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In the heart of the country: the auto/biographies of Ayesha Dawood and Fatima Meer

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ABSTRACT

South African struggle auto/biography has been a male-dominated genre in which the political has correspondingly dominated the personal. These life narratives have presented the formation of relatively coherent, autonomous selfhoods constructing a stable narrative of anti-Apartheid political history. Male struggle auto/biography has since the 1980s been counterbalanced by female auto/biography, existing in the margins of social and historical discourse. In the post-2000 period, a number of struggle auto/biographies have been published which appear to shift the prevailing norms of the genre to highlight the relationality of subject constitution, in which the family has been presented as the most significant matrix of self-formation. The proposed paper considers the curious case of two recent auto/biographies that position eros at the heart of activist self-realisation. Inextricably connected romantic and political relationships are tracked in the life narrative by Zubeida Jaffer, *Love in the Time of Treason: The Life Story of Ayesha Dawood*, and Fatima Meer's *Memories of Love and Struggle*. The article questions the significance of the foregrounding of intimacy in the constitution and the representation of the female (activist) subject.

KEYWORDS

Anti-apartheid life narrative; Zubeida Jaffer; romantic love; subject formation; relationality; feminism

Love in the Time of Treason: The Life Story of Ayesha Dawood (2008),¹ a biography by veteran journalist and anti-apartheid activist Zubeida Jaffer, and *Fatima Meer: Memories of Love and Struggle* (2017), a posthumously published autobiography by the internationally known South African sociologist and member of the liberation movement,² are two recently published life narratives that take their place in the very densely populated landscape of South African self-writing. Jaffer is an experienced auto/biographer, who infuses her life narratives with the insights of literature and journalism. Jaffer's life writing oeuvre includes her autobiography, *Our Generation* (2003), written before *Love in the Time of Treason*, and, more recently, *Beauty of the Heart: The Life and Times of Charlotte Manna Maxeke* (2016). By contrast, Fatima Meer's sociology is strongly determined by a biographical impulse influencing the collective "life narratives" she writes, for example, her first work, *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (1969), but also individual "biographies" like the often alluded to *The Trial of Andrew Zondo: A Sociological Insight* (1987). Of her twenty published books, the life narratives *stricto*

sensu authored, mediated, or produced by Meer include two versions of the authorised biography of Nelson Mandela (1988, 1990a), her prison diary (Meer 2001), her husband's autobiography (2002), and, finally, her own autobiography (2017).

In general, South African conditions appear to have been and continue to be highly conducive to reflections on various lives, including the auto/biographies of sportsmen, business and community leaders, celebrities, educationists, writers, artists, and humanitarian workers. A life writing sub-genre that emerges quite distinctly and that has received the most media and scholarly attention, is the sub-genre of "struggle" auto/biography which documents the lives of prominent anti-apartheid activists, of which the best-known autobiography is probably Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), published in the year of South Africa's first democratic election. Struggle auto/biography has, for the most part, brought the lives of already prominent male leaders and activists further into the spotlight, and has been identified as largely textually constituting the figure of the autonomous, teleologically determined national subject refracted through dominant European enlightenment auto/biographical textual practices (Rassool 2010). However, since the publication of Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* in 1985, and Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* in 1989, the number of struggle life narratives by or about politically active women has increased.³ Desiree Lewis, reviewing *Our Generation* (2003), the earlier autobiography by Zubeida Jaffer, and *Love and Courage: A Story of Insubordination* (2007), the autobiography of trade unionist and former African National Congress member of parliament Pregs Govender,⁴ suggests that women's life writing has the "potential to subvert official state-driven and masculinist narratives of nation and community" (Lewis 2017, 151). For Lewis, the autobiographies by Jaffer and Govender furthermore "unravel difficult personal experiences around, for example, marriage and family life, or deal frankly with depression, illness and spiritual despair; in so doing they unveil silences that a previous school of black women auto-biographers were unwilling or unable to address" (151). It is against this backdrop that the two life narratives being studied here need to be located.

Women's autobiographical acts, Susan Stanford Friedman has argued are generally more relational in their individuation than the apparently self-constituting formation presented by traditional male autobiography, which does not "recognize the significance of interpersonal relationships and community" in self-definition (Friedman 1988, 56). Relationality highlights the idea that the self is not formed independently but is constituted in dynamic interaction with an "other" or with multiple "others." In the context of feminist theory, relationality was first explored by psychologist Nancy Chodorow (1978) with an interest specifically in the mother-daughter relationship. Relationality among women more generally was first considered in the context of life writing by Mary G. Mason (1980) and given detailed theoretical expansion by Friedman. In the landscape of South African struggle auto/biography, along with the emergence of portraits of female activists in the 1980 s, the period post-1994 has also seen the development of narratives of the lives of political subjects embedded in the stories of their families. Gillian Slovo's *Every Secret Thing* (1997) and Elinor Sisulu's *Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime* (2002) are examples of this type of relational narrative.

