

The Letters of Sushila Gandhi: From Press Worker to Managing Trustee of Phoenix Settlement in South Africa, 1927 to 1977

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Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie¹

Abstract

An epistolarium of over 80 letters written by a first-generation Gujarati migrant woman to South Africa provides the basis for the construction of her biography. The personal register of the letters written to family and friends allows her to shape this biography and for her voice to be heard though filtered through the process of translation and selection. The letters are read for expressions of labour performativity, the meaning of work and its challenges, her political astuteness and for the intersections with her other roles such as that of wife and mother for there was a seamlessness across these. Her growth as a letter writer over five decades is mirrored by her maturation in all spheres of her life. Through her transnational life, there is the opportunity to consider what role movement to Africa had in this development. The space of Phoenix Settlement, a farm started by Mohandas Gandhi, plays a central role in her transformation, growth and relations with men.

Keywords

Letters, Gandhi, Phoenix, South Africa, *Indian Opinion*, auto/biography

¹ Department of History, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, Department of History, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town 7764, South Africa.

E-mail: umesthrie@uwc.ac.za

Introduction

On 18 March 1949, Sita Gandhi, the eldest daughter of Manilal and Sushila Gandhi, responded to a request for information from Louis Fischer who was writing his biography of Mohandas Gandhi. The 21 years old had taken over clerical responsibilities in the printing press at Phoenix Settlement where her father edited and published *Indian Opinion*, the paper Gandhi started in 1903 during his South African stay. With impeccable English and beautiful handwriting and, signalling the importance of awaiting her father's return from India, she added: 'My mother doesn't write English ...' (Louis Fischer Papers, Box 3). Language, thus, coldly cut Fischer from accessing Sushila and rendered her mute. The discovery of over 80 letters in recent years written by Sushila in Gujarati, the first of which was penned when she was several weeks short of her 21st birthday in 1928 and the last when she was 70 years old in 1977, allows us to access her voice even though these are mediated by the process of translation.

Letters have been very crucial in uncovering women's histories as women took to this medium with some enthusiasm from the 18th century onwards (Earle, 2016). In South African historiography there is an abundance of published correspondence from settler women, and the wives of colonial officials who sought to bridge the distance between home and colony (Erlank, 1995; Fairbridge, 1927; Gordon, 1970; Harington, 1997; Murray, 1953; Warner, 1991). In 1987 Shula Marks, who published the correspondence of 'three exceptional women'—Lily Moya, Mabel Palmer and Sibisiswe Makhanya—observed that women were 'hidden from history' with black women 'doubly hidden' (Marks, 1987, p. 1). Catherine Burns has since shown how a black woman, Louisa Mvemve, an eastern Cape herbalist, rendered herself as an important historical subject and controlled her own autobiography. Mvemve's letters to officials 'were written with this conceit as their basis: my addressee will preserve these letters and papers because I am a human of worth' (Burns, 2006, p. 81).

Women historians have recently read the paper regimes of colonial bureaucracy for the voices and histories of early Indian women immigrants (hitherto neglected in histories of migration to South Africa) and have also drawn on oral history as a recuperative methodology (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2014; Hiralal, 2013a, 2013b). The self-generated paper collections of first-generation women immigrants, free of official constraint and regulation, that may lie in files, drawers, cabinets, cupboards, bags, shoeboxes and garages have not yet been tapped. Language and space also contribute to the mystery of the lives of these women, for, if they

wrote letters to India they lie out of reach and if they do exist then they are most likely in Gujarati, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu and Konkani depending on their geographical origins. Sushila Gandhi's epistolarium, comprised from collections in India and South Africa (most of which are private), and, addressed to several recipients in Gujarati, is an unusual one offering a glimpse into the world of a first-generation woman migrant.

Sushila's letters, as objects of history, have their own fascinating travel history and after life which can be told elsewhere. They were written to parents-in-law, Mohandas Gandhi and Kasturba Gandhi who were in India, and, to friends—Kusum Desai in India, Babar and Ganga Chavda in Cape Town and Bhikha, Rajnikant and Jyotsna Master in Johannesburg. She writes about the family and her personal concerns, but since Babar Chavda and Bhikha Master were involved in the work of Phoenix Settlement they constitute work/personal letters. From her epistolary expressions, we shape a biography here and read character, emotion, tone, concerns and plot the maturation of a young bride into a woman with responsibility. The letters represent a crucial performative act of the self, providing access to a particular time and societal context and especially to the everyday (Brant, 2006, pp. 17, 24). The letters are especially read for performativity of work, its challenges and meaning and for how transnational mobility may have shaped her and her identity.

