"In the shadow of the Mahatma" - a critical analysis of Sita - Memoirs of Sita Gandhi

with particular reference to 'claiming a voice' and narrating place and identity

The autobiographical act in South Africa, more than a literary convention, has become a cultural activity. Memoirs, reminiscence, confession, testament, case history and personal journalism, all different kinds of autobiographical acts or cultural occasions in which narrators take up models of identity that have become widely available, have pervaded the culture of the 1990s and have spread into the new century. This flourishing of the autobiographical voice has emerged alongside the powerful informing context of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but it is also a symptom of the decompression, relaxation, and cacophony of the post-apartheid moment in general.

Particularly since the political transition of 1994, personal disclosure has become part of a revisionary impulse, a part of the pluralizing project of democracy itself. The individual, in this context, emerges as a key, newly legitimised concept, South Africa becomes a 'recited' community, in de Certeau's terms. Talking about their own lives, confessing, and constructing personal narratives... South Africans translate their selves, and their communities, into story. If this a product of a very specific moment of national historical change, it also reflects wider currents in a global age of textual transmission.

[Nuttall and Michael 2002:298-299]

INTRODUCTION
In recent years "women's voices" and "claiming one's voice" has become a defining trope in feminist analyses of women's writings in the South African literary landscape. Since "Soweto 1976", and especially since the mid-1980's, autobiographical writings by South African Black women have been particularly significant. Call Me Woman, by Ellen Kuzwayo [1985], Strikes have followed me all my life by Emma Mashinini [1989] and To my Children's Children by Sindwe Magona [1990] have become classics in this genre. And in the last decade we have had a growing number of memoirs and autobiographical writings by South African Indian women, among them Fatima Meer, Dr K Goonam, Zuleikha Mayat, Farida Karodia, Jayapraga Reddy, Agnes Sam, and Neela Govender-Peyere. These works, together with the other genres of their writings, have expanded the scope of the South African literary tradition as well as our critical discussions of the politics of identity in South Africa [see Govinden 2000]. If the texts that are read in a society are intertwined with the imagining of that community, as Benedict Anderson [1983] has argued, we have to constantly redefine and broaden the scope of the "canon". I also point out in my earlier work that literature must be re-defined so that it becomes flattened and more inclusive.

A recent addition to this corpus is Sita - Memoirs of Sita Gandhi [2003] in which Sita Gandhi, daughter of Manilal Gandhi and grand-daughter of Mahatma Gandhi, describes her childhood during the 1930's at the Phoenix Settlement outside Durban, South Africa, and her relationship with Gandhi when she was in India as a teenager, during the 1940's. This Memoir was published in 2003 when the centenary of the establishment of Indian Opinion and of the Phoenix Settlement was being celebrated.

In this study I begin by considering a few critical issues that might emerge in our reading of women's autobiographical texts, with particular reference to Sita's Memoirs. I then follow the progress of Sita's narrative both descriptively and discursively, dividing my analysis into two main parts to co-incide with the two sections of the Memoirs, "My Childhood at Phoenix Settlement" and "In India with Babuji". I focus in particular on Sita's narration of Phoenix Settlement, seeing this as the epicentre of her existence or as an important formation in the "topography of [her] mind" [to use a phrase in another context; see Cartwright 2002:38]. Within this narrative frame the narration of place, home, memory, identity, nation - themes that commonly surface in postcolonial literary criticism - are considered.

Reading the Memoirs in several categories

Broadly speaking, the Memoirs may be seen as exemplifying several genres in South African literature. I suggest a few here but further possibilities may be explored, and developed more fully. Firstly, as pointed out already, it is an example of autobiographical writings by women and
may be seen in the context particularly of South African Black women's autobiographical writing. With the addition of the Introduction and other sections it may be read as auto/biographical, in the sense that Sita as well as others are writing about her life [as well as that of Gandhi and Manilal and Sushila in particular].

Nuttall and Michael speak of "autobiographical acts" at this historical juncture when there is a profusion of writings against apartheid history, so much so that we speak now of a "memory industry". The signature of this period has undoubtedly been "memory work", or "a refusal of amnesia" [see Nixon 1997], epitomised by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee [TRC], described as the "public rehearsal of memory" [Nuttall 1998:75], and which stressed "narrative truth" among other truths. Mandela's autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom [1994] published in the year of the first democratic elections in South Africa is a prime example of this post-apartheid moment, where we see through 'autobiographical acts' a "choreographing of a political and social script" [Nuttall 1998:3]. [It is worth mentioning here that there has been some critique of the TRC; the need to consider amnesty more critically and reparations more substantially has been highlighted; the forgotten histories in many post-conflict situations in Africa are also lamented [see Soyinka 1999; Amadiume and An-Na'im 2000; Mamdani 2000].

As "memory work" Sita's Memoirs, dealing largely with a South African childhood and adolescence, resonates well with aspects of Sindiwe Magona's To My Children's Children, Ellen Kuzwayo's Call me Woman, and Boyhood - Scenes from Provincial Life, by J M Coetzee [1997], to name a few well-known examples. Although these writers depict different spaces of childhood experiences in South Africa there is overlap in terms of the effect of living in a segregated society and of the historical events of their time, especially in the case of the first two.

In general it is true that contemporary South African autobiography is "extraordinary, unmistakably a world of its own. Tattooed across its surface is a series of political events that configure and invade the private domain" [Whitlock 2000:146]. There are several ways in which comparative studies around this theme may be pursued, with particular attention to childhood and colonialism and/or apartheid. We do well to remember too that the different emphases from one period to another show that memory is not static; that "memory" is not a storehouse of the past waiting to be exposed, but that memory is constantly invented and reinvented according to the preoccupations of the period [146].

In view of the rich socio-cultural world that Sita depicts we may possibly categorise the writing as an example of auto-ethnography, a term that Francoise Lionnet gives to Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road [see Raynaud 1992:35], where there is a
creation of the self against the background of folklore. Sita does not write however in the role of "native informant", as the Other, but as one engaged in the writing of self-in-community. The social memory that is displayed in Sita's Memoirs is an important dimension of the narrative.

The Memoirs exemplify writing that spans South Africa and India, writing that expands the boundaries of South African literature. Of Aziz Hassim's novel The Lotus People, Isabel Hofmeyer states that:

The novel's importance lies equally in how it challenges the boundaries of South African literature. As a novel that unfolds between India and South Africa, it shifts the axes of our thinking. It moves our attention from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. This shift is an important one. South African literature is generally imagined as a combination of 'Europe' and 'Africa' or as a weave of Europe/Africa/North America. South Africa and its literary culture has consequently been seen as part of the world of the Atlantic. Hassim's novel, however, redefines South Africa as part of the Indian Ocean. It consequently extends our thinking about the multiple inheritances that make up South African society. [Hofmeyer 2003]

A similar "shift" [although I personally would not call it a "shift" as this has been a characteristic of writing before] is found in Imraan Coovadia's The Wedding [2001], the earlier novel, Behold the Earth Mourns, by Ansuyah Singh [1960], and Zuleikha Mayat's autobiographical work, A Treasure Trove of Memories [1990]. While this corpus is mainly by writers of Indian origin in South Africa, we need to see it generally and generically as writings that are the result of migration from one colony or location to another. The geo-political and historical connections between India and South Africa, or between India and other parts of Africa [and here we think of a novel such as The Gunny Sack by M G Vasanji, the East African/Canadian writer, or of Meena Alexander's critical Memoir, Fault Lines, where there is movement from India to the Sudan to the United Kingdom to the United States] are bound to be reflected in our literary writings.

It is exciting that contemporary comparative literary study in South Africa is developing in this direction with far-reaching implications for critical reflections on coloniality and post-coloniality, as one postcolony writes to another, inflected and complicated by the local and contingent. Edward Said has noted that "the history of imperialism and its culture can now be studied as neither monolithic nor reductively compartmentalised, separate, distinct" [Said 1994: xx].

The Memoirs may be seen as an example of South Asian diasporic writing, especially that
written by women. But rather than abstracting such texts from the African context and seeing them as free floating, universal, or collapsing them, we need to develop critical inter-diasporic conversations, rooted in specific contexts and locations, and in this our dialogue should be developed not only on the basis of the established or developing canon in our different contexts but on marginalised and excluded writings as well. We must be critical of attempts to constitute "diaspora" as Other. In the present period when we speak of the Diaspora "writing back" [see Chetty and Piciuccio 2004] we do well to note that Sita was not writing to some imagined "mother country". How do we see "Sita's Story", for example, as an African story, reflecting the diversity, inter-connected histories and overlapping identities of the African continent as well as that of the Indian diaspora.

Invariably, as writing composed by Gandhi's grand-daughter, the Memoirs are part of a genre in South Africa that deals with Gandhian themes, and in this it is similar to writers in India such as Raja Rao, who published Kanthapura [1938]. Other writings in South Africa that deal with the theme of Satyagraha directly or indirectly are Behold the Earth Mourns and The Lotus People, referred to already.

Sita's Memoirs are the only example, as far as I am aware, of autobiographical writing in English by a woman in the Gandhi household [Manu Gandhi, Gandhi's great niece, has written two volumes of diaries, entitled Dehima Gandhiji, in Gujarati, and these were published in 1964 and 1966]. In her Memoir Sita mentions meeting Pyarelal, Gandhi's private secretary, and his sister Sushila Nayar, who was Gandhi's doctor and India's first woman minister. Both played an important role in Gandhi's ashrams in India and compiled their biographical writings, In Gandhiji's Mirror, published in 1991. In the master-narrative of Gandhi's story, the many expositions on [and by] Gandhi, whether literary, discursive or documentary, the Memoirs may be seen as a "hidden history", a narrative very much in the oral, personal mode.

Further, the Memoirs are an important addition to writings on the city of Durban. At a time when we are considering the past histories of individuals, families, events and periods we realise how important it to reconstruct past images of the cities in South Africa, images that invariably show both the logic of apartheid, as well as resistance to this, images that show a close correlation between people and place. Memory plays an important part in descriptions of place in South Africa, as we see in the literary references to emblematic places, such as Soweto, District Six, Hillbrow, Sophiatown, Fietas and Durban's Casbah. With Sita's Memoirs the Phoenix Settlement in the Inanda area as a place is added to this developing national imaginary, which highlights "spaces of hope" [to use David Harvey's phrase in another context].