The two life narratives under consideration, *Love in the Time of Treason* and *Memories of Love and Struggle*, are exceptional in the history of South African struggle auto/biography since they present the development of political women's identities in relation

not only to family, but also, more prominently, in relation to the men they love. In this sense, they underscore the intersection of the political with the most intimately personal, but also, strategically in the current period, the betrayal of personal ethics by political opportunism, corruption, and power-hunger that threatens to collapse the democracy struggled for by these two women and people like them. Although a deep feminist consciousness infuses the writing and practices of both Jaffer, who constructs the textual subjectivity of Dawood, and Meer, the intimately personal in the form of the love relationships with the husbands is not presented as explicitly political in the texts. This may be contrasted with the approach in the autobiography by Pregs Govender, referred to above, where the chapter that deals with her first marriage to trade unionist, Jayendra Naidoo, is explicitly titled, “The Personal is Political,” and foregrounds the almost inevitable unfair division of labour in the marriage, especially once the children are born. (The title of the Govender autobiography itself, *Love and Courage*, derives from the Hindi meaning of Govender’s full first name, Pregaluxmi, where, as the autobiography explains, “prega” means courage and “luxmi” means love as compassion rather than erotic love.) The central significance of romantic attachment in the conception of the lives of Ayesha Dawood and Fatima Meer, however, is signalled by the prominence given to love in the titles of the two life narratives, *Love in the Time of Treason* and *Memories of Love and Struggle*, where “love” refers specifically to eros.

Jaffer’s *Love in the Time of Treason* is the more generically fluid of the two life narratives under consideration since it reads so much like a realist novel. It joins the ranks of a better-known South African biofiction, namely, Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003), where the iconic Winnie Madikizela-Mandela figures as a complex Penelope in relation to the political “odyssey” of her husband, Nelson Mandela. Of course, one cannot insist too dogmatically on the distinction between biographical forms based on fact and the novel as a fictional literary genre since the origins of both these forms is mutually constitutive, as the claims to the facticity of many eighteenth-century novels suggest. Problems with defining biographical forms and the generic flexibility of life writing that almost inevitably employs the literary techniques of the novel are historically tracked by Domna C. Stanton. Stanton quotes an anonymous scholar of life narrative as suggesting that: “The way in which the illusion of the past [of the biographical subject] is presented . . . is the ‘form’ the life takes” (Stanton 1998, 135). Thus, Stanton summarises that life narratives were “produced through a set of conventions similar to those of the realistic novel, the effect or impression of a referential narrative [where] facts were artifacts” (135). The biofictional dimension of *Love in the Time of Treason* is clearly evident when one compares the fully developed biography with an earlier instantiation. *Love in the Time of Treason* is not Jaffer’s first biography of Ayesha Dawood. An earlier, much shorter biography with the title *The Story of Bibi Dawood of Worcester* (1991) exists in the form of a slim booklet in the Mayibuye Library Series, using the nickname by which the biographical subject was familiarly known. This biography is a lot more conventional in that it tracks the political events and involvements of the subject’s life, but it is unconventional for the way in which it foregrounds the biographer in the opening sections. The broader community of which Bibi Dawood is a part continues to remember her despite her departure on an exit permit twenty-two years before Jaffer researches her story to write the initial sketch biography, which would later become the fully elaborated life narrative. Jaffer remembers her own “parents

travelling to Worcester to bid farewell to this woman” (1991, 7). Jaffer emphasises both her desire and her obligation to tell Bibi Dawood’s story – “I wanted to tell her story [...] I needed to tell her story” (7). Unlike *Love in the Time of Treason*, however, the earlier narrative is not primarily structured around the marital relationship; in fact, the sections that recount the meeting and relationship of the husband and wife are inconspicuously nested in the broader activist narrative.

