

Review

Fatima Meer (2017) *Memories of Love and Struggle*. Cape Town: Kwela Books

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Fatima Meer's book is well illustrated and, besides the narrative, has an extensive apparatus: an Introduction by Shamim Meer, a Foreword by Winnie Mandela, a glossary of Gujarati words, lists of the Meer clan members, a chronology of Fatima's life, a list of her publications, and endnotes. While Shamim Meer begins her Introduction with 'My mother started work on her autobiography in the year 2000' (15), the title provides a more accurate descriptor in its reference to 'memories', for this book is not a fully-fledged autobiography in which the first-person narrator-writer undertakes to tell the truth of how she became the person and achieved the understanding of herself that is put forward in the writing. What Fatima Meer does undertake in her life-writing is to provide, as her title suggests, various memories of certain aspects of her life, but without profound inquiry into how or why she became the remarkable person that she was. She is rightly remembered today as a fearless leader in a struggle for human rights against overwhelming, racialised odds, and as one who continued, perhaps even more remarkably, that fight after the liberating side that she had once supported (the African National Congress) had ostensibly won the battle (when it became the first democratically elected government of South Africa in 1994) but since then has seemed to neglect its obligations to the poor and dispossessed.

It is not that Meer evades the question of how she developed her vision and courage; rather her narration suggests that for her such matters were simply a non-question. While she details her growing involvement in the opposition to racism and to the Nationalist government's post-1948 hardening of attitudes as it developed its policies into apartheid proper, she takes her ideals and her obligations for granted. She was simply

following the example of her family: 'My family bubbled with the energy of the Passive Resistance Campaign' (105). She recounts, for example, that in 1946 her uncle arranged for her to give her first public speech at a mass meeting (she was then an 18 year-old schoolgirl) in Red Square; she was happy to comply and proud of her success. Her assumptions imply that, as she saw it, all thoughtful people oppressed by racism had no alternative but to dedicate their lives to the Struggle, but of course Fatima Meer's choices and her abilities were not those of the vast majority.

Sadly Fatima Meer did not live to complete her life-story. She had a heart attack and a series of strokes which made writing and, later, dictation increasingly difficult, and although her daughter Shamim, with Ramesh Harcharan who had worked with her at the Institute for Black Research, and other members of her family assisted her, it proved impossible for her to complete the work beyond her account of the 1960s. The last few chapters have been provided by Shamim working alone and are, as she says, taken largely from Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary: one hundred and thirteen days 1976* (2001). These chapters are also written in the first-person with Shamim ventriloquising her mother's voice (much as Fatima did for her husband in his 'autobiography' *A Fortunate Man* in 2002).

The opening chapters about Fatima's childhood offer a series of often charming vignettes rather than sustained accounts of development and are organised around the various places in which the family – or, more properly, part of the *kutum* (clan) – was living. Thus a chapter on Jeewa's Building in Grey Street is followed by one on Wentworth, then one on Convent Lane (in the city centre again), then suburban Ritson Road and finally Pinetown. It is a focus which demonstrates, without explicit articulation by Meer, the loss that such a family suffered once the choice of where (and how) to live was taken away from them by the Group Areas Act. In these early chapters, the first fascinating story that Meer tells is of the two marriages of her father, Moosa Meer: the first to Khatija in Surat, India (where he too had been born), and the second to Rachael Farrel who was born in Kimberley into a family with Irish, Dutch and Russian antecedents. Moosa Meer had left Khatija in Surat in order to make enough money to bring her to live with him in South Africa when, in the course of his work, he met Rachael who was an orphaned child, unwanted and bullied by her relatives. Moosa rescued Rachael and her younger brother and marriage followed soon after; Fatima was their first child. When Khatija came from Surat with her five-year-old son, they all settled happily in Waschbank and there