The city's varied histories are depicted by several Indian writers; this is not surprising as
Durban, on the east coast of Natal, has the largest concentration of Indians outside India and was the main port of arrival when Indians came to South Africa from 1860 onwards. We see both cultural specificities and diversities, apartness and integration in the different writings on the city. While Sita considers Durban of the 1930's and 40's, and part of the Phoenix area in particular, Hassim looks at the Casbah [also referred to as the Imperial Ghetto], the inner city underbelly of the Durban of the 1950's [see Govinden 2003], Coovadia the general seaport town that Durban was at the turn of the 20th century, and Singh Durban, including the suburbs, such as Reservoir Hills and towns outside Durban, as these places were in the early decades of the 20th century. These Indian writers may be compared and contrasted with other South African writers, such as Lewis Nkosi, Mafika Gwala, Barbara Trapido and Harold Strachan, who set their writings in different parts of the city.

Historical Background

By the time Sita was born sixty years had elapsed since the first group of indentured Indians had come to South Africa. From the time of their arrival Indians drew attention to their treatment by the colonial powers, with their opposition [and co-option] dominating local Indian politics. Gandhi's oppositional stand and pivotal role in this politics is well known. Gandhi was in South Africa from 1893-1914 and during this time formed the Natal Indian Congress and conceived of Passive Resistance or Satyagraha as a great moral and strategic force to counter colonial domination. He captures much of his experiences of these years in his autobiography My Experiments with Truth which was completed in 1927, a year before Sita was born.

During the time when Sita was growing up the era of Agents-general was instituted, where "agents" or representatives of the Indian Government were appointed in South Africa to oversee that the treatment of Indians was in accordance with the Cape Town Agreement [1932], an Agreement which was entered between local Indian leaders, the South African Government and India. Sita refers in her Memoirs to the friendship she enjoyed with the daughter of one of the Agents-General, Kunwar Maharaj Singh, and the privileges that came with this.

The Memoirs are set during the time when Manilal Gandhi was in South Africa and alludes to the different political activities that he was engaged in. The story of Manilal has not been given as much prominence as that of Gandhi's, and Sita's Memoirs are an important, though small, corrective in this respect. The newly published biography of Manilal, Gandhi's Prisoner? - The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal, by Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, fills an important void here. Dhupelia-Mesthrie points out that "our historians have yet to uncover lesser known heroes and heroines" [2004:22-23]. In this time of "memory", when we are building a new national collectivity and we are including previously excluded and marginalised histories, it is important
that we include not only the mainstream characters of the past, such as Gandhi, but others connected with this history.

Manilal had left for India with Gandhi and the rest of his family in 1914, but it was he who returned to South Africa in 1917 to continue the work of his father. He became the editor of Indian Opinion in 1920, played an active role in local politics in the ensuing years, especially through his leadership in the Natal Indian Congress [see Bhana 1997], in the Passive Resistance Council and in the Defiance Campaign of the 1950's [see Bhana and Pachai 1987], and in spite of his earlier misgivings [see Kathrada 2004]. He worked increasingly in broad multi-racial formations and in 1955 participated in the historic Congress of the People at Kliptown, where the Freedom Charter was adopted. He gave a comprehensive account of this Congress in the Indian Opinion of early July 1955 [see Meer I C 2002:171-175]. At the time of his death in April 1956 the Indian Opinion was the "oldest surviving Indian newspaper in South Africa" [Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2004:15].

Background to the Memoirs

At the time of her death, in March 1999, Sita's family discovered that she had composed the short Memoirs, written out in long hand in English and covering the first twenty years of her life. Jaspreet Kindra, a journalist friend, had encouraged Sita to write her story and was in possession of the manuscript when Sita died. Sita's accomplishment in long hand is worth noting as Gandhi had commented in practically every letter to her when she was younger about her handwriting, letter formation and expression.

The Memoirs may be read in conjunction with Sita's earlier piece, "A Grand-daughter Remembers", included in the collection The South African Gandhi, edited by Fatima Meer [1996].

Apart from the Memoirs [entitled "Sita's Story"], the book as a compilation, consists of a Foreword by the late Archbishop Dennis Hurley, family friend and liberation icon, a Message by Rooksana Omar, Acting Director of the Local Heritage Museum in Durban, an introduction entitled "Notes from a Daughter", by Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie [Sita's daughter 4, and South African historian of note], a sample of letters from Gandhi to Sita, and photographs. The book was edited by Dhupelia-Mesthrie who drew on the support of others such as Omar Badsha of South African History Online and Lorelle Royeppen from the Local History Museums. This collaborative effort, then, has the effect of producing a "multiply articulated" text, to use Carol
Boyce Davies’ description of life-story in another context [Boyce Davies 1992:4], or a dialogic inter-text, with this paper itself and my own voice inserted in the expansion and explication of “Sita's Story”.

While the authority of the compilation is shared, each section reflecting and refracting the other, the kernel of the compilation remains “Sita's Story”; and her writing it “in secret” shows her claiming her own “enunciative space” [to use a phrase from Whitlock [2000:144] unmediated by influences from anywhere. Where there have been several autobiographical texts by South African Black women that are mediated by amanuenses, usually white [for example, the texts Poppie Nongema and The Calling of Katie Makhanya], bringing to the fore the politics of production [for general discussion see Whitlock 2000:142-178], we see rather with Sita's Memoirs a politics of publication at work, where various choices - about whether to publish or not, when to publish, whose voices to include, what should be included - had to be made. In all this, however, the need to allow Sita's voice to be foregrounded is appreciated as Dhupelia/Mesthrie notes: “I have in preparing my mother's memoirs kept editorial interventions to a minimum and have added explanatory footnotes where necessary” [8].

Sita's Story?

But whose story is "Sita's Story"? Sita's or Gandhi's? Are the Foreword, Introduction, Message, the Memoirs, and Gandhi's letters designed to mirror Sita or Gandhi? Is the inclusion of Gandhi's letters written to Sita intended to tell us something of him rather than of her [We notice that there is no inclusion of letters written by Sita to Gandhi yet reference is made by Gandhi to Sita's letters to him]?  

In writing this paper I realise that I am constantly pulled in opposite directions, stretched between telling and explicating Sita's story and that of Gandhi's [Whitlock speaks of the "subject predicament" not only of the narrator but also of the reader; see Whitlock 2000:142]. Where does the narrative derive its authority from? Is it from its link to Gandhi and discourses for which Gandhi is well-known, values such as truth and speaking the truth to power? I have been aware of my own tendency to concede to Gandhi, to see Sita's Memoirs as an extension of Gandhi's life-writing. Is "Sita's Story" a vicarious telling of Gandhi's story? Is that why is was published? I also begin to notice that Manilal's story [and Sushila's, for that matter], generally neglected in South African historiography, is foregrounded rather pointedly in "Sita's Story". We appreciate the well-known aphorism - "We are a tale that is told" - in relation to Sita as being particularly apt, as a woman [in a patriarchal world], as a Black woman [in a colonial/apartheid world], but also by her being the grandchild of "one of the greatest figures of the 20
century” and living in his shadow.

Claiming her voice

"This land belongs to the voices of those who live in it

My own bleak voice among them."

[Krog 1998:210]

However, and interestingly, Sita herself does not seem to experience any "subject predicament" and presents her narrative and that of Gandhi's [and her father's and mother's] not as separate entities but as being inextricably linked. The image of her illustrious grandfather is ever before her, as that of her father, but she remains the arbiter of her story, "the teller of her tale", and the mediator of her experiences. Sita wrests authority for her narrative quietly and unobtrusively as she projects her own speaking voice, with no attempt to ventriloquize or write for imaginary interlocutors.

Sita claims interpretive agency in the narration of her story, written as it was without collaboration, and the portrayal of her as a passive spectator is inappropriate when we read her Memoirs. She speaks for instance of her personal contests with and misgivings of Gandhi, and does not hesitate to record the opposition she saw to Gandhi at the time of his death when some sections of the crowds were in a state of jubilation. She was all too aware of the fissures in her extended family [she is distraught over the fractured relationship between Harilal and Gandhi] and in Indian society at large to romanticise Gandhi's impact. She is ready to give her views, her testimony, conceiving of her story as one bearing witness. Sita's narrative shows throughout a critical but palpable and observant disposition. She writes honestly, as one growing up and trying to understand her world in bewildering times [she refers, for example, to her "confused childhood"] and is not conditioned by the need to be politically correct. She does not write in the vein of Gandhi's own autobiographical writing which contained intense moral reflection [see Parekh 1989/1999]. [Taken together the two autobiographical writings arguably show that the rational and non-rational are part of a single reality - surely a Gandhian principle, if ever there was one?]
While we might accept that "voice is often used as a powerful metaphor for the rebirth of what has been suppressed by patriarchal culture" [Harvey 1995:5] it is ironic that it was Gandhi who encouraged Sita to speak when she was a child. He remarked that she was a talkative little girl and this trait should be harnessed to good effect by her parents. "Personally, I like Sita being talkative and mischievous. It is for the parents to put these qualities to good use...Naughtiness and talkativeness are a kind of energy, like steam...if we understand it and use it wisely, it can produce excellent results" [53].

Although Sita was, in the economy of colonialism, subjected to a colonial and subaltern status, the legacy of her transgressive lineage, her belonging to a family of pioneers in the freedom struggle in South Africa and in India, her class privilege that afforded her education and proficiency in language, all provided her with the background for claiming her voice so that she is not a passive spectator in her story.

What does it mean for a young girl growing up within a contested colonial terrain? In considering Sita's claiming of her voice we should note that "voice" should not be seen as a "monolithic construction", as being stable over time [Harvey 1995:5-6]; voice may take different forms and expressions. There are numerous factors that create any subaltern woman's identity. Sita was influenced by both the dominant colonial context and the resistant politics of her parents. She was juxtaposed between contending appeals to power - that of the colonial and the colonised - the instrumental power of the former and the moral position of the latter. Her Memoirs show that she is positioned between various forces of coercion, persuasion, and resistance. There are complex and entangled strands of oppression and domination that criss-cross in her life even in respect of resistance to the colonial order. She feels the pressure of both the colonial order and of the resistant order. Sita's self-portraiture shows her awareness of the different ideologies that come to coincide and co-exist in her life, and of her having to understand and live with them.