Neither does the earlier biography highlight the relationship with, and symbolic value of, Nelson Mandela as the more substantial 2008 biography does. *Love in the Time of Treason* carries the subtitle, *The Life Story of Ayesha Dawood*, and the blurb on the back cover, which underscores the profile of this anti-apartheid activist through her links with Nelson Mandela, suggests outwardly that this is a biography of a notable political woman and member of the African National Congress. On the back cover of *Love in the Time of Treason*, we are told: “It is 1997 ... Political activist Ayesha Dawood is standing at Worcester train station, patiently waiting for the Blue Train to arrive. On board is Nelson Mandela, whom Ayesha is hoping to see for the first time in more than forty years.” (The title of the biography for international distribution *On Trial With Mandela: The Life Story of Ayesha Dawood* similarly takes advantage of the connection with the iconic Mandela.) Likewise, the prologue and epilogue present the episode, alluded to in the blurb, that takes place in 1997, after South Africa’s first democratic election, a scene on Worcester Station, a small town near Cape Town where Dawood lived her life apart from her twenty-three-year exile in India. The scene at the station brings Nelson Mandela, who is on honeymoon with Graça Machel on the Blue Train, and Ayesha Dawood together again for the first time since their meeting at the Treason Trial in 1957.⁵ The narrative of *Love in the Time of Treason*, beginning and ending with the re-encounter at Worcester train station, heightens the sense that one is reading a novel.

The biography thus is encompassed by this encounter as by a ring, most significantly, the wedding ring, an image that occurs also on the front cover of the book. Mandela represents the struggle to which Ayesha’s life was crucially bound, but Mandela also represents a philosophy of romantic love that is as important as, but also in some ways at odds with, political struggle. The two are passions, both of which are vital, but cannot be reconciled in the narrative. The prologue and epilogue to the biography present dual images of affection. In the prologue, there is Nelson whose hand, amidst the fanfare, “reaches for his companion, Graça, like that of a love-smitten teenager” (Jaffer 2008, 10). And there is Ayesha who looks up at Yusuf, her husband, who has his arm “protectively around her shoulders,” and “feels a rush of gratitude filling her heart” (10). The epilogue presents Mandela embracing Ayesha, who has been brought to his attention by the mayor of Worcester, and Ayesha then reaches out to Yusuf. At that moment when Ayesha embraces the free Nelson Mandela, the text presents Yusuf as feeling that Ayesha “was truly his at last, no longer hankering after a country and a movement from which she had been ripped so abruptly” (220).

The use of literary techniques in the composition of *Love in the Time of Treason*, as is evident above, is more striking than in any of Jaffer’s other auto/biographies, including the book-length works. The title, of course, alludes to Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1989), which, against the backdrop of postcolonial Latin American politics, tells the tale of Florentino Ariza whose flame of love burns bright for Fermina Daza over the lifetime of this forlorn but curiously charismatic lover, to be required only

in old age. Similarly, Yusuf's love for Ayesha has about it the incontrovertibility of destiny, and even though they meet and enjoy marital happiness, it is short-lived since Ayesha is also "married" to the cause of justice in the South African political context. Ayesha's marriage to the struggle results in the couple's separation for extended periods when Yusuf is incarcerated as an illegal immigrant on false pretext, and when they are political exiles in India, and Yusuf is forced to become a migrant worker in Kuwait. Ayesha's commitment to anti-apartheid politics is contrasted with her romantic bond, and politics takes precedence over the personal when she "betrays" her husband by refusing to do what would be expedient for her family. Like Florentino Ariza in Marquez's novel of love against the backdrop of postcolonial politics, Ayesha's husband, Yusuf, remains faithful to her till the end.

Curiously, the narrative proper does not begin with Ayesha Dawood, the South African woman activist who purportedly is the subject of the biography, it begins instead with her future husband in India. The first line of the woman's biography that reads like a novel introduces her husband: "Yusuf Mukadam woke to the sound of a cock crowing outside his home" (Jaffer 2008, 13). Yusuf Mukadam is a young man of marriageable age in a cultural context where marriage is an expectation and an inevitability like ageing. He knows that he will marry; but unlike the village norm where a suitable spouse is selected by the extended family to be approved by the bride or groom, Yusuf knows that he is "not interested in marrying just anyone" (20). Playing on the cliché of "love at first sight," which perhaps in the consistency of the need for its application is an enduring truth, Yusuf is struck by the young Ayesha who has come to the village to visit her paternal grandmother, the condition set by her parents for her visit on behalf of the African National Congress to Denmark, Hungary, and Rumania. Even though Ayesha hardly notices him, the attraction for Yusuf is instant and incontrovertible. The young woman is his destiny, even though he is warned by his cousin that she would not make a good wife since her husband would never be her "centre" (20), given that she is married to politics.