There are a few caveats. It is not envisaged to provide a full biography drawing on multiple sources. We peer instead through what Stanley (2004, p. 223) and Anderson (2012, p. 15) have called a biographical 'kaleidoscope' and a different lens (such as that of Gandhi's correspondence, for instance) offers a parallel construction. What is offered here, for the most part, is an auto/biography through the 'traces of this person in a particular representational epistolary guise' (Stanley, 2004, p. 223). There are the missing letters—to her parents and siblings in India and to her husband at times of separation. These may have revealed more of the self, maybe a different self and also have allowed greater insights into the differences of geographical location. Letters, Decker argues, have 'multiple rhetorical lives' they speak in different ways to different readers over time (1998, p. 21). We are engaged with what Stanley calls '*a post hoc*' reading—decades from the time when the letters were written and read by the recipient (2004, pp. 219–220). We need, however, to acknowledge the very nature of presentism that characterises letters and the context in which they were written (Earle, 2016). That moment may have passed in the moving life of the person, but the letter fixes it with greater meaning. Mark Gevisser goes so far as to call letters 'dangerous' in this regard (Nuttall, 2004, p. 110). Letters also are 'dialogical' (Stanley, 2004, p. 202) yet, except for

one instance, we do not have the responses of the recipients, and we are left with half a conversation. Collections encompassing a two-way dialogue are rare indeed. Zuleikha Mayet, a Muslim Gujarati woman who wrote in English, succeeded in retaining not only Ahmed Kathrada's letters to her from Robben Island's political prison but also the carbon copies of letters she wrote to him (Vahed & Waetjen, 2009). Sushila's letters were not written with such an eye on the historical record and neither were they meant to be public. She in a way now lies exposed. While she speaks through her letters, there is a biographical construction that takes place in the very reading, selection of extracts from these letters and the interpretation thereof.

Fashioning a Biography Through Gandhi's Correspondence, 1927 to 1948

It is through a letter written by Gandhi on 8 February 1927 to his son, Manilal, in South Africa, that we learn about 19-years old Sushila for it is Gandhi who arranged their marriage. The daughter of Nanabhai and Vijayalakshmi Mashruwala had hearing problems due to an overdose of quinine; she was an artist who also played the harmonium; was educated up to the fourth form and was proficient in Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi but knew only a little English (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)*,¹ 1999, 33, pp. 55–56). To his friend, Hermann Kallenbach, Gandhi emphasised her 'strong character' (*CWMG*, 1999, 38, p. 376, 13 May 1927). The wedding took place on 6 March 1927 in Akola, a small town in Berar (now part of Maharashtra). After a three-week journey by ship the couple arrived in Durban, the port city on the east coast of South Africa. They, then, set off by car for a journey of 15 miles over dirt roads to the 100-acre farm, Phoenix Settlement that Gandhi had bought in 1904 premises for the International Printing Press and its staff. While in the 1900s, it had been home to many press workers and their families and was an experiment in interracial living with many white and Indian residents, the Phoenix to which Sushila came to was more sparsely inhabited for most of the workers lived elsewhere and travelled daily to and from the settlement. Yet, it was still a place of residence for Manilal, and his place of work which involved some farming but mostly press work and the editing of the newspaper (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2004). It was this special characteristic of Phoenix that blended work and residence that began to shape the young bride. Back in Akola, Sushila left behind her parents, two uncles and an aunt, five siblings (the youngest two, a

sister just six years old, and, a brother, aged four) and eight cousins who were like siblings (P. Mashruwala, Unpublished manuscript, 2020). From a small town with the river Morna where children learned to swim and sail boats, and a large house full of people, she came to a farm where the male workers in the press spoke Tamil, Hindi and Zulu and some English. This became her home for five decades and by its nature as a site of work it lifted her out of normative gender relations confining women to domesticity.

The very first letter from Sushila that we have access to (Devadas Gandhi Papers, 13 July 1928) is of double importance since it was written to Gandhi being one of only three to him that has survived time. It provides a glimpse into a young woman just into her second year of marriage, second year at Phoenix, and, four months short of giving birth to her first child. She is diffident and reluctant to pronounce on local politics leaving that to her editor husband who knew more. She is afraid of being left alone on this big farm. Yet she is a keen reader of Gandhi's Gujarati newspaper, *Navajivan*, and is interested in the resistance led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in Bardoli against increased land revenues which also captured the attention of her uncle and younger sister, Tara, back home.

13 July 1928

To My Most Revered Father, at your service,

Please note that I have received your letter. And I have read and came to know the news in there. I also came to know from *Navajivan* about the ashram and Bardoli. You have been saying that there is nothing substantial in my letters. In fact, I don't even know what to write about. Nowadays, you must be knowing from respected Manilal whatever is going on in town. I'm not knowledgeable enough in that matter therefore I'm not writing anything about it to you. I understand the gist of what is going on. There is a lot happening about the 'apology letter'. Due to the internal differences of opinion, there are numerous meetings taking place.

Once the paper is printed, we are spending three to four days in town because respected Manilal has work there, therefore I also have to go. When he goes, I will become extremely lonely and I don't have the courage to stay by myself. That is why I also go to town. We spent those two to three days at Bhai Sorabjee's place. Khorshedbanu has a serious nature. She is in good health. My health remains unchanged.

We have received a letter from respected Kaka of Akola. He went to see satyagraha in action in Bardoli. Tara also went along. Due to Kaka's weak health, he was not able to participate. He writes that he feels sorry about that.

My regards to respected Ba and one and all. What more can I write? If you give me a subject then maybe I can write about it. That's it!

Your obedient daughter

Sushila with obeisance.

