

## THE WOES OF MAHATMA: A PERSPECTIVE ON GANDHI'S ROLE AS A FATHER TO HARILAL

**Ruchita Machal**

Assistant Professor (Adhoc)

Department of English

Miranda House, University of Delhi

New Delhi, India

Mahatma Gandhi has been under the watchful eye of the world for almost a hundred years. From his leadership over a few hundred men and women in South Africa till his command on the freedom struggle for millions in India, there have been countless followers who revered his ideologies, and practised his methods even after his demise in 1948. It has been a part of Gandhi's charisma that he has attracted many admirers, a phenomenon unmatched by any in the world. One could even say that the West has finally succumbed to the charm of the 'naked fakir' in the East. However, there has been some biting criticism and scathing comments along his way. Nevertheless, the world has not forgotten him; even after decades, he inspires millions of biographers, historians, and young researchers as a topic of study.

The pre-independent India saw Gandhi as the face of nationalism, as a positive soul-force that changed the face of a nation, thereby moving the world with his strict idealism. However, with the beginning of liberalisation, the world has given way to the Nehruvians who believe in science and development. For this brand of new generation Gandhi has been reduced to a "mnemonic of honesty, a passive icon, at best a commemorative stamp."<sup>1</sup> As Gandhi's life has been an open book for the world; *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* validates his belief that he never distinguished his personal life from political, thereby submitting himself to worldwide criticism and scrutiny. For many years critics have believed that Gandhi's self critique may be commendable but it is inadequate, that he may not have been a shrewd critic of himself. Facets of his life exist in numerous forms, be it the letters he wrote to his peers and loved ones, or the articles he wrote for his periodicals – his life has been read and interpreted by researchers and historians alike. Recent studies are aligning towards a modernist evaluation, such as attuning a psychological, sociological, or feminist reading of his life. These literary works posit a gradual change in Gandhian studies by hypothesizing a curiously nuanced study that delegitimizes Gandhi's force, and gives a new dimension to his public figure. One such interpretation is also offered in this paper that proposes to unravel the personal aspect of Gandhi's life exploring the distraught nature of his relationship with his son, Harilal which was unworthy of praise and glory.

Erik H. Erikson in his widely acclaimed book *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* writes, "As to the Mahatma's private life all we can say is that here was a man who both lived and wondered aloud."<sup>2</sup> Gandhi was transparent on the issues of his body and his "experiments with truth". Oddly enough his private life does not seem to be as transparent as he

<sup>1</sup> Shiv Visvanathan, "The Necessity of Harilal", *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Autumn 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Carol Becker. "Gandhi's Body and Further Representations of War and Peace, *Art Journal*, Vol 65, No. 4, 2006

claims it to be – he may have shared his life story through his evidently public Autobiography, but his inner self remains to be mystery, his interiority many believe he kept to himself. As noted by Carol Becker, “He did not turn his inner self out...he did try to fuse the private and the public, and to focus all his attention on the pursuit of truth and the liberation from British rule. He did not attempt to bring his personal life into the public, but rather to bring the public into his private existence. But he knew he must nonetheless always protect the inner voice that directed him, which he believed could best be heard in silence.”<sup>3</sup> This observation made by Becker firmly proves that Gandhi’s own critique of self was inadequate since he kept his true self away from the limelight. Such observations are not unfounded. Mahadev Desai, Gandhi’s personal secretary and his long time friend and companion kept a diary in which herecorded Gandhi’s daily routine. This meticulous journal gave rare insight which was used by the former’s son, Narayan Desaito write a biography on his father in *The Fire and the Rose* and author the pioneering work on Mahatma in *My Life My Message*.<sup>4</sup> This journal maintained with extreme precision does not find a noteworthy mention of Mahatma Gandhi’s eldest son Harilal Gandhi. Often before Harilal’s stay at the ashram, a long correspondence of letters would precede that included requests like smoking in the ashram surroundings. Such requests are not recorded in Mahadev’s diary. The reasons for this careful omission are best known to Gandhi; however, one can make a well placed speculation that Gandhi’s personal life and his public image were not synonymous.