Since he cannot get Ayesha out of his mind, Yusuf joins the merchant navy as a cook, holding out for a voyage to Cape Town where he hopes to meet her. When the opportunity arises more than two years after their first encounter, he sends a letter asking to be met at the docks. However, since Ayesha has been detained as one of the activists charged during Treason Trial proceedings in Johannesburg, the letter goes unopened, leading Yusuf to think his overtures have been rejected. Even though other opportunities to marry arise, he avoids them all, hoping against all hope that he will finally be united with Ayesha. About six years after his first trip to South Africa, the ship on which he works makes the voyage south, this time docking in Durban, where he jumps ship, travelling overland to Cape Town and then to Worcester. He visits Ayesha's family home and announces his intention with the bold statement: "I have come to marry you" (Jaffer 2008, 109). Ayesha, who, at 32, is a year older than Yusuf, has been hankering after marriage, envying the relationships she has seen among other activists at the Treason Trial. She is struck by the fact that Nelson Mandela, amidst the pressures of the trial, is caught up in a whirlwind romance with the young social worker Winnie Madikizela, and that the lawyer Ismail Meer finds consolation and hope in the letters from his wife, Fatima Meer. (These incidents constitute an important form of "interbiographical" reference.) Because she wants the joy she has seen in other activists' love lives, she is

filled with a quiet certainty that this man who has turned up on her father's doorstep is her future, and agrees to marry him:

She looked into his face and the intensity of his gaze communicated a message to her which translated into an instant realisation. This is the man I am going to marry, she thought. It was inexplicable. She didn't feel a rush of love, she simply felt a calmness unlike anything she had felt before. She could not compare it to any feeling. She had become so accustomed to living her life on the edge of danger that she had lost all sense of what it meant to be completely calm, to be completely unaware of the past or the future. Every day her mind was occupied with the crisis gripping the country. Seldom did a day pass without her thoughts going out to Mandela and the others who continued to endure the endlessness of the Treason Trial. (Jaffer 2008, 1108)

Even though Ayesha does not feel a “rush of love” when her future husband proposes, love develops in the course of their marital relationship, attesting the commonly held view about love and marriage that is put into the mouth of Yusuf's grandmother in the biography. The idea of love as the sole acknowledged foundation for marriage is a culturally specific idea that develops in the modern west and is exported through colonialism and then globalisation to the rest of the world. The grandmother echoes the folk wisdom that modern marriage is like a pot that boils furiously at the beginning and then cools down, while non-modern marriage is like a pot that starts cold and then gradually heats up. In its literary construction, the biography foregrounds the unusual coincidence of both cultural models of love and marriage in this relationship – the attraction on Yusuf's side is instant and precedes marriage, while Ayesha develops an attraction for Yusuf over the course of their marriage.

After the birth of two children and one stillbirth, Yusuf is arrested as an illegal immigrant which is a pretext by the apartheid government to blackmail Ayesha into spying on the liberation movement. She refuses, placing her ethical responsibility to political relationships ahead of her personal relationship with her husband (In this refusal Ayesha shows the strength and resolve of her unmarried life where she remained unbroken even after extended periods of solitary confinement after arrests). As a consequence of her refusal to cooperate, Yusuf is deported, and Ayesha is exiled to India with him. Because of the poverty of his natal village, Yusuf is again separated from Ayesha since he has to earn his family's keep as a migrant worker in Kuwait. Yusuf only feels that Ayesha's attachment to him is exclusive and that she is no longer married to the struggle, when Ayesha embraces Mandela at Worcester station in 1997, after the couple return to a new democratic South Africa.

The highly literary construction of the biography is evident from the careful attention to plot structure and the fleshing out of people as full characters with deep interiority. Unlike most auto/biographies, this life narrative does not provide a timeline of biographical developments and political events. The Ayesha Dawood biography is written as a love story, but it is not the conceptualisation of love presented in popular romance novels, modelled on the nineteenth-century European templates centred on aspirant heroines whose stories end in a happy marriage, a sub-genre finding its most significant literary precursor in the novels of Jane Austen. If one needs to find a literary precursor for Jaffer's biography, an ancient Greek example comes to mind. Chariton's *Challirhoë*, tells the story of a married couple who are destined for each other, and who face extended separation and numerous other obstructions to a love that is uncomplicated and

complete. This plot structure, where there is a symmetry and an equality in the statuses of the lovers, is virtually unique to the group of ancient Greek narratives of which *Challirhoë* forms a part (Konstan 1994, 6–7).