Ironically, what Sita does feel anxiety over is that she did not do more in the fight against racial oppression. She is sensitive to criticism in this respect: "Soon I will be 70, and the unkind words said by a teacher when I was barely fourteen years old that my family and I were basking in reflected glory came back to me and it makes me feel that what a waste my life was!" [inside cover]. On this view of Sita's Dhupelia-Mesthrie comments: "She judges herself harshly and expresses the deep sense of regret as she approached her seventies that her life was a failure. The basis for this judgement is the high ideals Gandhi set for public service and commitment. Sita's youthful ambitions were never realised. Writing about her early years was for her a way of coping with old age" [10]. Dhupelia-Mesthrie also notes that "as a descendant of Gandhi, one often feels one is expected to behave in a particular way" [2004:25].
More generally, Sita's misgivings are understandable given that we are presented with examples largely of resistant and heroic women and we assume that they are the only ones who are important. In evaluating her contribution Sita was no doubt defining herself by the larger struggle. She feels that her adult, married life was confined largely to the domestic sphere. Sita's sister, Ela Gandhi, an activist of long-standing, and Member of Parliament now, points out that Sita was politically active in her early years. "But now my sister is involved in her own family life and hasn't been politically active for a long time" [in Russell 1989:135].

Yet Gandhi did not belittle domestic labour; in fact, he encourages it. In one of his letters [when Sita was 18 years old] he encourages her in the homely crafts of "spinning and doubling the yarn", and asserts, "Do not cultivate the mind at the expense of the body" [64]. The description of the minor happenings and experiences in Sita's Memoirs highlights Arundathi Roy's injunction in The God of Small Things [1997], that the seemingly insignificant are also driven by history, that history is not composed merely of large brushstrokes, but that we need to see the political in the smallest things.

And Magona [in Whitlock 2000:147] reminds us that in South Africa we often pay more attention to the large acts of resistance, such as incarceration in Robben Island [and I would add in the context of Sita's Memoirs, acts of resistance such as the main Passive Resistance Campaigns of the first half of the 20th Century in South Africa where, incidentally, mainly men are the main protagonists, or their contribution more regularly recounted] and we tend to forget about the women who endured the inconveniences of daily living or who bolstered up the everyday lives of so many during the difficult days of apartheid. We also need to remember here the self-effacing, anti-hero personality and demeanour that Gandhi portrayed [and the way these very traits contributed to his iconic status].

How do we take seriously women who "break their silence" but who speak from different vantage points and categories of experiences, and not necessarily from a heroic standpoint? Dhupelia-Mesthrie, in prefacing her Introduction to the Memoirs with the words, "In every woman there is a story to be told", recognises the value of all women's personal experiences, whoever they were, and the need to create spaces for them to be told by themselves. Sita was claiming her voice not in the way we usually speak of this trope with reference to autobiographical writings by South African women. With Kuzwayo, Mashinini and Magona, among others, we see their writing as breaking the silence and coercion imposed by apartheid. Sita was claiming her voice in both a very personal and private context and a communal one, given the perception that she was but a minor player in the Gandhi saga.
We appreciate Sita's claiming her right to speak when we appreciate the pressures that militate against claiming a voice. Ari Sitas has drawn attention to this generally when he writes:

Foucault's point about the discursive subjection of individuals has to be taken seriously - the saying and doing occurs within relationships of inequality but more than that, within dominant, discursive regimes; it is therefore very difficult to develop extra-discursive spaces to speak outside the dominant narrations of power. Although individuals might be 'saying', 'articulating' and 'demanding' all kinds of things, they would be doing it through the grid of master narratives that shape them. It is not so much a monologue of power, but an unequal conversation within the discourse of power. By implication only a semblance of communication is possible. This is at the heart of Spivak's feminist and post-colonial concern when she asks whether the 'subaltern' can speak. It is not a spurious question. [Sitans 2004:106]

It is both demanding and challenging in a dominant colonial and patriarchal world for women to cultivate alternative spaces from which to speak. That the negative impact of this reality was overturned for Sita at Phoenix is evident in the latent consciousness and memory that she kept alive. Sita, the subaltern does speak, and in a timbre of voice that is self-composed, clear, distinct and distinctive. That she chose to write of her childhood and adolescence in the mid-90's, delving into the twilight zone of her memory, two years before she died and before she lost the ability to speak [due to a stroke], shows that that ideological moment for "re-membering" [in the sense that Toni Morrison uses the phrase] the past was both opportune, crucial and timely for her personally and for the wider community. It is clear that Sita was transporting herself into an important time in her past life, a time she wanted to preserve as she had remembered it. She refuses, for example, to go to visit Benares university in her later years when she discovers that it had changed drastically.

At the time when Sita was born at the Phoenix Settlement it was her father, Manilal, who severed the umbilical cord: she arrived earlier than expected, with the midwife having been scheduled to come later. In her writing Sita reconnects with the past, the present and the future. In J M Coetzee's novel Age of Iron, one of the characters, Elizabeth Curren, writes: "Once upon a time, you lived in me as once upon a time I lived in my mother. As she still lives in me, as I grow toward her, may I live in you" [Coetzee 1990:131]. In Sita's Memoir I believe that the umbilical cord becomes an extended chain of memory...as mother and father live in daughter and daughter gives birth to mother and father, through her writing...

Personal Memory as History
If over the years, and passing through the realities of life, dreams die, I still keep intact my memories, the salt of remembrance [Ba 1981:1]

Through the act of writing Sita refuses effacement, and the insouciant and understated way in which she scripts her self - as she herself says, "everyone was natural" - tacitly overturns the accusation levelled against her, referred to earlier. Victoria Byerly states that when a woman tells her story she engages in a dialogue with the world and becomes a "proactive subject" in her own life. "By narrating her story…she enters history, names themes for the future, and seizes the authority of the teller of experience" [in Boyce Davies 1992:15].

It is ironic that for a few years the Memoirs were hidden, yet by her very act of writing her story and her giving it to a publisher-friend, she was putting her life-story into the public space. Nuttall has drawn attention to writers in South Africa at the present time where in "speaking memory they try to negotiate or recast the relation between the public and the private" [Nuttall 1998:76]. Sita demonstrates by her actions the importance she attached to memory, her memory. If South Africa is now a " 'recited' community" as the quotation chosen for the epigraph of this essay suggests, was not Sita inserting herself into this community by writing her Memoirs? Dhupelia-Mesthrie, who edited the Memoirs, recognised "the importance of this manuscript, since there are so few Memoirs written by South African Indian families" [Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2003:1]. While it is true that the value of Sita's Memoirs rests in the collective and in its representivity, it is also an individual and unique story.

In claiming her voice Sita was claiming the land of her birth, the land that denied her her birthright right up to the time when she was 66 years, when she would have voted in the first democratic elections in South Africa.

Sita was the 6th of Gandhi's and Kasturba's 15 grandchildren. When two grandchildren died Sita became the 4th eldest grandchild. Of Manilal and Sushila's children Sita was the eldest; she had a sister, Ela and brother, Arun. In writing her Memoirs Sita is asserting and recuperating her identity among the collective of "grandchildren" of Gandhi, but also of "Indian women", especially of the time.
Sita’s tale is the simple, everyday and sometimes mundane details of growing up at the Phoenix Settlement, and in this she shows her implicit understanding of her memory as history. Carol Boyce Davies notes the production of “self-story”, where there is the “impulse to define, shape and order a life” [Boyce Davies 1992:7]. Omar notes that Sita had a very clear appreciation of the value of “preserving” history, of her being aware that she was the custodian of a living "community archive": “Sita's very incisive understanding of who she was and what role she was expected to play within the larger political sphere in Durban and around the world resonate in the interviews, comments and collections she had kept” [iv]. This shows Sita's implicit understanding of the dominant forces at work during the apartheid era that gave narrow, one dimensional views of the past [for general discussion, see Alexander and Mohanty 1997]. The general principle here - of the need to engage in a narration of an alternative history as a way of re-narrating the nation and contributing to a common and ever-growing historical archive that enshrines the common past of a collective people [McLeod 2000:70] - is an important one. Omar rightly points to Sita’s “historical consciousness” [iv], and her writing her Memoir is tangible proof of this.

Even though she is connected to a legendary figure in the larger narrative of colonial/postcolonial history and her life is linked to his, the details that she gives has the effect of a "history from below". She does not, for example, refer to Satyagraha in a direct, formal or discursive manner in her story. She relates mainly how Gandhi and Gandhian ideals impacted on their ordinary, day to day living. Omar rightly points to the way the "domestic and the political can be mutually intertwined in the narration of her life. Sita had triumphed in being a role model to all women to encourage them to tell their stories, to acknowledge the value of their reality and experience, and to use memory, artefacts, cultural experiences and knowledge to narrate their lives" [v].

Sita is primarily writing her own story rather than history as we conventionally define it, but we need to see how her story is history. There is no separation between her personal and family life and that of the larger history, nor does one get the impression that she is "suturing" public events onto the private, as do writers such as Kuzwayo [see Whitlock 2000:152]. Her private life is imbricated in the wider politics of the time. Even in the second half of her Memoirs where many public political events directly impinge on her life - for example, the assassination of Gandhi - the writing is still of her particular and personal loss and the impact these events had on her life rather than being a recounting of these historical details for themselves. At a time in South Africa when "historicity" itself is being re-defined against the hegemonic histories of the past, Sita's Memoirs is an important and timely contribution.

Naming oneself
The narrator in Justin Cartwright's novel, White Lightning [2002], notes: "The point of memory is to free yourself from the tyranny of the present. But I am enjoying a different process, freeing myself from the tyranny of the past which has constrained me unfairly…” [Cartwright 2002:125].

Is Sita through writing freeing herself of both the tyranny of the past as well as the present? However we choose to answer this question, it seems to me that Sita in choosing to write is naming and re-naming herself. At the time when she was born there was a contest about the choice of her name. Her maternal grandfather, Nanabhai Mashruwalla, decided to name her "Dhairybala" [maid of courage], but Gandhi chose the name ‘Sita', arguing: "It is a holy name. It is easy for friends to pronounce and suggests the virtues we wish her to have. I have considered some other names too, but could not think of a better one" [48].

