

'A living testimony of the heights to which a woman can rise': Sarojini Naidu, Cissie Gool and the Politics of Women's Leadership in South Africa in the 1920s

PATRICIA VAN DER SPUY^a and LINDSAY CLOWES^{b*}

^a Castleton State College, United States; ^bUniversity of the Western Cape, South Africa; *Corresponding author. Email: lindsayclowes@gmail.com

Abstract

A leading force in the Indian National Congress, Sarojini Naidu arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa, at the end of February 1924 after receiving an invitation to support South African Indian political organisations in their struggle against the Class Areas Bill. Intending to leave South Africa after two weeks, Naidu remained for several months. In this paper we explore Naidu's relationship with 'the Joan of Arc of District Six', Cissie Gool. We suggest that Naidu's visit was significant for South African women's political histories in general and Gool's in particular. Insisting that women be respected as political activists, Naidu's visit redefined the place of women, not only as participants in politics, but also as leaders. She provided a role model for women, such as Gool, who might otherwise not have imagined it possible to exercise power and authority within South Africa's profoundly patriarchal political mainstream. Against the broader context of South African women's activism Sarojini Naidu's South African visit expands our vision to encompass the doubly marginal: women acting at the margins of women's political history and at the margins of patriarchal politics - and further marginalised within the historiographies of each.

Keywords: women's political history; South African history; Sarojini Naidu; Cissie Gool; women's leadership; Class Areas Bill; feminist history; Gandhi; women's activism

On 1 April 1924, the Cape Times published a letter submitted by Mrs Z. Gool of Cape Town, in which the writer expressed outrage at the mainstream media's increasing hostility towards Sarojini Naidu, a

representative of the Indian National Congress (INC).¹ Naidu had arrived in Johannesburg at the end of February, having presided over an East African Indian Congress conference in Kenya. She had received an impromptu request by the Natal Indian Congress to visit South Africa to support local organisations in their struggle against the Class Areas Bill. The Bill undermined the Smuts-Gandhi Agreement of 1914 and because that agreement 'was arrived at with the knowledge and concurrence of the Imperial and the Indian Governments', Gandhi now insisted that India should intervene; hence the justification for the visit by a representative of the INC. Gandhi could not leave India (he had been incarcerated and then hospitalised), but he advised South African activists from afar.² Partly a response to pressure from white traders in the Transvaal who were in competition with traders identified as Indian, the Class Areas Bill was a component of a broader strategy of racial segregation. The Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 had given local urban authorities broad powers to institute and police residential segregation of African people, whereas this Bill targeted Indian South Africans.³

Since her arrival in South Africa, Sarojini Naidu had embraced a brutal schedule despite chronic and acute ill health, in the face of increasingly virulent insults and snubs from racists in local government, civil society and the media.⁴ Her speeches had been described in the Cape Times in the misogynistic language of 'wild oratory' and 'emotional, ill balanced harangues' as well as 'revolutionary and unlicensed talk', her visit described as a 'mission of stirring up mischief'.⁵ Sarojini Naidu was

¹ Cape Times, 1 April 1924

² M.K. Gandhi, 'Statement to the Press on Anti-Indian Campaign in South Africa', 14 February 1924, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/people/gandhi/51-73.htm>, accessed 13 March 2010.

³ A. Mabin, 'Comprehensive Segregation: The Origins of the Group Areas Act and Its Planning Apparatuses', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 2 (June 1992), 405-429; E. Pahad, 'The Development of Indian Political Movements in South Africa, 1924-1946' (DPhil dissertation, University of Sussex, 1972), ch. 2, http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/thesis/pahad_thesis/menu.htm, accessed 13 March 2010. See South African History Online for a timeline of relevant legislation in this period: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/segregationist-legislation-timeline-1920-1929>, accessed 12 June 2010.

⁴ The mayors of Johannesburg and Newcastle refused to meet with Naidu, and both Councils turned down requests to use the Town Hall to welcome her. See *Natal Mercury*, 1 April 1924; *Cape Times*, 7 May 1924. See also *Indian Opinion*, 1 March 1924 and 21 March 1924; *Natal Mercury*, 13 March, 19 March 1924 and 2 April 1924; *Cape Times*, 29 February, 26 March and 28 March 1924; editorial 3 April 1924

⁵ *Cape Times*, 22 March and 26 March 1924 respectively.

undeterred by such verbiage. Intending to stay for two weeks, she remained for three months because 'her people' needed her.⁶ Repeatedly drawing crowds of thousands, she travelled extensively, typically giving two or more public appearances on any given day, often acceding to pleas to add impromptu meetings to her schedule.⁷ Escorted in special trains bearing her name and garlanded wherever she went, Sarojini Naidu arrived as Mahatma Gandhi's ambassador.⁸ Three months later, she would leave the country a public figure with authority in her own right, having been elected President of the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) by men who had not previously imagined women as members, let alone accepted one as leader. In this capacity Naidu initiated the process that would lead to a Round Table Conference between the governments of South Africa and India, resulting in the Cape Town Agreement of 1927.

At the time Mrs Z. Gool's letter appeared in the Cape Times, Naidu had been attending the second reading of the Class Areas Bill, interviewing the Prime Minister and other government officials and ensuring Reuters heard (and would print) her story, as well as giving speeches in an overcrowded City Hall and in multiple venues throughout greater Cape Town and the Western Cape.⁹ Gool's letter began:

Your virulent attack on Mrs Naidu . . . compels me, as a woman with whom Mrs Naidu has stayed since her arrival in Cape Town and who has been to every one of her meetings without any exception, to give my impression of her speeches and the good work she has

⁶ Natal Mercury, 6 March 1924. See also Naidu's speech in the Durban Town hall, 10 March 1924 (G.A. Natesan, *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu*. 3rd ed. (Madras: G.A. Natesan & Co., n.d.), 413).

⁷ Natal Mercury, 11 March, 13 March and 14 April 1924.

⁸ Naidu described herself as Gandhi's 'soldier' and 'ambassador' in a letter dated 29 February 1924 (M. Paranjape, ed., *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), 173).

⁹ The Cape Times reported that the City Hall was 'crowded out'. At eight o'clock - 15 minutes before guests were due to be admitted - 'the hall was already filled to overflowing' (Cape Times, 19 March 1924). Apart from her visits to Parliament and her speeches in the City Hall (Cape Times 19 March and 23 March 1924), the fortnight or so she spent in Cape Town saw her meet with representatives of the 'entire non-European community of Cape Town' - the African People's Organisation, the Inter-racial Association, the Negro Improvement Association and the Indian Association (Cape Times, 29 March 1924). She also spoke on the Grand Parade (Natal Mercury, 25 March 1924); at Wellington (Cape Times, 14 March 1924); Walmer Estate (Cape Times, 21 March 1924); twice at the National Theatre in Williams Street Cape Town on Sunday 23 March (Cape Times, 22 March 1924); Paarl (Cape Times, 29 March 1924); Salt River Moslem School (Cape Times, 30 March 1924); Claremont Town Hall (Cape Times, 31 March 1924); as well as an 'At Home' at the house of Mr Norodien and his wife (Cape Times, 31 March 1924).

done during her visit here. You are absolutely wrong when you say that her ‘motives underlying all her speeches are to raise prejudice and to damage relations of white and black in South Africa’. Let me, a non-European woman who has up to now remained silent but who has watched the trend of political affairs in South Africa, especially the relationship between white and black, give you my view of Mrs Naidu’s visit and her speeches.¹⁰

Mrs Z. Gool, known colloquially as Cissie, would become a popular, vocal political leader in Cape Town in the 1930s, but until Sarojini Naidu’s visit, she had ‘remained silent’.¹¹ Born and married into the heart of Cape Town’s creole political elite, her unprecedented rise to positions of leadership and authority – as the only woman to preside over nationalist organisations (the National Liberation League and the Non-European United Front) and the only black woman to be elected to the Cape Town City Council before the demise of apartheid cannot be explained by her position as the younger daughter of Dr Abdullah Abdurahman and the wife of Dr A.H. Gool.¹² The pervasive ‘common sense’ understanding that political leadership and agency was (and even continues to be) the preserve of men is itself in need of explanation, as Amanda Gouws and others have observed.¹³ Evaluating herself as a woman who had ‘up to now remained silent’ in such a milieu, Cissie Gool had nevertheless long been observing ‘the trend of political affairs’ and, finally, she had broken her silence.¹⁴

¹⁰ Cape Times, 1 April 1924.

