

# Women Warriors and Female Community in the Prison Writings of Fatima Meer and Nawal El Saadawi

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse how the violence of a patriarchal system forces women into situations where they feel violence is the only option, either as a mode of resistance or an expression of agency. The article foregrounds how systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, perpetuate violence. The killing of men committed by Fatima Meer's prison associate, Lydia, and by Nawal El Saadawi's prison friend, Fathiyya, parallel manifestations of female agency such as that evinced in 2017 by the "warrior woman" in Qumbu in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Homicide, in the context of a woman taking the law into her own hands when driven into a corner by male supremacy, may simply denote spilling the blood of an abusive male. But, the term "homicide" may connote any one of many acts of female resistance which signal the desire to kill or annihilate structures of male privilege, sexual control and legal supremacy set up by a patriarchal society to benefit men. Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days 1976* (2001) forms the underpinning text for reading homicide in its literal and metaphorical senses and is supported by El Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1986). The article debates the ethical and legal implications of male hegemony versus the legitimacy of women's reactive protest against humiliation and abuse. A phenomenological approach is used to portray the lived experiences and actions of courageous women who were at first outlawed by a male-law society but are vindicated when taking into account the tyrannous and intolerant circumstances of oppression and patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Fatima Meer; El Saadawi; warrior woman; homicide; prison writings; memoirs

## "Women Warriors" and Female Community in the Prison Writings of Fatima Meer and Nawal El Saadawi

Phenomenology attempts to turn away from the "natural attitude" or commonsensical or normative modes of description and constantly seeks to avoid making prior assumptions, hence making it a useful methodology for investigating the specificity of

African embodied existence (Bakare-Yusuf 2003, 16). In Merleau-Ponty's reflections in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) on "the body in its sexual being," he takes issue with such accounts of bodily experience and claims that the body is "an historical idea" rather than a natural species (Butler 2004, 901). As an internally organised materiality, the body is always an embodiment of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention—as de Beauvoir claims, the body is a manner of doing, dramatising, and reproducing a historical situation (1974, 38). De Beauvoir underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity. The primary entry point for phenomenological analysis is always lived experience. Opportunities for opening up African feminist thought and action arise from focusing on lived experiences and the intricacies, nuances, contradictions and potentialities of everyday life, and in the case of this article, of prison experiences.

It is through their lived experiences in concrete situations that African women come to understand the context that constitutes their identity (Bakare-Yusuf 2003, 16). For both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, the body is the existential ground of experience and perception: "I apprehend my body as subject-object" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 95). The body is the fundamental synthesising agency that weaves the world into meaning, and the source for the emergence of knowledge, value and signification (Heinämaa 1996). It is in the light of this view of human existence that I investigate Fatima Meer's experiences as an African woman activist in her memoir, *Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days 1976* (2001) and briefly draw parallels with Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1986), and the warrior woman of Qumbu. All three case studies are constituted, limited and empowered by the interactions between their historical, social, personal and economic factors. The interactions include ways in which various colonial and patriarchal encounters, concomitant with their unique cultural and political contexts (South Africa and Egypt), continuously alter definitions of African womanhood, what de Beauvoir (1974) refers to as the "becoming" of woman. Meer's bodily situation in South Africa is already imbued with racial oppression of the apartheid regime and its Calvinist values towards black women's bodies. Similarly, El Saadawi's situation is marked by patriarchy and Islamist significations of women's bodies. According to Bakare-Yusuf (2003, 19) the meaning of "African woman" becomes material, embodied, multiple and generative, rather than a disembodied abstraction:

The ontological implications of an existential phenomenological account of agency demand that we rethink the notion that hegemonic power structures such as patriarchy and white supremacy imprint themselves upon passive bodies. Rather than viewing these systems as revolving around a master plan or closed hierarchical system that is imposed from above, it is more productive to look at how groups and individuals shape autonomous patterns of being, producing sites of struggle, contestation, complicity and transformation in the process.