Gandhi was no doubt influenced by the archetypal Sita whose example of selfless service and devotion is extolled. The burden of being a symbol of universal womanhood as epitomised by the name "Sita" is reflected in the uneasiness Sita feels about the accomplishment of a "mission" in life, as alluded to earlier. Rosemary Marangoly George points out that personal happiness is seen as self-indulgent, and that "To qualify for the status of "Indian Woman" one needs to go beyond the self [preferably through suffering], in order to facilitate the transmogrification into symbol" [George 1999:142]. Sita embraces both names, showing in her self-description a clear understanding of the act of naming herself, of choosing her own agency and accepting whatever her particular life experiences were as her very own and as important enough to tell. As she writes in her earlier reminiscences, "I have had my share of misery and I have had the courage to face it, so the two names have worked for me" [Dhupelia 1996:1071].

The name chosen [by the compilers] for the memoir is "Sita Gandhi", presumably because she was writing of the time when she was daughter and grand-daughter and not wife and mother. Her relationship with Gandhi is clearly being foregrounded [and would be of interest especially to readers unfamiliar with this connection]; however for the earlier piece written in 1970, when Sita was alive, the name she chose was Sita Dhupelia; this is also at the time when her husband was alive. [In any event, it is worth remembering that it was less common in the 1970's for married women in South Africa, whoever they were, to use their maiden names.]

When she was growing up she was made aware that the "Gandhi" name may be exploited by others. As Sita writes: "My father always told me that I must be careful about who likes us. It may be because of our name" [24]. And in spite of what Sita's teacher had said, "refusing" the Gandhi name, both literally and metaphorically, would have been difficult, then and now.
"MY CHILDHOOD AT PHOENIX SETTLEMENT"

"It struck me that our history is contained in the homes we live in, that we are shaped by the ability of these simple structures to resist being defiled."

[Dangor 1997:35]

Childhood Memories

Sita was born in 1928 at the Phoenix Settlement outside Durban. Her father Manilal had married Sushila a year earlier. It was already fourteen years since Gandhi had left South Africa with his entire family. As pointed out already, Manilal, who was Gandhi's second son, returned to South Africa in 1917 to assist in the running of the Settlement and the newspaper, The Indian Opinion, becoming by 1920 its editor. He was to be it longest serving editor.

It was at Phoenix that Manilal had imbibed the values of his father and mother. Manilal's own home - Kasturba Bhuvan - built by Herman Kallenbach, was alongside Sarvodaya, Gandhi's home, where Gandhi memorabilia was housed, being a constant and tangible reminder to Sita of her grand-father's presence at Phoenix [26].

It was at the turn of the century, in November 1904, that Gandhi had bought the one-hundred-acre farm fifteen miles away from the centre of the city of Durban. This was the place where Gandhi had instituted a pioneering experiment in communal living, being influenced by John Ruskin's Unto This Last, published in 1862. As Dhupelia-Mesthrie notes: "Gandhi's lifelong quest was to find a solution to the excesses of late 19th century industrial capitalism and its materialism..." [2]. Gandhi saw social and political redemption by embracing rural reality,
believing with Tolstoy that the "life of labour...was the life worth living". Ruskin's book was translated by Gandhi into Gujarati. Tolstoy Farm outside Johannesburg was a similar settlement developed by Gandhi. Ela Gandhi, Manilal's younger daughter, records that Gandhi's "plan was to give each family two acres of land and live a communal life" [Gandhi, Ela 1994:39].

Fatima Meer points out that Gandhi "believed that the Phoenix ideal led to the good and moral life, which he saw reflected in the life of the frugal peasant" [Meer 1970:72]. Dhupelia-Mesthrie also highlights the role that Phoenix played in Gandhi's life: "Phoenix plays a crucial role in Gandhi's evolving philosophy of satyagraha or non-violence. He believed that communities like Phoenix which exalted communal living and a simple life were ideal training grounds for the struggle against social injustice"[4]. It was from Phoenix that Gandhi went to prison several times. Ela Gandhi notes that Gandhi used the Settlement "to train political activists called satyagrahis as well as house their families, while they were engaged in the campaigns against unjust laws" [Gandhi, Ela 1994:39]. As Gandhi himself asserted unequivocally: "To tell the truth, the education in Phoenix was for the most part a preparation for Satyagraha" [in Bhana and Pachai 1984:140].

Sita spent her early childhood at the Settlement. After Gandhi left South Africa he sent Manilal in 1917 to continue his legacy at Phoenix. It was Manilal who became an important focus of resistance in the community and Sita came strongly under the influence of her father, as he was by his. Up to her own marriage Sita's home was Phoenix with all the personal associations that this historic place had for her.

As she was growing up, Sita was to breathe in the history and the atmosphere of the Settlement. Phoenix was the place of her childhood and adolescent memories, the place where she played her childhood and adolescent games. Sita, for example, remembered the trees, and felt connected through them with her grandfather:

I remember my life on the Settlement when I was five. We had a beautiful garden surrounding the house and in the middle of it was a very tall coconut tree which was planted by my grandfather. A little way from the house was a grove of mango trees and they bore every type of mangoes and these were also planted by my grandfather. I remember a tall Xmas tree, which was a little away from the house and one night during a heavy storm it was struck by lightning. [17]
These trees were important landmarks, carriers of memories, markers of identity, and they show a "communion with the landscape" [from Cartwright 2002:214]. Gandhi also notes in his autobiography that he had planted mango and coconut trees at the Phoenix Settlement.

Sita describes Phoenix as a place of bustling activity where a sizeable community continued to exist, a veritable kutum. Apart from family members, both immediate and extended, there were the press and farm workers and their families. All who lived on the Settlement also participated in communal activities, such as attending daily prayers. In this respect Sita writes: "My father had taught us and them to recite the prayers of all religions and sing bhajans" [21]. Manilal was following the ecumenical customs and habits of his father. Fatima Meer records this pattern that Gandhi had set: "Each evening he dedicated his followers anew to that life, casting them under the spell of his simple thoughts and the timeless rhythm of the hymns or bhajans they chanted" [Meer 1970:72].

From Sita's descriptions, we note that the image of the Settlement was one of efficient self-sufficiency. Manilal and Sushila supervised the running of the household in the manner in which Gandhi and Kasturba had done. At Phoenix the market gardening that had begun in earlier decades continued, and with its share of cows, supplied milk to the homestead as well as the neighbourhood; it also produced its own butter and ghee. There was a well on the farm that supplied them with water and became a focal point for the neighbouring families.

At Phoenix the boundaries between the domestic and public were blurred. It was a private space, the home of Sita and her family, both immediate and extended. It was also public in that there existed an ashram, an experimental farm, a printing press, a school, a clinic; it was also a political hub to which many people concerned about the political situation in South Africa converged.

Sita writes as one who readily accepted the communitarian nature of the Settlement; there is no question that she herself believed in the values of sociality, reciprocity, and sharing that were the norm here. Sita recalls the Settlement as a place to which many visitors from the city came during the weekends. Manilal also invited local indigent children on Sundays and they would all go together for picnics to the nearby Inanda Falls. This sharing of time and communal
shaping of identity seems not to be resented by Sita but embraced.

Sita's descriptions show that Phoenix was not exactly constitute an idyllic existence. At the time when Sita was growing up - the 1930's - life was hard in what was effectively a semi-rural location, and there were none of the modern amenities. She remembers that:

Apart from no electricity there was no water. We used lamps and for water my father used a well that was there during my grandfather's time. From this well pipes were laid and water was channelled to the press and our home and one or two pipes were outside where others could collect water, but in our house we had running water in the kitchen and bathroom, but this was not suitable for drinking. So we collected rain water in the tanks by drains laid on the roof and the water went through a fine mesh into the tank. [23]

The Settlement was also a considerable distance away from the centre of the city and there were difficulties in moving easily from one place to another. Sita points out that: "There were no proper roads to go to the city. If it rained there was mud all over and the little bridges would be over-run by the water and it was impossible to go anywhere" [15]. In describing his first visit to Phoenix Settlement I C Meer notes that "on a rainy day the 'track' became quite unmanageable, and on that memorable say the car became bogged down" [Meer, I C 2002:28].

Sita recalls the problems of daily travel between Phoenix and the centre of city, either by train or car, in order to attend school in town: "I first experienced the discrimination when we started travelling to school on the train - there were separate compartments for us at the end of the train, that couldn't make it to the platform and it was with great difficulty we climbed on and got off " [19]. Ela Gandhi, Sita's sister, recalls that when she travelled by train they were forced to use the "non-white" compartments [see Russell 1994:134].

Sita attended St Anthony's School and the Catholic nuns who ran the School were very strict about punctuality [18]. This became awkward given the difficulties that attended her daily travelling, and her mother decided to rent a house in town where they could stay over weekdays in order that Sita could attend school. She also boarded for a few years with the Revd Sundrum, a priest at St Aidan's Mission Church. 6 Her entire narrative shows the difficulties
she experienced in getting an education as well as her determination to overcome them. [Gandhi, of course, was opposed to Western "missionary" education, as I point out later.]

Sita is aware of the material wealth of her father's friends, and remarks on this unselfconsciously and non-judgementally. She expresses a childish delight in the glamour and luxury that these wealthier family friends exuded and the privileges that came with these contacts:

The Rustomjees lived in style and I remember as a child we would go to his house the 'Mayville Castle' and he would have lavish parties and we children would be taken care of by nannies. I seem to remember the Duke of Windsor coming to SA when I was very small and Mr Sorabjee Rustomjee had banquets for him. My father got on well with the elder brother Mr Jhalbhoy Rustomjee who was also a Trustee of the Phoenix Settlement. He was wealthy too but a quiet and simple man. [26-27]

Of the many relationships and friendships that were enjoyed between rich and poor equally, differences of class were sidestepped for common solidarity on matters of justice. Sita seeks sisterhood and friendship here with young girls her own age from families who had much in common politically. This is evident when she recalls her friendship with Kunwarani Maharaj's daughter and Monica Sundrum, among others.

