

## Married to the Struggle: For better or worse

### Wives of Indian anti-apartheid activists in Natal: The untold narratives

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#### *Abstract*

The role and contributions of women in war, and anti-colonial and nationalistic struggles have become the subject of intense research and analysis over the past two decades. In South Africa, the nationalistic struggle against the apartheid regime was a collective effort by men and women. Yet, to a very large extent, anti-apartheid discourses are male centred, focusing on well-known heroes of the struggle, their life in exile and their contributions. Women's activism is still at the periphery of nationalistic discourses; the impact of the struggle on the wives of political activists is even less visible. This article examines the daily survival and experiences of the wives of political activists in the anti-apartheid struggle who resided in Natal between the 1950s and 1980s, at the height of the anti-apartheid movement. Wives bore the heaviest burdens of the struggle, in the context of social ostracism, depression, stigmatisation, financial hardships, and violations of their human rights and coping with an "absentee husband". In this article I argue that the perennial absence of their spouses from the home and women's lives had multiple effects on families, and that family dynamics and gender relations were negotiated and re-structured. Regional socio-economic and political conditions shaped women's personal and political identities. New theoretical frameworks emerging from this article will add to the regional histories of the nationalistic movement in South Africa in the context of gender roles and family dynamics.

**Keywords:** Indians; Gender; Struggle activists; Wife; Mother; Apartheid; Natal.

#### **Introduction**

JW Scott's pioneering study, "Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis" has played an influential role in steering feminists, academics and

scholars to challenge traditional historical writing.<sup>1</sup> Scott argues that the use of the concept of gender and its theoretical framework enables a more complex examination of history and understanding of different times and societies. Gender, Scott argues, offers the opportunity to reveal the power relations and power structures that create both the hierarchy between men and women and the justification for the social structure. Over the past two decades several studies have used Scott's methodological framework to offer new and fresh perspectives on the gendering of wars, and nationalistic/anticolonial and racial/ethnic protests in the context of masculinity, femininity, gender roles and relations and sexual divisions of labour.<sup>2</sup> In many parts of Africa, such as Algeria, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Mozambique and Namibia, women contributed to the war effort through intelligence work, raising soldiers' morale, cooking, providing medical services, and serving as porters, disseminators of propaganda and combat trainers. Many wives had the support of their spouses, whilst others had to contend with the prejudices of their families and communities.<sup>3</sup> In India, familial support led to women picketing cloth shops and selling khaddar on the streets in defiance of the government ban on political activities and political demonstrations. Women's contributions in these colonised regions of India and Africa have shown that they were far from docile and passive, but were active political agents.

More recent studies have sought to frame gender and political conflict in the context of family dynamics, highlighting the lived realities of wives, mothers and children and thus providing newer insights and conceptual frameworks in these neglected areas of research.<sup>4</sup> For example, in her doctoral dissertation,

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1 This paper was presented at the: *The Lady Doth Protest: Mapping feminist movements, moments, and mobilisations*, Biennial FWSA Conference, 21-23 June 2013, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom. My sincere thanks for the constructive comments and suggestions received at this panel session. JW Scott, "Gender: A useful category of historical analysis", *The American Historical Review*, 91(5), 1986, pp. 1053-1075.

2 S Arnfred, "Women in Mozambique: Gender struggle and gender politics", *Review of African Political Economy*, 41, 1988, pp. 5-16; M Turshen, "Algerian women in the liberation struggle and the civil war: From active participants to passive victims?", *Social Research*, 69(3), 2002, pp. 889-911; AM White, "All the men are fighting for freedom, all the women are mourning their men, but some of us carried guns: A raced-gendered analysis of Fanon's psychological perspectives on war", *Signs*, 32(4), 2007, pp. 857-884.

3 G Geisler, *Women and the remaking of politics in Southern Africa – negotiating autonomy, incorporation and representation* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004), pp. 17-35.

4 S Fishman, *We will wait: Wives of French prisoners of war, 1940-1945* (New Haven, Yale UP, 1992); J Breen, "Prisoners' families and the ripple effects of imprisonment", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 97(385), Spring 2008, pp. 59-71; K McEvoy, D O'Mahony, C Horner and O Lyner, "The home front: The families of politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland", *The British Journal of Criminology*, 39 (2), Spring 1999, pp. 175-197; R Giacaman and P Johnson, "Our life is prison": The triple captivity of wives and mothers of Palestinian political prisoners", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 9(3), Fall 2013, pp. 54-80; L Buch, "Uncanny affect – The ordinary relations and enduring absence in families of detainees in the occupied Palestinian territory" (Ph.D, University of Copenhagen, 2010); C Coulter, *Web of punishment: An investigation* (Dublin, Attic Press, 1991).

anthropologist Buch explores the lives of Palestinian wives whose spouses were detained indefinitely in Israel and shows how suffering is an almost everyday manifestation in their lives. Women live in a kind of indefinite limbo, with their husbands both simultaneously present and absent; suffering becomes part of their everyday life.<sup>5</sup> Similarly Giacaman and Johnson focus on the narratives of Palestinian political prisoners' wives and mothers and show that their lives were ones of "triple captivity", that of the Israeli colonial system, the Israeli prison, and the post-Oslo Palestinian political landscape. The women perceived their lives as a "continuum between prison and Palestinian life outside"; in other words, their "...life is prison".<sup>6</sup> Fishman highlights the personal experiences of a group of French Prisoners' of War (POW) wives between 1940 and 1945. She highlights their social and material conditions; women assuming the roles of their absent husbands within the family, which was far from a heady experience. Many also engaged in collective activity, forming associations for their mutual benefit and support, and occasionally lobbied the state on pertinent issues.<sup>7</sup> Studies of the families of political prisoners in Ireland have shown that prisoners' families were entrapped in a "web of punishment" as wives and mothers suffered a high emotional toll,<sup>8</sup> "security force" harassment, victimisation by the state upon release, and the impact on marital relations after years of separation.<sup>9</sup> They also found that Irish political prisoners' family ties were stronger than those of non-political prisoners.<sup>10</sup>

This article seeks to follow a similar trajectorial path. It examines the everyday lives and personal experiences of the wives of anti-apartheid struggle activists, whose spouses were active in the anti-apartheid movement in Natal between 1950s and 1980s. Natal was the hub of political activity particularly in the 1970s and 1980s when trade union activity and student activism sought to destabilise the apartheid state. The state responded by introducing repressive measures and several political activists were detained, banned and sentenced to life imprisonment. During this period it was their wives who bore the brunt of the struggle in not only sustaining family income but also nurturing

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5 L Buch, "Uncanny affect...".

6 R Giacaman and P Johnson, "Our life is prison...", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 9(3), Fall 2013, pp. 54-55.

