkably similar anxiety to that discernible in the United States of America, where white men attempt to incinerate the record of their past yet are drawn to the black bodies of those around them and from whom, by force usually, so many offspring of slaves and slave owners were born. The black female body in this peculiarly dualistic state is both a site of loathing, repugnance and lustful intrusion. The white male who parades himself as above such acts and attractions depends upon, leaches from, the black body as just such a "firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsory sexuality operate" (Butler 2012, 134). The black female body that is inscribed in this way becomes an object of stringent discipline if she, like Madikizela-Mandela, dares to speak back to the hypocritical, tortured "boss." Madikizela-Mandela's punishment is the most severe because she is, and becomes, articulate, perceptive and critical. To reply to Butler's question about the anteriority or originality of women's political presence, it is important to note that within the scope of Meer's *Prison Diary*, the qualities of voice and critique, which condemn Madikizela-Mandela to beatings and mental torture equally, seem not to be solely *reactive* powers instigated against the political injustice around her and the taken-for-granted right to both penetrate and loath the black female body. In terms of anteriority, both Meer and Madikizela-Mandela appear to possess an *innate* maturity, self-knowledge and security of voice which were nurtured by their communities.

While in prison, Meer the intellectual and academic befriended "different people" whom she would not otherwise have encountered, such as a murderess called Lydia, a further reinforcement of the anfractuous narrative with its windings and turns that

include both political activists and female prisoners jailed for other reasons. Meer experienced a sense of liberation in these moments of common humanity that were remarkably close to Virginia Woolf's during the bombing of London. The fact that Woolf (1984) met people during wartime whom she would not have met during peacetime raises some suspicion that class entrenchment may flourish more easily during periods of comfort and stability: somewhat contradicting notions of a general improvement for all in times of economic security. The question arises of whose economic security is prioritised in a capitalist system. The common experience of egalitarian society sensed by Woolf in London and Meer in Johannesburg during times of political turmoil may imply that peace and wealth for the few go hand in hand: true equality seems to emerge during times of war. There are significant parallels between the highly visible anti-establishment priorities of Bloomsbury and the less visible stand made by Gandhi's female acolyte incarcerated in Johannesburg, the white capitalist hub of South Africa. It cost the British government thousands of lives in the Anglo-Boer War to wrest the gold that lay beneath the city from the Afrikaners. Woolf and Meer, writing from the North and South of the English-conquered world, both wrote against the dominance and greed of a male reign. Johannesburg of the 1970s and London of the 1930s constituted cityscapes of sovereign capitalism: centres that drew in wealth and investment from around the world and between each other. The bombing of London broke down class distinctions much as the Soweto riots in South Africa united individuals across class divisions.

At the time of her arrest, Meer, as an academic and activist, considered herself to be knowledgeable about the detailed workings of racial segregation in the country. Yet her incarceration teaches her that, to her chagrin, she is treated differently to other prisoners who are classified as socially lower to her: as such Meer is made a beneficiary of a system she despises. At the start of her detention, Meer is searched by prison officers:

I was ordered to strip. I stood on the cement floor and took off my sari, which fell in its six-yard heap at my feet. I paused, hoping that would satisfy the matron. It didn't. I took off my long under-slip (*langha* in Hindi) and stood embarrassed, my legs exposed. I wasn't used [as a Moslem] to revealing my legs. They stared at me, waiting, the matron and the vagaash (female prison warden). I stared back. I was told to take off all my clothes. I took off my blouse and bra, but left my panty, determined not to take that off. A few more tense moments of staring at each other followed. It was a question of who would give in. The matron let go. I didn't strip any further. (2001, 32)

In terms of postcolonial theory, this episode in Meer's period of detention describes an actual forced stripping as well as a metaphysical humiliation by the master of a subaltern subject. The barbarity of the action of the occidental force is made plain by the fall of the sari. The phrase "six-yard heap" is a dramatic oxymoron which contrasts the beauty and intimacy of the sari with the lifeless heap that it becomes at the hands of a Westerner who exhibits nothing but contempt for the culture and dignity of the Easterner. The demand to remove even the *langha* and expose flesh shows complete disrespect for the religious and ethical dispositions of another cultural community. Such insensitivity and

arrogance characterise the imperialism of many exploitative powers who intruded into the East and Africa. The conflict of wills between resistant subject and barbaric occupier is spelt out in the words “the matron let go.” Finally, the subaltern is spared complete stripping, but any semblance of trust or mutual recognition of law has been stripped away. The oppressor is the one who has in fact stripped himself of his legitimacy.

