

Presentation

Phyllis Naidoo Memorial Lecture: Sisulu 100 - The role women played in the fight for liberation of South Africa

7 August 2018

University of KwaZulu-Natal

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Good evening ladies and Gentlemen it's pleasure to be here tonight to address you, and it's also an honour to have the opportunity to speak beside Ms Eleonor Sisulu.

The year 1918 marks the birth year of Nelson Mandela, whose centenary we are celebrating this year in 2018. What is less well known, is the fact that it was also the year that the *Bantu Women's League* of the *South African Native National Congress (SANNC)* was formed under the leadership of another hero from an earlier generation - Charlotte Maxeke. The League was formed in response to the introduction of pass laws in South Africa. To further their cause, members of the League sent a delegation to Prime Minister Louis Botha to discuss their opposition to such repressive legislation.

It's also exactly a decade before the birth in 1928 of another important anti-apartheid stalwart, Phyllis Naidoo, who this lecture is held in commemoration of.

Today I have been asked to talk on the role of women in the struggle. This is a challenge in some respects. As Gina Mhlophe writes in her forward to a biography of Mama Nokukhanya Luthuli:

If I were to stand on top of a hill
And raise my voice in praise
Of the women of my country
Who have worked throughout their lives
Not for themselves, but for the very life of all Africans
Who would I sing praises to?
I could quote all the names
Yes, but where do I begin?

There are indeed so many women, and yet so much work remains to be done to excavate their voices and experiences and to bring these into public consciousness. This is perhaps why we are so familiar with the birthdate of Nelson Mandela, or 1912 as the founding year of the ANC but know much less about Charlotte Maxeke - who was the first South African Black woman to receive a Bachelor's degree – or about mobilizations of women, such as the formation of The Bantu Women's League in 1918.

The silence of women's voices and experiences in the struggle reflects the boarder silence and invisibility of South African women, particularly black women in our country's history.

Finding ways to uncover such voices and let them speak for themselves will give us a much deeper, richer and meaningful understanding of our past, but it will also help us see and assess how to go forward in South Africa with the unfinished business of transformation - and hold lessons for gender activists today.

Over the past nine months I have had the opportunity to browse through the extensive and rich collection of Phyllis Naidoo's papers housed at the Gandhi Luthuli documentation Centre. This has been a real treasure trove for any historian. I found these papers very insightful for better understanding of the hugely significant, complex and yet at times nuanced role that women activists, like Phyllis played in the struggle in South Africa, a role, which remains under acknowledged and under examined.

I was particularly interested in the thousands of letters she wrote to family, comrades and friends across the world during her time in exile between 1977 and 1990 first in Lesotho and then in Zimbabwe. I came to the Gandhi Luthuli Documentation Centre because I wanted to read these letters to learn more about her political thinking and ideas, but the more I read the more I came to realise that there was something else very significant in these letters:

Reading Phyllis Naidoo's correspondence has helped me to see another facet women's role in the struggle – one that continues to remain largely unrecognised – the importance of personal relationships – of friendship, mutuality and support – that underpinned political activism in the public sphere.

These letters give and seek love, consolation and advice, provide commentary on unfolding events in South Africa and neighbouring countries. Some are a cry in the wilderness, grieving the loss of fellow activists. Others send instructions and money to colleagues for the support of the families of imprisoned activists. Many pass on greetings and good wishes, pursue news of comrades and friends, or offer instructions for school fees, children's clothes and birthday presents.

After Steve Biko's death in detention in September 1977 she writes tenderly to comfort a mutual friend "How can I share your grief at Steve's death – but to say that I wish you great strength...I'd like to walk back and come to you, to hold your hand"¹

The importance of these relationships and both the emotional and practical support they offered is illustrated by some of the correspondence between Phyllis and the wives of the Pietermaritzburg nine – a group of ANC activists who were on trial for terrorist activities in the late 1970s, including Harry Gwala. At the time Phyllis had gone into exile she had been one of the defence lawyers on this trial. Sentencing took place on 25 July 1977 just after Phyllis had fled across the border to Lesotho.²

¹ GLDC, Phyllis Naidoo Papers, Letters from Phyllis Naidoo to Comrades and Friends 1977-1980 (Box), 1977 Letters from Phyllis Naidoo to comrades and friends (Box 8, File 1), Phyllis to Sam, 18 Sept 1977, Maseru.