7 S Fishman, *We will wait...*

8 C Coulter, *Web of punishment: An investigation...*

9 K McEvoy, D O'Mahony, C Horner and O Lyner, "The home front...", *The British Journal of Criminology*, 39 (2), Spring 1999.

10 J Borland, RD King and K McDermott, "The Irish in prison: A tighter nick for the 'The Micks'?", *The British Journal of Sociology*, 46, pp. 371-394.

the liberation struggle through their own acts of defiance. These women are the forgotten and invisible survivors of the anti-apartheid struggle. Their experiences are the untold narratives which urgently need to be documented. Since 1994, scholarship on the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa has to a very large extent, been dominated by masculine narratives of nationalism. Recent publications in the context of post-apartheid “herstories” have sought to capture women’s voices and their political roles in this struggle. Whilst this is commendable, these are the histories of well-known, popular women who came from politically connected families.<sup>11</sup> Whilst the history of the anti-apartheid struggle is well known globally, the suffering of the families – wives, mothers, sisters, children, brothers, and fathers – of political activists is relatively unknown, unexplored, highly under-theorised and under-problematised. In addition regional histories of the anti-apartheid movement have also been marginalised.

Mothers, wives and children played a pivotal role in the political struggle in South Africa. On his release in 1990, Nelson Mandela, the first president of the democratic South Africa, acknowledged their contribution: “mothers, wives and sisters of our nation” were “the foundation of our struggle”.<sup>12</sup> In this article I examine the lives of five women of Indian origin who married political activists of Indian origin – Marie Naicker, Rabia Motala, Saravathie Chetty, Devikie Venkatrathnam and Elsie Nair – who came from diverse social and cultural realities in the context of age, class, and religious and linguistic affiliation, thereby exploring the heterogeneity of their experiences. I chose Natal as the focus of my study because the greater majority of Indian political activists came from this region and it also has the greater density of the Indian population than any other region in South Africa. Secondly, Natal was the hub of labour activism in the 1970s and 1980s. Many people were involved in boycotts, protests, sit-ins and stay-aways. Their wives bore the heaviest burdens of the struggle, in the context of social ostracism, depression, stigmatisation, financial and personal hardships, and violations of their human rights and coping with an “absentee husband”. This article is

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11 Z Jaffer, *Our generation* (Cape Town, Kwela, 2003); P Govender, *Love and courage: A story of insubordination* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2007); M Ramphele, *A life* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1996); A Cachalia, *When hope and history rhyme* (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2013); E Mashinini, *Strikes have followed me all my life – A South African autobiography* (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2012); L Ngcobo, *Prodigal daughters stories of South African women in exile* (Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012); B Govinden, ‘Sister outsiders’ – the representation of identity and difference in selected writings by South African Indian women (Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2008); H Haasbroek, “An absolute pillar of strength for her husband and the struggle”, Molly Fischer (1908-1964) – wife, mother and struggle activist, *New Contree*, 65, December 2012, pp. 87-110.

12 G West and RL Blumberg (eds.), *Women and social protest* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 16.

a historical turn in the South African nationalist narrative in that it examines the daily survival and experiences of the wives of political activists during the anti-apartheid struggle that lived in Natal at a particular period in South African history. I argue that the perennial absence of their spouses from home had multiple effects on families and that family dynamics and gender relations were negotiated and re-structured. This paper by documenting the narratives of the wives of political activists also highlights the complexities and nuances of political conflict in the context of race, gender and class in the Natal region. New theoretical frameworks emerging from this article will add to the regional histories of the nationalistic movement in South Africa in the context of gender roles and family dynamics.

I chose “Indian” women largely because firstly, during my research on the anti-apartheid movement I became painstakingly aware that, while the involvement of South Africans of Indian origin is an under-researched area, rarer still is the unstinting contributions of women of Indian origin. Studies focusing on the spouses of anti-activists (there are very few) have largely focused on African and White women. For example, Arianna Lissoni and Maria Suriano’s, article “Married to the ANC: Tanzanian Women’s Entanglement in South Africa’s Liberation Struggle” examines the transnational character of the anti-apartheid struggle, particularly the relationships between ANC/MK cadres in exile and Tanzanian women. They argue that many Tanzanian women became entangled with the South African liberation struggle, “Relationships and marriages between South African exiles and Tanzanian women were not only a significant aspect of everyday life in exile, but also key components of an ANC family hood, linked in turn to expressions of masculinity in MK and to the making of a national community and imaginary”.<sup>13</sup> Hannes Haasbroek, focuses on Afrikaner activist Molly Fischer wife of the renowned Communist and struggle-activist Bram Fischer. Molly was a wife, mother, and a fervent Communist activist who supported her husband Bram in the anti-apartheid struggle. She was a “pillar of strength for her husband” and “Her contribution remained rather obscured to the general public when compared with that of her famous husband”.<sup>14</sup> Similar studies of wives of Indian anti-apartheid activists are absent. Secondly, women of Indian origin embraced multiple identities and oppressions during apartheid in the context of race, class and

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13 A Lissoni and M Suriano, “Married to the ANC: Tanzanian women’s entanglement in South Africa’s liberation struggle, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40(1), 2014, pp. 129-150. H Haasbroek, “An absolute pillar of strength for her husband and the struggle...”, *New Contree*, 65, December 2012, pp. 87-110.

14 H Haasbroek, “An absolute pillar of strength for her husband and the struggle...”, *New Contree*, 65, December 2012, pp. 87-110.

gender. Whilst this is not peculiar to women of Indian origin, an examination of these aspects will provide nuanced understandings of how women of Indian origin engaged in the politics of resistance,<sup>15</sup> and the "... more commonplace stories of how 'race' and 'gender' played out in racist patriarchal South Africa have ... not been interrogated in much depth".<sup>16</sup> Thirdly, in recent years, an incipient anti-Indianism has infiltrated South African society. This has manifested in racial slurs and the inflammatory anti-Indian song, *AmaiNiya*, which calls for "strong and brave men to confront Indians" who "do not want to change".<sup>17</sup> South Africans of Indian descent are perceived by some as exploiters and racists who have done little for their country. There appears to be an "ignorance of the history of the South Africans, both in terms of their suffering from the time of indenture and the complete lack of knowledge of their struggles for freedom..."<sup>18</sup> South Africans of Indian origin, both men and women, contributed significantly to the anti-apartheid movement. They fought bravely alongside other racial groups. They did not embrace an ethnic (Indian) identity but a broader South African identity. They supported, fought and sacrificed their lives for a multiracial and democratic South Africa. Only as a collective group did they perceive constructive change to be possible. The narratives of the wives in this article bear testimony to this fact. Finally, these narratives also reveal that women of Indian origin were far from docile and subservient; their stoic and steadfast support provided the catalyst for their spouses' political activity.