That very day Sushila was inspired to write again to Gandhi (Devadas Gandhi Papers, 13 July 1927) giving an insight into the household once night fell and the work of the press had ceased. She had access to a Gujarati magazine, *Samaj Jeevan*, and after reading an article on Sudama (a figure about whom the poets, Narasinh Mehta and Premanand, had written and whose relationship with Lord Krishna was a central focus) she and Manilal had a 'heated debate'. She was interested in Sudama's character and the reasons why his wife Susheela sent him to Lord Krishna. She had already written to her sister and uncle in Akola about this. Unlike her uncle who argued that Sudama's wife 'had a materialistic nature', Sushila believed that her namesake was motivated by 'love for her children'. Perhaps wanting affirmation for her critical reading, she prevailed on Gandhi to weigh in. In this rare surviving epistolary dialogue, Gandhi is somewhat dismissive and may have disappointed Sushila who expected a resolution. In his opinion the character was a literary construction; the story was meant to reveal the power of devotion, and, too much should not be read into the relationship between the husband and wife (*CWMG*, 1999, 42, pp. 355–356, 12 August 1928).

Sushila's two surviving letters to her mother-in-law Kasturba provide a contrast, for they comprise a list of questions about family members in India with short sentences about her two children Sita (b. 1928) and Arun (b. 1934) (Devadas Gandhi Papers, to Kasturba, 13 and 30 September 1935). Letters to Kasturba were most likely read out to her, and letters from her were most likely written by others, though we more recently have evidence of a greater literacy than has been hitherto assumed.² In comparison to these sparse remnants, we have a collection of 267 letters from Gandhi to the couple that spans the beginning of their married life to the month in which he was assassinated in 1948. These, mostly written to them jointly, but some individually depending on where they were, constitute a crucial lens through which her biography emerges. His responses may be read for what they may have told him and his advice to shape their development. Gandhi sought to educate his daughter-in-law about the art of letter writing. His relationship with her, that of a mentor, was also characterised by jovial repartee. From the outset, he chastised the couple about their letters which he found short, 'dull',

‘uninteresting’, lacking news and ‘rather dry’ (*CWVG*, 1999, 41, p. 73, 31 December 1927; 42, p. 142, 19 June 1928; 45, p. 392, 27 April 1929; 46, p. 34, 19 May 1929). He jokingly described Sushila as ‘a lazy woman’ and ‘a princess’ who spaced her words to create the illusion of length. He advised her to follow his example when he had been a young man in England: ‘I would write about everything I might have done during the week, everyone I might have met and everything I might have read and every foolishness I might have committed’ (*CWVG*, L, p. 404, 22 August 1932). ‘If you have interest in life, you will have much to write about’, so the young bride was informed (*CWVG*, 1999, 41, p. 73, 31 December 1927). In 1933 she was praised for her efforts ‘Sushila now seems to have learnt how to write letters’ (*CWVG*, LIV, p. 146, 20 March 1933). What delighted him we are not privileged to know. In 1941 he referred to her ‘beautiful letter’ for she provided details about the couple’s travels through then southern Rhodesia to collect subscription fees for *Indian Opinion* (*CWVG*, LXXIII, p. 349, 25 February 1941).

We learn that Sushila had begun to work in the press just a few months after arriving in South Africa. She began by constructing words with the Gujarati types. Each column of the paper was set by hand, paragraph by paragraph. Gandhi had aspirations for her: ‘She can become capable of managing a press.’ He cautioned the couple not to spend too much time on household duties and that cooking should be a joint effort for ‘a woman is not born merely to cook meals’ (*CWVG*, 1999, 39, p. 87, 20 June 1927). He also advised his daughter-in-law:

There is an agreement between Manilal and me that he should not look upon you as his servant but should regard you as his life-partner in the duties of life and his better-half. You two, therefore, have equal rights over each other. (*CWVG*, L, p. 405, 22 August 1932)

He warned his son about sexual pleasures:

You shall not force her to surrender to your passion, but you shall take your pleasure only with her consent, I would advise you to set limits to your enjoyment ... you know my attitude to women. Men have not been treating them well. (*CWVG*, 1999, 33, 1927, pp. 55–56, 8 February 1927)

Gandhi emerges as a crucial figure shaping the couple’s gender relations and for redefining traditional gender roles. From the early 1900s, he envisaged Phoenix as a place that could liberate women from the household and he himself taught his first daughter-in-law, Chanchal,

wife of Harilal, the work of composing during her short stay at Phoenix (Parikh, 2001, p. 128). Ten years after Sushila's arrival at Phoenix, Gandhi observed to his son 'You have always been unlucky in the matter of helpers. You have never had a really good man. But you have got a good helper in Sushila. I wonder how you could have managed to pull on if you didn't have her'. He wished for her to improve her reading so that she could write for the Gujarati section of *Indian Opinion* (CWMG, LXVII, p. 271, 20 August 1938). In 1944 when Manilal and Sita travelled to India, Gandhi was full of praise 'I am still more pleased that you yourself stayed behind. I had thought that would be beyond your capacity' (CWMG, LXXVIII, p. 421, 18 September 1944). He jokingly wrote 'Now that you have learnt to drive a car, how can I keep pace with you?' (CWMG, LXXVIII, p. 115, 18 September 1944).