Although for both Meer and El Saadawi oppression is a concrete historical situation, one which conditions their identity as African women, through their lived experiences (and specifically incarceration) they are able to determine their project, discover who they are and what form their resistance will take. In dealing with a South African and an Egyptian woman's narrative and experience, analysis should be sensitive to each African cultural context, acknowledge the power of difference and consider how national culture is inflected by political, historical, religious and ethnic specificity. Bakare-Yusuf (2003, 21) cautions that even as we speak about an African woman, we must understand that this identity is necessarily connected to very specific gender configurations, forms of access to and control over means of production, participation in civic and spiritual life, inheritance rights and individual choices in particular African locations.

## **Women Writing against Apartheid**

The 1990s marked the end of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa which, for 40 years, instituted oppression and statutory racism. The advent of freedom witnessed an unparalleled engagement with "writing the self," social recollection and a proliferation of life stories in the literary landscape of the country. As part of this broader trend of reminiscence about the fight against apartheid, many autobiographical writings by South African Indian women emerged with strong undercurrents of individual nostalgia (Chetty 2015, 20). Liberation activists among this group of autobiographers include Fatima Meer (*Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days 1976* [2001]), Kesaveloo Goonam (*Coolie Doctor* [1991]), Pregs Govender (*Love and Courage: A Story of Insubordination* [2007]) and Phyllis Naidoo (*Footprints Beyond Grey Street* [2007]). The subaltern speak through such autobiographies: there is a "talking back," a restoration of memory, bringing to light the blanked out areas of their identity and in the case of prisoners like Meer, of their lives. Although Meer's prison memoir belongs to this grouping in many respects, it differs in significant and compelling ways. Meer recovers and reflects her role as interventionist historian and the unique form of her writing was a reflection of her conscientious resistance to apartheid.

Key prison memoirs of South African women include Ruth First's *117 Days* (1965), Caesarina Kona Makhoere's *No Child's Play: In Prison Under Apartheid* (1988), Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989), Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1996), Jean Middleton's *Convictions: A Woman Political Prisoner Remembers* (1998), Helen Joseph's *If This Be Treason* (1998) and Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary* (2001). Ruth First was detained in solitary confinement in 1964; Middleton was sentenced to three years in prison in 1965; Emma Mashinini was arrested under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act in 1981 and spent six months in solitary confinement and Caesarina Makhoere, a Soweto '76 student activist, was convicted in 1977 and was incarcerated for five years. Makhoere's memoir details an incident of violence perpetrated by the protagonist. She unapologetically refuses to enter into any civil discourse with the prison officials, or to treat them with any humanity. Her

description of stabbing Mbombvana, a black woman prison guard, is unsettling. The violence shows parallels with the Qumbu warrior woman in standing up against dehumanisation (Makhoere 1988, 64):

And we went for Mbombvana. We stabbed her several times with those mathematical instruments. We had made up our minds that this prison is not going to treat us like this; we wanted to kill her there and then. Let us kill her and they can hang us. Because we had enough of her. We assaulted her for a long time, stabbing her in the face, on the head, on the body, all over. She was bleeding on the passage floor. After we had satisfied ourselves we went back to our cells.

Although Makhoere's attack on the warder is unique, black women prisoners were generally dehumanised in prison when compared to the treatment meted out to white prisoners like First and Middleton. Political prisoners experienced incarceration differently given their historical context, personal background and the racial penal system of the apartheid regime. Meer (2001, 209) notes, "[w]e were all women, but so classified and separated that we could not be women together: we were divided by the impregnable barriers of law and custom, in addition to race." Women political prisoners suffered more hardship than men; because they were few, the authorities found it easier to isolate them (Middleton 1998, 118). Meer (2001, 58) also questions, "[d]o they consider us women more dangerous, hence our isolation from each other?" The regime of control in prison reflects the broader patriarchal social structures that govern the performance of being a woman.