¹¹ Many writers refer to Mrs Z. Gool as ‘Cissy’, but we have spelt her name as she did (see, for example, University of Cape Town, Manuscripts and Archives [hereafter UCT M&A] BCZA 83/30-35, Abdurahman Family Collection, *passim*).

¹² While we recognise the constructedness of racialised subjectivities such as ‘black’, ‘coloured’ or ‘white’, and the problems associated with continuing to use these categories, we also recognise that the historical development of these categories shaped (and continues to shape) daily life in South Africa in important ways. We use ‘black’ descriptively to refer to people who were classified as ‘coloured’, ‘Indian’, ‘native’ or ‘Non-European’ at the time of Naidu’s visit to South Africa. For a discussion of the historiographical ‘bracketing’ of Cissie Gool between two men, or recorded as the (younger) daughter of Dr Abdurahman, see P. van der Spuy, ‘Not Only “the Younger Daughter of Dr Abdurahman”’: A Feminist Exploration of Early Influences on the Political Development of Cissie Gool’ (PhD dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2002), introduction

¹³ A. Gouws, ‘Introduction’, in A. Gouws, ed., (Un)thinking Citizenship: Feminist Debates in Contemporary South Africa (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2005), 4.

¹⁴ Cape Times, 1 April 1924. Cissie Gool had been taking care of her son, Rustum, born in 1920. According to Elisabeth Everett, Rustum was born in 1923 (‘Zainunnissa (Cissie) Gool’, Honors thesis, University of Cape Town, 1978, 4): her source is Cape Times, 13 December 1962. However, Rustum Gool confirmed (personal communication, 23 October 2001) that he had been born in 1920. For a description of Rustum Gool’s recollections of his early life, see van der Spuy, ‘Not Only’, ch. 4. Of particular relevance here, Rustum Gool remembered that, when the Prince of Wales visited the country, Abdurahman had introduced his five year old nephew to

Mrs Z. Gool wrote that Naidu had ‘passed through the country from East Africa to Cape Town setting the country aflame with truth, touching the hearts of all with her inspiring message of truth’.¹⁵ She was ‘a great guiding star that has loomed on our horizon pointing out the way’. The letter continued:

Only our own feet can carry us there; only our own efforts can win the goal. Of course, we non- Europeans must become organised, united, self-reliant, and fight for the great goal she has placed before us. She has certainly given courage to the oppressed, a new sense of self-respect to us without distinction of caste or creed . . . She has been a warning to Europeans, a lesson to the non- European, and a glorious inspiration to the dark races of Africa.¹⁶

Mrs Z. Gool, a wife who used the initial of her given name, Zainunnissa, instead of her husband’s, had introduced herself as ‘a woman’. She closed with the words, ‘[t]he world needs more of such women. [Naidu] is a living testimony of the heights to which a woman can rise.’¹⁷ These words were penned even before Naidu had returned to Durban and been elected President of the SAIC. In the course of her visit Naidu clearly evoked strong feelings in many of the thousands who heard her. Anti-apartheid activist I.C. Meer, for example, wrote:

To my mind India’s greatest ‘ambassador’ to South Africa was the Congress leader and poetess Sarojini Naidu . . . No black person had received as much publicity in South Africa as Sarojini Naidu . . . The disenfranchised South Africans loved her and followed her every move with pride. To have this sari-clad black woman holding discussions with the Prime Minister and attending Parliament and then declaring that she had found many of the speeches in Parliament ‘full of blind prejudice, selfishness and ignorance’, was a new experience for

the Prince, and that no women were part of the welcoming delegation. He supposed that his mother might have been watching from a distance, in one of the dignitaries’ cars (personal communication, 24 March 2002).

¹⁵ Cape Times, 1 April 1924.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

South Africa . . . never in the history of South Africa had a visiting personality been shown so much love, affection and respect by the deprived people of this country as Sarojini Naidu who charmed them with her oratory in both English and in Urdu.¹⁸

In this paper we investigate how Sarojini Naidu's South African visit in 1924 provided the spark which activated Cissie Gool's latent political ambition. Gool's letter is the only evidence we have of her speaking directly into the historical record at this time. Despite both Naidu's and Gool's relatively privileged status within colonised elites, their relationship has not been preserved in personal or official archives. Because Naidu's visit created an enormous media storm, however, mainstream newspapers and *Indian Opinion* allowed us to trace her entire journey.¹⁹ Local news media were supplemented by archival research in South Africa, mostly pertaining to Cissie Gool, in addition to published letters and speeches of Sarojini Naidu and other published material pertaining to M.K. Gandhi (we were unable to expand our archival research across the Indian Ocean at this early stage of our transoceanic project).²⁰ The news media which traced almost every step of Naidu's journey, describing and transcribing public meetings, interviews and speeches in detail, typically referred to men by name, but not women. We do glimpse the presence of women other than Sarojini Naidu, and in rare cases we hear reportage of their voices, but seldom may we identify such women by name.²¹ Despite these challenges, we could read between the lines to verify that Sarojini Naidu and Cissie Gool spent much time together. This paper, therefore,

¹⁸ I.C. Meer, 'I Remember', ed. E.S. Reddy and F. Meer, 5,

http://v1.sahistory.org.za/pages//pdf/I_remember_IC_Meer.pdf, accessed 20 January 2012.

Reporting on a meeting in Cape Town, the *Cape Times* stated that an unnamed lady speaker had declared that '14 years ago on Union they had been robbed of their rights, and Mrs Naidu's arrival had already put new heart into them' (*Cape Times*, 19 March 1924). That the white men who heard Naidu took her seriously is evident from the correspondence and editorials in the newspapers referred to earlier. As the *Cape Times* observed, 'Mrs Naidu's speeches have transferred this threat [economic presence of Indians] to the political plane' (*Cape Times*, 3 April 1924).

¹⁹ See also Everett, 'Cissie Gool', and van der Spuy, 'Not Only', ch. 4, 129-134.

²⁰ We were limited mainly to mainstream newspapers and to *Indian Opinion*, published in Natal; two key sources for Cape political history in the interwar period, the *APO* and *The Sun*, were not published at the time. The *APO* had ceased publication in 1923, and *The Sun* first appeared in 1932.

²¹ For instance, 'Mr Norodien and his wife' (*Cape Times*, 31 March 1924), or the unnamed lady speaker quoted in the *Cape Times*, 19 March 1924; or another in the *Cape Times*, 2 April 1924: 'Mrs Naidu was presented with a bouquet and a message of farewell by an Indian lady.'

reflects a process of what might be called feminist historical archaeology, a careful sifting of available resources for evidence of women the media ignored (in reports on the one woman the media could not ignore) and the impact of Sarojini Naidu's visit on their lives.²² It is evident that while Naidu's vision of cooperation and unity was significant, what was more important for Cissie Gool in particular was her literal embodiment of 'the heights to which a [black] woman' could rise in a patriarchal and racist society.

A number of writers have insisted that gender was as central as race to imperialism and colonialism, arguing that the gender division of labour in precolonial societies was understood by the colonisers as a key physical expression of 'savagery' or backwardness. What women and men did signified their location in a social Darwinist hierarchy that idealised the behaviours and practices of white/European men and women.²³ Others have complicated this analysis by drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity and the understanding of sexuality as a performance of gender in which racial hierarchies can only be maintained through the policing of interracial heterosexual interactions.²⁴ It was what Naidu did - and what she told women to do - that was critical. Sarojini Naidu's visit reveals a 'light bulb' moment for Cissie Gool, the realisation that women could inhabit the closely

²² Jane Bennet used this phrase to refer to van der Spuy, 'Not Only' (personal communication, 3 March 2002).