### **Indians in Natal and resistance to apartheid**

The contributions of the wives to the anti-apartheid struggle must be viewed against the overall anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Colonialism and imperialism advocated the racial superiority of the coloniser and the dependency and underdevelopment of the colonised, and played an important role in the formulation of racial ideology and policy formulation.<sup>19</sup> In 1910 the Union of South Africa government sought to perpetuate racial and gender hierarchies both through ideology and policy implementation. In 1913, Indian marriages

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15 B Govinden, 'Sister outsiders...', pp. 35-38.

16 T Shefer, "Intersections of 'race', sex and gender in narratives on apartheid", G Stevens, N Duncan and D Hook (eds.), *Race, memory and the apartheid archive – towards a psychosocial praxis* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2001), p. 170.

17 *Sunday Tribune*, 31 August 2014, *Post*, 3-7 September 2014.

18 *Post*, 3-7 September 2014.

19 M Davies, "Women in struggle: An overview", *Third World Quarterly*, 5(4), 1983, pp. 875-876.

were declared invalid by the Cape Town Supreme Court and African women's mobility was restricted through the introduction of passes in the Orange Free State. Both events gave rise to women's protest marches.<sup>20</sup> During the 1920s and 1930s South African Indians educated abroad were imbued with ideas of equality and non-racialism and criticised the "accommodationist" policies of the leading Indian political organisation in Natal, such as the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). Political activists such as Dr Monty Naicker, George Singh and HA Naidoo challenged the NIC in 1945 and took leadership of the organisation. In the 1940s the NIC embraced radical strategies of mass mobilisation and opposed the government's Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act which sought to restrict Indian purchases of land in white controlled areas. Non-racialism was further reinforced through the "Doctors Pact" in 1947 between Drs Monty Naicker, Yusuf Dadoo (President of the Transvaal Indian Congress, TIC) and Alfred Xuma (President General of the ANC).<sup>21</sup> In the 1950s the apartheid state enforced residential, trading and recreational segregation through legislation and the Coloured People's Organisation (CPO), ANC, TIC and NIC, jointly launched the Defiance Campaign. The first group of resisters in Natal consisted of 21 leading activists amongst them Dr GM Naicker, Billy Nair; PH (Stalwart) Simelane; Zakariah Gumede; Mrs Fatima Augustine Malinga and others. In Natal in the 1950s non-racialism was further reinforced through women's organisations. In October 1952 the Durban and District's Women's League was formed at the Bantu Social Centre. An organising committee was established comprising of Bertha Mkhize, Dr Ansuya Singh, Marie Naicker, Fatima Meer, V Ponen and RI Arenstein. The League was at the forefront of women's rights in Natal seeking to fight for free and compulsory education for all South African children, adequate and modern social welfare conditions, hospitalization, and all discriminatory laws. Chief Albert Luthuli commended the women on this great achievement and highlighted the necessity of inter-racial collective action, towards a common goal which would lead ultimately to the creation of a truly democratic South Africa. *The Leader*, the local Natal newspaper, reported on the work of the League: "While Cato Manor continues to be a subject for all and sundry – the large majority of whom are theorists and planners on paper – a silent band of women social workers, in keeping with their progressive go-ahead policy, are grappling with the problem of

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<sup>20</sup> *Indian Opinion*, 10 May 1913; 5 July 1913.

<sup>21</sup> DS Dhillon, "The Indians of Natal: Resistance to apartheid 1971-1985" (BA Honours, National University of Singapore, 1998/1999), p. 7.

malnutrition... The Durban and District Women's League, which includes a large number of Indian housewives, has been distributing free milk to needy African families for some time now and are in need of urgent financial assistance in order to extend their services".<sup>22</sup> On August 9, 1956, over 20,000 South African women marched on their country's Parliament to protest the oppressive "pass laws" of apartheid. Indian women were at the forefront of this struggle fighting for women's rights and dignity. In Pietermaritzburg, one of the largest women demonstrations was held under the leadership of Bertha Mkhize and Fatima Meer. African, Coloured and Indian women rallied to the call. Pietermaritzburg became the centre of protest because the offices of the Chief Native Commissioner were based here. Among the women protesters were Mrs Sushila Gandhi, Mrs PL Patel, Mrs Radhie Singh, Mrs Rabia (Choti) Motala, Mrs TC Mehta, Violain Junod and Hilda Kuper.

The turbulent political activity in the 1950s gave rise to political clampdown by the state in the 1960s. A series of measures were enacted giving the police the power to detain a person for 90 days without a trial. By the Sabotage Act of 1962, sabotage was made a treasonable offence with a minimum of five years' imprisonment and a maximum penalty of death. Most of the NIC and ANC of the ANC leaders were banned; house arrested or was serving sentences on Robben Island. The 1960s also saw the banning of the ANC and PAC and many political activists and gave rise to the ANC underground movement. It also led to the formation of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation or MK, the armed wing of the ANC). Billy Nair of Natal was the deputy head of MK during this period. In the 1970s, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) challenged the "hegemony of whiteness",<sup>23</sup> espoused the ideology of black solidarity and black power and laid the foundation for non-racialism. The Natal Indian Congress called "Indians 'blacks' to show its solidarity with the other black groups".<sup>24</sup> The 1970s was also characterised by rising youth activism and labour strikes particularly in Natal. Labour unrest by men and women in the garment, textile and food-processing industries was rife. There were work stoppages, boycotts and stay-aways in Durban, Cato Manor, Phoenix, Chatsworth and Pietermaritzburg.<sup>25</sup> In 1975 women supporters of the BCM launched the Black Women's Federation (BWF) in Durban. They

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22 ES Reddy and F Meer, "I remember' reminiscences of the struggle for liberation and the role of Indian South Africans, 1924-1958 by IC Meer", Unpublished, n.p. no.

23 B Govinden, 'Sister outsiders'..., p. 39.

24 S Bhana, *Gandhi's legacy – the Natal Indian congress 1894-1994* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal, 1997), p. 6.

25 *The Leader*, 26 December 1980.

collectively worked to promote women's issues on literacy, nutrition and health programmes for women. In Natal women formed the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW) in December 1983.<sup>26</sup> During the 1980s whilst many political leaders were banned or detained, NOW provided the political leadership in Natal and spearheaded a number of UDF campaigns. In the 1980s, in the midst of escalating protest, the state implemented successive States of Emergency which curtailed press freedom, banned political organisations and imposed detention without trial. Several ANC and NIC leaders were detained during the school boycotts of the 1980s and their wives rallied together in protest. Among them were Mrs Rashida Meer, Mrs Roopee Bugwandeen, Mrs Sewpersadh (sister-in-law of NIC president, George Sewpersadh), Mrs Dolly Pillay and Mrs MJ Naidoo.<sup>27</sup>

It is against this background that the lives of the wives of political activists should be perceived. Whilst their hardships and behind-the-scenes contribution to the anti-apartheid movement are known in struggle circles, this is not widely known to the broader public. It is the lives of these women that I wish to document.