Yet such a postcolonial analysis, in some ways, sustains the narrative of denigration rather than that of educative experience, sorority and political moment. Less obvious than the pageant of “stripping” is the fact that South African apartheid prison officers maintained a fixed hierarchy among prisoners. Meer, by virtue of her education and social class, is not required to strip entirely. She realises after what she considered the ordeal of her stripping that she was in fact privileged compared to women prisoners who were considered of a lower station:

Later we compared notes about our stripping. Jeanie and Sibongile detailed their humiliations. They had arrived late at night and had been made to strip to their skin in the freezing cold on the verandah. They had been forced to crouch naked while the wardress looked for contraband in their vaginas. I was horrified. I told them I had no such experience. “All to do with class,” Jeanie said with resentment in her voice. I was in partial agreement. My status and perhaps also my age had restrained them, but Jeanie and Sibongile had been disgracefully abused. (2001, 32)

A collegiality and sisterhood, a form of connectedness, grew quickly between Meer and prisoners whom so-called Christian authority deemed to have less status. In emphasising master and servant as antagonists at various levels, postcolonial discourse in some ways unintentionally re-inscribes polarities and even endorses the oppressor’s might simply by virtue of considering it worthy of critical comment. It is possibly more empowering to engage Schulze-Engler’s (2004) notion of transnational culture by drawing attention to the resourcefulness and mutual support of women who find themselves in a common predicament. Meer’s ready association and friendship with women classified by the apartheid state as belonging to a lower order point to the same willingness and openness to found a common citizenry that was observed in Woolf’s (1984) wartime *éclaircissement*. Schulze-Engler’s (2004) emphasis is corroborated by such bonding across classes established externally by the oppressor. The commonality that is established by women in jail with Meer indicates the growth of a wider connectedness, a transnationality.

Meer realises that the indoor concrete floor on which she had to strip was far less a punishment than the freezing cold of the outdoor verandah, as Johannesburg’s night temperature can fall below freezing in winter. The greater infraction of searching in the women’s vaginas “horrified” Meer. Her statement that she had no such experience could well be writ large as the confession of the upper classes. Jeanie explains “with some resentment in her voice” that it is “all to do with class” (2001, 32). The word “class” in South Africa in 1976 immediately signals racial segregation, yet Jeanie is talking to Meer who as an Indian did not enjoy the privileges of white citizenship, franchise,

education and healthcare. Jeanie's resentment refers to class divisions based upon education and wealth: Meer enjoys both middle-class income and educational status as a university lecturer. Meer has to dissociate herself from any privilege of financial superiority and identify with her fellow prisoners to create a significant sorority and anfractuous narrative that denies racial or class separation its purchase. As a follower of Gandhi's pacifist and democratic values and concern for the poor, and a committed socialist, Meer aims to break down class division in any form. She is shocked and ashamed to discover that she herself is a beneficiary of classist privileges, even in prison, and that she does not have to suffer the same indecencies as everyone else. But the sense of being marked as a type of collaborator is countervailed by the sisterhood that Meer establishes. In her diary entry for 24 August, four days after her incarceration began, Meer records her joy in the moment of being with new-found friends:

The wardress waits. I comb my hair and follow her. For the first time since entering the yard, I am led out of it. We walk into the common courtyard. I see Jeanie. We run into each other's arms and embrace. We hold hands and walk together like two young children and then Jeanie warns: "If we look too happy, whoever comes to see us will think we are having a wonderful time."