Gandhi shaped his daughter-in-law's ideas about work. When she shyly asked him to elaborate on social service, he responded that if she assisted in the press:

merely to save money, that is service of self. If however, your aim is to learn that work and spend the money saved by your work for some public purpose, if it is that you should bring out the paper even at the cost of hardship to yourself, that is social service. (CWMG, XXIV, p. 331, 14 August 1927)

He wanted her life to be driven by service and, to this end, his newspaper, which aimed to guide readers towards an ethical and moral lifestyle, was to be produced by the couple with 'single-minded devotion' (CWMG, 1999, 44, pp. 63–63, 29 January 1929). Gandhi's words from across the ocean urging her forward as a particular kind of worker became a beacon of light for the young woman and are central to her biography.

We learn from Gandhi's letters that he had heard that Sushila 'speaks fairly good English' (CWMG, 1999, 42, p. 355, 12 August 1928). Yet throughout her life, she spoke in a style which linguists characterise as 'inter-language'²³—someone whose language was influenced by her prior mastering of her Indian languages. In the 1950s, her spoken and written English grew with the influence of her grandchildren with whom she spoke only in English. By the 1960s, she had no hesitation conversing with the world renowned South African novelist, Alan Paton, with whom she developed a close relationship as will be seen below. In the 1920s, she would have spoken with greater hesitancy. Through Gandhi's correspondence, we learn of bodily changes that accompanied her work life. Childbirth changed her body weight. From being 90 pounds in 1929, she gained 40 pounds in seven years and two children (CWMG, LX11, p. 427, 21 May 1936). She also suffered

several miscarriages before a third child, Ela, was born in 1940 (*CWMG*, LXIV, p. 270, 18 January; p. 339, 4 February 1937). Her own letters shed light on how she managed work and motherhood.

Press Worker, Wife and Mother (1939–1955)

While for the 1930s, we have only four letters written by Sushila; for the 1940s and the period 1950 to 1955, there are 11 and 12, respectively. This period is significant for she is no longer the young diffident bride but a worker alongside her husband and also a mother and who had now found enough subjects to write about. Sushila's letter to Kusum Desai in India (Gandhi Papers, SN 3408, 7 June 1939) offers an insight into the preoccupations of the 32 years old whose two children were 11 and 5. Kusum Desai had once resided in Gandhi's ashram in Ahmedabad, and Sushila asks her 'What work are you doing now?' which points to the recipient's engagement in public life. The long letter is significant for its sparse lines on household matters and her children. Sushila frames herself as a keen and regular reader of newspapers from India, the *Hindustan Times* and *Harijan* among them, and as one well-acquainted with politics in India and Gandhi's campaigns. She educates her Indian friend about South Africa where 'the atmosphere here is so "rotten" and the government is bent on removing Indians from here.' Her confidence in pronouncing on local politics is revealed in this and a subsequent letter (Gandhi Papers, SN 3406, 2 August 1939). She writes about Indian politics in the Transvaal where a Nationalist Bloc led by the young Dr Yusuf Dadoo, challenged the conservative leadership of the Transvaal Indian Congress and pushed forward the idea of a passive resistance campaign. This was in response to new restrictive laws affecting the rights of Indians to lease new property and secure new trading licences. Manilal was temporarily located in Johannesburg both to report on and to participate in the activities.

Sushila's letter (7 June 1939) reveals quite confidence in her work. She displays initiative in managing the paper's Gujarati section and seeks assistance from her friend to secure articles from India for this section. She writes without boastfulness, but, with a hint of the difficulties of handling different roles:

In Manilal's absence I have to manage all work relating to the newspaper. The girl who was working in the house has taken leave because she is to be married. Until a replacement is found the housework is my responsibility as well. I am in a difficult position.

She felt that the needs of the children and the work of *Indian Opinion* ensured only one of them could participate in resistance. In her words, South Africa is 'this foreign country' where backup child support was lacking. From Gandhi's earlier correspondence to her, we know that when the family visited India during the Salt Satyagraha in 1930, while Manilal was jailed for a raid on Dharasana salt works, she took care of her two-year old daughter but also picketed liquor outlets with other women (*CWMG*, Vol. 49, p. 241, 1 May 1930). From Gandhi's letters in 1939 we glimpse household discussions between Manilal and herself about the possibilities of her participating in the 1939 resistance (*CWMG*, LXX, p. 79, 8 August 1939; p. 109, 21 August 1939). She did accompany him to Johannesburg, where she addressed a large crowd on the need to resist. Passive resistance, however, was deferred on Gandhi's advice to the resisters pending an intergovernmental solution (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2004, pp. 255–257). Sushila carefully defined her activities prioritising the press and her children over political protest but did enter the foray where she could. She saw her role as freeing up her husband for fuller political participation.

In the early 1940s, Manilal and Sushila befriended the Gujarati community leader, Babar Chavda and his wife, Ganga Chavda. Originally, a shoemaker by caste, he ran a fruit and vegetable shop in Mowbray, Cape Town. Manilal and Sushila wrote individually to them and, often times, Babar and Ganga were joint recipients though sometimes they were addressed individually. These letters⁴ provide insights into the household and press. On 29 September 1941, writing to Ganga, who assisted her husband in his shop for many years, Sushila reveals that Manilal was in Johannesburg and she was managing the press work with her youngest child just a year old: 'Ela's tantrums have increased. Since she started walking it had become her job to shuffle and upset each and everything about the house. This carries on the whole day. Therefore the work has increased'. At the bottom of this letter, she requested Babar to send a poem for publication for Diwali in the paper.