Sita writes of relatives who came from India to the Phoenix Settlement but who were lured to the city to pursue more lucrative enterprises. The whole ethos at Phoenix was one of frugality, of adopting a lifestyle that reflected one's political values. For Gandhi "the morality of the 'means' was as important as the morality of the 'ends' " [Sitas 2004:104]. This philosophy was practised by Manilal and it is evident from Sita's writings that this was imbibed by her. Yet Sita was all too aware that the Gandhian legacy lay heavy on her father: "My father and his brothers had no carefree childhood and as a young man he was left alone here with the burden of his father's ideals on his young shoulders" [26].

At times for the young Sita the "burden" of Gandhi's ideals, mediated to her constantly by her father, was too much to deal with and she surreptitiously went against their demands. For example, rather than face ridicule at school she knitted socks for the soldiers in World War 2 although Gandhi and Manilal were against any participation in the War. There was disquiet about Gandhi's position as this was seen by some as tantamount to support for Hitler. I C Meer recounts Manilal's resistance to the war effort and his support for the Non-European Unity
 Movement [see Meer, I C:2002].

The usual discourses of victimhood and agency in feminist analyses are given an ironic twist in the Memoir, as Sita sees "victimhood" not only in relation to living in a segregated society but also in relation to being connected with Gandhi and Gandhi's name, of being pressed into a mould determined by her father [and grandfather]. Sita writes of her childhood "transgressions" with honesty and candour, and this resonates with Nayantara Sahgal's remarks in reference to the pressures of living in a highly politicised family herself [Sahgal belonged to the Nehru household]: "I'm not sure whether a childhood lived in this heightened state of national and world awareness was euphoric or wretched" [Sahgal 1993:117].

Indeed. In her descriptions of Phoenix as a whole Sita captures in a simple way the ambivalent and complex meanings that this home location has for her. It was a pressured moral existence, a sparse physical one; at the same time, and because of this, there was a certain stability and security - "psychic shelter" - that the place afforded her. In her book, The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction, Rosemary Marangoly George [1996/1999] writes that the recuperation of "home", like the "self", is constructed in the gap between the idealisation and the reality of one's existence" [Carol Maloney1999:1; my emphasis]. If the "narrative of home is equated with an author's/narrator's attempt at a coherent self and brings with it all the socio-cultural influences that affect the author/narrator's consciousness" [1999:1] then it is understandable why Sita lived so closely with the memory of the Phoenix of her childhood experiences.

While for Black women writers such as Kuzwayo and Magona "childhood is a time of wholeness and integrity in the African community", before the disintegrativeness of apartheid [see Whitlock 2000:153], for Sita her childhood at Phoenix was marked by diverse impulses. Phoenix was a place of plenitude, of love and security; it also compelled awesome responsibility and moral obligation. Sita's story shows how a young person, growing up in a household that was synonymous with what was to become a world movement, had to negotiate her own personal life in this borderland.

The Indian Opinion - "A Paper in the Jungle"

Predictably, Sita devotes a considerable part of the first section describing the printing operation at the Settlement. She recalls that the typesetting was a laborious process, executed by hand as there was no electricity. The press was clearly a bustling operation, demanding a
tight routine in order to meet the weekly deadlines, and in the process several local staff were trained. Sita recalls the important role, for instance, that Mr Alpha Ngcobo played in running the printing press [23].

It was at Phoenix that Gandhi had established International Printing Press which published the Indian Opinion. The first edition of the newspaper the Indian Opinion was produced in 1903, and in 1904 the Press was relocated to Phoenix. Initially it was published in four languages - English, Tamil, Hindi, and Gujarati - but was later published in just English and Gujarati. Sushila supervised the publication of the Gujarati edition. Gandhi had hoped to use the newspaper to create social awareness of conditions facing the colony. Dhupelia/Mesthrie points out that this "was no ordinary 'news' paper but one that defended human rights and stirred the consciences of readers and promoted a universal set of social and moral values in a society that was marked by racism and inequality" [Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2003a:3].

From Sita's descriptions it is apparent that the production of the Indian Opinion was not a lucrative enterprise and Manilal had to spend a great deal of time raising funds for the running of the Press. Sita is conscious of the great difficulty of publishing the newspaper on sparse means: "As I write all this, it makes me think how much my parents had to do to maintain Phoenix Settlement and produce a paper in the jungle with no mod-cons and how much we took it all for granted because they never complained" [23].

What is noteworthy is that Sushila, Sita's mother, not only saw to the female activities making of butter and ghee at the Settlement but also assisted in the printing work. It is not surprising that Sushila understood the important role that the Indian Opinion played in the politics of the time. She came from the Mashruwala family who were closely related to the Gandhian struggle in India, with her uncle Kishorelal Mashruwala continuing with the editorship of Gandhi's newspapers in India, Harijan, Harijan Bandhu [Gujarati] and Harijan Sevak [Hindi] after Gandhi had died [see Pyarelal and Nayar 1991:280].

The gender roles for women were not confined to domestic chores narrowly defined [indeed, Gandhi reconfigured the locus of the "domestic" as well as the "feminine"]). It was natural then that Sita would learn about the mechanics of running the printing press. When she was older Sita herself took charge of the production of the newspaper. She and her mother managed the Settlement and the newspaper when Manilal had to go abroad, as he did in 1948 and 1949, or when he was in prison. In 1950, when Sita was barely 22 years, she helped to produce a special edition of Indian Opinion, to mark Indian independence. She was commended widely for her work, being described by an overseas visitors as "manager of the newspaper" [9].
Both Sushila and Sita understood the strategic value of the newspaper in the life of the community, of the way the Phoenix Settlement and its values were synonymous with the newspaper and vice versa. When Sita married she merged her domestic, familial roles for a few years to assist her mother in running the newspaper. The role that they both played in this respect shows that the portrayal of Indian women, and Black women in general, as passive, is questionable. Apart from the example of women such as Kasturba and Valliama, two notable women satyagrahis, other contributions must be narrated and celebrated, such as that of Sushila's and Sita's, as well as that, for example, of Poomoney Moodley [see Naidoo 2002] who was born two years before Sita. Dhupelia-Mesthrie rightly emphasises the achievement of Sushila, Sita's mother:

Sushila Gandhi above all ended a 34 year old link with the paper. She had come as a young bride of 20 years in 1927 and began in the press by composing types - each letter had to be handset - for over 58 years advances in printing technology were deliberately avoided. Time stood still and manual labour was favoured over machines. Sushila soon progressed to writing and editing Gujerati sections and then took over after her husband's death. A photograph shows a lone woman in the printing press working amongst a handful of men. Indian Opinion provided a place where women could work as equals and be freed of cultural and traditional restraints and that was Gandhi's doing and teaching. [Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2003a:4]

It was fitting that Sita's Memoirs were launched during the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Indian Opinion, as indicated already. But generally does the history of alternative journalism in South Africa give adequate credit to the role that women played directly or indirectly?

The Phoenix Neighbourhood

Sita writes of the wider neighbourhood around the Phoenix Settlement; she noticed how well-known and respected her father was in the area. She recalls his daily walks and his meetings with Dr John Dube, their immediate neighbour at Phoenix. Dube, a contemporary of Gandhi, and President of the Natal Native Congress, had founded the Ohlange Institute in 1901, situated right next to the Phoenix Settlement. The Institute was developed along the lines of Booker T Washington's Tuskegee Institute in the US [see Maylam 1996:71] which stressed industrial education. Ohlange was another vibrant community, and was instrumental in developing many exemplary choirs, as well as the publication of the Zulu newspaper, Ilanga lase Natal.
During his morning walks Sita notes that her father, in addition, met Mr Isaiah Shembe, who founded the Church of Nazareth in 1911; he also met the Ramgobins and Ramdharis, who owned property in this vicinity. These families and communities were all part of the landowning community of the time and enjoyed camaraderie, being opponents of the colonial order.

What is evident in the landscape of the city of Durban is that there are rival geographies, narratives, histories, ideologies. And in this opposition to hegemony there are different configurations of resistance, as the Phoenix area of Dube's Ohlange Institute, Shembe's Nazarite community, and Gandhi's Phoenix Settlement illustrate. The neighbourhood reminds us that there were different formations of resistance to an oppressive society, that the "metanarratives of liberation were not "totalising" [Sitas 2004:19]. In the present-day debates and contestations of Gandhi's own role in forging links with other communities Sita writes simply of the good-neighbourliness that she remembers.

In the economy of the overarching liberation struggle we should remember that "people generated forms of resistance that were dissonant, alternative and polyvalent" [Sitas 2004:19]. Throughout the history of struggle in South Africa we see how social identities oppositional to apartheid constantly converged and diverged, and the role that space played in this. The Phoenix neighbourhood shows that a strategic essentialism was necessary against the undermining of Indian and African identities by the dominant powers. There was a common history of discrimination and oppression shared among Indians, Africans and Coloureds, and within that there were different experiences. Relations, of course, between the Indian and African were not always cordial and co-operative and show in ensuing decades the usual tensions common in a colonial society. There was resentment against the Indian business group in particular who were seen as a threat to African attempts at entrepreneurship. Gandhi for his part during his sojourn was trying to unite disparate Indian communities, divided by competing allegiances to India and to South Africa, exhibiting class and entrepreneurial divisions, and divisions of language and religion and narrow sectarianisms. He was also fighting untouchability among Indians themselves [see Parekh 1989/1999].

When tourist groups now go on The Inanda Heritage Route in "hermetically-sealed" coach tours it would be illuminating if they stopped to appreciate the way complex and complementary relationships developed across the neighbourhood fences of the early decades of the 20th century in South Africa. The move towards more uniform forms of resistance, exemplified in the Defiance Campaigns of the 1950's, the Mass Democratic Movement of the 1980's and early 1990's was to come later. When one thinks today of "geographies of resistance" in the historical/political landscape of South Africa - the best-known being Soweto - the Phoenix area as a whole, and the Phoenix Settlement in particular, are important landmarks.
Transgressive Community and Identity

The political importance of Phoenix in the history of Durban cannot be over-emphasised. It epitomised for Sita the simple and profound promise of an alternative community. As Sita remembers: "It was the most beautiful piece of land, untouched by the then racial laws ... In Phoenix I didn’t feel any racial discrimination, as we had blacks, whites, Indians and coloureds coming regularly to the settlement and everyone was natural" [15, 19]. One may compare Sita’s observations with that of Sindiwe Magona's in her autobiography, To My Children's Children, where she points out that "as a child she had no racial consciousness" [in Nuttall and Michael 2000:301].