## **The wives**

Mariemoothammal (Marie) Vadielloo Appavoo was born on 13 December 1911. She was the daughter of Vadivello Appavoo of the Eastern Cape and attended the local Catholic primary school. The Appavoo family was religious and instilled strong cultural ethics in their children. Consequently the children were taught to read and write Tamil, their vernacular language. Marie married Gangathura Mohambry "Monty" Naicker on 29 November 1936. Monty was served with banning orders and detained and imprisoned several times and it was Marie who raised their two children, Kreesan and Vasugee. Even after Monty's death in 1978, Marie continued to support the anti-apartheid movement.<sup>28</sup>

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26 Y Padia (Personal Collection), interview, Y Padia (Lecturer, Durban University of Technology, Sports Science Department)/K Hiralal (Associate professor, Department of History, University of Kwzulu/Natal), 13 January 2011.

27 *The Natal Mercury*, 4 May 1985.

28 Interview, K Naicker (Son of political activist Dr Monty Naicker, Westville)/K Hiralal (Associate professor, Department of History, University of Kwzulu/Natal), 11 December 2010; *Drum*, June 1968.

Rabia Motala was born in 1932 into the well-known Muslim Goga family of Kokstad in the Eastern Cape. Rabia schooled in Durban, but at the age of 13 she was called home to assist her father in their family business. At the age of 19 Rabia married Dr Mohammed (Chota) Motala on 30 September 1951. Rabia's first introduction to being a wife of a political activist was their efforts to hire a hall for their wedding in Durban. Most organisations rejected their application and they were forced to get married at a local cinema. Rabia recalls, "In those days to have a 'nikka' in a cinema was unheard of and lot of family boycotted the wedding".<sup>29</sup> After her marriage, Rabia moved into the Motala home in Pietermaritzburg where life was certainly different and challenging. Rabia grew up in a very sheltered environment in East Griqualand, and this was a far cry from the life she was to lead as a wife of a political activist. However, her strong commitment to a just and free society guided her and enabled her to support her husband's political career.

Devikie (Terese) Venkatrathnam was born in Seaview, Durban, on 21 March 1938. Her father, Appadu Rajoo, was a tailor and her mother, Soobamma a housewife. Her mother supplemented the family income by being a part-time dressmaker. Terese attended Seaview Primary School and later enrolled at Durban Girls' High school. She completed Standard 8 and was forced to leave as her parents could not finance her education. Terese first became politically conscious when her family was uprooted, under the Group Areas Act (1950), from Seaview to Chatsworth. She later married Surinarayan Kala (Sonny) Venkatrathnam and his involvement in the liberation struggle deepened her own sense of political consciousness. In the 1950s, Terese worked as a private secretary to the Registrar at the ML Sultan Technical College. At the time, Sonny was an academic at the same institution. Later, they were both fired for inciting a student protest on campus.<sup>30</sup>

Sarasvathie (Saras), Chetty was the wife of Saravanan (Ted) Chetty, a well-known political activist of Pietermaritzburg. Saras was born on 29 August 1934 in Vryheid, Natal. Her mother, Minnimah Govender, (known affectionately as Minnie), was a housewife and her father, Thungavelu Padayachee was employed as a waiter at a local hotel in Newcastle. Saras had nine siblings.

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29 N Naidoo, Political Editor, *Natal Witness* (Personal Collection), telephonic interview, Mrs R Motala (wife of former anti-apartheid activist Dr C Motala)/K Hiralal (Associate professor, Department of History, University of Kwzulu/Natal), 17 January 2011, interview, Dr Motala (anti-apartheid activist, Pietermaritzburg)/R Lundie (Oral History Project of the Alan Paton Centre, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg), 13 September 2001; *Satyagraha in pursuit of truth*, April 2011.

30 Interview, Mrs T Venkatrathnam (wife of anti-apartheid activist Surinarayan Kala (Sonny), Durban)/K Hiralal (Associate professor, Department of History, University of Kwzulu/Natal), 3 December 2010.

She describes her father as a traditionalist, a disciplinarian who insisted that his children attend vernacular school in the afternoons, to learn the Tamil language. Her father was Chairperson of the Newcastle Indian Congress and was active in community organisations. He was also a key soccer player for the NIFC League (Newcastle Indian Football Club). Saras matriculated at St Oswald's School in 1953 and enrolled at Springfield Teachers' Training College in Durban. While at College, Saras courted her future husband, Ted, and politics was often the subject of discussion. However, her parents disapproved of Ted because of his political involvement. They subsequently eloped and married on 27 January 1957. Three weeks after their marriage, Ted was fired for inciting workers at a local grocery store to engage in strike action. For Saras, this was the beginning of what life meant to be married to a political activist.<sup>31</sup>

Elsie Nair (nee Goldstone) was born in Newcastle, Natal in 1937. After completing her primary school education, she joined her mother in Durban and worked at a clothing factory and part-time as a dressmaker. She joined the Progressive Garment Workers' Union. Elsie married political activist Billy Nair in 1960 who at the time was actively involved in the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). In 1963, Billy was arrested, charged with treason and sentenced to 20 years on Robben Island, along with other activists such as Nelson Mandela.<sup>32</sup>

## **Analysis**

The location of these narratives in the context of wives and families in Natal is significant in many ways. Firstly it provides an insight to inter-ethnic and racial ties forged amongst oppressed groups in their defiance of the apartheid state and contributes to a better understanding of regional political histories. Secondly the narratives highlight the challenges and constraints experienced by the wives in Natal, how socio-economic and political factors regionally facilitated and shaped their personal and political identity and thus offer new insights and paradigm shifts in the context of gender and family dynamics in political conflicts.

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31 S Chetty, "The peoples' man – AS Chetty – My memoirs as the wife of a veteran stalwart" (unpublished manuscript). The following excerpts are reproduced with kind permission from Mrs Sara Chetty and the Alan Paton Centre in Pietermaritzburg.

32 Interview, Billy Nair (anti-apartheid activist, University of Durban-Westville, Documentation Centre)/D Shongwe (Researcher, Oral History project, "Voices of Resistance"), 12 July 2002, p. 30.