²³ For insightful discussion of the development of writing about the intersections of gender, sexuality and colonialism see S. Tamale, 'Researching and Theorising Sexualities in Africa', in S. Tamale, ed., *African Sexualities: A Reader* (Cape Town, Pambazuka Press, 2011), 11-36, and S. Arnfred, 'Introduction', in S. Arnfred, ed., *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2004), 7-29. Also S. Andrade, 'Gender and "The Public Sphere" in Africa: Writing Women and Rioting Women', *Agenda*, 54 (2002) 45-59; J. Van Allen, "'Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 6, 2 (1972), 165-181; G. Moane, *Gender & Colonialism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); I. Berger and F. White, eds, *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

²⁴ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990); J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: The Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993); M. Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Kali for Women Press, 1997); S. Markowitz, 'Pelvic Politics: Sexual Dimorphism and Racial Difference', *Signs*, 26, 2 (2001), 389-414; A. Ferber, *White Man Falling: Race, Gender and White Supremacy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995); A. McClintock, "'No Longer in a Future Heaven": Women and Nationalism in South Africa', *Transition*, 51 (1991), 104-123; N. Erlank 'Gender and Masculinity in South African National Discourse 1912-1950', *Feminist Studies* 29, 3 (2003), 653-671.

guarded citadel of 'malestream' politics, that gender need not stifle their political ambitions.

At the time of Sarojini Naidu's visit, 'government and politics were generally seen as the terrain of men ... The exclusion of women [from the African National Congress] was not surprising [or] exceptional for the time'.²⁵ This was equally true of both the newly constituted SAIC and the African Political Organisation (APO), originally founded 'to fight the denial of the franchise to all people who were not white', but which had become 'primarily concerned with defending coloured civil rights'.²⁶ The exclusionary policies and strategies of such organisations reflected a broad consensus among South African men that the South African polity itself was gendered male.²⁷ As Frene Ginwale and others have noted, however, the denial of membership of political organisations to women did not prevent their engaging patriarchal organisations, and indeed acting autonomously.²⁸ It was clear that militant women needed to be taken into account, and strategies had to be devised to bring them under the authority of men. Anne Marie Goetz and Shireen Hassim's typology of 'three types of public engagement-access(consultation, dialogue), presence (representation) and influence (accountability)' - is instructive in this context. In facing the fact of women's activism, women's auxiliaries 'relegated them to a feminised and marginalised "women's wing"' in an effort to co-opt women and allow them minimal access without either presence or influence.²⁹ In

²⁵ F. Ginwale, 'Women and the African National Congress: 1912- 1943', www.anc.org/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo13g.html, accessed 6 June 2010. See also C. Walker, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement: The Politics of Gender, Race and Class', in C. Walker, ed., *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990), 314, and H.J. Lubbe, 'The Myth of the "Black Peril": Die Burger and the 1929 Election', *South African Historical Journal*, 37 (1997), 120.

²⁶ H. Giliomee, 'The Non-Racial Franchise and Afrikaner and Coloured Identities, 1910-1994', *African Affairs*, 94, 375 (April 1995), 206.

²⁷ This had been clear before the Union of South Africa had even been constituted, as Cherryl Walker has shown ('The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa', *Communications*, 2, 1979, 27).

²⁸ Ginwale, 'Women and the African National Congress'. See also J. Wells, 'The Rise and Fall of Motherism as a Force in Black Women's Resistance', paper presented at the Women and Gender in Southern Africa Conference, University of Natal-Durban, January 1991; J. Wells, 'Maternal Politics in Organising Black South African Women', in O. Nnaemeka, ed., *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power* (Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 1998), 251-262; E. Brink, 'Man-Made Women: Gender, Class and the Ideology of the Volksmoeder', in Walker, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa*, 273-292; G. Fester, 'Merely Mothers Perpetuating Patriarchy? Women's Grassroots Organisations in the Western Cape 1980-1990', in Gouws, *(Un)thinking Citizenship*, 199-219.

²⁹ A.M. Goetz and S. Hassim, eds, *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2003), introduction, 10.

such auxiliaries, women were fully aware of their status as second class citizens and devised various strategies to (re)claim authority or autonomy. An early example of such an auxiliary organisation is the APO Women's Guild, established in 1909 under the leadership of Mrs Helen (Nellie) Abdurahman, Scottish immigrant and mother of Cissie Gool.

As Cissie Gool noted in her letter to the Cape Times, she had indeed observed the political scene for many years. Zainunnissa (Cissie) Abdurahman, born in 1897, had grown up in the shadow of the patriarchal APO under the leadership of her father, Dr Abdullah Abdurahman. Even as girls, she and her sister Waradea (Rosie) were members of the APO Women's Guild, under the leadership of their mother. In the years leading to the 'Great Betrayal' of Union, when hopes of a non-racial, masculine, franchise were dashed (although it was retained in a limited way in the Cape), gender was central to Dr Abdurahman's plan to promote 'the social uplift of the coloured people as part of the struggle to claim full citizenship with whites'.³⁰ According to Cissie and Rosie's father, women were mothers of 'the race'.³¹ In 1910, he explicitly laid out the role he expected women to play. Speaking first exclusively to men at the APO conference, Dr Abdurahman later addressed women directly through the pages of the organisation's newspaper, the APO. He urged women to make it their 'constant endeavour to brighten our homes and regard them as the best training ground possible for our future citizens. [He]... referred to the weighty influence for good that women can exert in their homes'.³² He went on to explain how they might fulfil their responsibilities and duties as mothers and home-makers:

A mother's influence is incalculable. The character of children is far more dependent on that of the mother than that of the father ... I must urge you women to cherish a high sense of duty. Avoid idleness, vice, and slatternliness. Keep your homes and yourselves pure and clean ... If your homes are not clean and restful, your children will be morally dwarfed and

³⁰ Giliomee, 'The Non-Racial Franchise', 206. Giliomee does not mention the Women's Guild or discuss the gender division of labour required to pursue this vision.

³¹ C. Hall, J. Lewis, K. McClelland and J. Rendall, 'Introduction to Special Issue on Gender, Nationalisms and National Identities', *Gender and History*, 5, 2 (Summer 1993), 159-164. See H. Terreblanche for a discussion of the way in which Afrikaans magazines constructed Afrikaans women as mothers of the race ('Mothers of the Nation: Afrikaans Women's Magazine Advertisements in the 1940s', *Kleio*, 28, (1996), 174-188.)

³² APO, 4 June 1910; see also van der Spuy, 'Not Only', 54-55.

This elitist vision of gendered domesticity (which would have been impossible for most coloured women to attain) existed in tension with the very public role played by Abdurahman's own wife as leader of the APO Women's Guild. Her role, however, was specifically defined as not political, the Women's Guild being expected to confine itself to the 'social' work of 'uplifting' coloured women and children.³⁴ Yet Guild women were essential to the 'political' work of the APO men; most notably, they raised the funds to send two members of the APO to London to appeal to the British Parliament to preserve the Cape's liberal franchise in the Union constitution. Dr Abdurahman continued:

Every one of you who have the upbringing of children should so live that you . . . may see in your offspring your proudest jewels. If such aims guide your actions and control your conduct, the coloured people of South Africa will become strong and enduring, and worthy of a proud place in the annals of the world. A woman's heart and life 'centred in the sphere of common duties', are an ornament to the nation, and if she instils into her children a love of work, and an overpowering sense of the dignity of labour, a love of duty, reverence for truth and virtue, and courage, she will have won the crown which never fades.³⁵

The Guild women's 'social' work included actively promoting an image of the APO - and by extension, coloured people - as 'civilised', and coloured men as deserving of the franchise.

Evidence of the strides taken towards these gendered aspirations is reflected in the APO's reports of the 'social' events that preceded the APO's monthly business meetings. A public lecture or debate would be followed by some form of cultural entertainment, which might include a piano or poetry recital or a song (always firmly located in the Western Tradition) typically performed by children of leading members of the

³³ R.E. van der Ross, *Say it Out Loud. The APO Presidential Addresses and Other Major Political Speeches 1906-1940 of Dr Abdullah Abdurahman* (Bellville: Western Cape Institute for Historical Research, University of the Western Cape, 1990), 34-35.