When one considers that Durban reflected [and to continues to reflect] the "manichean structure of the colonial city" [see Said 1994:xxvii, for general discussion], we appreciate the role that Phoenix played during the first half at this time. It ironically provided sanctuary in the same way that other segregated areas in the city did. Apartheid planning encouraged the enclosing of communities within themselves. These separate, impoverished spaces became transformative and transgressive spaces, mighty symbols of resistance. This was true not only in the developing apartheid city of the early decades of the 20th Century; Phoenix [as well as Tolstoy Farm outside Johannesburg] also signified this in the wider colonial or metropolitan space, as did Gandhi's ashrams in India.

Gandhi was trying at Phoenix to prefigure a postcolonial world of possibility against the emerging apartheid one - a world based on political, moral and ethical affinities and ideas, on principles of self-development, rather than on territory or ancestral homeland, religion, race, ethnicity, class. It was in the imagining and the performance of an alternative community that one could will it into existence. Interestingly, in all her self-descriptions, in the letters from Gandhi or the moral injunctions of her parents, nowhere is there for Sita a claiming or assertion of "Indianness" as a narrow ethnic category. There is no preoccupation in "Sita's Story" with the making of exclusive Indianness as an identity; if there is any assertion of Indianness - encouraging the speaking Gujarati, or the wearing of saries - it is done to counter Western cultural domination and to avoid becoming "mimic men" and women. Like Fanon, Gandhi had chosen the cultural terrain for transformation, for decolonisation, and Manilal and Sushila understood this implicitly as well.

It was in these liminal spaces, such as Phoenix represented, that a subjectivity based on affirmation and not negation, was being inaugurated, and which Sita inherited. Phoenix was this
"imagined community", an enclave where another world was envisaged and nurtured. While one was "colonial subject" in the one world, enduring object status, this marginalised position was inverted at Phoenix, the paternalism of the colonial world side-stepped. In the face of attempts to de-centre and subjugate individuals and communities, Phoenix constitutes a "cultural formation", organically developed that counters this. Ari Sitas shows how such strategies are part of the economy of change and transformation of a society:

'cultural formations' that constitute attempts to recoil from and to refract the pressures of modernity: pressures that tend to disvalue, to degender, to disoralise and to alienate. If, therefore, modernity's institutions tend towards 'anomie', cultural formations are so many contranomic instances of sociality. The dissonant energies embedded in cultural formations must be seen as 'centring' instances that not only recoil from and refract the pressures of institutional life, but also create navigating nodes that shape the substance, the sway and the parameters of social action. They are therefore a major element of subject formation. [Sitas 2004:ix]

Ari Sitas sees the Phoenix model as part of a long line of non-violent and communitarian traditions that have marked the history of South Africa and of KwaZulu-Natal and where the humanity of people was emphasised:

At Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm the satyagraha campaigns, the inclusive forms of nationalism of the Luthuli era of mass defiance, the participatory democracy: of labour and cultural struggles have left behind a simple legacy - that people were not a means to an end, that struggles demanded exemplary forms of hegemony, and that instrumentalism and reification, the treatment of people as 'facts" or 'things', were to be avoided in any organisational or social relationship. [Sitas 2004:114]

This "experiment with truth" that the Phoenix neighbourhood constituted must be appreciated against the relentless pressure of the dominant regime. Archbishop Hurley intimates this when he notes in the Foreword to the Memoir: "Those of us who never experienced those limitations find much that is poignant in these memoirs but much that transcends those limitations in the family, community and religious life of the Indian people" [iii].
Speaking at a celebratory ceremony to mark the rebuilding of Gandhi's house, Sarvodaya [in the 1980's during the height of the factional fighting in Natal it was raised to the ground], Thabo Mbeki, president of South Africa, recognises the importance of Phoenix as a signifier in the political imaginary not only for the past but for the present and future:

It is this wealth of knowledge that must guide the new Phoenix: for it is here where the sharing of ideas about the road ahead for all of us must be shaped, where discussion groups must be revitalised and insights must be found. The strategy of satyagraha, of non-violence co-operation, was conceived here by Gandhi as a weapon of the struggle on this soil in a humble wood and iron structure. Yet it is this weapon that led to the defeat of British colonialism in India and also greatly influenced our own liberation movement in SA, especially in the 1940's and the Defiance Campaign of the 1950's through wide resistance of the Pass Laws and the Group Areas Act. [Mbeki 2000]

In recalling the vision for a future that was previously envisaged, in presenting a "re-memoried past", Sita's descriptions of Phoenix Settlement points to the promises and social contracts for the present and future that were held sacred in the past. Timothy Brennan points out that a politics of positionality is not so much about where a person is born as much as an individual's "situatedness in a place" [Brennan 1997]. Whatever the many different feelings towards the place, it was a place that Sita could not deny, a place that was to remain with her to the end of her days.

* * * * *

"IN INDIA WITH BABUJI"

A Change Of Place
The second part of Sita's Memoirs, "In India with Babuji", may be seen as a counterpoint to the first, "My Childhood at Phoenix Settlement". The place changes. We move from South Africa to India. The narrative is of an older Sita, one entering adolescence. With the change in place is also a change in political tempo. It is the early 1940's and the struggle for independence in India intensifies and becomes more complicated.

Most importantly, this part of her story deals with Sita's direct encounter with Gandhi. At Phoenix Settlement Gandhi was not physically present during Sita's childhood years though, as pointed out earlier, his presence was evident everywhere. The reference to Gandhi as "Babuji" and used in the title of this section foregrounds the intimate and deferential relationship between Sita and Gandhi. Sita had first gone to India when she was a year old, and then when she was seven. In 1943 when Sita was 15 years she went again to India, this time with her father alone.

Travelling to India

This was the era of the steamship, which symbolised the link between India and South Africa. Darryl Accone, in All Under Heaven - The Story of a Chinese family in South Africa [2004], has devoted an entire section of his autobiographical novel to the sea journey that his grandparents made between South Africa and China.

In her Memoirs Sita provides an interesting bridge between South Africa and India by referring to her travels with her father through several major cities on the East African coast, of her meeting with friends and family that were well-known to them. Her descriptions show that the translation from South Africa to India and vice versa was not exclusive, but included travel to other parts of the continent. Sita describes their stopping at different ports, such as Mozambique, where Gandhi was well known, the Port of Beira [meeting with those who came from Malawi and Zimbabwe], Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, and Zanzibar and Mombasa, before they finally reached Goa, and then on to Bombay. Her father was also well-known to people on the East Coast, among them relatives and friends, as well as followers of Gandhi. This points to the wider regional impact that Gandhi's work in South Africa had and the way these affinities were sustained by Manilal.

Continuity
As alluded to already, India and South Africa were two specific colonial locations. It was Gandhi who contributed significantly to the political link between the two through his resistance to the workings of British imperialism in both. It should be noted that through Gandhi's influence, among other factors, India was to contribute to the anti-apartheid struggle significantly. India's stance against the apartheid regime, and the growth of the anti-apartheid movement there is well documented, with people like Yusuf Dadoo, Ashwin Choudury, Dr Goonam and Indira Gandhi all contributing to this resistance. The globalised nature of colonialism inevitably set in motion a globalised form of resistance, and we note the influence, for example that Gandhi had on Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and in Africa through its own independent struggles. When Gandhi left South Africa Manilal continued to symbolise this connected struggle.

Through her travels between the two colonies Sita saw, as Gandhi did, the struggle against British domination being waged on both colonial fronts. Her experiences were of the India of the 1930's and 1940's. In the early 1930's Gandhi was also involved in visits to England and Europe, meeting important individuals and groups as well as receiving various visitations from different persons at his ashrams in India. Among those he met [when Sita was growing up] were Bart de Ligt of the pacifist movement in Holland, who visited Gandhi in 1931, and Del Vasto a spiritual pilgrim from Sicily who came to see Gandhi in 1937 [see Hardiman 2003].

One sees with Gandhi an easy continuation of his activities wherever he went in South Africa and in India. This was true of Manilal as well. On the first occasion that Sita went to India with her parents [in 1930] Gandhi was preparing for the Salt March, which lasted 25 days and covered 241 miles. Manilal immediately joined these activities, courting imprisonment in the process.

South Africa and India were seen as one struggle not two. While in our readings of post-colonial literature we stress questions of home and exile, belonging and dislocation, through migration, we need to see the way in which "home" was also found in common struggles, and how colonial terrain, wherever it was, became a site for contestation against colonial hegemony.

The continuity between India and South Africa is suggested by Sita herself in her description of physical details as well. She saw India through her South African experience and through her home at Phoenix. When she arrived she observes: "...we reached Panchgani and the surroundings were so much like Phoenix - that I felt happy to get to the house..." [32], and she also recalls that "the prayers were the same as we had in Phoenix" [33]. Sita however also
experienced India as a great "cultural shock" and found it hard to adapt to what seemed very traditional ways.

Questioning Gandhi

The nuances in the relationship between Sita and Gandhi is an important element of the Memoirs. Sita's relationship with Gandhi is a complex one, a relationship marked by acquiescence and resistance, love, respect and admiration as well as critique and circumspection. Sita's identification with her grandfather, who had exacting expectations of anybody, did not come easily or automatically to her. Initially, watching the influence of Gandhi on her father and seeing it as a stranglehold, she objected. Gandhi's demanding parenthood towards his sons is keenly felt by her. Dhupelia/Mesthrie writes: "My mother always held strong views right until her last and was never afraid of questioning any orthodoxy. In our household, she would sometimes shock me by the way she could question Gandhi's views and actions on many matters. In her youth she was no less critical. She has lots of questions about her grandfather. She felt that he dominated her parents' lives and they unquestioningly followed his dictates from India" [4-5]. In her earlier reflections Sita herself writes: "At home, I observed my parents' total submission to this 'stranger' whose every word was law in our home. My father did not make a single decision without referring to Bapu. My mother was no less enslaved" [Dhupelia 1996:1071].