Over the years, she went on to write more directly to Babar about work with greater familiarity, ease and humour. Her confidence with men had long been established in the earlier decades where she worked as the only female press compositor and where she had since established her authority in Manilal's absences. Her long letter to Babar of 25 November 1944 when she was alone on the farm with the younger two children reveals how the 37 years old had matured to realising Gandhi's ambitions for her to manage and lead. She understood the very ethos of the paper and how it compared with, for instance, the other

Durban Gujarati–English weekly, *Indian Views*. She informed Babar: ‘... *Indian Opinion*’s objectives are to inform the rest of the world of this country’s problems and questions and the other is to spread Gandhiji’s thinking and ideals.’ She also saw it as an important outlet for local creative talent. Her objective was to encourage more contributions from Babar who was also an artist and poet and to get him to secure advertisers and subscribers. Some letters are about accounts for she increasingly took on this responsibility, and Babar was in charge of collecting Cape subscriptions (8 January and 19 September 1948). Her instructions reveal a command of the paperwork of receipts and debts. We do not know if she herself wrote articles for the Gujarati section, as Gandhi wished, but she designed the special Diwali issues and in 1950 was a co-producer with her elder daughter of the special India independence issue (to Babar 19 September 1948, 8 January 1950).

While she immersed herself in work and sought to balance work and home, there is, however, a delightful attempt to imagine another life for herself when she suggests to Babar on 25 November 1944 that he come to Phoenix to assist during Manilal’s absence in India:

Oh yes, if you decide to come then you must definitely come and you can give your service even in my presence. I will be the Queen of the house and hand over the press to you and become a housewife! Gangaben and I will go out for a walk and do shopping etc.

India, the motherland and home to the family was always important. All Sushila’s letters are signed off with various renditions of Victory to India, ‘Jai Jagat’, ‘Jai Hind’ and ‘Jai Bharat’. The desire to visit India often and together was tempered by the search to get friends to take over the work of the paper. It is possible to plot the trips to India (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2004). In 1930–1931 Sushila and Manilal and their toddler went to India together for almost a year and a half. This was followed by a short urgent trip of three months in 1932 when Gandhi had begun a major fast and they feared for his life. In 1938, the couple and the two children went to India where Sushila stayed on with the children for the year. In 1944 following Kasturba’s death, Manilal and Sita went to India, while Sushila, no longer the scared new bride, held the fort at Phoenix. In 1945 the whole family set off for India. While Manilal returned after a year, Sushila only returned towards the end of 1947. During this time, she stayed in Akola and also at Gandhi’s ashram in Sevagram, while the eldest daughter studied at university and the younger two attended the local school in Akola.

This transnational lifestyle ensured that both countries remained crucial to their identity, and the Indian nationalist struggle was a significant part of their lives for apart from the close involvement of family members, it received significant coverage in *Indian Opinion*. India's freedom struggle inspired their resistance to South Africa's discriminatory and segregatory practices (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2004, pp. 275–279). For Sushila, there was always the pull of her family though a lengthy stay in India could mean a period of separation for the couple. The tension that these produced can be read from Gandhi's letter to Sushila. Understanding her need to be with her parents and her fear in 1938–1939 that Nanabhai might die in her absence, he advised:

If your presence here is necessary for some service, it becomes your duty to stay back. Otherwise, your place is by Manilal ... Go without hesitation and with a light heart. That is your duty.

(*CWMG*, LXVIII, p. 329, 25 January 1939)

Gandhi's definition of work as 'duty' and as 'public service' as articulated earlier would always prey on Sushila. Gandhi perhaps expressed it best when he referred to their lives 'in exile' (*CWMG*, 1999, 44, pp. 63–63, 29 January 1929).

The pain of separation from her family at the time of the non-cooperation movement is revealed in Sushila's letter to Ganga Chavda on 17 November 1942:

The news from India causes a lot of concern. We also do not get the truth. Therefore it causes greater concern. My sister had written a letter. She writes that one day the police arrested 4 people from the house. They were three brothers and one sister. Also my father just passed away. There is no one with my mother. I feel that at such times if I could fly over and go to India then I should.

The periods of separation from each other were also difficult. How indispensable she had become to her husband is best revealed in Manilal's letters. On 24 November 1946, during her extended stay in India, Manilal wrote to Babar: 'I cannot manage on my own.' On 14 July 1955 when Sushila was in the Cape to collect subscriptions for *Indian Opinion*, the 63-years old cautioned Babar with whom she was staying: 'Just remember that she is not on a visit but for the purpose of work. I would be very grateful if you could send her as soon as the work is completed.' She showed herself capable during Manilal's absences in 1944 and also in 1950 when she oversaw the public opening of Gandhi's home at Phoenix after it had undergone extensive renovation (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2004, pp. 338–339).

Manilal's life was also an activist's life. He undertook several fasts at Phoenix in 1951 and 1952 to prepare himself for civil acts of disobedience against apartheid. Sushila also joined him in defying petty apartheid on Durban's buses (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2004, pp. 345–348). Periods of separation were also caused by jail sentences. In 1953 she worried about the 60-years old who was in jail for participating in the Defiance Campaign launched in 1952 by a multiracial alliance of parties and organisations. She wrote to Babar on 27 September 1953:

Manilal has gone to jail. We have to do our duty. Therefore I have occupied my mind with the work he has given me. I only pray that the severe jail life does not affect his good health at this age. When writing this I am experiencing Bapu standing in front of me and reprimanding me and saying leave Manilal's and my worry to God and do your duty then only will you be peaceful.