Harilal Gandhi was born to his parents when they were just nineteen. Even though Gandhi may have disapproved of Harilal’s marriage to Gulab on account his son’s adolescent age, the former reconciled with his emotions and tried to raise the best pupil in Harilal. Chandulal Bhagubhai Dalal’s monumental research work on the life of Harilal Gandhi flaunts the author’s meticulous work as a historiographer. The biography provides a detailed appendix that includes most letters sent as a reply to Harilal’s letters by Gandhi<sup>5</sup>. Ramachandra Gandhi in his ‘Foreword’ to *Harilal Gandhi: A Life* writes, “A clash of fundamentalisms seems to me to characterise the conflict between father and son regarding many matters. Harilal gave himself to alcohol, even as Gandhi gave himself up to Ramnama. The son suffered privations; the father won martyrdom and, possibly, moksha.”<sup>6</sup> Harilal had a strange dysfunctional relationship with his father. Harilal never knew a father, he always found a mahatma in his place who was atoning for the greater good. In Gandhi’s quest to become a greater and a better person, it was Harilal who possibly lost a parent. He lived under his father’s shadow. At some point in his adolescent life, he wanted to be a great barrister like his father. Gandhi on the other hand had begun his experiments. While living on the Tolstoy Farm Gandhi took the opportunity to teach the children present in the neighbourhood. By this time Gandhi had also begun to despise the modern day education system that did not emphasize on the moral growth of the young minds. Along with

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> *The Fire and the Rose* is the biography of Mahadev Desai, published in 1995, is a record of Desai’s lifelong service to Mahatma Gandhi. In the Preface by Rajmohan Gandhi, he writes, “His [Mahadev’s] diaries recorded Gandhi’s doings, conversations, political parleys, ethical dilemmas...waking up before Gandhi in pre-dawn darkness, and going to sleep long after his Master, Desai lived Gandhi’s day thrice over - first in an attempt to anticipate it, next in spending it alongside Gandhi, and finally in recording it into his diary.”

*My Life My Message*, published originally in Gujrati is a four volume biography on the life of M.K. Gandhi and his journey to sainthood

<sup>5</sup> Harilal’s letters have been preserved by Neelam Parikh, his granddaughter available in Suhrud’s translation of Dalal’s research work on Harilal’s life

<sup>6</sup> Chandulal Bhagubhai Dalal, *Harilal Gandhi: A Life*, translated from Gujrati by Tridip Suhrud, Orient Longman, Delhi, 2007, page ix

other children present on the premises, his children, too, were kept away from formal education. This experiment of Gandhi aimed at imparting value based education to his pupils. Harilal could not withstand Gandhi's experiments as he began to grow anxious. Harilal was displeased when his father decided to send a distant cousin to England to study law. His discontentment was rarely noticed by Gandhi.

Harilal's life story echoes notes of tragedy. He was his father's son in every way. He was fondly addressed as "young Gandhi" when his father was commencing their first satyagrahi fight. The irony of Harilal's life lies in his wish to be his father's son. The enmity between father and son was sown over the choice of the prospective recipient of scholarship to England for the study of law meted out first to Chhaganlal Gandhi and later to Sorabji Adajania. It was Harilal's ardent desire to become a barrister like his father, but he was never encouraged; instead he was sent to settle matters in Phoenix, South Africa. Gandhi may not have intentionally usurped his son's future, he may have deemed his son suitable because of his potential as satyagrahi, but his actions appeared otherwise to Harilal. In one of the letters, the Mahatma writes, "he is a brave boy in one sense, he makes no secret of his vice and his rebellion is an open rebellion." Gandhi never doubted his son's abilities and Harilal never stopped rebelling against his father. His conduct itself became a sign of rebellion. Out of all of Gandhi's sons and followers, Harilal's staunch criticism validates that it is necessary and also inevitable to have fundamental disagreement with Gandhi's ideas and philosophies.