² South African History Online, The Trial ends in the Natal Supreme Court in Pietermaritzburg of five Africans all of whom have previous convictions for sabotage, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/trial-ends-natal-supreme-court-pietermaritzburg-five-africans-all-whom-have-previous-con> Accessed 19 June 2018.

Sylvia Mewiya the wife of Matthew Mewiya one of the accused in the trial, writes to her August 1977:

Many thanks for your kind letter. I was so pleased to know your whereabouts. I am very sorry to lose my husband in this way. And all of a sudden left by you. I had a great hope that you will be of great help to us to some other problems that we come across" "But in all that has happened I must thank you very much for every effort you did during my husband's trial.³

At about the same time she also received a letter from, Elda Gwala the wife of Harry Gwala, who writes to Phyllis in August 1977:

The way I was so happy to receive your letter I even kissed it" "We were all shocked about the sentence of the nine accused. I was in bed for a week just thinking of what has happened... "I hope you will keep on writing to us and send us some money because you know the condition this side. I've sold the cauliflower I've planted so I preparing to plant other plants like mielies bit the soil is poor now. Thanks very much sisi Pills I have more to say but I am afraid. ⁴

Phyllis then writes back to Elda in September saying:

Don't fear we shall all be together again soon. Don't take sleeping tablets my sisters rather drink warm milk before you sleep. You have to keep strong for all those children at home. ⁵

Phyllis Naidoo had a naturally observant and curious personality. She was interested in people; and their identity, their experiences, and how their environments shaped them, and how they carved out a space for agency and voices within an oppressive system. And I think that was one of the reasons she was interested in writing about people, and what made her a good writer.

This translated into her political work in terms of her ability to network, to reach out to others in a practical way to provide what they needed, but also to connect different people together in her network of mutually beneficial and supportive contacts. One can perhaps say that these letters reveal the importance of a politics of intimacy, and of the everyday in struggle histories.

After Phyllis's return from exile in 1990 she spent much of her time back in South Africa researching and writing books about the about the lives and personalities of activists in the struggle. This was a deliberate effort to ensure that these individuals were recognised in South African history.

She wrote several volumes of *Footprints in Grey Street* (2002), which contains dozens mini biographies of people from all backgrounds who were connected with Grey Street a traditionally designated Indian business district in downtown Durban. These include activists and ordinary people.

³ GLDC, Phyllis Naidoo Papers, Correspondence: Letters from friends to Phyllis Naidoo 1976-1979 (Box 7, File 1) Sylvia Mewiya to Phyllis 29 August 1977

⁴ GLDC, Phyllis Naidoo Papers, Correspondence: Letters from friends to Phyllis Naidoo 1976-1979 (Box 7, File 1) Elda Gwala to Phyllis 25 August 1977, Pietermaritzburg.

⁵ (Phyllis to Elda, 15 September 1977? Maseru) Letters from Phyllis Naidoo to comrades and friends 1977-1980

In 2006 she also published *156 Hands that built South Africa*, a collective biography of the accused in the 1956 Johannesburg based Treason Trial, which saw 156 people including Nelson Mandela, arrested in a raid and tried for treason in an epic trial lasting from 1956 to 1961.

Her friend in Lesotho Monroe Gilmour Jr describes Phyllis as having “an ability to comfort and counsel other victims of apartheid”.⁶ This stemmed from her own experiences of separation, hardship and loss as an antiapartheid activist. She herself spent ten years under house arrest and was also separated from her second husband who was imprisoned on Robben Island. Tragically in 1989, a year before the unbanning of the ANC and her return to South Africa, she learned that her eldest son, Sadhan, had been murdered by an apartheid agent on a farm in Tanzania. A year later, her second son, Sha, died after a lengthy illness.

Many of Phyllis’s letters, written while in exile are concerned with organising funds and the logistics to support detained prisoners, their families. These included organising funds to provide food, school fees and uniforms for prisoner’s children. Organising permits for spouses them to visit their loved ones on Robben Island, providing money for travel-tickets to CT, providing financial support for them to study in prison.