Her 'duty' to Gandhi and the work at Phoenix would soon be severely tested when on 5 April 1956 Manilal died after having suffered a stroke in November 1955. Hereafter, she began to perceive of the work that fell upon her as a heavy weight to bear.

Editor, Managing Trustee and Grandmother (1956–1977)

That the early months of 1956 brought much turmoil is revealed in Sushila's letter to Babar Chavda as she shuttled between Phoenix and the hospital in Durban and relied on friends to do her work for the Gujarati section (16 January 1956). At the hospital she was told by the management to use the back entrance and keep out of sight for this was a whites only hospital. She transferred Manilal to a hospital for blacks rather than endure the humiliation of preferential admission. Writing to Kusum Desai, she echoed her previous reference to 'this faraway foreign country'. What was uppermost in her mind was who would take control at Phoenix and her own desire to not be landed with the responsibility.

Who in this country will volunteer to serve in this capacity while upholding Bapu's principles and not harbouring a greed for money? ... I wish to free myself from the responsibilities of the newspaper and the 100 acres land by passing it on to someone who will not misuse these.

(Gandhi Archives, SN 34039, 15 March 1956)

This would prove to be an elusive search for several years. In the meantime, the widow of 49 years was forced to step up. At the time of Manilal's death, her eldest daughter lived in Durban with her husband and toddler; Arun, the second eldest, was 22 years old, and Ela was just sixteen years old.

For the two decades after her husband's death, we have a corpus of 52 letters (43 of which were written between 1960 and 1969), which deal mainly with the affairs of Phoenix Settlement with bits of interspersed family news. Babar Chavda continued to be a significant recipient, but there are many letters in the period 1960 to 1962 to Bhikha Master, an accountant-turned-manufacturer of hats and Gujarati community leader in Johannesburg whom Manilal had appointed a Phoenix Settlement trustee. He took care of the financial matters. When he died in 1962 after an illness, his son Rajnikant replaced him. Sushila enjoyed a very close relationship, that of an elder aunt, with him and his wife, Jyotsna, and there are a few letters to them.⁵

The letters from 1956 to 1962 reveal a time of great difficulty for Sushila—there was the need to establish a sound management structure for Phoenix Settlement, to decide the future of the newspaper and to secure her own financial security. There is much pain in her letters. These difficulties were compounded by personal worries. Her son, Arun who departed for India in 1956 to immerse his father's ashes, secured a job as a reporter for the *Times of India* in Mumbai. In 1958 he married an Indian nurse who had a six-year-old daughter. Since South Africa's immigration laws expressly forbade the entry of a wife from India, a residential permit for his new family was unlikely, though Sushila tried (to Babar Chavda, 12 October 1962). In 1960, Ela took a gap year in India. That this was a period of immense loneliness for Sushila at Phoenix is communicated to Bhikha Master (6 February 1960):

Yesterday the ship left at 1pm. Ela and I, we both were sad, I am still feeling emotional. Lots of memories make the mind weak. At the end we get peace at the Almighty's feet. ... I feel my world is empty.

Ela returned though in 1961 and she and her husband, Mewa Ramgobin, settled in at Phoenix Settlement with their children. Sushila's house was full. She was grandmother to Sita's three children and to Ela's five children. While Ela travelled to Durban as a social worker for the Durban Indian Child Welfare Society, Sushila took on extra responsibility: 'I have become everyone's mother' (to Babar Chavda, 5 June 1965). Arun, his wife and two children also gained temporary entry permits for a few months in 1967–1968. Sushila's older grandchildren remember their grandmother in the 1960s. She had great story telling abilities and

entranced them with Gujarati short stories from magazines that came from India while she also read their English books. Not an overtly emotional person, she was full of humour and was always ready for fun activities, card-playing being amongst these. She cooked vegetables freshly plucked from the garden that she tended. She taught them about Gandhi and his values, and it is from her they learnt prayers and respect for all religions. She enjoyed stays in Durban with her daughter for they allowed her to meet with all her friends. Her grandson in India remembers her bringing a chart of Africa's wildlife; a granddaughter in South Africa remembers stories of the family in India. The grandchildren in India accompanied her on visits to Gandhi's ashrams, to visit Gopal Godse, the brother of Gandhi's assassin and to tourist sites too. They remember how she regained her hearing after an operation in India, which meant they had to cease shouting words at her. Her grandson draws attention to her English for she asked of a visitor at Phoenix: 'Why do you drink cigarette?'