Even though Fatima Meer's *Memories of Love and Struggle* follows the conventions of life writing more closely, it also places romantic love at the heart of the narrative. The book is made up of four parts, the first three of which could be considered to constitute the autobiography proper. The final section was written with assistance after Meer had a stroke and is quite fragmentary, picking up on meaningful experiences, significant events, and important people without strong continuity. The biography closes, however, with a meditation on the relationship with her husband, Ismail Meer, written after his death in 2002. The more coherent life narrative presented in parts one to three presents, according to life narrative convention, the life of a subject from family pre-history and birth, to the reflections gained with maturity in later years. These sections are titled: "A Part of Me: The Family of my Birth," "Bluer than the Blue Sky: My Childhood," and "A Heart Aflame: A Career and a Family of My Own." It is the third section, "A Heart Aflame", however, which narrates falling in love and getting married that retrospectively illuminates the preceding sections, and to which the narrative seems to build up.

Meer's suggestion that eros is the most meaningful and most powerful influence in the constitution of the subject, may be identified in her foregrounding of romantic relationships in the earlier authorised biography of Nelson Mandela, where the relationship between Nelson and Winnie Mandela is highlighted, and the couple's Robben Island love letters are published. The significance of romantic love in lives in general, and in activist lives in particular, is foregrounded again in a 1990 article for *Ebony* magazine penned by Meer. The article is titled, "The Love Letters of Nelson Mandela," and refers to Nelson Mandela's refusal of the recommendation of his comrades in the African National Congress to exclude the letters from his biography, saying "... that a revolutionary is, among other things, a father and a husband and that revolutionaries fight, among other things, for the right to love and to make music and poetry" (Meer 1990b, 99). Meer continues in the magazine article: "It was, in fact, this love, stronger than iron bars, that helped him endure, and the letters introduce us to one of the great couples of the century and one of the great love stories of all times" (99). The breakdown of the Mandela marriage shortly after Nelson Mandela's release after twenty-seven years of incarceration does not detract from the idea of the importance of love (not necessarily monogamous for life, precluding divorce) which is underscored by the loving portrait of Nelson Mandela and Graça Machel used by Jaffer to open and close the Dawood biography, as discussed above.

In some ways in the narrative, Meer's early years, fascinating and unusual though they may be, and her exceptional achievements are all understood refracted through her relationship with her husband, Ismail. Meer grows up in an extended family in Durban, including her mother, referred to as "Amina Ma" (to distinguish her as the second wife from "Ma", the first wife, who was her father's cousin from Surat in India). Amina Ma, whose given name was Rachel Farrel, was of Irish-Dutch and Russian Jewish descent, and her poverty and miserable circumstances precipitate her marriage to Meer's father, Moosa, who rescues her from penury. Rachel Farrel embraces Islam, learns to speak Gujerati, dresses as the other women in the family do, and to all intents and purposes, becomes one of the Meer clan. Meer presents the extended family as the matrix,

which forms the bold, outspoken, strong-willed person Fatima becomes in both personal and political contexts. She gives her first public political speech at the age of seventeen and is involved in the Defiance Campaign and numerous other social justice and upliftment initiatives. As a consequence of her activities, she is arrested and detained on numerous occasions. But this does not prevent her from becoming one of the first female university academics of colour, and the author of numerous books.

A significant figure in this family is her “uncle,” Ismail Meer, actually her father’s cousin, who is ten years her senior. Big Ismail, as he familiarly known to distinguish him from Meer’s brother, Ismail, is the person who probably exerts the greatest influence on her life. He plays a significant role when the family arranges for Fatima to study away from home in Johannesburg, ensuring that they do not back out of the bold decision of allowing a young girl from a conservative family out into the wide world. He also keeps a watchful eye on her when she is in Johannesburg. In a chapter titled “Falling in Love,” Meer recounts: “Big Ismail was always in my life. He was there when I became aware of myself as a person and as a woman. I was aware of him as I was aware of my parents” (Meer 2017, 130). Fatima’s individuation thus is linked more specifically with her uncle (and future husband) than with the national political narrative into which she enters, formed by a polygynous and extended family.