³⁴ The following discussion of the APO women's Guild is drawn from van der Spuy, 'Not Only', chs 2 and 3.

³⁵ van der Ross, *Say it Out Loud*, 34-35.

APO community. Having showcased the gendered cultural and educational achievements of coloured boys and girls (including of course Cissie and Rosie) - and having had a cup of tea, provided by the Guild - all but the APO executive would leave, and the 'political' business meeting would commence.³⁶ When the Guild threatened to become more overtly political, holding annual conferences separately from the men, for example, or when Guild members participated in the historic women's anti-pass protests in Bloemfontein in 1913 (the same year thousands of women joined Gandhi in satyagraha), leaders of the APO were quick to reprimand the women for acting autonomously.³⁷

Growing up, the Abdurahman daughters would have observed that their role as women in the politics of Cape Town's creole elite would be to support the men. They would have watched their mother working within the gendered constraints imposed by their father, subtly redefining them. Mrs Abdurahman presided over an organisation carefully defined as apolitical, which nevertheless did political things. The Guild was a large organisation, with up to 70 branches at one time. Mrs Abdurahman presided with flair and authority over meetings of both women and men under the APO umbrella; she proved herself to be a leader demanding respect, especially when speaking about education, a profoundly political concern that was seen as falling within women's purview as mothers. Historically, as a number of authors have noted, South African women's activism has often been structured around their roles as mothers. According to Gouws, '[m]otherhood has formed a basis of political power for African women and [this] has led to the politicisation of women engaging in political struggles, often leading to a feminist consciousness'.³⁸ However, she underscores that '[w]hile motherhood has often necessitated political activism, in developing countries entry into institutionalised politics demands different strategies from women'.³⁹ Thus while some suggest that identifying as 'mothers' has allowed South African women to mobilise and to claim authority in the past, others warn that 'celebrating purely symbolic roles for women, or affirming gendered roles of service and

³⁶ Cissie became 'self-consciously poetic' around the age of 14 or so and this may well have helped deepen her connection to Naidu, a celebrated poet, just over a decade later (van der Spuy, 'Not Only', 86-100).

³⁷ J.C. Wells, 'Why Women Rebel: A Comparative Study of South African Women's Resistance in Bloemfontein (1913) and Johannesburg (1958)', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 10, 1, Special Issue on Women in Southern Africa (October 1983), 55-70; Wells, 'The Rise and Fall of Motherism'; Wells, 'Maternal Politics'; van der Spuy, 'Not Only', ch.2.

³⁸ Gouws, (Un)thinking Citizenship, 'Introduction', 5-6.

³⁹ Ibid.

nurturing ... ultimately reinforces standard gender stereotypes'.⁴⁰

Few have accorded Nellie Abdurahman historical recognition, let alone evaluated her political strategies; as a mother, her influence on her daughters' political development has been ignored in published accounts.⁴¹ Only Richard van der Ross has mentioned that she led the APO Women's Guild, while Mogamed Ajam has acknowledged that her passion for educational reform influenced her husband.⁴² Yet she also served on the Cape Town and Wynberg Board of Aid, would become active in radical politics, and consistently demanded universal women's enfranchisement from within the Women's Enfranchisement League.⁴³ Cissie Gool, then, had grown up in the company of politically active women, observing her mother pushing the political envelope. She would have been acutely aware of the constraints facing women who sought to challenge the leadership of men. It would take a woman activist from a political tradition in which women participated alongside men in nationalist politics to demonstrate that women could indeed storm the citadel - and then be handed the crown.

Scholars have begun to explore transoceanic connections between India and South Africa, recognising 'the global alignments within which South Africa and India have been positioned'.⁴⁴ As Isabel Hofmeyr and Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie have noted:

Linked from the seventeenth century by global flows of labour (first slavery and then indenture), the two regions have long been yoked together by the mechanisms of imperial

⁴⁰ D. Lewis, 'African Feminisms', *Agenda*, 50 (2001), 4-10.

⁴¹ van der Spuy, 'Not Only', chs 2 and 3.

⁴² Van der Ross, *Say it Out Loud*, 9; M. Ajam, 'The raison d'être of the Muslim Mission Primary School in Cape Town and Environs from 1860 to 1980 with Special Reference to the role of Dr A. Abdurahman in the Modernisation of Islam-oriented Schools' (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1986), 191.

⁴³ As a Socialist, Mrs Abdurahman supported the work of Ray Alexander, Communist Party organiser, in later years, and she serving alongside Rosie under Cissie's leadership in the National Liberation League (UCT M&A: BCZA 83/30-35, Abdurahman Family Collection; van der Spuy, 'Not Only', ch. 6).

⁴⁴ I. Hofmeyr and U. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 'South Africa/India: Re-Imagining the Disciplines', *South African Historical Journal*, 57 (2007), 1-11. See also M. Samuelson, 'Re-Imagining South Africa via a Passage to India: M.K. Jeffrey's Archive of the Indian Ocean', *Social Dynamics*, 2007, 33, 2, 61-65. This special issue of *Social Dynamics* was devoted to 'Oceanic Worlds/Border Crossings'. For an earlier examination of India-South Africa connections, see U.S. Meshrie, 'From Sastri to Deshmukh: A Study of the Role of the Government of India's Representatives in South Africa, 1927-1946' (PhD, Durban University, Durban, 1987).

modernity and anti-colonial resistance . . . In a globalising world where most disciplines are taking a transnational turn, these questions have assumed a new urgency. How does one figure the shifting relationship of the national and the international? How does one understand different moments of globalisation? . . . How does contemporary globalisation relate to the transnationalism of European imperialism? . . . A consideration of South Africa and India provides an opportunity to intervene in these debates by examining both previously obscured transnational histories.⁴⁵

Viewing such interconnections between colonised Indians and South Africans through a gendered lens reveals deeper layers of complexity, as ‘common sense’ understandings of gender - and in this case the possibilities for political activism - experienced transoceanic culture shock. For instance, Dr Abdurahman led a delegation of SAIC leaders to India in 1925 which was hosted by President of the INC, Sarojini Naidu. One glance at the composition of such male-only delegations is sufficient to underscore the exclusion of women from their political imaginary. When the visitors arrived in India, they would have been surprised to discover that Sarojini Naidu was by no means the only woman playing a leading role in serving the nationalist cause - and her leadership was by no means merely symbolic. While South African nationalisms were beginning to embrace the rhetoric of women as mothers of the nation,⁴⁶ women had been central to Indian nationalism since its development in the nineteenth century, as leaders as well as ‘foot soldiers’.⁴⁷ Although Indian nationalism was deeply gendered, with women’s imagined role and contribution conceptualised as spiritual, their on-the-ground activism was ubiquitous. It is no surprise that Gandhi sought to mobilise women in South Africa in 1913; women’s activism made as much ‘common sense’ to Indian nationalist men as it seemed unimaginable to their South African counterparts. Sarojini

⁴⁵ Hofmeyr and Dhupelia-Mesthrie, ‘South Africa/India.’

⁴⁶ McIntock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’”; Terreblanche, ‘Mothers of the Nation’.

⁴⁷ By the 1920s women such as Naidu, Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, Dr Mutthalakshimi Reddy, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya and others had occupied a range of highly visible leadership roles in Indian nationalist movements (P. Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu: A Biography* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1966), 147-157, 192-202). That aspirations to even the highest political office were conceivable is evidenced by Naidu’s position as governor of Uttar Pradesh at the time of independence, and Indira Gandhi’s election as Prime Minister in 1966. Women also represented Indian nationalism to the British Parliament in the early twentieth century and to the United Nations in the 1940s. See E. DuBois, ‘The League of Nations as Testing Ground for Women’s Rights in the UN’, paper presented at the International Federation for Research in Women’s History Conference, Amsterdam, August 2012.