These memories contrast with the sustained narrative of worry and distress that emerge in the letters Sushila wrote in the 1950s and 1960s. As Manilal lay in hospital in early 1956, the question of management was addressed by the trustees. For the very first time in the history of Phoenix Settlement, a woman was appointed trustee that too managing trustee. While her status as daughter-in-law was a factor there must have been some faith in Sushila's abilities and prior work history. Additional trustees were also appointed, among them, Babar Chavda.⁶ We have snippets of information of the role of trustees during Manilal's time where they could be obstructive or helpful (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2004, pp. 153–156, 287–289). While Bhikha Master was a crucial support to Sushila and raised finances for the continued existence of *Indian Opinion*, Sushila felt disappointed in most of them. Already in March 1956, she felt abandoned: 'they nominated me ... and then washed their hands off the organisation's duties' (Gandhi Papers, SN 3409, to Kusum Desai, 15 March 1956). Two years later, she put her hypertension and diabetes down to her worries. She informed Babar, whom she felt let her down the most, 'my body is broken.' While the trustees felt that *Indian Opinion* should be continued, they left it to her to make it work. Humour deserted her, and she was quite forthright in informing Babar how his 'indifference' affected her (4 March 1958). To Bhikha, who was ailing and unable to do as much as he did before, she wrote: 'It often feels like the settlement only belongs to me ... If you ask any of the trustees, I doubt that if they can tell you what's happening ...' (24 January 1962).

While she did not hesitate to let the men she relied on to know her disappointment, she also began to take firm action. After discussion with Jordan Ngubane, the editor of the English section, a momentous decision was taken to rename this section *Opinion*, to become more reflective of South African society (to Babar Chavda, 26 April 1957). Yet the biggest problem she faced was an inherited financial situation of severe lack. Manilal in 1955 had contemplated closing down the newspaper noting the falling subscribers and the competition of more commercial newspapers (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2004, pp. 376–797). In April 1957, Sushila wrote to Bhikha: ‘All my work depends on the money you send. I have not been able to pay bills since two months’ (16 April 1957). In a moment of desperation she wrote: ‘I have this thought in my mind that to how many people will this paper bring misfortune and be satisfied’ (to Babar, 14 March 1958). She gathered herself and undertook a tour of the Transvaal and southern Rhodesia with Master and the Phoenix driver, Bechoo, to raise funds (to Bhikha, 6 February, 23 May 1960). Few Indian women would have journeyed alone with two men. That the paper struggled along until August 1961 when the last issue was published was in itself a remarkable feat. Sushila’s decision to close down a 57-year-old paper that Gandhi had started was governed by pragmatism rather than emotion. ‘Indian Opinion is over’, she informed Babar (30 July 1961).

The death of her husband changed the meaning of work for her. For three decades their married life involved a joint partnership of work with clearly defined duties. Never one to complain about Manilal’s temporary absences, the permanent void now rendered everything overwhelming and a burden and the work of management became a less joyful activity. Personal financial struggles humiliated and angered her. By arrangement with Gandhi, Manilal was entitled to draw £100 from the settlement per month. Sushila as a worker had also drawn a small sum with Gandhi’s permission. She now struggled to secure a small subsistence. That she had to ask brought her much pain: ‘In case there comes a time to write my biography then just for 50 to sixty pounds I really had to plead yet I didn’t get anything’ (to Babar, 4 March 1958). Of her duties at Phoenix and her needs she wrote: ‘If I stay here I cannot live on grass and water. If I stay with the settlement there will be some expenses. We have visitors. We offer tea and snacks. Also I will need for my upkeep’ (to Babar, 20 July 1961). She wrote as a feminist with a reluctance to be a dependent, even to her own children. ‘Is it not my right to ask for six months salary?’, she asked of Bhikha (9 March 1961). While part of the difficulty lay in the lack of funds, there is also more than a hint of patriarchy by the male trustees who did not quite see her as a working woman, but more as the daughter-in-law of Gandhi who lived at Phoenix.

Her hands-on management of the sale of the press equipment and her attempts to find alternate work for the press workers reveal that she was more than this (to Bhikha, 15 September, 12 October 1961). Once her daughter Ela came to stay with her some of her financial worries eased but it dented her desire to be independent, and for some years hence her struggle to get a good allowance for the work she did continued.

Sushila was also creative in thinking of a new Phoenix without a newspaper. This was realised when the Mahatma Gandhi Clinic was opened in October 1961. The idea emerged from discussions with her children Sita, Ela and her husband, Mewa, and was supported by the doctors on the trust. The opening of this clinic and its work in providing healthcare for the poor of Inanda became her new source of happiness and energies. 'And this way more life has been injected into the settlement', she wrote to Bhikha Master (12 October 1961). In 1962 she brought the trustees attention to the fact that Gandhi's birth centenary would be upon them in seven years. She urged them to plan for this and not 'to let things slide by' (Chavda Papers, to the trustees, 15 February 1962).

As planning began, the trust was reconstituted, and Alan Paton was drafted to chair the centenary committee. She and Paton developed a close relationship. Often times, she was the only woman attending the working committee that met in Durban rather than at Phoenix but she held her own. The slowness with which the men worked frustrated her as did their inefficiency. That some of the men were dismissive of her concerns is shown in the fact that the lawyer on the trust ignored her appeals to officially register the trust with no valid reason. He was also dismissive of her request for him to renew her book licence so that she could purchase books to sell at Phoenix, something she had done for decades. He suggested with disregard for her sensibilities that she purchase books regardless of the licence (Paton Papers. PC1/5/8/2/5-1, to Paton, 15 March 1956). Paton was informed by her quite firmly about her thoughts on these matters and the upcoming centenary: 'I have spent forty years of my life on the settlement. It is my earnest desire now that I should do all I can to make a success of the centenary celebrations of the man who founded this settlement' (Chavda Papers, copy of letter to Paton, 18 May 1966). The work for the centenary gave her new meaning in life. These plans ultimately came to fruition when a new building of the Mahatma Gandhi Clinic was opened in June 1970, and a new museum and library were also opened.