## **The Warrior Woman of Qumbu**

We are tired of being victimised, raped and killed by the monsters we live with here. On Tuesday, people from the six villages that fall under Swartwater gather to support the woman, who now faces a charge of murder and two of attempted murder. The community hall is filled with more than 100 people, mostly women, who sing and speak and cry. "We are here to support this woman who had the strength to do this. It has been years women have lived in fear and not a single man could do anything about it. Women in this village have been raped and murdered. There are cases where perpetrators are still walking among us. God gave this woman strength to do what many couldn't, to protect her child and this village."<sup>1</sup>

In September 2017 in the tiny rural village of Qumbu, near Queenstown, in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, a woman found that her daughter was being raped by three men. The mother called the police and when the police failed to respond, she took a kitchen knife, went to the hut where the rape was being perpetrated and stabbed the men abusing her daughter. The woman killed one of the assailants and injured the other two. She was charged for murder and two cases of attempted murder. The National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) declined to prosecute the woman who has since

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<sup>1</sup> This account is taken from Athandiwe Saba and Kiri Rupiah's article "The Only Way Was Murder" (2017) published by the *Mail & Guardian*.

become known as the “warrior woman.” The historical, social and geographical context of Qumbu, concomitant with the extremely high rates of violence against women nationally, were considered as important extenuating circumstances in the case. Qumbu has “a sordid history where women live in fear, alcohol abuse is rife and family bonds are in tatters” (Saba and Rupiah 2017).

The warrior woman incident has not been narrativised in memoir form, and the account given in this article is mediated through newspaper reports and I acknowledge that reporting is not ideologically neutral. The NPA records were not made public, apart from the verdict. The warrior woman of Qumbu’s actions stand in strong parallel to the killing of men described in the prison diaries of Fatima Meer and Nawal El Saadawi. The three instances of the killing of men highlight the tension between ethical and legal implications of male hegemony and the legitimacy of women’s reactive protest against humiliation and abuse. The violence of patriarchy forces women into situations where they feel violence is the only option, either as a mode of resistance or an expression of agency. Within Spivak’s discourse of “Can the Subaltern Speak,” insurgent action among oppressed women arises when those in power (men) hear but don’t listen, and the excluded who would have spoken are forced to find more immediately radical avenues of political persuasion and this may take violent forms (Spivak 1994, 82).

The decision of the NPA not to prosecute the warrior woman for murder has puzzled legal experts in South Africa who maintain that many other women have killed in self-defence, yet they were prosecuted, convicted and have been behind bars for up to 10 years. Ruth Hopkins (cited in Saba 2017) from the University of the Witwatersrand Justice Project has researched cases in which women’s arguments of self-defence for killing their intimate partners have failed in court and was mystified by the NPA’s decision not to prosecute:

The woman did something that was very understandable in the circumstances. But looking at the cases I have worked on and researched, I found it quite baffling, because the women I have interviewed were in situations where it’s either they die or the men they were protecting themselves against die.

Were the actions of the two women who killed their abusive husbands and for which they were incarcerated with Meer and El Saadawi any more culpable than those of the warrior woman? In the sense of a broad ethical debate concerning women fighting for liberty and men’s impulse to control women, homicide in this article is regarded denotatively as a crime and connotatively as any action taken consciously against male oppression. Meer, El Saadawi, and the Qumbu warrior woman all challenge, shame and question the legal apparatus of their respective countries and the male structures controlling them. “Who are the real criminals?” is the question they ask. The reprieve granted the warrior woman constitutes a landmark decision in the African continent and across the world, in favour of women’s rights, humanity and social justice.

## The Hoe, Spade and Pen

A curious coincidence in the history of the incarceration of female political activists in twentieth-century Africa is that Fatima Meer in South Africa at the southern end of the continent, and Nawal El Saadawi in Egypt at the northern edge, were both imprisoned for their radical political views and both befriended women in prison who had killed men. In her memoir, El Saadawi recalls her imprisonment in 1981 for resistance against the Egyptian government, and provides narratives of a few of the women detainees. This article views the story of El Saadawi's fellow inmate, Fathiyya, who killed her husband with a hoe. Meer writes about her fellow inmate, Lydia, who had killed her husband with a spade. Both political prisoners, Meer and El Saadawi, were detained unlawfully under structures of male hegemonic domination. Both so-called "murderesses," Lydia and Fathiyya, were held as criminal prisoners: their actions against male abuse were far more brutal yet may, in important ways, be classified within the same reactive bounds as the standpoints of the two political prisoners. The warrior woman from Qumbu village killed one of her daughter's assailants. Unlike in the case of Lydia in Meer's *Prison Diary* and Fathiyya in El Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, the National Prosecuting Authority declined to prosecute the Qumbu warrior woman.