Naidu's assumption that she had the right to lead (what hostile masculinist media referred to as her 'arrogance') would have made 'common sense' to Indian women while simultaneously being perceived as radical and revolutionary by South African women like Cissie Gool.

Taking for granted her right to represent the INC, on her arrival in South Africa Naidu stated that she had been 'pressed ... by the Indian Congress, the unofficial Parliament, to come to South Africa at all costs, and she had to obey'.⁴⁸ Given the androcentric character of South African Indian politics in the 1920s, Sarojini Naidu's invitation to represent Gandhi and the INC warrants attention. We have no record of the initial hopes of the East African Indian Congress, but once Naidu had departed, they did not ask for her to return, requesting instead any one of four other male leaders (if Gandhi was still incapacitated).⁴⁹ The South Africans had looked forward to a visit from C.F. Andrews, who had served for many years as Gandhi's 'right hand man' in Africa. Andrews had explained why he should not visit Africa (he would likely 'inflammate the White settlers'), and Indian Opinion had expressed 'great disappointment' at the news.⁵⁰ However, once the decision had been made and Sarojini Naidu had accepted the invitation, Indian Opinion encouraged its readers to welcome their celebrity guest:

Mrs Naidu holds a distinguished place in the Motherland, not only by reason of her political and social activities, but because of her literary gifts . . . We have had the pleasure of publishing several of her public speeches which are always spirited and full of national pride.⁵¹

Focusing on the unthreatening notion of women speaking to women, Indian Opinion continued:

In one of her messages to the womanhood of India Mrs Naidoo [sic] said: 'It is the motherhood of a nation that alone

⁴⁸ Natal Mercury, 29 February. 1924. See also Natesan, *Speeches*, xxviii.

⁴⁹ On 15 March 1924 the East African Indian Congress cabled Gandhi: 'Request send four workers preferably Andrews, Vallabhbai, Mahadevbhai, Devdas. You visit Kenya recovery health'. Gandhi had replied 'Regret unable send anyone.' Of course, Sarojini Naidu was then in South Africa: http://ltrc.iiit.ac.in/gwiki/index.php/Collected_Works/Volume_27/Cable_To_East_African_Indian_Congress_%2815th_March_1924%29, accessed 12 January 2012.

⁵⁰ Indian Opinion, 28 December 1923.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

is the authentic measure of its work and capacity . . . So shall the great mother be served by her millions of daughters in whom, thank God, survives the immortal spirit of Sita and Savitri, and the heroic and heavenly women of our ancient legend and history’.

Naidu would indeed mobilise such rhetorical devices in her speeches in South Africa, targeted at men and children as well as women, and she would reiterate that her goal was ‘enlightenment’, that, in the words quoted in this welcoming editorial, ‘I am merely a spectator from the watch tower of dreams’.⁵²

Sarojini Naidu’s first ‘lesson’ for South African women may have been to reveal no hint of awareness that one’s gender might be perceived as an obstacle, no moment of self-doubt or apology for being female. Indeed, Naidu would use self-deprecating language, but in a sarcastic vein. She often reminded her audiences that she, a ‘mere woman’, had the might of India, the INC, Gandhi, and the South African Indian Congress, behind her - just in case anyone might wonder what right she had to speak at all.⁵³ And speak she did. Her first speech on the African continent was given *ex tempore* to the East African Indian Congress in Kenya on 19 January 1924. She introduced herself in these terms: ‘I am aware that there are many very irresponsible men in your country who regard a mere woman from India as an irresponsible firebrand.’⁵⁴ She challenged ‘any man’ to deny her the right to speak, and ended her speech with the declaration that she was a mother who had made the ‘little sacrifice’ of ‘leaving my little child who is dying because the needs of the children of our nation are greater than the needs of one child.’⁵⁵

Elements of Sarojini Naidu’s initial speech would be woven into dozens of public orations throughout her sojourn in southern Africa. While she was careful to emphasise her role as representative of Mahatma Gandhi and the INC, Naidu consistently foregrounded her own embodiment as woman, sister or mother and appealed to her audiences from that subject position, typically disarming them with an ironic or humorous tone. Thousands of girls, women, boys and men saw,

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ For instance, in Cape Town’s City Hall she was introduced by Dr Abdurahman, ‘as the authorized spokesman of 400 millions of people’ (Cape Times, 19 March 1924).

⁵⁴ Natesan, *Speeches*, 392-393.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Naidu’s youngest child, who was often ill, but was not then dying, was 20 years of age.

heard, and spoke with Sarojini Naidu, who arrived in style as Gandhi's celebrity ambassador, but who looked and sounded nothing like Gandhi. Despite her clear political purpose, Naidu played off the ambivalence and resistance expressed within South Africa at the idea of a woman politician. On her arrival in the Transvaal, for instance, the Natal Mercury reported that

[t]he Indian community gave an enthusiastic welcome to Mrs Sarojini Naidu, a cultured Indian woman . . . Mrs Sarojini Naidu declared at the outset she had no intention of making a political speech.⁵⁶

She then went on to do precisely that. In an interview in Pretoria, she declared 'I am not here to address political meetings . . . it is enlightenment at which I am aiming chiefly'.⁵⁷ Throughout her visit, Naidu would deny being political, emphasising instead the spiritual role accorded women in Indian nationalism, while ignoring the domestic role that was meant to preserve their enlightened authenticity.⁵⁸ As reported on her next visit to South Africa, representing the INC in the Second Round Table conference in 1932, Naidu claimed the right to speak predicated on the belief that:

The poets had always preserved as ideals of womanhood not patient, humble, or downtrodden women who were afraid of mice and sought protection, but women with courage, learning and wisdom - qualities in the West called male, but worshipped as female in the East.⁵⁹

This claim had underlain her 1924 visit too. Challenging gender

⁵⁶ Natal Mercury, 29 February 1924; Cape Times, 29 February.1924.

⁵⁷ Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.

⁵⁸ Partha Chatterjee notes that 'in the entire phase of the national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve, and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence. No encroachments by the colonizer must be allowed in that inner sanctum. In the world, imitation of and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity', and that, according to Indian nationalists, the world was 'a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It [was] also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world - and woman [was] its representation' (Empire and Nation: Selected Essays (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 122- 123).

⁵⁹ Cape Times, 25 January 1932.

stereotypes assumed by many of her South African audiences, Naidu's rousing performances, blending profundity with humour, were nothing short of brilliant in the challenge they presented to the patriarchal stranglehold so evident in political organisations in the 1920s.

Following meetings in Pretoria and Johannesburg, Naidu was escorted to Natal, an important centre of the South African Indian community. It was here that indentured workers had settled in the 1860s, and it was here that Gandhi had established his base in South Africa. The Natal Mercury described Naidu's arrival in Durban:

In spite of [a crowd numbering 4000] there was no disorder when Mrs Naidu was escorted from the special train in which she had travelled . . . The engine of the train bore the message, 'Welcome to Shrimrti [sic] Sarojni Devi', and was decorated with foliage, while on the platform there was a guard of honour wearing pink turbans, and representatives of the Indian National Volunteer Guard. Outside the station the visitor entered a carriage . . . and was escorted to Albert Park by the majority of those who had assembled to meet her . . . Mrs Naidu . . . was attired in flowing blue robes and gold embroidered slippers, carrying a bouquet of carnations and wearing a necklet of the same flowers.⁶⁰

A large audience awaited Naidu at Albert Park, where she gave a speech to the children of Durban. She asked the adults present to step back, as she would address them the following day.⁶¹ That afternoon Naidu addressed the Indian Women's Association, and made her most direct appeal to women to become engaged in political struggle.⁶²

Without overtly challenging the stereotypical role of women as wives and mothers, Naidu informed the women of their enormous power and responsibility: 'the decision lies in your hands'.⁶³ Women had been central to satyagraha; 'it was the women of Natal and the Transvaal who were the first soldiers of [Gandhi's] flag'⁶⁴ and now they must fight against the Class Areas Bill: 'Not only your rights but your very existence is threatened'. Repeating her 'mother-martyr'

⁶⁰ Natal Mercury, 10 March 1924. See also Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.