Harilal's semi-public letter<sup>7</sup> to his father presents the other side of Gandhi's experiments. He writes, "For ten years now I have been crying and pleading with you [...] you have never considered my sentiments. I believe that you have always used us as weapons [...] you have dealt with us just as a ringmaster in a circus treats animals in his charge. The ringmaster may believe that he is ridding the animals of their beastly character because he has welfare of animals in his heart [...] *you have oppressed us in a civilised way.*"<sup>8</sup> The bitter anguish in Harilal's words is the first public act of defiance against Gandhi's authoritarian principles. A major fact that goes unnoticed is that this semi-public letter is the only letter which is available to the reading audiences without prejudice. Harilal wrote few letters, most of the replies that Gandhi wrote to him are available. But the letters that Harilal wrote to his father have been destroyed; this was done under his father's command. There are instances that substantiate this claim. In one of his letters, Gandhi wrote to Harilal: "And hence, *contrary to my usual practice, I am preserving your letter* so that, when you have awakened, you may see the insolence of your letter and weep over it and laugh at your folly."<sup>9</sup> In another letter, Gandhi wrote to Devdas Gandhi referring to Harilal: "After I had torn up the letter it occurred to me that probably you had not come across it, so I decided to send you the pieces."<sup>10</sup> This deliberate omission of Harilal from Gandhi's life directs towards the Mahatma's failure as a father to his family.

As discussed earlier in Mahadev Desai's journal, the intent to keep Harilal out suggests Gandhi's apprehension in dealing with matters related to Harilal as it was a matter which grievously pained him. There are numerous instances of Gandhi publicly ousting any affiliations

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 127. Harilal Gandhi published a letter titled "My Open Letter to My Father M.K. Gandhi (Bar-at-Law)" in the form of a booklet which was circulated amongst family and friends. Gandhi received the letter when he reached Shantiniketan on 31 March 1915

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, italics added

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Gandhi wrote this letter to Harilal from prison on 27 April 1932. A fragment of the letter is available in the Translator's Appendix 1, page 197. Italics added

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, page xiv

with Harilal. During Harilal's short lived conversion to Islam, Gandhi released a public statement in 1936 under the title, "To My Numerous Muslim Friends" in which he writes, "Everyone who knows my son Harilal, knows that he has been for years addicted to the drink evil and has been in the habit of visiting houses of ill-fame...he remains the same wreck that he was before."<sup>11</sup> In another instance, on 18 August 1940, Gandhi released a statement in his weekly journal Harijan reflecting on the discordance in his relationship with his son: "I regard the birth of a bad son to me as a result of my evil past whether of this life or previous [...] *My eldest son was the direct victim of my experiments* – radical changes in my life – and so he cannot forget what he regards as my blunders."<sup>12</sup> Harilal's life had the markings of a failure; he repeatedly tried to do better at various vocations, but each time he tried, he was unsuccessful. At last Gandhi may have accepted his faults in raising his children under strict discipline; no sooner Harilal experienced a similar fate. After finally returning to India to live a marital life, his wife Gulab succumbed to influenza in 1918 thereby separating Harilal from his dear children who were sent to live under Ba's care at ashram.

Harilal's tragic life has been the antecedent of several fictionalized works of art. Dinkar Joshi's Prakash no Padchyyo (1988) presents Harilal as a victim to his father's subservience. The novel later became inspiration to Feroz Khan's critically acclaimed play Mahatma Versus Gandhi. Neelam Parikh's short biography Gandhiji's Lost Jewel (1998) is yet another attempt at restoring the honour lost to her grandfather because of his open rebellion against the Mahatma. It is extraordinary that Gandhi who merged his private and public life would remain silent on the biggest failure of his life. Harilal was that part of Gandhi's life that ill-fitted the grand scheme of his supreme ideals. His constant embarrassment to the family tantalized attention from the world that made their differences public. This son of his was a testimony of all the follies and failings that Gandhi had in his early years; a painful reminder that Gandhi wished to negate, or probably forget. At last the son remained a shadow to his father's light.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, page 221-222

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, page 223. Italics added