According to the enlightened legal understanding of the warrior woman's case by authorities in a liberated, post-apartheid South Africa, Fathiyya and Lydia who were incarcerated with El Saadawi and Meer might never have been charged with murder. Fathiyya found her husband raping their young daughter and killed him with a hoe. If the laws are promulgated by men and privilege their pleasure, position and advantage then the legal structure is skew and out of balance: the scales of justice in a male-dominated society cannot hang evenly. In their fight against male privilege and illegality, Meer and El Saadawi find common ground in unique and revealing ways. Both, as political activists and prisoners, although regarded as socially superior to criminal prisoners, soon befriended women prisoners from all social stations, breaking down class, ideological and economic boundaries imposed by male hegemony—what may be referred to as female community. Harlow (1992, 137) writes of El Saadawi's experience of female bonding across social boundaries in prison: "The hoe and the pen, the *fallaha*, or peasant woman, and the intellectual, find common cause in inaugurating the outlines of a counterculture that will resist the bureaucratizing influence of the state's apparatus of repression and degradation." This egalitarian experience results in mutual education: El Saadawi learns from Fathiyya how to plant a small garden in the same courtyard where she exercises and writes.

Because women of all classes are imprisoned under the same male structure of iniquitous control, all women in El Saadawi's Egyptian prison join in a common cause: prostitutes, robbers, drug-dealers, intellectuals, writers and artists. Bonding across educational, social and economic boundaries changes El Saadawi; as it does Meer in the Johannesburg jail. Both El Saadawi and Meer leave prison fortified in

their political purpose and educated in a new way by having mixed, and been ready to mix, under trying circumstances, with women from different social backgrounds. There is a telling irony in the fact that Fathiyya was put in prison for her murderous use of the hoe, and that she taught El Saadawi how to garden with a hoe while in a women's prison: the environment of male-dominated marriage proved adverse to Fathiyya while the experience of women bonding was constructive.

The desire to kill male dominance amounts to homicide, which women commit in intention, writing and intellectual impulse. Possibly the most agonising and coherent articulation of female homicide is El Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) in which she interviews Firdaus, a female prisoner in Cairo, who murdered a man claiming to have been her pimp. In 1973 El Saadawi collected case studies in the Qanatir prison as well as local hospitals and clinics, when she met and interviewed the prisoner who served as the model for Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*. El Saadawi records the actual oral narration of Firdaus's history as a prostitute and "murderess" but at the same time, through her novelistic framework, speaks metaphorically of Firdaus's condition as a universal emblem of the prostitution of women in general and "murder" as a legitimate reprisal against the exploitation of women (El Saadawi 1983, 99):

Yet not for a single moment did I have any doubts about my own integrity and honour as a woman. I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth, and the one in heaven. That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another.

Because Egyptian society's legal system is so biased in favour of men, and because women in it are obliged to sell their bodies to the men who set up the laws of male privilege, acts of social justice such as Firdaus's "murder" or Lydia's or Fathiyya's or that of the Qumbu warrior woman may sensibly be deemed not to be murders. Arguing along the lines of Meer's (1998) plea as expert witness in the case of the "Amanzimtoti bomber," Andrew Zondo, that social inequalities may not be ignored but must be assessed as mitigating causation, all these women warriors deserved to be cleared of their charges. The Qumbu woman's release remains a high-water mark in the African continent, and elsewhere, rectifying the imbalances of a legal system founded on male advantage.