⁶¹ Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.

⁶² Ibid. See also Natal Mercury, 10 March 1924.

⁶³ Indian Opinion, 4 April 1924.

⁶⁴ Cape Times, 10 March 1924.

motif, Naidu encouraged the women to declare:

We do not care if we spend every penny; we do not care if we die; if our children die; but once and for all time we are going to establish our rights in this country that belongs neither to the white man nor to the brown man but to the black man, who has never been treated rightly.

It was Indian women's responsibility to demolish ethnic and racial barriers:

You ask for justice from the white man, but do you ever ask yourselves if you have been right and just to the African and coloured populations? . . . If you have failed, there is no peace in this land . . . you must mend your own faults. If you have not done your duty as citizens you must begin to do your duty at once . . . Let us see how the Indian women of Africa can build up South Africa. Then we must not forget the suffering people. What can we do for these, whether they are Indian, African or coloured?

Women, declared Naidu, should take leadership roles in this work:

Women must be kind . . . You must not wait for the Government . . . You must pay your debts to this land, and the best way is to have your children so educated that they will be noble citizens. You can pay your debts by lifting the status of the Native and the coloured people.

Naidu continued by insisting that gender mattered:

[Women] have another duty. You must say to your men, 'if you fight you are foolish.' We are going to live in peace. Men might be different race from race, but women cannot be different; a common motherhood makes them alike. I never hope to hear an Indian woman say, 'I am different from the white women, the coloured women, the Native women'. I do not care what your religion is, you are women, and women were meant to lead the earth, and when women do that the world will become good. Do not think only of yourselves, but

For Naidu, the education of girls was essential to the nationalist project. Yet rather than drawing attention to its political implications, she explained that education was critical 'so that when [girls] are married they will go as young brides full of ideals'. By embracing a notion of universal motherhood and arguing that education prepared women well for marriage, Naidu's statements appeared non-threatening, while bearing a radical message: 'women should lead the earth'; women should 'fight for [their] rights'; they should be prepared to die for the struggle; women are the peacemakers, whose role is to unite 'the whole world'.⁶⁶ Not only was it radical to imagine women as world leaders, but Naidu's call for unity among all South Africans persuaded local male political leaders to seek common ground across racially defined barriers. Gavin Lewis noted:

Encouraged by the visit to South Africa of Mrs S. Naidu ... [Abdullah] Abdurahman in 1924 established a consultative committee consisting of representatives from the APO, the Cape Indian Council and the ICU [Industrial and Commercial Workers Union] to lay the groundwork for closer cooperation.⁶⁷

Naidu's message to South African women was clear: take responsibility, set aside domestic passivity, get your own house in order, be peacemakers, set aside any notion of racial exclusivity. Women's political agency and public leadership were central to these aims and here too Naidu was unambiguous, insisting that women wait neither for 'your men' or the government to act, and, even more radical, telling women to be prepared to die in their fight against injustice.

These understandings of what women should do were revisited at a 'monster' meeting at the Durban City Hall. Amod Bayat, Natal Indian Congress President, addressed Naidu as 'one of the most distinguished

⁶⁵ Indian Opinion, 4 April 1924.

⁶⁶ Cape Times, 10 March 1924; Natal Mercury, 10 March 1924; Indian Opinion, 4 April 1924.

⁶⁷ G. Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African 'Coloured' Politics* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1987), 135-136. See also M. Adhikari, "'The Product of Civilization in Its Most Repellent Manifestation': Ambiguities in the Racial Perceptions of the APO (African Political Organization), 1909- 23", *The Journal of African History*, 38, 2 (1997), 293, n.50, and I. Goldin, *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa* (London: Longman, 1988).

and enlightened daughters of their beloved motherland'; she was 'received with a storm of cheers and applause from the vast audience'.⁶⁸ Naidu responded:

I might almost be deluded in this beautiful sub-continent of South Africa into believing that I am really monarch of all I survey, and of the hearts of the women and men of South Africa as well. I said 'women' first (laughter) . . . [but] I have dealt with too many types of men and women - I put 'men' first in this instance - (laughter) to be so easily deluded into the belief that all I desire has been fulfilled.⁶⁹

Naidu's references to gender typically elicited laughter. She did not intimidate; she disarmed with humour while reminding her audiences that she was speaking to and for women as well as men.

Over the course of several days, Naidu gave numerous speeches before heading south to Cape Town in a special train, to a raucous welcome which necessitated a police escort.⁷⁰ It is more than likely that her gender would have been a topic of discussion for many South Africans, including the Indian and coloured activists awaiting her visit in Cape Town. Wives and daughters of politicians became actively involved in planning her visit, as arrangements had to be made to accommodate a woman differently from a man.⁷¹ Naidu would necessarily spend much of her 'leisure' time in women's spaces, in the company of women. Cissie Gool immediately took advantage of the situation. Her father-in-law, a leading member of Cape Town's creole mercantile elite, had assumed that Naidu would reside in his home, as Gandhi had done previously. Challenging any number of social taboos (ignoring the authority of her mother-in-law, let alone her father-in-law), Cissie Gool insisted that the distinguished guest stay with her and her husband, Dr A.H. Gool, in Searle Street.⁷² She prevailed, and Sarojini Naidu would reside with, and remain under the watchful eye of, Cissie Gool during her stay in Cape Town from mid-March to early April.⁷³ A Cape Times photograph

⁶⁸ Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Indian Opinion, 28 March 1924.

⁷¹ Indian Opinion, 7 March 1924: A committee had been formed to give Naidu 'a splendid reception'. The committee members are unnamed.

⁷² Amina Gool, personal communication, 14 August 2001.

⁷³ The Natal Mercury states that Naidu left Durban for Cape Town on the evening of 12 March (13 March, 1924), and reports on her farewell in Cape Town's City Hall held on the evening of 1

recorded Naidu's arrival in the city. Described as 'Gandhi's Great Woman Disciple', and of course garlanded, she is framed by Cissie Gool and her father on one side, and other men on the other. Cissie Gool's gloved hand rests on Sarojini Naidu's arm.⁷⁴

Dr Abdurahman, too, took advantage of the situation. He seems to have grasped the opportunity presented by the Class Areas Bill to shift his focus from what had become somewhat moribund coloured politics to the arguably more challenging arena of Indian politics. The APO had recently changed its name to the African People's Organisation, reflecting a shift towards the politics of social welfare, while the APO newspaper had ceased publication in 1923.⁷⁵ The decline of the APO had left Dr Abdurahman with time and political energy to devote to a new cause. As a City Councillor and one of only two black members of the Cape Provincial Council, he used his considerable political experience and reputation to provide leadership in protesting against the Bill in Cape Town. He would take centre stage when Sarojini Naidu visited Cape Town, and of course his family would follow events very carefully. His family-in-law was actively involved in the protests too; his son-in-law Dr A.H. Gool, whom he had inducted into the APO years earlier (the two men, then, were both coloured and Indian at different moments), had been active in Indian politics for years.⁷⁶ Many of Dr Gool's younger relatives would play significant roles in Cape Town's radical political scene in later years, while his parents had hosted Gandhi in the past. There can be no doubt that Cissie Gool, along with many relatives on both sides of the family, would have been glued to the daily news reports as well as other forms of correspondence now lost to us. Detailing both Sarojini Naidu's journey across South Africa and the multifarious reactions she evoked, these reports would have provided much food for thought and discussion in their homes and on the streets of Cape Town as Mrs Gool prepared for her honoured guest.

Cape Town was the political focus of Naidu's visit, where her most challenging diplomatic work awaited her. Parliament was in session and

April (Natal Mercury, 3 April 1924), although she stayed on in Cape Town to attend the second reading of the Class Areas Bill on 2 April 1924.

⁷⁴ Cape Times, 18 March 1924. Naidu had arrived the previous Saturday.

⁷⁵ M. Adhikari, 'The Product of Civilization in Its Most Repellent Manifestation'.

⁷⁶ For a discussion of coloured identity through the entire period of white supremacist rule, see M. Adhikari, 'Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration: Continuity and Change in the Expression of Coloured Identity in White Supremacist South Africa, 1910-1994', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32, 3 (September 2006), 467- 487.