## **Closest comrades and pillars of strength**

The wives in this study consciously embraced their spouses' political affiliations. They comforted, supported, nurtured and advanced a political ideology that fought for a democratic and free South African society. Their husbands could pursue these ideals knowing that they had the support of their spouses. In other words they became their spouse's closest comrade and confidant. This is clearly articulated in their statements. For example, Monty described Marie as a "wonderful support to me";<sup>33</sup> Billy Nair said of his wife, Elsie's contribution, "We are lauded to the skies for the sacrifices we made at Robben Island, but our wives, bore the brunt and made the bigger sacrifice".<sup>34</sup> AS Chetty described his wife, Saras' contribution as follows, "Throughout my imprisonment, bannings and house arrests, my darling wife was a real gem, together with my children; she took things in her stride..."<sup>35</sup> Haasbroek described Molly Fischer as a "splendid pillar of strength for her husband"<sup>36</sup> during the liberation struggle.

Another important fact that emerges from the narratives is that marriage also had an impact on political identification. The spouses influenced each other because they shared a common political ideology. Prior to their marriages to political activists, some wives had developed their own sense of political consciousness largely through personal encounters with apartheid. For example, Terese first became politically conscious when her family was uprooted under the Group Areas Act (1950), from Seaview to Chatsworth and Saras's father was chairperson of the Newcastle Indian Congress and was active in community organizations. Their marriage to political activists further strengthened their political philosophy and determination to fight injustice. Thus "marriage gives rise to a new and shared set of social and economic circumstances..." as well as opportunities to "learn from and influence" each other.<sup>37</sup> Elsie Nair aptly states that her experience was "hard, but when we were affected, you don't feel that it's hard, as long as you know it was a struggle that meant good for the people of South Africa".<sup>38</sup> Similar expressions

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33 *Drum*, June 1968

34 *Satyagraha in pursuit of truth...*, June 2005.

35 S Chetty, "The peoples' man...", *Unpublished Manuscript*.

36 H Haasbroek, "An absolute pillar of strength for her husband and the struggle" ..., *New Contree*, 65, December 2012, p. 104.

37 L Stoker and MK Jennings, "Life-cycle transitions and political participation: The case of marriage", *The American Political Science Review*, 89, 1989, pp. 421-433.

38 South African History Online, "Elsie Nair" (available at: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/elsie-nair>, as accessed on September 2014).

of dedication and support were common among Southern women in the American Civil War, where wives or the “home front had a newly important role in generating mass armies and keeping them (men) in the field”.<sup>39</sup>

### **Development of personal and political identities**

Being the wife of a political activist also provided an opportunity for the women to “develop their own personal and political identities”. The narratives reveal that adversity made the wives stronger, more determined and self-assured with new aspirations and goals. They discovered both their strengths and weaknesses and in the process, developed a new sense of who they were not only as a woman but their capabilities as a wife and mother. A new female identity emerged, both personally and politically. As a result of their spouse’s perennial banning and incarceration, all the women engaged in some form of social and political activism and became more empowered, and in the process developed their own political agency. Sonny’s constant imprisonment made Terese “even more determined to fight back”.<sup>40</sup> In 1973, Sonny and a fellow prisoner on Robben Island, Kader Hassim signed a petition against the prison authorities after certain privileges such as smoking cigarettes, receiving and reading books, studying and participating in recreational games such as chess, cards, table tennis, and soccer were denied them. The case was largely spearheaded by their wives, Terese and Nina Hassim (wife of Kader Hassim), a pharmacist in Pietermaritzburg. They applied for court interdicts against the Prison Department on Robben Island to have their spouses’ privileges reinstated. Terese and Nina won their court application with costs. This was the first time that private individuals had brought a successful application against the Prisons Department. Terese stated, “... it was my anger and not fear that drove me to stand my ground and demand that the comrades on Robben Island be treated humanely and with dignity”.<sup>41</sup> Terese made another application to the authorities to secure the services of a Hindu priest. Other religious bodies were already attending to the spiritual needs of comrades of other denominations. Permission was granted after many frustrating months of correspondence and negotiations. During the Hindu Diwali festival, Terese requested that, as was customary, the prison

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39 DG Faust, “Altars of sacrifice: Confederate women and the narratives of war”, *The Journal of American History*, 76 (4), March 1990, p. 1200.

40 Interview, T Venkatrathnam/K Hiralal, 3 December 2010.

41 Interview, T Venkatrathnam/K Hiralal, 3 December 2010.

authorities allow Diwali food parcels to be sent to prisoners. For the first time in the history of Robben Island, food parcels were allowed from the outside.<sup>42</sup> Marie was also actively involved in the political struggle. She supported Monty's call for defiance during the 1946-1948 passive resistance movement. When Monty was imprisoned during the campaign, Marie led a group of women to the Resistance Site in Gale Street, Durban and was subsequently arrested and sentenced to one month's hard labour. On his death in 1978, Marie continued to support the anti-apartheid struggle, attending meetings and speaking at mass rallies.<sup>43</sup> Rabia and Saras became actively involved in Pietermaritzburg. They were part of a group of women who formed a support group, the Emergency Detainees Committee to assist the families of the detainees. Their tasks included raising funds, collecting second-hand clothing for the detainees' children and preparing hot meals. In the 1980s both were also actively involved in the UDF-approved "Million Signature Campaign" to declare opposition to apartheid.<sup>44</sup> Rabia's most difficult work, and one which has been largely been unrecorded, was her role within the Banishing Committee (BC). Helen Joseph, another political activist, was instrumental in identifying individuals who were banished to the rural parts of Natal and homelands such as Transkei. Many of these individuals were forgotten and the BC sought to create public awareness of their plight. Rabia formed a small committee in Pietermaritzburg that located banished individuals and provided them with food, clothing and shelter. She was also actively involved in the potato boycott in Pietermaritzburg and the Federation of South African Women. During her husband's incarceration, Rabia sought to improve her academic qualifications. She completed her matric and enrolled with the University of South Africa (UNISA) for a BA Degree.<sup>45</sup> Elsie too, challenged the apartheid state when Billy was severely assaulted whilst in detention at the hands of the Security Police. She enlisted the help of lawyers and applied for a court interdict to stop further assaults.<sup>46</sup>

The narratives reveal that wives were far from docile, and passive, merely waiting for their husband's return from prison. Rather, they displayed their

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42 Interview, T Venkatrathnam/K Hiralal, 3 December 2010.

43 Interview, K Naicker/K Hiralal, 11 December 2010.

44 S Chetty, "The peoples' man...", *Unpublished Manuscript*; N Naidoo (Personal Collection), telephonic interview, R Motala/K Hiralal, 17 January 2011; Interview, Dr Motala/R Lundie, 13 September 2001.

45 Telephonic interview, R Motala/K Hiralal, 17 January 2011; interview, Dr Motala/R Lundie, 13 September 2001; *Satyagraha In Pursuit of Truth*, April 2011.