## **The Significance of Sociological Context in Legal Rulings**

Meer was profoundly concerned with exposing and opposing the illegitimacy of South Africa's legal system which was deeply flawed in its treatment of blacks. Meer's landmark publication as a sociologist was her book entitled *The Mis/Trial of Andrew Zondo* (1998). In her plea for extenuating circumstances at the trial of 19-year-old Zondo, who planted a bomb in the Amanzimtoti shopping centre (a town on the south

coast of the Kwazulu-Natal province) on 23 December 1985, Meer defends Zondo on the grounds that the court that charged him with terrorism had not taken into account the sociological circumstances and political injustices which prompted Zondo to plant the device.

Meer's understanding of the significance of the sociological context of a legal ruling was groundbreaking in many ways: it shattered the myth of law as a realm unto itself and broke the male authority of white racist laws. Terrorism is not necessarily terrorism if the perpetrator can demonstrate the predicament of living in a social cage of illegality. By the same token, homicide ceases to be homicide in the case of the warrior woman if it can be proved that the mother of the rape victim acted according to just requirements. The same legality of context may well apply to the two so-called murderesses, Lydia and Fathiyya, who had their own personal, historical and political reasons for killing the male-constructed patriarchal legal apparatus of their day. In a connotative understanding and contextual estimation of their work, Meer and El Saadawi may be charged with homicide: of challenging and annihilating male hegemony.

In the pre-1994 South African racist legal system, black subalterns who were exploited within that system were seldom granted fair legal rights, and similarly, within a male hegemonic system, females are disadvantaged. Prosecution of blacks and females in the South African apartheid legal system was unjust. In the case of political detainees such as El Saadawi and Meer, and their criminalised fellow prisoners, male hegemony is impugned and its legal purchase negated. Given this degree of bias in global legal workings, it can be argued that homicide or killing of male advantage by subalterns of all kinds (women, gay men, lesbian women, blacks) suffering under such unjust systems, is defensible; subalterns have the right to undermine, challenge and ultimately destroy a carefully constructed social structure of male privilege. In her examination of the politics of resistance in South Africa, Maimela states bluntly "the South African legal system, as it evolved over three centuries, created all kinds of legal disabilities for women" (1999, 223). In each town in South Africa and colonies such as Rhodesia, men's clubs were built on British models to be a convenient gathering place for men to make key financial and political decisions for their respective communities: blacks and women were not allowed and if invited for special functions, had to enter by a side door. Few citizens have the perspicacity to observe shortcomings of this nature in a legal framework and fewer still have the courage to speak out against the wrongs they perceive: El Saadawi and Meer did so; so did Lydia, the Qumbu warrior woman and Fathiyya.

## **Enactment of Political Principles**

Meer and El Saadawi's criticism of the political and social systems of the day in South Africa and Egypt caused grave discontent and retribution from the patriarchy that controlled their societies. Both women, one a sociologist, the other a medical doctor,



were imprisoned for their political activism. Their incarceration was the enactment of their radical resistance. The behaviour of both women while in prison was determined by their ethical and egalitarian codes. Their belief in a common humanity and the rights of all human beings were transferred into action when they were humiliated, insulted and isolated in jail. The acuity of their critique of government and the precision of their observations guaranteed enmity from patriarchy.

At every turn, Meer resisted the minute instruction of white male hegemonic rule. Although she was determined not to be the victim, the psychological attrition of being in a cell away from her family, did affect her (Meer 2001, 94):

Vesta complains that I am sulking and not talking to the others. I am depressed. I don't want to talk to anyone. I have curled up on my mattress, my eyes are sore, but my problem is my mood. It has taken hold of me and I can't shake it off. Vesta wants to know if I am cross with them. Why will I not talk to them? I have no answer for her; I am sunk in my depression.

In order to break the chains of apartheid, one of the most complete systems of white male hierarchical control, Meer determines to assert her agency as a non-male, a non-Christian and non-white: she has to convince herself that she can psychically resist the urge to capitulate, sink into misery and self-pity (Meer 2001, 94):

Today, for the hell of it, for the fun of it, just to prove to them and to myself that I could, if I wished to, violate the prison rules, I violated one. The gate to our yard was open; I walked out of it and out of our yard.