Naidu explained, 'I have come especially to be in time for the second reading of the Class Areas Bill. I have read about it in the papers, but I want to get the atmosphere of it in the House of Assembly'.⁷⁷ Thus it was that on 18 March the City Hall 'presented a most unusual aspect, being crowded with thousands of Indians assembled to hear their famous compatriot, Mrs Sarojini Naidu.' The Natal Mercury reported that '[t]he hall was crowded to its utmost capacity ... and after the main meeting had concluded, an overflowing meeting was addressed by Mrs Naidu in the Banquet Hall.'⁷⁸ Naidu's status as a serious politician - despite her gender - was recognised by the appearance on the platform of important men: Bishop Lavis, Advocate Alexander, five Members of Parliament and several City Councillors, including the mayor. The president of the Cape British Indian Association was there too, but it was Dr Abdurahman who introduced Naidu to her audience. Then, in 'an eloquent speech', Naidu 'claimed the right to speak to all races and classes':

What was it she had come to say? She came to seek that peace which would be a victory and not a charity. She wanted not a settlement, but justice, and she felt they were with her (Cheers). The brotherhood of those who suffered was immutable. The Class Areas Bill was only a symptom of . . . ignorant prejudice, and the only remedy was a change of heart.⁷⁹

Once again Naidu 'emphasised that she was not a politician, [that] when she met great statesmen she went down on her knees, and thanked God she was not a politician, but a poet'. Concluding with 'a passionate denunciation of the wrongs of the coloured races', she then 'sat down amid prolonged applause'.⁸⁰ It was a masterful performance, demanding the radical political solution of 'justice' which she had previously defined as 'equality', before reminding her audience that she was no politician.⁸¹

Sarojini Naidu then retired to the home of her hosts, Cissie and A.H. Gool. Cissie Gool would have spent many hours with her guest in the

⁷⁷ Cape Times, 17 March 1924.

⁷⁸ Natal Mercury, 19 March 1924.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Natal Mercury, 11 March 1924.

intimacy of her home, as well as in more public spaces, and yet their relationship may largely be discerned only through hints, innuendo and throw-away comments in the writings of others.⁸² Our sources shed no direct light on those rare moments of privacy which allowed a personal relationship to develop between them.⁸³ We have no record of the conversations that took place over making, or drinking, tea - the quintessential political lubricant of the British Empire - within politically charged domestic spaces. We do know that tea was an important ritual for Sarojini Naidu, and in presiding over the drinking of tea within domestic spaces, she would easily have been able to disarm and unsettle politicians who would have felt more comfortable in masculine spaces. On the other hand, 'tea' also provided the opportunity for women to meet apart from men, and this underscores the importance of Naidu's gender in terms of her influence on women's history. Being both woman and politician, Naidu was equally at home in domestic and public spaces, but more importantly, as a woman she 'naturally' spent more time with women, who had a degree of access to her company that would literally have been unthinkable had she been a man. Women were typically excluded from 'serious' political conversation, but here the politician at the centre was a woman and yet the segregated conversation continued. A Cape Times report reflects how this internationally recognised politician made what was labelled 'small talk' with women while the men sat outside:

The tables were set out, laden with good things, as for a children's party. On the stoep all the men - Indians, Malay, Cape coloured, native and a sprinkling of Europeans - sat at a long table, while indoors Mrs Naidu held court among the women of equally diverse races.⁸⁴

One can imagine how Naidu might relax with her hosts in the evenings, reflecting on the events of the day as well as strategising about meetings with South African political leaders scheduled for the morrow. In these meetings Naidu unhesitatingly assumed the authority to speak for Gandhi and the INC (representing 'the people of

⁸² van der Spuy, 'Not Only', Introduction.

⁸³ Cape Times, 24 March 1924.

⁸⁴ Cape Times, 21 March 1924. Naidu often held tea parties in her rooms in India, as Aldous Huxley discovered when he met her in 1925 and enjoyed her hospitality (A. Huxley, *Jesting Pilate: The Diary of a Journey* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), 13). Padmini Sengupta remembered accompanying her mother as a child to meet Naidu and drink tea (A Biography, 158).

India') as well as the all-male leadership of the SAIC.⁸⁵ Directly after meeting with the Minister of the Interior Patrick Duncan, she informed Reuters that these constituencies had given her the authority 'to object to the principles of the Class Areas Bill'. Duncan had 'promised to place the views of Mrs Sarojini Naidu before the members of the Cabinet, and also her request to be heard by the Cabinet'.⁸⁶

When interviewing government officials, Naidu appealed to a sense of honour, and this was most critical in the interview which she had long anticipated - her meeting with Prime Minister Jan Smuts on 28 March.⁸⁷ It is likely that she would have shared her impressions with her hosts before sitting down to pen these words to Gandhi:

My interview with the Strong Man of the Empire was very interesting. He was full of his famous charm and magnetism and withal apparently simple and sweet; but what depth of subtlety and diplomacy are hidden behind that suavity and simplicity! My impression of him is that he was designed by nature to be among the world's greatest, but he has dwarfed himself to be a small man in robe of authority in South Africa; it is the tragedy of a man who does not or cannot rise to the full height of his pre-destined spiritual stature.⁸⁸

A few days after this interview, Naidu wrote to her daughter Leilamani (Papi) that 'this week Parliament is debating the fate of the Indian community and every speaker quotes me whether for or against the Bill!'⁸⁹ The Minister of the Interior had told Reuters 'he could not agree with the views expressed by Mrs. Sarojini Naidu . . . Mr. Duncan added that he would make a full statement on these points on the second reading of the Bill'.⁹⁰ Sarojini Naidu's presence in the Public Gallery during the Bill's second reading would hold him to this promise.

Cissie Gool may well have accompanied Naidu to the debate,

⁸⁵ Gandhi to Naidu, March 1924 (Gandhi, Collected Works, Vol. 23, 258-259).

⁸⁶ Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.

⁸⁷ Indian Opinion, 29 February 1924.

⁸⁸ Naidu to Gandhi, n.d., excerpted in Young India, 15 May 1924. See also Cape Times, 2 April 1924.

⁸⁹ Sarojini Naidu to Leilamani Naidu, 3 April 1924 (Paranjape, ed. Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters, 174).

⁹⁰ Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.

although only Dr Abdurahman and other men were mentioned in news reports. Naidu harboured no doubt that she was the equal of the South African government, and that she had the power (as well as the authority) to affect the passage of the Bill.⁹¹ She had extracted a promise from Duncan that her concerns would be addressed on the floor of the House, and indeed they were.⁹² And when she attended the debate, her presence was palpable. Indian Opinion reported:

[T]he second reading of the Class Areas Bill was moved in the Union House of Assembly by the Minister of the Interior on Tuesday night. There was a large attendance of Indians . . . one of the bays . . . was occupied by Mrs Sarojini Naidu, Dr Abdurahman and other leading members of the community. In the course of his speech the Minister of the Interior declared that the Government would not be deterred by . . . threats . . .⁹³

That Mrs Naidu saw such warnings as a challenge rather than a reason to conform would not have been lost on her female companions. The evening before the Parliamentary debate began, Naidu had responded to criticism by going on the offensive. Speaking at a public meeting, Naidu addressed supporters of the Bill:

Do you realise how you are making exiles of yourself, disintegrating [sic] yourself from that which is your rightful place in the world by putting yourself in class areas and segregation which will make you outcast against the rest of the world because of your blind arrogance, your wilful, shameful, Imperial arrogance, built on the blood on which you have built the Empire of which you are so proud.⁹⁴

Although the volatile political situation would likely have dominated conversations in the Gool household, another topic of common interest between Naidu and her hosts may well have been women's participation in local government. In both Bombay and Cape Town,

⁹¹ Natal Mercury, 29 February 1924.

⁹² Indian Opinion, 11 April 1924.