46 Historical Papers Wits University, "Report of visit of Mr HJ Brown to Mr Billy Nair now on Robben Island Prison on Saturday Morning the 9 May 1967" (available at: [http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv\\_pdf/AD1844-C44-text.pdf](http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdf/AD1844-C44-text.pdf), as accessed on 3 September 2014).

own sense of agency, both personal and political. Their circumstances moulded their personal and political identities and in the process they emerged as more confident, determined and tenacious women. The wives served an important symbolic function: as stoic wives and “pillars of strength” exerting positive influence and as role models for their husbands. It was the women’s resolve and the courage of their convictions that provided their spouses with the will and determination to survive in prison.

### **Private and public “imprisonment”**

The everyday lives of the wives of political activists were highly regimented and rigidly controlled. Women lived in a perpetual state of “private and public ‘imprisonment’”. The incarceration, detention and banning of their spouses impacted on their marriages. Restrictions on one inevitably fell on the other and governed their personal lives as husband and wife. When Marie’s friends visited her at home, she was forced to move her husband to another room until after her guests left. When they dined at a restaurant they could do so only with each other and not with friends. The monotony of their lives was broken by bi-weekly visits to the cinema. According to Marie, “At least this allows us a break in our life there are times we go to see films that we would never see under ordinary circumstances. But we have little choice....”<sup>47</sup> When Monty’s banning orders were lifted temporarily in 1973, he applied for passports for himself and Marie to visit family in Ireland. However, both were denied passports. An irate Monty stated, “I know of no reason why my wife should be denied her privileges unless of course she is paying the price for marrying me”.<sup>48</sup> In another interview he stated, “The tragedy of it all was that my wife Marie, who had not been banned was compelled all the same to suffer a life of restrictions because of the restrictions on me....”<sup>49</sup>

Terese also felt the impact of banning orders. In an interview in 1985 she said: “... he (Sonny) cannot answer a knock on the door ... that would mean he is receiving a guest. He cannot answer the telephone ... he doesn’t exist. He could only see his doctor. When I used to get visitors, he had to adjourn. You never knew when they would pounce on you for breaking orders”.<sup>50</sup> She

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47 *Drum*, June 1968.

48 *Daily News*, 28 August 1973.

49 *Drum*, June 1968

50 Interview, T Venkatrathnam/K Hiaralal, 3 December 2010.

added, “Over the years we were constantly harassed by the Special Branch and Sonny was placed under house arrest and banned for 5 years. We could not find employment and had to rely on the goodwill of family and friends...”<sup>51</sup> Saras expressed similar sentiments, “This meant that if he was in my company, and my three children, he could be arrested. As a result I curtained my front entrance from wall to wall. Whenever there was a knock, my husband disappeared into the kitchen... Life became very tense, since his house arrest meant we were also under house arrest. Every weekend we remained at home while my brothers did the grocery and vegetable shopping”. Elsie too, was often harassed by the security police and taken in for questioning on Billy’s whereabouts and her home was raided on several occasions.

Constant police harassment, raids on the family home and police surveillance of their personal lives, not only stifled the wives’ own mobility but also created a sense of abnormality in their daily lives. Terese stated, “During this period of detention the Special Branch monitored all my movements, the telephone was tapped, mail tampered with, friends were warned not to associate with me, the house was under 24 hour surveillance”.<sup>52</sup> The women lived in a perpetual state of anxiety and uncertainty as they did not know when their spouse would be captured and detained, the status of his health, whether he was alive or dead, or when the police raids would happen. In 1970 when Sonny was captured by the police, Terese had no idea how long he would be detained. The police refused to divulge any information as Sonny was detained under the Terrorism Act, that is, detention without trial. This was the most dangerous period for many prisoners, as they had no contact with anyone but their interrogators. Detainees’ families were not given any details of their whereabouts. Terese recalls:

For the first 3 months of his detention, I did not see or hear from him. I thought he was killed by the Special Branch, because a number of people died in detention during this period. Fear did not come in to question – only anger.

Saras recalls her ordeal:<sup>53</sup>

There were many lonely nights when I used to sit up waiting for him, not knowing whether he was arrested or beaten up by the police. I was always tense and lived in fear not knowing who our real friends were.

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51 Interview, T Venkatrathnam/K Hiralal, 3 December 2010.

52 Interview, T Venkatrathnam/K Hiralal, 3 December 2010.

53 S Chetty, “The peoples’ man...”, *Unpublished Manuscript*.

Thus the wives perceived their everyday life as a continuum of their spouse's imprisonment. Whilst their spouses were imprisoned, in detention or served banning orders, the women's lives were inevitably and simultaneously regulated within the domestic and social sphere. Any attempt to create a normal family life for them and their children was impossible.

### **Social ostracism, stigmatisation and chronic loneliness**

All the women experienced “social ostracism and stigmatisation and suffered chronic loneliness”. This had serious implications for their health and sense of well-being. Their spouses' constant banning orders and imprisonment meant that the women were on their own most of the time. Furthermore, relatives and close friends were afraid to associate with politically active families who were often stigmatised because of their political affiliation and activities. Giacaman and Johnson report that in some communities an absentee husband can “reconfigure women's social identity...change gender and family relations”; when “wives are ... placed under the authority of their in-laws' “increasing restrictions” are placed on women's “movements, dress, and freedoms by family and community”.<sup>54</sup> Helen Codd adds that, “...while children may at times be viewed as ‘innocent’ and thus in need ... partners become stigmatised (to a greater degree) by their relationship with the inmate”.<sup>55</sup>

Marie, Rabia, Saras, Terese and Elsie found that people were either intimidated or warned by the police not to associate with their families. This meant that many wives became single parents amidst financial difficulties. When Sonny was arrested in 1971, “... my whole world turned upside down. I couldn't understand why he was being detained ... what is going to happen to me and my two children; how will I cope; depression set in...”.<sup>56</sup> For Saras, her husband's imprisonment was a “nightmare”. She explains, “People – family and friends – stayed away from us for fear of being arrested...” It was a stressful period in her life that gradually began to take a toll on her health. She

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54 R Giacaman and P Johnson, “Our life is prison...”, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 9(3), Fall 2013, p. 71.

55 J Breen, “Prisoners' families and the ripple effects of imprisonment”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 97(385), Spring 2008, p. 62.