Sita recalls how her grandfather even chose a wife for her father and discouraged her father from following a medical career: "That story amazed me and I was critical of my parents for allowing my grandfather to make decisions for them. I liked my grandfather even less when I heard my father complain that he had wanted to be a doctor, but his father had prevented him from becoming one, that he had passed on scholarships intended for his sons, to others" [Dhupelia 1996:1071-1072]. Although she expresses surprise that Manilal succumbed to an arranged marriage, it is clear that she considers her mother a most suitable partner for him. Sita comments on the cracks in the family, especially concerned about the troubled relationship between Gandhi and his son Harilal: "I met Harilal Kaka just once, at his daughter's house in Bombay, a kind and gentle man, but completely broken by his father. Later that same year, he was found dead on a Bombay street" [Dhupelia 1996:1072].

Meeting Gandhi

Sita and Manilal went to India soon after Kasturba's death. Sita, fifteen at the time, met Gandhi,
who was at this time at the ashram in Panchgani. This visit, that was to last until Gandhi's assassination, was the most significant as this was the time when she was old enough to encounter Gandhi for herself and form her own impressions of him.

Sita remembers this important meeting very well: "When he saw us, he had a broad smile on his face and looked at us over his glasses. My father prostrated before him and he had tears in his eyes for the mother he had lost and for the father whom he longed to see and then I bowed down to him and he said that "Kastur has come back" [33]. In her earlier reminiscences she writes: "But when I saw him and he drew me into his embrace, I was completely won over. I loved him instantly and all my doubts disappeared. It seemed to so comforting to place myself in his complete care and I understood my parents' 'captive' state" [Dhupelia 1996:1072].

Manilal

Sita's relationship with her Grandfather is to a considerable extent influenced by the example of her father. When they arrived at Gandhi's ashram Sita saw her father prostrate himself before his father, and this made a deep impression on her. This was both a physical but also a deeply symbolic act. Her was deeply respectful of Gandhi's status and influence and of his beliefs. She saw her father's reverential attitude towards Gandhi and knew of his adherence in South Africa to Gandhi's ideals in all circumstances. Manilal was acutely aware of the "great moral soul" that Gandhi was. It is clear that Gandhi's hold over Manilal was intensely persuasive precisely because Manilal himself subscribed to Gandhi's moral philosophy. Gandhi expected no more, no less. In a letter to Sushila in 1944 Gandhi wrote: "Manilal has devoted himself completely to my service, and is thus paying his filial debt" [58].

The relationship between Gandhi and his sons has been the subject of much discussion and debate. Dhupelia-Mesthrie gives a more nuanced rendering of this relationship in her book, Gandhi's Prisoner? - The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal. There is certainly ambivalence that Sita feels in respect of Gandhi's relationship with Manilal, her father, and this is evident in the words she uses, such as "devotion", but "sacrifice", "captive" and "enslaved".

And for her part Sita's love and admiration for her father is unquestionable. In fact what comes through in the Memoirs is a very close relationship between Sita and her father. How could she resist the object of her father's respect and devotion - Gandhi himself? Sita was positioned between her identity as daughter and her identity as grand-daughter. And this is one of the reasons why it was difficult for Sita to ignore Gandhi. In fact "Sita's Story", full of references
to Manilal, as the following excerpts show, may be read as a tribute to him:

I must mention here that my father's devotion to his father was phenomenal, though my grandfather did not shower him with fatherly love. My father slept at his feet and helped with his massages and bath and just sat by him and saw to it that his every need was supplied and he was completely at peace with himself, whether Babuji spoke to him or not. It just struck me how devoted he was to his father and when they spoke of Kasturba he had tears in his eyes. I felt that had he had his own way he would have spent every minute of his life with them and what a big sacrifice it was for him to stay in South Africa ever since he was 18. [34]

Of all his sons, my father had made the biggest sacrifice to be away from his parents and brothers to carry on with his father's vision in South Africa. he applied himself to the last letter and word for the rest of his life. People did not recognise him during his lifetime and to this day though he was the loudest voice against apartheid and he served many prison sentences when his father was here. [34]

He had set himself very strict rules to reach the heights of my grandfather not because he was aspiring to be him but was obeying him. It hurts me that when small time passive resisters are recognised, my father is never mentioned. [34-35]

Sita also noticed the veneration accorded to Gandhi in the public domain. In the light of these observations and the personal interest that Gandhi bestowed on her Sita's misgivings against Gandhi slowly began to wane. In spite of its initial tenuousness then the relationship between grand-father and grand-daughter grows stronger. Dhupelia-Mesthrie notes that Sita "was instantly drawn to Gandhi's charismatic personality and came to love him deeply. She also came to understand her parents' devotion to Gandhi. She got to know many of the leaders of the Indian nationalist movement" [7].
Following the example of her father, Sita learnt to serve Gandhi assiduously, and together with Abha, a niece of Gandhi’s, were ironically referred to as Gandhi’s "walking sticks", as the photographs included in the book indicate. These "favourite" photographs of herself and Gandhi seem to me to show strain and tenseness on Sita's face. Or could it be anxiety caused by deference? They are not images of the carefree and happy Sita that we see in some of the other photographs. However the letters that Gandhi writes to Sita, included in the collection, show that a friendly and relaxed relationship was cultivated between grandfather and grand-daughter.

One wonders too if Sita was aware of the furore at this time [she was in India during these years, 1944 to 1947] around Gandhi's unusual experiments at a continuing celibacy [included among his experiments was Abha] as a way of purifying himself of all sexual desire and intention [see Parekh 1989/1999, for a frank and balanced discussion]. In "claiming a voice" women often make choices related to disclosure and silences, as we see in the other autobiographical writings by South African women, such as Ellen Kuzwayo, or Dr Goonam, who wrote Coolie Doctor [see Govinden 2001]. In writing in the persona of a young adolescent, Sita seemed not to experience any dilemma in this respect, depicting a world that she is trying to understand as it was unfolding to her; nor is it apparent, as pointed out already, that she is writing for an imagined interrogatory audience.

Educating Sita

On Sita’s arrival in India Gandhi made her write an essay on her impressions of India. Her reaction was a typical one, seeing it as "an area of darkness", a place of filth and poverty. Immediately Gandhi set about correcting her impressions, showing her that she was seeing India as "Other". He was intent on making her circumspect towards the ideology of the coloniser, knowing full well, as did Gramsci later, that hegemony is power that is achieved not only through coercion but also through consent [see Loomba 1998:28].

Gandhi objected to Sita getting a colonial education and had strong views especially against the teaching of English. His resistance was based on the dominant Anglicised cultural environment of these schools and the mimicry of colonial values through education. Gandhi had discouraged Sita from studying in English schools; he encouraged her to speak in Gujerati. "I shall be satisfied if you do not Anglicise them, but bring them under the influence of dharma. Do not let them forget their mother tongue and also teach them Hindi…None of your acts should encourage in them an infatuation with English [54].
The letters that Gandhi wrote to Sita may be seen as an attempt to subvert and supplement the formal education she received at the English schools. Gauri Viswanathan [1989] has written of the institutionalisation of English education within the politics of colonial rule [see Loomba 1998:54]. It was clear that Gandhi perfectly understood "the totalising discourses of Orientalism" [as Said describes them; 1994:xxiv], and proceeded unambiguously to educate Sita, seeing this as being in keeping with his overall mission. In Gandhi's attitude we see an operant post-coloniality at work during the colonial era, his actions corroborating what some critics have observed, that "postcoloniality should 'signify not so much subjectivity 'after' the colonial experience as a subjectivity of oppositionality to imperialising/colonising discourses and practices" [in Loomba 1998:12].

Gandhi's first letters to Sita were written when she was 13 years. He corrected her language as well as her impressions of places, people and events. On her visit to India when she was adolescent, Sita decided to go to school in Akola, where her maternal family resided, and then to the Benares Hindu University [1946-47], where Radhakrishnan, a close family associate, was the Vice-Chancellor. During the time that she was away from Gandhi he maintained a regular correspondence with her, automatically seeing himself as her teacher and mentor. He was aware that she was lonely in India and wrote to her to encourage her in her work. He was trying to induce a normality in her adolescent development, yet intent on providing a subversive influence in her life in order to counter the dominant discourses that she would have been exposed to.

Gandhi attached the same degree of importance to Sita's education as he did to that of his four sons. He also set much store on the influence of her parents in her education and development. In a letter to Manilal and Sushiela he writes: "Know that you have a duty towards Sita as you have your other duties...Just by her trying to pick up your calling she will train herself" [53].

The importance of Gandhi's letters to Sita may be gauged from the fact that the other correspondence was mainly between Gandhi and adults, most of whom were male. We also realise that Gandhi was involved in important affairs of state at the same time. What is significant is the way the public affairs that dominated Gandhi's life dovetailed with the personal affairs of family. In this respect Dhupelia-Mesthrie points out: "This was a time when he was engaged in some of the most critical discussions with the British and with the President to the Muslim League, Muhammed Ali Jinnah, on the future of India. In the early hours of the morning before national matters consumed his day, he found time to write short notes to members of his family and friends. This is a side to Gandhi that few of his biographers have seen or understood" [8].
We note a similar trait with I C Meer, as he records in *A Fortunate Man* [2002], that while he was at the Rivonia Trial he kept up a regular correspondence with his family. Gandhi’s letters are reminiscent of Nehru’s to his daughter, Indira Gandhi. Of those letters Gandhi himself had noted that Nehru had tried to reach the heart of his daughter and give her insight and understanding of her world. Gandhi’s letters and his general interaction with Sita illustrates that he recognised her values and worth as a young woman and was trying to forge her political consciousness by imbuing her with a passion for the wider political world in which they lived.

From Gandhi’s earlier letters to her parents about her education he emphasises character-building rather than the kind of book knowledge that schools perpetrate: “The purport of all that I have said is only this: Forget for the time being your obsession with schooling for Sita. Let her have as much English, Hindi, Gujarati as you two can give her. Teach her your calling. You can impart to her plenty of knowledge through everyday conversation. In this way she will be making good progress…Teach her the prayers, bhajans, etc. She should learn the Ramayana and other stories. Let her know about the Gita and other books” [54].

We are aware that Gandhi generally opposed the strait-jacketing "strategies of containment" of colonialism, whether intellectual or formal, and juxtaposed and balanced them with resistant "strategies of intervention". He was able to constantly play one against the other, propelled by his extraordinarily strong political conscience and intellect. From Sita’s Memoirs we note that he was adept at doing this at the private level as much as at the public, that he was interested in changing large institutional systems as much as lives of individuals. That Sita began to set down her story shows the extent to which Gandhi succeeded in imbuing her with the sense that she was valued as a human being [see Parekh 1989/1999, for general discussion].