The avuncular relationship transforms quite suddenly into an amorous one, though apparently not without premeditation on the part of Ismail, on overhearing a comment from his sister when he first leaves Durban to take Fatima to Wits University. His elder sister, Ayesha, says to the family gathered: “That is a pair crafted in heaven” (Meer 2017, 133). When Meer returns to Durban to complete her degree in Sociology at the University of Natal, Ismail kisses her when he fetches her from a lecture. This is the moment that transforms their family relationship into the relationship of lovers: “He was the first man who had kissed me and I cultivated the idea that he had claimed me and there could not be another man in my life” (131). The family is somewhat taken aback by the announcement of their love, not so much because they feel that Ismail has abused his position of authority over his “niece,” but rather because traditional protocols have not been followed allowing the groom’s immediate family to initiate marriage negotiations. This relationship too, like the Dawood–Mukadam relationship, troubles the dichotomy of modern love marriage and non-modern, “loveless,” arranged marriage: the marriage is a variation of the traditionally encouraged cousin marriage, but, unexpectedly, is also a marriage that collapses the dichotomy of marriage as a means of “functional” social reproduction and love-marriage as a relationship ideal.

Unlike the marriage of Ayesha and Yusuf in *Love in the Time of Treason*, the Meer relationship is a tempestuous one which, nevertheless, lasts almost fifty years because of the deep bond of love that Ismail’s habit of perfectionism and his temper cannot break. Fatima is aware of his character flaws while courting: “I also learnt during our courtship that Ismail’s temper was not to be played with; it was to be feared, and above all, if I were to commit myself to him, I would have to accommodate it” (Meer 2017, 137). Soon after their marriage, Ismail’s irritation at Fatima’s shortcomings as a housekeeper and hostess make him gradually delegate these roles to others. A conservative sense of propriety also leads him to forbid Fatima from entertaining her student friends and riding a bicycle into town. Even when he returns home intermittently during the Treason Trial, where he meets Ayesha Dawood, and shares his correspondence with his wife as recounted in the

Dawood biography, Ismail's mood shifts unpredictably from joy about being home to anger at all the little things he finds amiss there:

On the weekends he visited us in Durban, Ismail would come home happy, but in a short while his mind would travel to his worries and his anxieties and the little things that he found out of order. Our short time together would be marred by these fault findings. He would realize the time he had wasted in this manner, and 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. (Meer 2017, 170)

One can read the tensions in the visits as a product of the fears, anxieties, and psychological disturbances of the husband hounded by the security police and the pressures of court proceedings. This is a pattern one discovers in other activist relationships also. But, in the case of the Meers, the tensions exceed that explanation and seem instead to be the consequence of differences of character between the spouses. Despite the differences, however, Fatima Meer's autobiography without doubt constitutes the romantic relationship with her husband as the pulse and pole of her existence. The autobiography closes with Meer's meditations, two years after Ismail's death in 2000, on the occasion of her wedding anniversary:

The most important relationship in my life is with Ismail. It is today, March 11 2002, our 51st wedding anniversary. If there is no thought after death, then his marriage with me ended with his death and he lived with me for 49 years, but my marriage with him continues. It is not of the day itself I think, but of the love that the day brought into my life for all of the years I lived with Ismail. I thank him for those years.

Today when I recall my relationship with Ismail, it is the loving that dominates. I think of all the loving and companionship, of his great patience with me, and his tolerance of my faults, which are many. We had a remarkably happy marriage. (Meer 2017, 235)

Meer's reflections on her life in her winter years thus revolve around the complicated relationship with her husband. That Meer accepted her husband's flaws are certainly not an indication of a weakness in her character, which is defined by and is well known for its risk-taking outspokenness and courage.

Indeed, most of the eulogies on Fatima's death in 2010 underscore her principled commitment to social justice even where it meant challenging African National Congress policies and comrades. A tribute by political economist, Patrick Bond, and social activist, Orlean Naidoo, shortly after Meer's death, for example, suggests that "when the ANC government embraced neoliberalism Meer threw in her lot with the poor and the oppressed who, despite the change of government, continued to bear the brunt of inequality and exploitation" (Bond and Naidoo 2010, n. p.). They then proceed to document Meer's grassroots support and organisation of residents threatened with eviction in the impoverished area of Chatsworth, Durban, in 2000, even though it meant standing up to local African National Congress leaders. Fellow South African sociologist, Ashwin Desai, suggests furthermore that Meer's boldness extended disciplinary boundaries from a purely theoretical sociology to a public activist and then radical sociology, which shifted the epistemic boundaries of the discipline. Desai notes that in Meer's research and thought, she "repeatedly focused on black women as a potential radical subjectivity" (Desai 2010, 123).

The love as conceptualised in the autobiography, furthermore, is not a love based on the philosophy of eros which sees the partners as two halves of a lost whole – a tradition going back to Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium* and taken up in a slightly different form in the nineteenth-century European ideas of mutualism in marriage. Neither is the relationship defined by Islamic conceptions of marriage, a faith which both husband and wife adhere to till the end, where the intimacies of partners are a reflection of the love of God, and gendered roles and responsibilities are scripturally defined and guided. To the end, romantic love is defined in Meer’s autobiography as a binding relationship of independent (though somewhat compromising) opposites, as Fatima suggests in response to her husband’s attempts to change her in the extract above: “I was I, the woman he married.”