⁹³ Indian Opinion, 4 April 1924, 11 April 1924. At the second reading of the Bill the Minister of the Interior stated, 'we do not intend to be deterred by any threats of resistance inside South Africa or by any threat of political action outside South Africa' (Hansard, 2 April 1924, 1278).

⁹⁴ Cape Times, 2 April 1924.

colonised women and men could participate in municipal government. The previous year had seen the first woman - a white woman - elected to the Cape Town City Council.⁹⁵ Gool's father was a long-serving member of this Council, while Naidu served on the Bombay Municipal Council from 1923 to 1929.⁹⁶ While in Durban, Naidu had received an invitation to serve as the mayor of Bombay. The Cape Times reported that she had 'declined the honour of the Presidential Chair of the Bombay Town Council, the offer of which she received by cablegram'.⁹⁷ Dr Abdurahman would never have declined such an offer; his indignation at his exclusion from such office on racist grounds was legendary.⁹⁸ We suspect this topic would have engendered lively conversation. We doubt that it is merely coincidental that in the years following Naidu's visit both Nellie Abdurahman and Cissie Gool came to believe it possible that they too might serve in local government. Nellie Abdurahman would agree to represent her district on the Cape Town City Council in 1929 (she was not ultimately elected); Cissie Gool would seek (and gain) office in 1938, following nearly a decade of political leadership and demonstrated activism outside 'the system'.⁹⁹ Significantly too, Dr Abdurahman would go on to support his daughter's political career from 1930 (when they shared a platform denouncing legislation designed to enfranchise white women only) until his death a decade later, despite their deep political differences. Within a few years of Naidu's visit he would also be instrumental in according women full membership rights within the APO.¹⁰⁰ This authoritarian patriarch apparently learned much from his 'dear sister' about the benefits of women's participation in mainstream politics; not only was she persuasive, but political capital was to be made by sharing a platform with a powerful woman.¹⁰¹ It is evident that Sarojini Naidu helped to engender a milieu in which women such as Nellie Abdurahman and Cissie Gool and men like Abdullah Abdurahman

⁹⁵ In 1923 Miriam Walsh had been the first woman elected to the Cape Town City Council. The first to stand (unsuccessfully) for election had been Julia Solly in 1918 (van der Spuy, 'Not Only', 144).

⁹⁶ The Star, 7 October 1926 (UCT M&A: BCZA 85/21, reel 1); South African Who's Who, 1940, 341.

⁹⁷ Cape Times, 13 March 1924.

⁹⁸ Amina Gool, personal communication, 12 August 2001.

⁹⁹ van der Spuy, 'Not Only', chs 5 and 6.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Hindustan Times, 28 December 1925; Abdurahman to Naidu, 22 April 1926, UCT, M&A: BCZA 85/21, reel 1. According to Dr Abdurahman's grandson, Rustum Gool, Abdurahman's name, AA, reflected his authoritarian attitude: 'The first letter of the alphabet followed by the first letter of the alphabet' (personal communication, 21 March 2001).

could begin to imagine the political participation of women in new ways.

Sarojini Naidu gave her farewell speech to South Africa in Durban on 22 May 1924, several weeks after she had been elected President of the SAIC. While Naidu herself had seemed oblivious to any resistance to her leadership, Gandhi's correspondence does suggest that some doubts had been expressed.¹⁰² Yet there she was, and as I.C. Meer has underscored, she would continue to be re-elected for five years.¹⁰³ This achievement would not have gone unnoticed by the woman with whom she had spent so many hours and who had followed her every step; she had indeed achieved unprecedented heights. But it was as a mother, rather than as SAIC President, that Naidu chose to frame her 'last word' in South Africa. In her farewell speech, she shared these words from her son: 'It is unavoidable that you should be such a success. Courage and hope always come from the mouth of a mother. (Applause).'¹⁰⁴ Naidu had made an impact on many thousands of South Africans, and they had made a lasting impression on her too. She ended her speech with the reminder, 'my heart is drawn to this country'.¹⁰⁵ She would maintain contact with her South African friends. As President of the INC, she would host a delegation to India led by Dr Abdurahman the following year. On that occasion, the Hindustan Times reported:

Dr Abdur [sic] Rahman [sic] . . . said that Deputation was presenting to one of the greatest women of the world (Mrs Naidu) her photo. The South African Indians had given India the greatest living man (applause) 'Mahatma belongs to us. You will have to give us at least one of the two to go to Africa and fight our battle. If we take the greatest woman of India we are leaving behind her photograph . . . We present this photo to our mother and aunt in token of the love of the South African Indians.'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² M.K. Gandhi to P.K. Naidu, 28 March 1924 (Gandhi, Collected Works, vol. 3, 329. Extracts reproduced at www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/gandhi/51-73.htm#N_12_, accessed 8 June 2010).

¹⁰³ Meer, 'I Remember'.

¹⁰⁴ Natesan, Speeches, 426.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 427.

¹⁰⁶ Hindustan Times, 28 December 1925 (UCT M&A: BCZA 85/21, Abdurahman Family Collection, reel 1).

When Naidu returned to South Africa again in 1932, representing the INC at the Second Round Table Conference, she again gave numerous public speeches and was greeted universally with standing ovations. She continued to encourage women's agency, delivering, for example, a public lecture on 'The Women's Movement'.¹⁰⁷ Naidu also continued her association with Cissie Gool; although the Cape Times report mentioned neither Gool nor Nellie Abdurahman in connection with this meeting, Ray Alexander recalled attending such a meeting as a new immigrant, a significant moment in her own life. She observed both mother and daughter on the platform alongside Naidu, before she challenged Naidu's exclusion of Russian women from her speech, whereupon she was invited to join the women on the platform, and she and Cissie Gool became firm friends.¹⁰⁸

A comprehensive analysis of Naidu's visit of 1932 is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear that in 1924 she had encouraged local women to redefine their relationship to mainstream politics. She reached out with a subtle but clear message to South African Indian women in particular, to whom the doors of 'politics' had formerly been firmly bolted, although women from across the spectrum listened. In public speeches, media interviews and private conversations, Naidu insisted that women's duty was to participate actively in political struggles. Indeed, her entire visit redefined the place of women, not only as participants in politics, but also as leaders. Irrespective of her intended audience, she provided a role model for any South African woman who might otherwise not have imagined it possible to exercise power and authority within the profoundly patriarchal political mainstream. Cissie Gool recognised the importance of Naidu's visit for her own political development. Of course she did not owe everything to Sarojini Naidu. She had indeed learned much about political strategies from her mother, particularly through her leadership of the APO Women's Guild and her participation in the struggle for women's enfranchisement (Gool would launch her political career in protesting against the enfranchisement of white women only).¹⁰⁹ The foundation had already been laid. However, rather than embrace the kinds of covert activism Nellie Abdurahman had modelled, Gool thrived on direct confrontation and she would have been struck by how closely Sarojini Naidu reflected her own directness and 'sanguine'

¹⁰⁷ Cape Times, 14 January 1932.

¹⁰⁸ Simons, *All my Life*, 59.

¹⁰⁹ van der Spuy, 'Not Only', chs 5 and 6.

personality.¹¹⁰ Gool's friend, Zelda Friedlander, would observe that '[i]n many respects [Cissie] was not unlike Mrs Sarojini Naidu . . . Cissie possessed her drive, her delightful way of injecting humour into every situation'.¹¹¹ It was more than a similarity in style and approach to life, however. Naidu provided a model of highly effective female leadership in a profoundly patriarchal domain, and it is clear that Gool admired her guest deeply for this. Sarojini Naidu's personal, political relationship with Cissie Gool had been established in domestic spaces, and it was both there and in the public performance of her unassailable authority that Naidu made a difference. Carolyn Heilbrun has written that '[p]ower is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter'.¹¹² Sarojini Naidu demonstrated that even in the 1920s, gender did not need to define one's role in national politics in South Africa; a woman could assume the right to power and have her part matter, profoundly.

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¹¹⁰ See Huxley, *Jesting Pilate*, 12-13.

¹¹¹ Cape Times, 12 July 1963.

¹¹² C.G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (London: The Women's Press, 1988), 18.