

In 'n sekere sin is hierdie die verhaal van 'n gewone vrou. Sy sê self: "Plek-plek is dit nie veel meer nie as 'n afspraakboek ingevul met huishoudelike besonderhede (356). Maar uiteindelik is hierdie geen "gewone" vrou nie, maar 'n opvallend belese, besinnende mens en skrywer wat geloofwaardig kan beweer: "Ek het nooit 'n groot lewe gehad nie, maar ek kan alles daarin gebruik" (320).

En wanneer jy as toenemend meelewende leser met jammerte moet groet, verstaan jy die motto uit Louis Couperus se *Op reis beter*: "Toch was het leven druk binne deze muren..."

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#### **A Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal.**

Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. 2004. Cape Town: Kwela Books. 420 pp. ISBN 0-79570-176-4.

University of the Western Cape history professor Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie is the great granddaughter of Mohandas Gandhi, the eminent mahatma, and the granddaughter of his son and spiritual heir, Manilal Gandhi. Her latest book, *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal*, addresses the life and times of her grandfather. She does so in exquisite prose spiced up with a picture gallery of Gandhi's satyagraha (soul force) family.

Proceeding from a wealth of archives, documentary, oral and personal, Dhupelia-Mesthrie tackles her subject with confidence, it seems to me, that no other scholar could have mustered. While lineal closeness is frowned upon in the historical profession, it worked for Dhupelia-Mesthrie. She gathered a host of earliest memories, inter-

viewed Manilal's closest relatives, and painstakingly sifted through primary archives and a body of secondary literature. In doing this she got to know Manilal, to a great extent, through the life and teachings of Gandhi – and through those, including Manilal, who vicariously lived Gandhi's life. The voice of those who rebelled against the mahatma, like his son Harilal, however, hardly assumes volume, and this is perhaps a book for another occasion and author. From the tidbits about Harilal one cannot but admire him. The author at times enters the narrative, and one suspects her sympathies are then as much with Harilal and the women (who struggled to emerge from Gandhi's shadow) as it is with Manilal.

In telling the story of Manilal's life of struggle, Dhupelia-Mesthrie rolls out not merely a personal graph, but the content and character of the history of South Africa and of India, circa 1860-1960 or so. Here is found history of South Africa in the context of Empire or Commonwealth. Here we see how Indians, both in India and South Africa, masterfully practiced politics in a global context.

They suffered unfair discrimination as "aliens"; they astutely conducted their struggle both as "aliens" (Indians) and South Africans. In doing this they invited the ire of the white supremacist power structure under successive prime ministers from Louis Botha to Hendrik Verwoerd. The fact that Indian South Africans called on and enjoyed the political support of India gave white supremacists a pretext to rile and legislate against them as a "foreign, unassimilable" people.

At community (grassroots) level we see nascent histories of institutions – Tolstoy Farm, Phoenix Settlement, and *Indian Opinion* – that manifested Gandhi's philosophy emerge and stand as commentaries on the South African narrative.

At micro-level we see that, through a “the personal as political”-style, Dhupelia-Mesthrie enters the history of heartache, specifically as Gandhi stamped his teachings of personal virtue and satyagraha on his disciples and in how Manilal tried to first follow the precepts of his father and then to carry the torch of the moral struggle as a leader, both in South Africa and India.

Existentially, however, he could never be his father. He did not initiate a way of struggle, he carried out that of his father; he was not the philosopher king martyred in public; he was the technocrat, the applied social scientist, who laboured his life long and died in his bed. These elements of his life “condemned” Manilal to being his father’s shadow, or prisoner. At one point (119) writing about a minor (personal) but telling incident (Manilal as an adult and satyagraha prison graduate wanting to go up Table Mountain), Dhupelia-Mesthrie writes: “Freed from prison, Manilal was still his father’s prisoner.”

Later she writes: “Manilal was now editor of his father’s paper.”

And later still: “Ever the obedient son, Manilal once again bowed to his father’s wishes.”

Dhupelia-Mesthrie’s academically rigorous but relentless style (heaping up the evidence of Manilal’s imprisonment) also contributes to a feeling that Manilal is always struggling with a choke-hold.

In addition, the personal-as-political sometimes had to pay deference to practical political situations. While Gandhi was liberal in matters of religion, he would not allow his son to transcend Hindu-Muslim religious differences (in his personal life) when he, Gandhi, faced the conundrum of the India-Pakistan religious schism.

The omnipresence of Gandhi so suffuses the first three-quarters of the book that one is apt at times to ask: where is Manilal’s

voice? By page 172 – halfway through – matters had become so depressing this reader prayed for Manilal to break free.

In masterfully unfurling this tapestry and filling it out with analytical comment, including mildly critical but historically empathetic analysis of Manilal, Dhupelia-Mesthrie homes in on her thesis of whether her grandfather was the “prisoner” of Gandhi. The tone and trajectory of the narrative shows the author showing this to be so.

Also, while Manilal silently and at times unhappily bore the burden of Gandhi’s expectations, women, including Gandhi’s wife Kasturba and Manilal’s wife and daughter, Sushilla and Sita, gave voice to their disaffection with his overlordship, albeit of the moral sort. I shall not suggest that such is Dhupelia-Mesthrie’s sub-text, but if these voices were given greater space a picture depicting the power of the patriarchy rather than of the moral philosopher would have emerged.

For me the book also represents a foray into the personal lives that shed new light on Gandhi. I am not sure my interpretation is correct, or if this is the intent of the author, but the elder Gandhi emerges as a tyrannical father who used virtue as an iron heel, and who denied others the joys of life he had experienced.

He refused to let a thousand experiences of life flower.

We know Gandhi the fearless satyagrahi; but in *Gandhi’s Prisoner?* we find Gandhi the husband and father on a relentless moral crusade that did not consider individual differences and preferences. While this does not, in the scheme of Gandhi’s grand accomplishments, detract from his greatness, it shows how his project imprisoned those around him, specifically his first disciple, Manilal.

*Gandhi’s Prisoner?* constitutes a sophisticated analysis of Gandhi the man, Manilal



the disciple, and of Indian South African socio-political history. It is a superb contribution to our national literature that surpasses previous scholarship on Indian South Africans.

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