When activists George Naicker and Kirsten Moonsamy, are discharged from prison in Durban in Jan 1978 she writes to fellow comrades to ensure that they are there to support them and to organise clothes for them to wear.⁷ On another occasion in May 1981 she writes to her work colleague, Cynthia, asking her to help organise the transport and logistics for Mrs Azania Ndebele – Sobantu to visit her husband in Robben Island.⁸

Phyllis’s work supporting political detainees, prisoners and their families, as well as supporting activists and youth fleeing into exile, was part of a lifelong commitment which had begun many years before at the time of the 1956 Treason Trial. She was then a student at the University of Natal, Non-European section and decided to organise a Human Rights Committee at University to help raise funds for the Treason Trialists and their families.⁹

Phyllis recalls in one of her letters - one of the first detainees - Ebrahim, she had supported: Her letter describes the terrible conditions under which detainees were often kept. Phyllis writes, for example, that

He had been in a cell so small that he couldn’t stretch to sleep. He sat in it with 2 buckets for company and had not had a change of clothes in 23 days. My sister refused to go. I was dead broke, penniless, that not an expression it was true. I went to a café belonging to some friends and picked up some food. Got another pal to open up his factory and give me 2 khaki pants, shirts, underpants. Armed thus, face cloth, soap, toothpaste, brush. I had no bus fare to get to

⁶ GLDC, Phyllis Naidoo Papers Personalia, Awards, Articles, (Box 1), Newspaper clipping Monroe Gilmour, ‘No Human Being Should Be Made to Suffer This Penalty’ The Charlotte Observer 22 June 1990.

⁷ GLDC, Phyllis Naidoo Papers, Letters from Phyllis Naidoo to Comrades and Friends 1977-1980 (Box), 1977-1978 Letters from Phyllis Naidoo to friends, comrades and family (folder), Phyllis to unknown, 16/1/1978

⁸ GLDC, Phyllis Naidoo Papers, Letters from Phyllis Naidoo to friends and family 1980-1983 (Box 10, File 2), Phyllis to Cynthia, 14 May 1981

⁹ South African History Online, Biographies, Phyllis Naidoo, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/phyllis-naidoo> Accessed 17 June 2018.

*the jail. Walked to the taxi rank and asked a bleary eyed fellow if he'd take me. I'd pay next week. He did. Eventually when I got into point prison, there he was in khaki, clinging to the bars like a monkey, smiling 'I knew you'd come'. Of course he had parents who wouldn't touch home with a barge pole...He has been my baby since.*¹⁰

Women in the struggle performed the labour of sorrow – being separated from their families, in exile or prison, and suffering the loss their loved ones in the fight against an unjust state.

They also undertook the labour of love – as Phyllis Naidoo's letters illustrate – maintaining the home, feeding clothing and sheltering activists on the run, supporting their families and providing other much needed emotional and financial support.

Women took on many other roles within the struggle too, working in Trade Unions, as underground operatives, community activists, intellectuals and negotiators during the transition to democracy, and much work remains to be done to fully understand and recognise the experience of these women. But I think it is these labours of love, and of sorrow that remain most invisible, or when recognised are viewed merely a side line to the struggle histories. Rather they need to be incorporated and recognised as a key component of these histories.

For Phyllis Naidoo her letters were not just about providing much needed emotional support and comfort, they also played a key role in enabling Phyllis to continue her political work of supporting political prisoners and their families, and campaigning against the apartheid state, while in exile.

The importance of the personal in underpinning political activism in the public sphere – in keeping the home fires burning – is recognised in the Monument to the Women of South Africa at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. Being in fact, the “only commemorative site dedicated entirely to women's apartheid-era political efforts.”¹¹ The design chosen to represent this role is not of a group of women marching, protesting or burning passes, nor that of female MK guerrilla fighter with a baby in one hand and a gun in the other, as so often represented in liberation imagery. It's that of an *imbokodo* – a grinding stone used primarily by rural women for grinding maize for food preparation

This everyday object “carries with it the memory of women's work and it is a reminder of women's domestic labour.”¹² But I think it also seeks to convey another message that the personal is political: whether in the case of the 1929 Beer Hall Riots where African women challenged the Durban municipality over their monopoly on beer brewing which deprived them of important economic livelihood and let them maintain social control over the