Ismail Meer’s 2002 autobiography, *A Fortunate Man*, published posthumously after his death in 2000, and prepared over a few years before his death, provides an interesting counterpoint to Fatima Meer’s autobiography. The autobiography of the husband, reflecting on the same extended family background and life course as his wife, appears far more overdetermined by political relationships and history than that of the wife. Chapter titles like “Passive Resistance,” “Violence and Unity,” “The Defiance Campaign,” “Freedom Charter,” and so on, read more like a timeline of South African history than a reflection on an individual life. Although the wife is referred to throughout the narrative, the relationship itself is covered in about seven pages in the subsections, “I Court and Marry ‘Behn’ [sister]” and “Our Wedding Day,” and is largely events – rather than affect-driven. The point is not so much that Fatima was not important to Ismail, but rather the question suggested is – what are the changed social and political contexts that oblige the wife’s life narrative to present a fundamentally alternative way of textually constituting the activist life?

Love in the Time of Treason and *Memories of Love and Struggle* were not written independently of each other, and there clearly was authorial contact. For example, Fatima Meer’s commendation of *Love in the Time of Treason* is included on the front cover. The recognition of cross-referencing in the texts is reinforced not so much by intertextual allusion, but by “interbiographical” allusion. Ismail Meer’s autobiography is one of the sources Jaffer acknowledges as part of her research, most significantly, one suspects, for the detail of what transpired at the Treason Trial. Jaffer highlights the Treason Trial, not so much for its importance in national history, but for its importance in various personal histories. Ayesha Dawood, a “small” person from a small country town in the Cape is thrown together with internationally known political figures. She meets Ismail Meer who notices her because of her sari and is surprised that she is a member of the African National Congress, an organisation to which he had struggled to gain membership since he was not black. But race is played down to foreground the love relationships of the trialists instead. Ayesha’s meeting with Ismail Meer at the Treason Trial stands out in her memory since he talks to her about missing his wife who stayed behind in Durban to keep his legal practice running. He shows her the stack of correspondence between the spouses, and reading the love letters causes her embarrassment and confusion. Ismail writes to his wife: “I greet you, my wife, on this day of our anniversary . . . the most important day of my life, for on this day the most beautiful woman in the world became my wife. Without her, this world and everything in it become meaningless. I love you” (Jaffer 2008, 70). In response to this letter, Fatima Meer replies: “Six years ago today, we

pledged to preserve our love and that love grew into something we never dreamed of, our beautiful children . . . I was a young, immature girl when you first kindled feelings of love in me and now that love has grown into a fire that death alone can extinguish. I love you more than ever before” (70). (*Memories of Love and Struggle* contains additional love letters between Fatima and Ismail Meer, written in the period of their separation at the time of the Treason Trial.) But in reading the love letters between husband and wife, Jaffer also presents Ayesha feeling a deep yearning for a similar romantic attachment to a person, rather than only to the cause of opposing the system of “grave injustice” that has “fired her up” and that “opened her heart” (68–69).

Likewise, Ayesha’s experience at the Treason Trial is filtered through the personal life of a national hero who embodies her dream of democracy and freedom – Nelson Mandela. The years over which the Treason Trial extends are also the years in which Mandela’s marriage to his first wife, Evelyn, breaks up and his intense relationship with Winnie Madikizela begins. Ayesha sees Mandela talking on the telephone; whereafter there are rumours in the “cage” where the women accused are kept that he has fallen in love. When she is confounded at Mandela’s amorousness at such a grave time, she is told by Joseph Mphosa, her comrade from Worcester that Mandela cannot help himself: “Mandela likes women. . . . And beautiful women, even more so” (Jaffer 2008, 73).