Meer returns to her own yard: her gallantry has broken the dark spell of a regime which sentences her to being, acting and thinking as an *untermensch*. Her small act of defiance, a single degree of disobedience “for the hell of it, for the fun of it” has assured her inwardly of the justice and righteousness of her cause: both for women and for blacks in South Africa. The war of the will takes a crucial step in Meer's sudden refusal to sink into the despondency that her tormentors wish to impose: “My dark mood is broken. I have entered the world of my fellow detainees again” (Meer 2001, 94). Meer's ability to evade the trap of self-pity, her sheer exercise of the will, intimates a far larger existential war for female agency: entering the world of her fellow inmates tells of the vital solace of women's community and arguably the peculiarly female wisdom of recognising the value of such sisterhood. Her escape from depression is a rite of passage and her re-entry into the company of survivors is a personal badge of honour. Vesta, her fellow prisoner's concern for her is part of a life-saving membrane of care woven between the prisoners. On her first night in prison Meer sinks into despondency but is awoken by the caring knock of Sibongile Kubeka in the next-door cell (Meer 2001, 35):

My headache has returned. I lie cold, sick and miserable in my improvised bed. I turn my face to the wall. I hear a muffled knock. All my senses are on alert. I return the knock. "How are you?" the voice comes in a loud whisper.

This concern and bonding signify much greater issues: an egalitarian social linking that breaches barriers of class, race, profession, gender and the stigma of criminality. Vesta and Sibongile provide evidence of a uniquely female instinct to care, communicate and support and both know instinctively when and how to contact a sister (Fatima) in pain and danger.

Meer repays these moments of care by reaching out to help other women in moments of crisis: she pleads for the teenage girls who are imprisoned on little proof of wrongdoing. Meer is distraught at the sobbing of one of the teenagers and records the confusion, anxiety and desperation she hears (Meer 2001, 101):

I do not know when I fell asleep, but towards morning I woke up to the terrible sobbing of little Baleka locked up by herself. She was calling for her mother and for her home. From across the yard and from across the other cells, Jane Pakathi called to the child in consolation and then called on us to console her.

This statement points to the formation of bonds of support in an organic and spontaneous way which demonstrates the emergence of a new kind of society and a novel way of recording that emergence. Meer is quick to observe that the thirteen-year-old Baleka is braver and more effective in her sobbing than older inmates: Baleka disturbs the peace, challenges the continuity of male domination and refuses to "be a good girl." Meer (2001, 101) remarks astutely:

A child is teaching us to protest and has jerked us out of the way we accommodated our imprisonment. It is no place for her. It is no place for us. Baleka must go on crying, for crying is terrible to hear; it tears the silence and wrings the conscience. "I'm dying, let me out!" Baleka pleads in Sotho through her tears, "Mother! Oh mother! I'm dying!"

Meer senses that Baleka's protest is braver than her own meek "accommodation" of prison life: she is ashamed that she did not, like the young detainee, howl in grief and anger against her incarceration. The child has "jerked us out of the way" of mild acceptance. Meer realises that her protest, the ethical reasons for her being imprisoned are undercut by her slippage into a patriarchal and patronising system which wishes to dull prisoners' senses, anaesthetise women's minds and, mainly, silence them. Baleka's call to her mother awakens responses in the prison and alerts Meer not to relapse into the minutest degree of co-operation with the hierarchy of white men. Meer's resistance is reignited by Baleka's plangent call at night: it is a call to arms. The young teenager's cry represents a general call between women: against barbarity, lack of feeling and chauvinism. The nature of Meer's response cuts across boundaries of class, education, religion and age. A year before her incarceration Meer was elected

the leader of the Black Women's Federation that spearheaded women's resistance to the apartheid regime.

Meer accesses different cultures, classes and languages during her imprisonment and writes a cross-cultural discourse in her prison diary. Jacobs (2004, 179) cites Iser (1996) in defining the emergence of a new form of intercultural expression at a time of acute political crisis:

Operating at the interface between different cultures as well as between a culture's past and its present, such a discourse "establishes a network of interpenetrating relationships" which both allows for "mutual impacting of cultures upon one another" and functions as "a clearing station in which cultural differences are juxtaposed and sorted out" rather than smoothed over.