"Who cares," I say, "this moment, now, together: we are deliriously happy and we are having a wonderful time." (2001, 43)

In terms of Schulze-Engler's (2004) theory and his interpretation of Woolf's (1984) celebration of the democratic present time, the key words in this passage are "common courtyard" and "this moment, now." The spontaneity and candour of their embrace is captured by Meer's spare and even laconic use of short sentences. Her description of the innocence of their happiness is marked by the phrase "like two young children." This natural and unaffected sorority is in contrast to the stultifying restriction of the white master's separation and obsessive need to control. The childlike affection of these two women is thrown into sharp relief against the architecture of male oppression and the formalised litany of locking, unlocking, washing, eating and exercise. Jeanie and Fatima are in the master's house, yet they are demolishing it at the same time: stone by stone with their irresistible humanity, warmth and care. The ability to live in the moment and to invoke egalitarian values with the nonchalant dismissal of "Who cares" point to a hope for a common humanity that goes beyond the polarities of feminist discourse against the father's house or postcolonial discourse against the master's house. Meer's emphatic deepening of the words "this moment" with the parenthetical "now" links her realisation, *éclaircissement* or sudden understanding of the moment with Woolf's (1984) similarly liberating appreciation of being able to meet all Londoners and make friends in new ways. Woolf is saddened by the bombing of her Bloomsbury home, yet feels at the same time and expresses in her diary entry an unaccountable sense of relief from material things, habits and cycles of time: conventions and strictures that obstruct the sort of spontaneous "delirious" human joy that Meer remembers in her *Prison Diary*. Meer's memoir points to a vision of common humanity, a classless, or at least far less racially stratified, society in the future.

Conclusion

Vulnerability and precarity are to a large extent dependent upon the organisation of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions (Butler 2012, 148). Whether explicitly stated or not, *Prison Diary* focused on conditions in South Africa that threaten life in ways that appear to be outside of one's control and resonates with Butler's argument that it is not possible to separate ontology from social and political context. The memoir notes how apartheid was designed to deprive people of their humanity, resulting in precarious living concomitant with race and class prejudice, injury, violence, and death. Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. The concept of precariousness does not explain why certain subjects and populations such as blacks experience a greater risk of death and injury than others or why women experience the curse of patriarchy and gender-based violence across the globe. The privileges accorded to males as birthright in fact blind those who benefit from this position of heterosexual normality, hegemonic surety. The British colonists, apartheid bullies or current neo-colonial male African leaders are in many significant ways the victims of their own assumed advantages. Because they have not been objectified, spurned, tortured, made to feel the lash, they acquire a certain indifference to the plight of those around them and quickly lose that exact degree of perceptiveness and empathy which women such as Meer have to fight for and gain by slow degrees through strategy, wit and streetwise nous. A comparable question to that which Judith Butler poses could be set for male political awareness of stolid unawareness as the case often is for the unconscious beneficiaries of privilege: Is there a political shape to men, as it were, that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of their interests and epistemic point of view? One response in terms of the figures reflected in the *Prison Diary* is that this political shape is attributed too easily so that their inevitable political elaboration is quickly misshapen and their point of view soon purblind.

The anfractuousness of Meer's text is represented in the contours of gender geography that not only imply characteristics of becoming woman that ascribe attention to the individual, concern for the neighbour and resilience—there are the windings, turns, twists and roundabouts of female activists as mothers, freedom fighters, prisoners, academics, researchers and a myriad other roles that they play. The concerns of Meer are immediate, tangible wrongs and the hardships of those around her, a “womanly” attendance to the wants of others which men in power too easily dismiss as fitting for little women. Over time, however, this insistent concern for the details of living retains a traction that outlasts the large-scale political structures of the racist patriarchal state and state of being.

In comparison with theology, philosophy and law, contemporary sociology has made little direct contribution to the study of human rights. Turner suggests that this absence is a function of its relativism, and that its relativism is a legacy of Weberian perspectivism. When sociologists do study rights, they can make useful contributions to

the study of rights as sociolegal institutions (Turner 2002, 602). Meer has made a significant contribution to the sociological analysis of human rights in South Africa through her life and writings. Sociology as a science of institutions has been more comfortable with the study of social citizenship in specific (capitalist) societies than with the study of human rights as a normative framework for international political action (Turner 2002, 602).

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