There were new roles Sushila also had to assume. She accepted the request of anti-apartheid activists to lead a five-day fast at Phoenix in 1960 against the state of emergency and the bannings and house arrests of those opposing apartheid, but she was careful to solicit the advice of

those whom she trusted (to Bhikha, 23 May, 7 June 1960). South Africa had become her centre. In 1961 during the short-lived Sino-Indian war, she supported the collection of clothes and funds for India with this rationale: 'According to my calculations even if we are citizens of South Africa but favouring independence as humans it is our duty to help any country whose independence is taken away. From this point of view it is our duty to help India' (to Babar, 16 November 1962). In this formulation, South Africa was no longer that 'foreign country', and India was 'any country' needing of help. India remained a site for family visits and reflecting her new responsibilities at Phoenix, she met with members of other Gandhi museums in 1966 and made arrangements for exchanges of material (Paton Papers, PC1/5/8/2/5-1, to Paton, 15 March 1966).

Sushila's stay at Phoenix came to an end when the Ramgobin family decided in 1976 to move to a new house in the small rural town of Verulam within the same district. The 69 years old first investigated solutions for this new life challenge:

I am looking for someone who is married with a small family and is interested and also skilled in this kind of work. He can stay separately in the house and assist me at the same time. We can divide the house by putting a partition.

(to Rajnikant Master, 15 February 1976)

This was, however, not to be. We end with her letter written on 1 August 1977 after she had just returned from India. She accepted her limitations, yet her unflagging devotion to the work at Phoenix remained.

Dear Rajnikantbhai and Jyotsnaben,

I have arrived straight into Durban on the 1st of the previous month. My health is worse now than when I left. I now have to take insulin injections everyday. At the moment I am staying with Ela. I alternate staying between the two sisters. In this condition they do not want me to stay alone in Phoenix.

We are going there twice a week to check and instruct what work needs to be carried out. A township is being built near Phoenix. Many people are making use of our clinic. They are now asking for maternity ward facilities because they can't find ambulance services urgently. The committee has decided to keep one or two beds and open a maternity ward facility. It is decided to ask the government to fund certain of the expenses. We have decided to have a Bhajan, Kirtan programme on 2nd October. We should invite Hindus, Muslims and Christians together. Can you suggest someone from the Hindu community?

Trust your daughter and son-in-law are keeping well. Do they write to you?
My regards to all. My namaste to Ma.

With blessings,

Sushila masi

Conclusion

The hand and power of the biographer is evident here in the slicing of letters into quotes and in the framing of a life of duty. Yet, Sushila's own letters unmute her, and she shapes her own biography. The reproduction of two of the shortest letters to begin and end this essay is an effort close to the heart of feminist methodology to allow this voice to be heard more loudly (Butalia, 2000, pp. 275–289; Geiger, 1990). Her life's trajectory was from a young partly deaf bride to press worker and manager of the whole settlement. We cannot say what her fate would have been had she remained in India. Her sister, Tara, two years older than her, went on to receive national recognition for her community work with young women, and two of her female cousins became doctors. Many Gujarati women who followed Sushila in that journey to South Africa in subsequent decades also found the necessity to assist their husbands in their shops and contributed to the household economy (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2014). We do know that Gandhi's Phoenix provided a space for the redefinition of gender roles and Sushila's own character and abilities responded well to this. Work meant living up to Gandhi's ideals and became duty, but being independent meant she was unafraid to demand that salary she deserved. In that male world of meetings and recalcitrance she forced a recognition of her status and wishes. We have her strongly expressed emotions about the hardships of the 1960s. These pin and fix her emotions. Yet in 1971, interviewed by a reporter when she was in a happier space with the successful commemoration of Gandhi's centenary behind her, she commented:

You ask whether I would have chosen the 'hard life' had I known what was in store for me. Oh yes, I most certainly would have. It has been a wonderful life. And you know hardships cease to be difficult if they are accepted and just lived day by day. (quoted in Thomson, 1993, p. 70)

So which is true? Both, in fact, are true and are deeply framed by the context of time.

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Notes

1. The author's research was conducted over many decades, and two versions of the *CWMG* were used. The 1999 edition represents the e-book published by the Government of India. Where the volumes are indicated by roman numerals these are the hard cover editions published over a very extensive period of time beginning in 1958.
2. Tushar Gandhi (2022) has recently published *The lost diary of Kastur: My Ba*. The diary reveals a very rustic style.
3. My thanks to sociolinguist Rajend Mesthrie for this.
4. All letters from Sushila to Babar and Ganga Chavda come from the Babar Chavda Papers in Cape Town which I hold.
5. Letters to Bhikha Master may be found in the Bhikha Master Papers, Johannesburg held by his brother Harshad Master, and letters to Rajnikant and Jyotsna Master may be found in the Rajnikant Master Papers, Johannesburg held by Sharad Master.
6. These were Arun Gandhi, Babar Chavda, Dr Edul Rustomjee and Dr Rustom Rustomjee with the older ones being M. B. Naidoo and Bhikha Master and Rustomjee Rustomjee.

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