It could well be claimed that the writings of El Saadawi and Meer written at such nexus points in their countries' histories do create "a network of interpenetrating relationships" which allow "for mutual impacting of cultures." Their inclusion of fellow women in their prison memoirs, specifically women who killed men, rebukes and rewrites a history of exclusion. Their writings create an egalitarian blueprint for a more just society: the centrality of their work makes its critical neglect more inexplicable. Arab critics contend that El Saadawi perpetuates negative Western stereotypes of Arab-Islamic male violence and domination and that her work has been neglected in the Arab world due to its literary shortcomings (El Saadawi 1993).

## **Conclusion**

What binds the warrior woman of Qumbu, El Saadawi, Meer, Lydia and Fathiyyah is a common determination among women across the African continent to resist male oppression. Whether in prison, in the community of letters or societies throughout Africa, women support each other in an often unspoken understanding of female community—the need to oppose a common enemy. In the introduction to *African Women Writing Resistance*, De Hernandez et al. (2010, 6) review commonalities between African women who are alert to their own rights, liberty and autonomy:

For women across the African continent, resistance frequently takes more subtle forms. "To me, resistance means challenging beliefs, traditions, and values that place women below men in terms of being heard, making decisions and choices," says Zambian contributor Ellen Banda-Aaku. Kenyan Ann Kithaka agrees, saying that "resistance means saying 'no' to the patriarchal system and values that continue to disempower, subjugate, and undermine my personal dignity. In all stages of my life, my thoughts and actions have been subject to societal dictates, where 'society' denotes the male figure—my father, my husband, my boss, my brothers, my pastor." Marame Gueye of Senegal defines resistance simply as "the political, moral, intellectual, and spiritual refusal to succumb to any form of violence or oppression."

These similar definitions of resistance are evident in the actions of the warrior woman of Qumbu, El Saadawi and Meer, as illustrated in this article.

Female community may be employed as a legal term that binds the rights of women, exposes gender-biased legislation and chauvinistic social mindsets which caused and continue to cause many women to reach point zero in their lives. Female community speaks of the literary awareness of women who are able to communicate their predicaments through writing and share solutions to male injustice, implementing and living out an ordered homicide in their conscious and sustained resistance. Female community indicates the mutual support and instinctive, often unspoken, apprehension of fellow women's crises. Such material female community is evidenced in El Saadawi's planting of food crops in her small prison vegetable garden, aided by the convicted "murderess" Fathiyya and using a hoe—this time an instrument of bucolic purpose rather than one of blood-stained retribution against men. Meer gives her prison rations to women prisoners convicted of criminal rather than political crimes, although such actions are forbidden (2001, 95). But possibly the single incident that most clearly encapsulates the indomitable and uniquely female quality of women's particular type of community and resistance is best left in Meer's own words as she describes the celebration of fellow inmate Jeani's birthday (Meer 2001, 145):

Our cell doors are opened and we pour out in our night clothes and sing and dance, "IjaalileImothando Section Ten"—"There is love in the jail in Section Ten". We give Jeanie her skirt and cards. The dancing continues. I arrange the flowers. The dancers dance to the backyard to alert the detainees in Winnie's yard. I leave my flower arranging to join them but stop when Winnie [Madikizela-Mandela] and company, still in their night gowns, come dancing through the gate into our yard. We are wild with joy, waving our hands, singing and dancing towards us, and then we join together, forming one long chain.

This particular type of resistance, joyful celebration of female comradeship, is as effective as invective, armed struggle or exile. To raise this energy of happiness in one of the grimmest penitentiaries, Johannesburg gaol, during a time of one of the most systemic and brutal regimes of white male suppression, is a potent testimony to the nature of female resistance. "One long chain," a concatenation of unbreakable strength between like-minded women intent upon homicide in every sense.

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