56 *The Graphic*, 26 March 1971. Sonny was held under the Terrorism Act. According to Section 6 of the Act, no court could question the validity of any action, and no wife, no lawyer and no minister of religion could have access to a detainee. A person detained under this Act could thus simply vanish and no one could get any information as to his fate or whereabouts.

suffered from chronic headaches.<sup>57</sup> When Chota was imprisoned in the 1950s and 1960s, Rabia's relationship with some relatives and friends deteriorated. Some people apologetically told her, "... we can't come and see you because we are so scared".<sup>58</sup> Elsie experienced similar social ostracism but stated, "You don't blame them because you may get arrested for no reason at all".<sup>59</sup> Whilst the nature of banning orders, detention and imprisonment on Robben Island differed from spouse to spouse, all the wives experienced high levels of stress, anxiety, and social ostracism in the absence of their spouses. Their narratives also highlight how these women individually coped in trying to hold the family together. In many ways they tried to maintain sanity amidst an insane political environment.

### **Domestic space acquiring a new political meaning**

The wives also allowed their homes to be centres for political work. The home or the "domestic space acquired a new political meaning". Stephen Legg has shown how, during the anticolonial struggle, women in Delhi "helped to politicise the home and assert agency ... transforming previous duties into new techniques of protest such as spinning, cooking, accommodating, clothing and singing".<sup>60</sup> According to Haasbroek, their homes became an "oasis for struggle associates",<sup>61</sup> a meeting place for political activists, refugees and prisoners. Important planning sessions were held to mobilise consumer boycotts, marches and rallies. The wives provided hot meals, shelter to escaped prisoners, refugees and unwavering moral support to their spouses and fellow comrades. For example, many political icons such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu frequented the home of Rabia Motala. During the late 1980s Rabia was involved in UDF structures and her home was the venue for many political meetings. For Saras her "first introduction to underground activity by the ...ANC" and being a political wife occurred when she was six months pregnant with her first child:<sup>62</sup>

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57 S Chetty, "The peoples' man...", *Unpublished Manuscript*.

58 N Naidoo (Personal Collection), telephonic interview, R Motala/K Hiralal, 17 January 2011.

59 South African History Online, "Elsie Nair".

60 S Legg, "Gendered politics and nationalised homes: Women and the anti-colonial struggle in Delhi, 1930-1947", *Gender, Place and Culture*, 10(1), 2003, p. 23.

61 H Haasbroek, "An absolute pillar of strength for her husband and the struggle" ..., *New Contree*, 65, December 2012, p. 100.

62 S Chetty, "The peoples' man...", *Unpublished Manuscript*.

My husband woke me up about 2 a.m. to prepare coffee for some comrades. About three, people arrived, dressed in army overcoats and balaclavas. I made the coffee while some of our comrades, who had arrived, chatted with our early morning visitors. At that time I paid no attention to them, little knowing that our visitors were the top African National Congress leaders; they were working underground, hiding from the security. Ted was most secretive about the movements of our comrades. Seeing the happiness and glow shining out of my husband's face, I vowed to stand by him in his struggle for freedom.

These narratives reveal the different ways in which the wives of political activists contributed to the anti-apartheid struggle as some of their activism operated behind the scenes. Some wives did not necessarily adopt conventional modes of resistance – public protests, a rally, marches, public meetings, speeches, slogans, banners, or picketing – but used their domestic space as a platform for activist work.

### **Absentee husband**

Wives suffered from the “absentee husband syndrome” because their spouses spent much of their time working clandestinely in underground structures or in prison. This altered family dynamics in terms of changing gender roles and relations. It increased the wife's status and autonomy within the home and had multiple effects at all levels of family life.

Wives had to adopt multiple roles – mother, wife and father – and multi-task in rearing a young family and finding employment. Marie, Terese, Saras, Elsie and Rabia had to deal with their husbands' long absences. Their spouses were the main breadwinners and their imprisonment meant the loss of a stable income and created a financial crisis. This placed wives in a very vulnerable and disadvantaged position. They were forced into employment, at times taking on two jobs, just to sustain the household and personal expenses such as rent, legal fees, food, clothing and the cost of prison visits. Terese found it challenging. When Sonny was detained in 1971, she was pregnant with her third child, and his detention led to the neglect of the family business, a butcher store, their sole livelihood. She could not rely on family and friends as they had “their own problems”.<sup>63</sup> In an interview with the *Daily News* in March 1971, she stated: “Who will look after my home,

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63 Interview, T Venkatrathnam/K Hiralal, 3 December 2010.

my children and the butchery?”<sup>64</sup> After giving birth to her third child, Nolan, she found employment with their family attorney, Navi Pillay. For Saras, Ted’s detention and imprisonment was a real “nightmare”, as she had a young family. Her parents and a few friends helped with rent money and groceries. She even contacted community organisations, like the Pretoria Red Cross for assistance with groceries, to support herself and her three children. She found her role as a young mother, wife and breadwinner increasingly difficult. Her children were robbed of a normal childhood as circumstances forced them to take on adult roles. She recalled:<sup>65</sup>

My three children grew up in a political environment. People - family and friends - stayed away from us for fear of being arrested. My children grew up without any pocket allowance. They helped me with household chores whilst I was teaching and spent their time in libraries. My daughter, Kamy, used to take care of her brother and sister. When she was six years old, in grade one, she used to take the flat key in her school blazer to St Anthony’s School. Jessie used to be left at a crèche where Kamy used to collect her and then see to the cleaning of the flat until I came home from school. She used to learn to cook by putting the dhol (lentils) to boil on the stove. It was a full-time job for me - seeing to the preparation of meals, household chores, and then late at night doing my school preparation for the next day.

Elsie took on two jobs to sustain the family income. She worked during the day as a supervisor in a clothing factory and at night from 6pm to 11pm in a take-away restaurant to save money to visit Billy annually on Robben Island. She also supplemented the family income with private work such as stitching clothing and wedding dresses. According to Billy, “You got not a cent while I was in... If it were not for the wife supplementing our rent and this, that the other, no we would not have been able to manage...”<sup>66</sup> Elsie regularly sent Billy five pounds to buy cigarettes and sweets, the few luxuries he was allowed in prison.<sup>67</sup>

The task of raising a young family without a husband was perhaps the most challenging for Marie, Saras, Terese and Rabia. Wives became single parents, tasked with protecting and nurturing their children in a political environment. Children often witnessed raids at home and this was a traumatic experience for some. Kreesan Naicker, son of Monty and Marie Naicker, recalls that his mother was fiercely protective of her children during these challenging times.

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<sup>64</sup> *Daily News*, 4 March 1971.

<sup>65</sup> S Chetty, “The peoples’ man...”, *Unpublished Manuscript*.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, B Nair/D Shongwe, 12 July 2002, p. 30.

<sup>67</sup> South African History Online, “Elsie Nair”.