Rachael's Indianisation began ... her transformation into Amina appears to have been rapid. She was soon indistinguishable from Ma [Khatija] and the other aunts in my clan in her Indianness. She spoke Gujarati exactly like the others did. Amina struck roots in the Meer family ... and nobody asked any questions She related as sister-in-law to every one of my father's generation and was respected by all as their own. (37-38)

The clan's conviviality was not felt by Meer herself who says that because she was often on the receiving end of her birth-mother's short temper and because she did not know Amina's story until after her death (being left, therefore, without a means of comprehending this woman's temperament), she turned by choice to her senior mother. As she tells this story, Meer regrets her childhood reactions for she knows that Amina's is an extraordinary example of dignified welcome to be set against the widespread racial prejudice of the day. Such stories seem seldom to have surfaced in South African annals. But at the same time she is content simply to trace her childhood experience, leaving it to her reader to reflect on its possible psychological and its definable, wider political implications.

From her headstrong childhood in a crowded and unusual family life, Meer presents herself as a natural community fund-raiser, political organiser and leader. When it comes to her marriage however, and this is the second fascinating family story which she tells with considerable candour, her love for Ismail is presented as more complex in its evolving, especially as she had been accustomed to regard him as her uncle who belonged to an older generation. He was ten years older and had often played the role of arbiter in matters such as her education. Theirs were two powerful personalities and they did not always find it easy to adjust to each other. Ismail does not seem to have shared the view that his wife should be a subservient home-body, but he did expect his home to be run according to his tastes: Fatima had to eat what he liked, cease wearing slacks when entertaining her students friends, and stop riding a bicycle. Meer sums up their relationship: 'This was ... the story of my marriage – tempers and tears, deep hurt and deep love. Ismail was a passionate lover almost to the end of his life, but he was also a possessive, domineering husband' (139). As Ismail Meer was always proud of his wife's community activities and political work, it does not seem to have been threatening to their relationship for Fatima to move steadily into the political limelight once the banning orders and various prison sentences to which he was subjected effectively prevented him from all public activity.

Meer tells of her love and marriage to Ismail and of her growing political involvement in Section III, under the title 'A heart aflame', thus indicating that both areas of life were products of a united passion, a shared idealism. The chief objective of her writing is to lodge her political activity within her relationship to and her love for her husband. The difficulty they found in accepting each other's faults and tastes would probably be shared by most powerful personalities when each partner refuses subservience, and Meer could have written a profoundly feminist analysis of her marriage. But she is content to leave some of the apparent inconsistencies in her general demand for independence for her reader to puzzle over. For instance she reports that when Ismail proposed that they have an ante-nuptial contract for their marriage she was upset and 'reacted to it as a document of separation when we were about to come together' (157). But for all her attempts at yielding and wish for perfect unity of spirit, she could not become the person her husband wanted. Meer tells of the times when her husband was able to come home during the preliminary hearings of the Treason Trial, and of how he was drawn into fault-finding despite his knowledge that it was a waste of their valuable time together:

... on his return to Johannesburg he would beg forgiveness. But come the next visit and it would be the same. Ismail wanted me to be like him – disciplined, tidy and orderly. As much as I loved him, I did not want to become like him. I was I, the woman he had married. (170)

It would seem that Meer was unusually brave, resolute and forthright, and in some ways tenaciously difficult, in more than one area of life.

In the course of her account of family and political life, Meer also tells of her academic achievements and the books she published, her friendship with Winnie and Nelson Mandela, the lives of her growing children and how she supervised the building of their home in Burnwood Road, the deaths of her parents and the terrible loss of her son Rashid who had come back to South Africa after a long exile in Britain. The lasting impression that she wants to leave is of the utter dependence she and Ismail had on each other, and for it she uses a tender, moving ending. Ismail is buried in the same grave as Rashid: 'I go as often as I can and I read the *fateha* for both of them – the two most important men in my life, my husband and my son. I hope to be buried in the same grave' (236). Like other life-stories of the great, this one is carefully managed and is told with considerable grace.