Return to South Africa

Sita’s Story culminates with her return to South Africa. She was still in India and 20 years old when Gandhi was assassinated. While India was mourning the death of a national icon her inconsolable grief was at the sudden loss of her grandfather. The fragile and nascent, but wracked, Indian nation was evident everywhere.

Her grief and bereftness was exacerbated by the disappearance of her fiance, Krishan, who seemed to have become embroiled in the violence of Partition when he returned to Lahore, which now fell in the new state of Pakistan. The incident shows how her private life was imbricated in the larger politics of the sub-continent, how the wider unfolding history had a direct
impact on her individual life. Krishan was a young student Sita had met while she was at the university; Gandhi had met him and had approved of their relationship although, characteristically, had set down some rules for the young couple. They had planned to become betrothed at midnight on August 14, 1948, when India became independent [see Bramdaw 2003], but this opportunity to be "midnight's children" was cruelly snuffed out.

What is worth noting is the inclusion in her short narrative of the story of this budding and promising love relationship. Gandhi had chosen the name 'Sita' for her as it was one of "the seven satis" and signified "freedom from passion" [48]; and Gandhi in later life stressed emotional austerity and denial rather than indulgence in sexual experiences. But Sita was asserting her sexual identity and independence as an adolescent, and in setting down this intimate personal episode years later shows her claiming her freedom in self-representation.

Sita does not dwell at any length on the existential anguish she would have been experiencing. The writing here is sparse and sketchy. But the decisions she makes at this moment reveal much. The eruption of violence on Gandhi's death seemed to undermine all that Phoenix and the other ashrams stood for. Had Satyagraha as a principle failed or had its adherents failed Satyagraha [see Mandela 1994]? This question will continue to haunt the debates around the most appropriate form of resistance that should be mounted against oppressors in the many decades that followed Gandhi's death.

With "a heart in exile" from itself the only option left to her was to return to South Africa. As she notes: "I returned to South Africa soon thereafter. There was no point in my being in India, once my grandfather had left it physically" [Dhupelia:1996:1073]. South Africa was seen as "home", though not in any stable political sense. Ironically she leaves India when it had just gained its independence and comes to a South Africa, now ruled by the National Party, that was entering a period of increasing intransigence. Sita also returned to a South Africa where opposition to the regime continued unabated. Passive Resistance was reinvigorated in the face of the onslaught of the Ghetto Acts, and in the decade that followed [the 1950's] the Defiance Campaigns were mounted. In time Sita herself will participate in protests against the segregation laws of the South African government and of the Durban Municipal authorities. The Library in Durban was segregated and she defiantly went to the main white section rather than the "Non-European" section on several times to register her protest, thereby courting imprisonment.

Sita married Sashikant Dhupelia, and they had three children Satish, Uma and Kirti. Of her role as mother, Dhupelia-Mesthrie writes: "For us children our mother was decidedly different from our other Gujerati family friends. She was modern in her attitudes, drove a car, spoke fluent
English, was a voracious reader and a totally dedicated mother. As children we grew up very aware of the legacy of being the great-grandchildren of Gandhi and of our grandparents' role at Phoenix" [10].

Reading "Sita's Story" at the present time

In South Africa we are tempted now to read texts such as Sita's Memoirs for the way they prefigure the nation. In what way did Phoenix Settlement or Gandhi's ashrams in India for example anticipate the nascent nation?

We are preoccupied since the first democratic elections with "nation-building". Ari Sitas points to our present need to "create a new South Africanism beyond our apartheid past. At its crudest, such a process manifests itself as emanations and invocations of a 'rainbow nation'…But as we are searching for that ever-elusive and unattainable 'we', we know that such essentialisms are crumbling in the new global world of ideas". Sitas reminds us that the notion of nation is under erasure and that there is "a growing crisis of 'territoriality', as the 'nation' and the 'nation state', this complex mix of people, history and territory, is shown up to be a problematic category" [Sitas 2004:17].

The world has moved on, and South Africa is caught in the gap between desire and reality. Nationhood and nation-building continues to be held as a dream, as [static] images of the "rainbow nation" dominate the national imaginary; yet we appreciate more fully now that "nations, like other communities, are not transhistorical in their contours or appeal, but are continually being re-imagined" [Loomba 1998:203].

Gandhi himself, half a century ago, was arguing against the impulse towards a superficial claiming of nationhood. Bhiku Parekh outlines Gandhi's position:

During his negotiations with Jinnah, Gandhi challenged his two-nation theory. He argued that the language of nationalism was both inapplicable to India and inherently absurd. Unlike the European countries, India was not a nation but a civilisation, which had over the centuries benefited from the contributions of different races and religions and was distinguished by its plurality, diversity, and tolerance … Gandhi was opposed to partition because for him it was based on a "'falsehood'. It denied a thousand years of Indian history and the basic spirit of
Indian civilisation, and rested on the inherently 'evil' principle of religious nationalism. [Parekh 1997:26,27]

In the context of struggle against imperialism which was based principally on race it is understandable if the idea of nation was synonymous with extolling the ancestral, indigenous homeland. But the situation in India was and is more complex. Citing Oommen who argues that "a nation is a community in communication in its homeland", Sitas concludes that this "leads to a conception of India as many intertwined nationalities held together by a postcolonial state" [Sitas 2004:17].

Sita's Memoirs reminds us that there were valiant attempts to prefigure a community not based on race, ethnicity or class; of the attempts at anticipating and envisioning a new understanding of freedom and identity, as at the Phoenix Settlement and the Phoenix neighbourhood in the early decades of the 20th century. Yet Sita lived through the second half witnessing the chequered career of Passive Resistance, with the ideals of her grandfather, and also of her father, being savagely mauled. Satyagraha was questioned after Indian independence and after the death of Gandhi; in South Africa Nelson Mandela, faced with the intransigence of the apartheid machine, despaired of its effectiveness as a weapon of revolution, and opted for the armed struggle.

We read Sita's Memoirs at this historical moment when Passive Resistance is being reconfigured in the blossoming of new social movements, as David Hardiman's analysis shows [1997]. While in the present time there is war in so many parts of the globe, increasing fundamentalisms, tribalisms and polarities of different kinds, perceptions of the world as experiencing a "clash of civilisations", with the ideals for peace and justice and community daily being eviscerated, there are also new affinities and solidarities on the global stage. Writing at the time of the new and burgeoning democracy in South Africa, with all its promises and problems, it is interesting that Sita goes back to an earlier time, when an egalitarian world was anticipated and dreamed of.

We register in the Memoirs the characterisation of Manilal [and of Gandhi] as men of peace, as stalwarts of Passive Resistance in all its power and tolerance. This is in contrast to the resurgence in India of Hindu nationalism which, some have argued, may be seen as a resurgence of Hindu masculinity, expressed in the increasing emphasis on nuclear capability
[see Subramaniam 2003].

Sita was writing retrospectively, looking back to an earlier time in her life. But this earlier time she was writing about was when she was effectively living in the future. Her Memoirs show that she was living the reality of an oppressive history but also living the truth that it is neither invincible nor implacable, that its untenability and eventual demise was an accepted and established truth. For all the visibility of the dominant social order it was not durable and inevitable. The story of her individual life indicates this as much as does the grand counter-narrative of Gandhian Satyagraha.

Sita is looking back and writing of a time of historical colonisation; the Memoirs were composed during the time of transition to a democratic state. They are published and read now at a time when South Africa is dealing with the past, emphasising communal and individual memory, truth, healing and reconciliation, exemplified officially by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as pointed out earlier.

What does it mean to read Sita's Memoirs at this particular juncture in our history both in South Africa and globally? Our readings are always influenced directly or indirectly by present concerns and preoccupations. Harvey points out that "If history is a narrative, constructed from the perspective of a present that is itself governed by cultural factors specific to its own historical moment, then what one chooses to focus on in the past, what elements one privileges…are largely determined by present preoccupations" [Harvey 1995: 6].

My reading of Sita's Memoirs - as illustrating how personal memory is a great cultural and historical archive and how the living out of history in the personal and public are intricately intertwined in the orbit of her experience - is also a dimension of the fast changing and fluctuating conditions governing the shaping of the political imaginary at the present time.

We read Sita's Memoirs at a time when the political logic of the past, its divisions and concomitant solidarities, is changing. Our reading of "Sita's Story" is influenced by our present historical moment of reconciliation in South Africa when the "genre of testimony" is predominant and we as a nation are confronting the "ghosts of [our] past" [Whitlock 2000:173]. We need to be aware of our own positions and interests as academic readers, and the way texts get co-opted into different ideological positions and institutional settings when they themselves might wish to travel light…be set free…
Epilogue

"Memory… is this gunny sack…I can put it all back and shake it and churn it and sift it and start again, re-order memory, draw a new set of lines through these blots, except that each of them is like a black hole, a doorway to a universe…It can last for ever, this game, the past has no end…"

[Vasanji 1989:266]

REFERENCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY


Mamdani, Mamhood. 2000. "The Truth according to the TRC." In Amadiume, Ifi and An-na’im [eds].


Rolland, Romain. Mahatma Gandhi - The Man who became One with the Universal Being. [undated; unannotated].


Subramaniam, Banu. 2003. "Imagining India: Religious Nationalism in the Age of Science and
Development." In Bhavnani, Kum-Kum, John Foran and Priya Kurian [eds].


ENDNOTES
1 In this essay, for convenience, I refer to Mohandas [Mahatma] Gandhi as Gandhi and Manilal Gandhi as Manilal.

It should also be noted that for the Memoir only page references are given throughout.

2 A similar shift, from the Atlantic to the Far East, is exemplified by other recent writings; see, for example, Darryl Accone's All Under Heaven - The Story of a Chinese family in South Africa [2004]

4 There is an interesting generational continuity here, as Sita writes of her parents and grandparents, and Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, Sita’s daughter, and editor of the compilation, has dedicated the book to her own daughter, Sapna.

5 This is a line from the Psalms, and was used by Isabel Hofmeyr as part of the title of one of her books on women's narratives.

6 I have a personal link with this Parish; and recently my husband, Dr H S Govinden, wrote a history of the parish. St Aidans was established as “the mother church” for Indian Anglicans in Natal.