He was only 13 years old when this incident occurred:<sup>68</sup>

She was upset ... but my mom protected me ... I remember one time when they took him (Monty)... During the Treason Trial ... they (Special Branch) came about 4 o' clock in the morning ... and the first thing she did she came into my room ... and she held me ... because she did not want me to see what was happening ... they came to our house ... to my bedroom ... looking for documents...

Terese describes the emotional toll on her and the children:<sup>69</sup>

She (Zinaida) is not well and is pining for her father. She wants to know where her daddy has gone to. She refuses to eat or play... How can I possibly explain to her about her father's whereabouts? The sight of her daddy's clothes is enough to send her into fitful cries for him. It is becoming too much for me.

When Ted was released from prison on 18 September 1960, Saras describes the reaction of her two young children when they saw their father for the first time:<sup>70</sup>

My son was about three years old and my daughter six months when they saw their dad and screamed in fright at the sight of his face which was covered with his moustache and beard. My son, Vijay, who was dressed in a green corduroy bib pants and a red shirt (second hand), burst out crying when he was hugged and kissed by his Dad. It took time to convince him that the bearded man was really his Dad.

## **Prison visits**

Prison visits to Robben Island in Cape Town or to prison cells were emotionally draining and traumatic experiences for the wives. They share similar trajectories of pain, humiliation, agony and hardships experienced by families of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. McEnvoy and Giacaman and Johnson have shown that it was not the “centrality of the visit” or the “financial and emotional costs” but the process of acquiring permits, “fear of obstacles at checkpoints”, and the “humiliating search at prisons”,<sup>71</sup> that “pervades the daily lives of women of political prisoners”.<sup>72</sup> It was an “ordeal

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68 Interview, K Naicker/K Hiralal, 11 December 2010.

69 *Daily News*, 4 March 1971.

70 S Chetty, “The peoples' man...”, *Unpublished Manuscript*.

71 R Giacaman and P Johnson, “Our life is prison...”, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 9(3), Fall 2013, p. 61.

72 R Giacaman and P Johnson, “Our life is prison...”, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 9(3), Fall 2013, p. 62.

that structured and haunted daily life”.<sup>73</sup> The narratives in this study reveal that wives had to painstakingly manoeuvre around an iron-clad bureaucratic regime to process permits seeking special permission from the state to visit their spouses. Visits were both costly and painful. Preparations for the visit involved weeks of planning. Funds had to be raised and the children had to be left in the care of family and friends. Moreover, the treatment meted out to the families of political prisoners did little to alleviate the wives’ stress. When Sonny was imprisoned on Robben Island, Terese would make two to three visits a year, finances permitting. She was allowed to visit him for only 30 minutes a month. She would fly to Cape Town and had to make a formal application for a visiting permit two months in advance. She would then board a ferry to Robben Island. The children were left in the care of an “ayah” (grandmother) who was Terese’s companion and confidant during those lonely days and nights. Terese recalls these years:<sup>74</sup>

Visits to Robben Island were very traumatic. We (that is the wives of various prisoners) were not allowed to sit on the top deck of the ferry because this was reserved for the warders and their families. We were herded down very steep steps into the hold which was filthy and stinky. This made us violently sick. I had many arguments with the warders who threatened to lock me up for refusing to comply with the rules and arguing with them. Eventually they relented and I was warned not to be so troublesome....

Terese’s experience not only highlights her “traumatic” experience but the humiliation and indignity that the families of political prisoners endured. Her treatment by prison officials shows the inhumane nature of apartheid security personnel in violating her basic human rights and dignity. For Saras, visiting her husband in prison was stressful. She recalls when he was in Modderbee prison in Johannesburg:<sup>75</sup>

I shall never forget the stress I went through to visit my husband... On my first visit I was given a lift by a comrade’s wife from Durban, it was about eleven p.m. at night... It was bitterly cold as I struggled to keep myself warm. When we reached the prison we were told to get a visiting permit from Springs. There were other wives and families who were stranded without transport; we offered a lift to a few. ... At Modderbee I deposited some money into my husband’s account, and a parcel of warm clothes. I was overjoyed to see him, although he was behind a thick glass window, we had to converse via a telephone. It was agony not touching him.

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73 R Giacaman and P Johnson, “Our life is prison...”, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 9(3), Fall 2013, p. 62.

74 Interview, T Venkatrathnam/K Hiralal, 3 December 2010.

75 S Chetty, “The peoples’ man...”, *Unpublished Manuscript*.

Elsie too, saved money and visited Billy each year. She recalls that the prison authorities were “strict. There were gates, you’ll find them all lined up, you can’t talk to them, you can just say ‘hello, how is everything?’ but no shaking hands, nothing... We didn’t worry about it because at least you’re seeing the person you married”.<sup>76</sup>

The narratives highlight the bittersweet nature of prison visits, with wives expressing both pain and happiness. Terese, Saras, and Elsie’s experiences also highlight the securitisation procedures of prison visits: barbed wires, huge gates, restrictions on communicating freely, telephonic communication, the constant presence of security officials and limits on public displays of affection. Thus women became captives within the prison surroundings. For Elsie, there was “no shaking hands, nothing...”<sup>77</sup> for Saras, it was “agony not touching him (Ted)”.<sup>78</sup> Wives were forced to endure this form of humiliation, and violations of their dignity and basic human rights. However, they were willing to make these sacrifices because they had no other choice: Endure humiliation or no visit.

## **Conclusion**

In many ways the wives of political activists were the political “widows” of the anti-apartheid struggle given the long absences of their spouses in their fight for a free and democratic South Africa. The wives bore the brunt of the struggle: held families together amidst an absentee husband, developed personal and political agency and endured social ostracism and stigmatisation. They should thus be seen as the survivors, the active agents and “pillars of strength” to the nationalistic discourse on the liberation struggle. At Elsie Nair’s funeral in 2011, fellow comrade, Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, paid tribute capturing the essence of the stoic support wives gave their spouses: “She never gave up on Muna (Billy Nair) despite his many years in jail, detention in the underground... She and hundreds of other wives and partners of political activists and leaders are the unsung heroines of the struggle. They supported their husbands even when the situation looked bleak”.<sup>79</sup> The wives’ narratives in this study highlight how women negotiated both the personal and public

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76 South African History Online, “Elsie Nair”.

77 South African History Online, “Elsie Nair”.

78 S Chetty, “The peoples’ man...”, *Unpublished Manuscript*.

79 S Govender, “Elsie Nair”, *The Subry Govender Column*, 18 February 2011 (available at: <http://subrygovender.blogspot.com/2011/02/elsie-nair.html>, as accessed on 4 September 2014).

spheres amidst political chaos in Natal. This study serves as a call for future research on regional histories to be more interrogative of gender, particularly in the context of family dynamics, gender roles and gender relations. It is only within this conceptual framework that national narratives can reflect the holistic histories of their people.