

# GANDHI'S AFRICAN LEGACY

## *Phoenix Settlement*

1904 to 2024



## A History Through Letters

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Winner of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NHSS) 2025 award for  
Best Non-Fiction Edited Volume



# Gandhi's African Legacy Phoenix Settlement: 1904-2024+ A History Through Letters

By Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie

Review by Bernedette Muthien

UWC Press, 2024, 685 pages, R455

On the afternoon of Saturday 3 October, Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie's book, *Gandhi's African Legacy Phoenix Settlement: 1904-2024. A History Through Letters*, was launched at the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Centre Foundation<sup>1</sup> in Cape Town under the theme of "Talking Rights". This launch was immediately followed by the Insurrection Ensemble's multi-media production, *Must Gandhi Fall?*, under the theme of "Performing Rights", at the historic theatre<sup>2</sup> at the District Six Homecoming Centre around the corner. These two successive events are inextricably connected. They were part of the Living Rights Festival with its focus on intersectional justice and realising constitutional rights through multi-genre arts.

The book launch was moderated by Nirode Bramdaw of African Sun Media and UWC Press. Discussant was the renowned award-winning writer-scholar-teacher, Imraan Coovadia of the University of Cape Town. Among others he authored *Revolution and Non-Violence in Tolstoy, Gandhi and Mandela* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

The star was undoubtedly historian Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie of the University of the Western Cape. Among her publications are *Cane Fields to Freedom: a Chronicle of Indian South Africans* and *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal* (Kwela Books, 2000, 2004).

The book is a commemoration of 120 years of Gandhi's Phoenix Settlement outside Durban, South Africa. Mesthrie is the great-grand-daughter of Mohandas and Kasturba Gandhi and grand-daughter of Sushila and Manilal Gandhi (second son of the Mahatma). Unlike most Gandhi scholars around the world who focus only on the Mahatma, Mesthrie locates the guru in his large and ever-expanding family, and within his various communities over decades, especially the Phoenix Settlement: "within four years [of its founding], sixty residents resided [at Phoenix] – families with husbands, wives, children, brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts. And Gandhi's own wife and children. He called it "a little village" (2024: 1).

She dedicates this book to her grandmother, Sushila, who with her husband, Manilal, managed the Phoenix Settlement for decades after the Mahatma returned to India and its struggle for independence from the British Empire. In this book and elsewhere, Mesthrie also lifts up the women in her extended family, remembering them, honouring them, appreciating them, showing that the Mahatma was a mortal man, located in a family and communities, and with many women and others supporting their just causes, from Kasturba to the youngest generation today.

The deliberately multicultural, multifaith, multilingual Phoenix Settlement was explicitly non-profit, a cooperative, with all residents participating equally in manual labour. It was from Phoenix that Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha*, nonviolent resistance to oppression, was born.

Gandhi was not born a Mahatma, or Great Spirit. He grew into one over decades of struggle, learning, transformation. In his youth he represented the privileged class and cultures from which he came, including racism against black Africans and sexism against women, particularly his wife, Kasturba. When Ghanaian students removed Gandhi's statue from their university during 2018, they were protesting against the ignorant young Gandhi, racist, classist and sexist as he was at the time, in the context of contemporary society. South African and other leaders, including Nelson Mandela, have publicly recognised that the youthful Gandhi was not the same man who had grown over decades into an international guru of nonviolent resistance, a man devoted to "universal egalitarianism of humankind" (2024:8).

Mesthrie draws on the memoirs of her own mother, Sita, who wrote about the 1930s and 1940s, about Phoenix and her own parents, Sushila and Manilal. The letters in the book range from the first letter in 1915 to the last letter in 1977, from Sushila, narrating the life of the Phoenix Settlement over 62 years. "The letters in this book reveal relationships, friendships, and networks" (2024:19).

"Letters have been extremely important in uncovering women's histories," says Mesthrie, who refers to the publication of Kasturba Gandhi's diaries in 2022, showing her as literate and agentic, indeed even a public protestor and political detainee, as well as a literacy teacher to her fellow detainees and other women in the community. So too Mesthrie recentres her grandmother,



Sushila, who took over the management of Phoenix after the demise of her husband, Manilal, and was the first woman to lead the settlement and its projects.

The author's mother, Sita, started leading the settlement press from the 1940s. "Through 'the performance of the self' that went with the letter-writing, the women shine through the book. Gandhi had meant from the outset ... for Phoenix to be a place where women could be liberated from relentless domestic work and take their place in public work. The three Gandhi women in this book did just that (2024:26).

"My goal in compiling this archive is to see how Phoenix Settlement as a place and as an institution passed through many eras, encountered different people, and ultimately changed. Change, after all, is an intrinsic part of all biographies; that of lives and of objects ... I am interested in the 'eras of its social life' (2024:29).

The Phoenix Settlement established an independent community clinic, which still exists, now as a government clinic. Based on community needs, the clinic focused on women's and children's health, including pre-and post-natal maternity care (2024:526).

The Settlement also conducted pathbreaking educational, multiracial/nonracial youth camps of up to 70 participants, with evenings "devoted to poetry, plays, and films" (2024:513). Several of South Africa's struggle stalwarts of the 1970s passed through the camp - and through the pages of this book. Indeed, over its many decades, international multi-faith gurus, and many ordinary people, have passed through the Settlement, and traverse this important book, too many to enumerate in a short book review.

Mohandas Gandhi grew alongside his extended family and many diverse communities in South Africa, India and elsewhere.

The Phoenix Settlement was destroyed by the Inkatha movement during the height of the 1980s anti-apartheid struggle (2024:585), with only the community clinic left intact (it was protected by the community). As South Africa rose from the depredations of apartheid in the 1990s, the Phoenix Settlement was re-established, albeit on a smaller plot, as an important heritage site. Thus the phoenix rose from the ashes, to continue inspiring new generations of activists for social justice.

Since Mohandas Gandhi was a mortal, not a deity, he was as fragile and fallible as any human, and hence there is no need to de-pedestalise him. We all fall, and hopefully rise again, like the phoenix, reborn from the ashes of the past.

This excellent, important book is an epic tome of 685 pages, which of necessity could not be done full justice in a brief book review. It begs for further engagement, not only with the text/s, but also in personal workshops and other creative and scholarly spaces, about Gandhi, his extended family and many communities around the world, *satyagraha*, and nonviolent struggles for justice in South Africa, India and the world at present.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tutu.org.za/>, accessed 18 February 2025.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.homecomingcentre.co.za/avalonauditorium>, accessed 18 February 2025.