¹⁰ GLDC, Phyllis Naidoo Papers, Letters from Phyllis Naidoo to Comrades and Friends 1977-1980 (Box), 1978-1980 Letters from Phyllis Naidoo to friends, comrades and friends (Box 8, File 4), Phyllis to Anthony, 16 February 1978

¹¹ Kim Miller, 'Selective Silence and the Shaping of Memory in Post-Apartheid Visual culture: The Case of the Monument to the Women of South Africa', *South African Historical Review*, Vol 63, No. 2 June 2011, p. 295.

¹² Kim Miller, 'Selective Silence and the Shaping of Memory in Post-Apartheid Visual culture: The Case of the Monument to the Women of South Africa', *South African Historical Review*, Vol 63, No. 2 June 2011, p.300.

context in which their men drank, or the consumer boycotts of the 1980s in South Africa – led by women who shopped for the household.

The preparation of food and the eating together – nourishing body and soul – is itself an important part of Comradeship. I am sure that Phyllis would have spent many hours in her flat in Durban and her dwellings in Lesotho and Zimbabwe, cooking, feeding and comforting anti-apartheid activists, exiles and their families.

The use of the *imbokodo*, a grinding stone, in the Women's Memorial seeks to make visible the invisibility of women's labour, and to highlight the crucial role that it played in the struggle.

As a member of the SACP, someone who had an understanding of the relationship between the exploitation of labour and extraction of wealth I think Phyllis Naidoo might agree that just as women's invisible labour of love has been under-recognised in struggle histories, so too has the economic value of women's labour in the private sphere, reinforcing gender and racial inequalities.

In South Africa women perform the bulk of the productive and reproductive labour of the household, such as cooking, cleaning and gardening, caring for children, the sick and elderly, and providing emotional care and social support to the broader community. This unpaid care work contributes directly to our country's economic and social development.

In doing so they spend nearly twice the amount of time on unpaid house work compared to their male counterparts. Economists have calculated that this unpaid care work would be worth - between 11% and 30% of South Africa's GDP.

In South Africa too caring work has historically been under-valued. This has been largely due to the fact that it is labelled as unskilled, and was one of the few livelihoods open to Black South African women who under the unjust apartheid system were denied access to education, skills training and capital which would have allowed them to enter other industries. Just under a million women work as domestic workers in private households in South Africa today, making up 14% of all working women in the country, and playing a vital role in enabling their employers to go out to work. Government statistics from 2013 show that white women in South Africa was a staggering five times the median wage for African women, indicating the depth of inequality amongst this group as a whole. The words of activist George Monbiot certainly do seem to ring true here, that 'If wealth was the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise, every woman in Africa would be a millionaire'.

Labours or love, labours of social justice

In June 1981 Phyllis writes to her close friend Rita: "someone said there was no easy way to freedom, & that's so true my friend."¹³ In many ways, women are still labouring today to bring a more just, safe and equitable society into being in South Africa. Whether it's Gogos using their pensions to feed their grandchildren and send them to school, or as we've seen

¹³ GLDC, Phyllis Naidoo Papers, Letters from Phyllis Naidoo to friends and family 1980-1983 (Box 10, File 2), Phyllis to Rita, 18 June 1981

recently with the Total Shut Down Campaign, whether it's women taking to the streets in numbers across South Africa to demand that the State take more effective action to prevent gender-based violence.

For too long these labours of love and been seen as a sideline to struggle histories, when they have been acknowledged at all, rather than being viewed as an integral part of these histories. Their value has been overlooked, as have the very firm principles that have underpinned these labours of love – the equitable sharing of resources, the building of community, the creation of safe homes, and the fostering of relationships of trust and respect. Are these not after all the very principles of justice that the liberation movement was seeking to bring into being? As Cornel West reminds us 'Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.'

Thank you.

Acknowledgement and thanks to the Gandhi Luthuli Documentation Centre at UKZN Westville campus for their support in accessing Phyllis Naidoo papers, especially Thiru Munsamy, and to Prof Goolam Vahed at UKZN for his guidance and support.