The life narratives by Jaffer and Meer are striking and exceptional in the landscape of South African struggle auto/biographies for the ways in which they foreground romantic love relationships as shaping subjectivities, not to the exclusion of, but as the most intimate, most enduring factor in a dialogic subject formation. Although romantic love is cross-cultural and trans-historically universal, love is conceptualised in many different ways. Eros is viewed in some contexts as a bewitching madness or form of addiction. Love in its link with beauty is seen as having the potential to reproduce beauty and, on a ladder of virtue, lead to a social ideal. Lovers are often regarded as two halves of a lost whole, as mentioned above. In the two life narratives studied, love takes a different, and, more importantly, strategic form, apart from its other significances. In Jaffer’s biography, love is presented as a destiny which, once fulfilled, holds the lovers in a relationship of subdued, self-sacrificing harmony. The only threat to marital love comes from the subject’s prior political commitment, a bond that is broken when the subject, Ayesha Dawood, is liberated from the political struggle in the embrace of a free Nelson Mandela. But Jaffer, of course, is not writing the biography in the period of utopian hope that inspires Ayesha, the biographical subject. Jaffer is writing in the period of post-2000 disillusionment with an African National Congress-led and -condoned moral and management malaise, which determines the narrative structure and approach of the biography. Meer’s autobiography also retrospectively constitutes the romantic relationship as the alembic of self-formation in contradistinction to her political formation in the African National Congress. The romantic relationship is highlighted as the most significant factor in life as a consequence of disillusionment with post-apartheid adjustments to the iniquities of globalisation and unfettered corruption and self-enrichment. In this respect, these two life narratives may, in part, be gesturing to Ashraf Jamal’s more theoretical intervention into post-1994 South African culture, art, and politics, where Jamal, too, brings love to the heart of things. Counter-proposing J.M. Coetzee’s assertion in the Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech that South Africa is as “irresistible as it is unlovable,” Jamal suggests that “South Africa is as *resistable as it is loveable*” (Jamal 2005,

23, emphasis in original). He wagers that “for the imagination to liberate itself, for freedom to become realisable, thought must resist closure *in the name of love*” (24, emphasis in original). In charging love to redeem a negative dialectic, Jamal gives it an inspiring and formative power similar to its actualised potential in Jaffer and Meer’s life narratives.

Amitav Ghosh (2002), in an exchange of correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarty in the pages of *Radical History Review* after the publication of *Provincializing Europe*, observes that in an Indian and African context, the family may be the more significant matrix for a relational subject formation as opposed to the autonomous nation-state subject that is brought into relief through the European enlightenment. The life narratives by Jaffer and Meer intertwine national and familial subjectivities, but with the romantic love relationship as the most important thread running through the lives narrated. Thus, in the South African historical juncture in which these two activists write, a juncture where all the principles for which they stood seem to be breaking down, the authors of these auto/biographical narratives find in sometimes difficult, sometimes complex, but ultimately loving relationships the heart of the identity and ethics that made them what they were. It serves well to remember that romantic love, over and above other affections, has the potential to draw people together across boundaries in a spirit of loving and principled compromise as suggested in these two life narratives. The heart of South Africa as a country in the narratives of these two women activists thus is found in romantic love contrasted with the bleaker “heart of darkness” revealed through J. M. Coetzee’s female protagonist of *In the Heart of the Country* (2004), to which the title of this article alludes. In Coetzee’s vision, presented in disorienting and sinister flashes, a heart of racialised sexual violence is revealed in the photographic negative of the South African apartheid state held up to the light of its narrative consideration. But to return to the two life narratives in question, whether these two South African “romance” struggle auto/biographies are a harbinger of a trend or whether they are anomalies whose concerns will not be repeated, the (rhetorical) question one is forced to ask since it remains incompletely answered is: “What is the significance of writing the heart in a country that increasingly is becoming, in many respects, heartless?”

Notes

1. *Love in the Time of Treason* has been published internationally under the title, *On Trial With Mandela: The Life Story of Ayesha Dawood*.
2. Fatima Meer’s autobiography was begun in 2000 when she was working on posthumously publishing her husband, Ismail Meer’s, autobiography. Ill health in 2002 prevented further work on the manuscript until 2006 when Meer resumed work with the help of a research assistant. In 2007, Meer’s daughter, Shamim Meer, began assisting her mother to complete the autobiography since she remained wheelchair-bound and incapacitated as a consequence of repeated strokes. Shamim Meer intermittently worked on her mother’s autobiography after her death in 2010, with the bulk of the work done from 2015.
3. For a fuller presentation of South African women’s life narratives with extracts from the most significant examples, see Judith Lütge Coullie (2001).
4. Govender’s *Love and Courage* does not highlight romantic love as the two life narratives under consideration do. It seems to circle instead around the love for children, especially Govender’s eldest daughter, who seems to have the most significance in the family.

5. The Treason Trial was the court proceeding of 156 organisers of the Congress of the People at Kliptown in 1955. The trial lasted from the end of 1956 till 1961, when all charges by the apartheid state had to be dropped for lack of sufficient evidence against the accused.

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