Introduction

I.1 The Rise and Fall of Gandhian Passive Resistance

The story begins, but does not end, with the man who would eventually be known as the Mahatma. It was in his foundational treatise composed in 1909, *Hind Swaraj*, that Mohandas Gandhi introduced the idea of passive resistance to India.[1] In my telling, passive resistance will have only tangential relations with the political movement that Gandhi inspired and mobilized. Instead, it becomes a term for art and the aesthetic exchange that leaves one open and vulnerable to an external force. This runs counter to Gandhi's intent and indeed, he would come to abandon the phrase altogether for the weakness he believed it conveyed.

Gandhi's treatise remains an influential rallying cry for passive resistance and lays some theoretical ground for its recovery. When the British immediately banned the book for advocating "dangerous thought" (Suhrud, 72), Gandhi published its translation, wryly explaining: "I thought it was due to my English friends that they should know its contents" (*Hind Swaraj*, 16). This was the only work Gandhi would translate into English himself; his plan, he said, was to "'use the British race'" to transmit "his 'mighty message of *ahimsa*' [or non-violence] to the rest of the world" (Parel, xiii).[2] In the twenty brief chapters of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi presents his principles for India's moral and spiritual victory over the "evil" forces of modern civilization, six years before his return to his native country; he would spend the rest of his life campaigning on behalf of non-violent protest and solidarity between castes and religions.

[1] Gandhi misremembers this date as 1908 in the opening, "A Word of Explanation," to the English translation (16). See Parel, xiv.

[2] Gandhi suggested that *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* was a fairly free translation from the Gujarati original. *Swaraj* refers to self-rule *and* self-government, incorporating the two ideals of personal self-rule in addition to political self-rule. *Satyagraha*, eventually his preferred term, brings both ideas into play and stands against the aesthetic effects that I explore in these pages.

Hind Swaraj is staged as a conversation between a "Reader" who asks a series of questions and an "Editor" who provides long, detailed responses. The dialogue form is pedagogic, moral, and spiritual, but Gandhi places it within a journalistic frame as a conversation between Reader and Editor emphasizing communication, logical argumentation, and sharpened interpretative skills. Rhetorical training of this kind presented dangers, no doubt, to the British, but most threatening for the colonial authority in 1909 was Gandhi's call for passive resistance. When the independence-minded Reader, impatient to overthrow the British, argues that "brute force" (70) should be met with brute force, the Editor counsels patience, asking the Reader not to "blame the English. They rather deserve our sympathy" (38), and introduces the antithesis to violence, the idea of "truth-force" or "soul-force" that will eventually become the pillar of Gandhian philosophy as *satyagraha*. When the Reader demands more information about the meaning of passive resistance, the Editor defines it as "a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms . . . It involves sacrifice of self" (79).[3]

Ten years later, Gandhi would be propelled into Indian nationalist politics following the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, and Britain's subsequent whitewashing of General Dyer's order to fire on a large and unarmed crowd. The prophet of cooperation would take up the path of non-violent non-cooperation in 1920. A master political strategist, Gandhi made his body the most potent exemplar of his method as he was beaten and imprisoned, as he fasted, and as he walked across the countryside on countless protest marches: "his tiny physical frame grew to fill an immense imaginative space, becoming the screen on which the misdemeanours of the entire British empire were shamingly projected" (Khilnani, 144). Gandhi promoted the potency of the passive, vulnerable, and wasting body as India's greatest weapon against the authority of the Raj through his own example and through his speeches, essays, and highly visible protests. Only through such willingness to suffer, to accept the blows of an oppressive regime and therefore resist its moral authority, would his movement prevail, he argued.

The phrase passive resistance, however, began to fade from Gandhi's lexicon, even as he continued to urge submission and suffering as the

[3] Leo Tolstoy, agreeing with Gandhi, conveyed his support in a letter: "that which is called 'passive resistance' . . . is in reality nothing else than the teaching of love uncorrupted by false interpretations" (September 7, 1910, Bari 153). Passive resistance, the term that still conjures figures such as Tolstoy and Thoreau, nevertheless became most associated – and continues to be associated – with Gandhi's campaign for Indian *swaraj*.

primary weapon against injustice. *Hind Swaraj* dedicates a chapter to the necessity of passive resistance, yet even before the Amritsar massacre, and his launching of the Non-Cooperation Movement the following year, Gandhi had begun to express a growing aversion to the yoking of passivity and resistance, proclaiming instead his devotion to the idea of *satyagraha*, "which differs from passive resistance as North Pole from South," he now avowed (*CWMG*, Vol. XVII, 152). Once used as a synonym for passive resistance, *satyagraha* became its opposite. He reiterated this claim in his autobiography and elsewhere, characterizing passive resistance as an expression of "hatred" that would lead to violence (*Autobiography*, 318). Gandhi also acknowledged a motivating concern about language: "As the struggle advanced, the phrase 'passive resistance' gave rise to confusion and it appeared shameful to permit this great struggle to be known only by an English name" (quoted in Khilnani, 139). Passive resistance was thus retired, now signifying for Gandhi weakness, anger, violence, the colonial imposition of the English language, and mere reaction to an external force. *Satyagraha*, rather, springing from within, would stand for a pure source of spiritual and moral strength with which to counter injustice. From 1917 until his death in 1948, Gandhi reiterated what had become his catchphrase for dismissing passive resistance, the method that nevertheless clings to his name. It was, he repeated, the weapon of the weak, and weakness led to violence.

It isn't, perhaps, so surprising a rejection of the concept that once bound him to visionaries he admired.[4] Gandhi was first a strategist and grounding his movement in concepts drawn from Indian tradition and in an Indian language offered a sounder platform from which to convince and educate a broad swath of the population. One might imagine other reasons to distance a moral and political movement from any suggestion of passivity, such as the centrality of passivity to orientalizing discourse which borrows from the ideologies of the feminine to disempower colonial, or formerly colonial, subjects. Passive resistance, as a phrase in English that veers uncomfortably close to the terms set by colonial ideology, raises a number of red flags that signal a full spectrum of moral weakness, from political quietism to a propensity for violence. Even when complicating any binary understanding of colonial logic in the ways that Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Ashis Nandy, and others have proposed, passivity remains a

[4] Such as Thoreau and Tolstoy, but also Edward Carpenter. See Judith M. Brown and Anthony Parel introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi* and Vinay Lal's essay on the influence of Western thinkers on Gandhi's philosophy, "Gandhi's West, the West's Gandhi."

suspect category that seems all too neatly aligned with the passive subject of ideology.

And yet, this book argues, passive resistance provides a valuable approach to aesthetic production during Gandhi's time. In its original articulation in *Hind Swaraj*, passive resistance targeted the forces of modernity that Gandhi saw as India's greatest threat, especially in the form of mechanized industry and the cities to which industrialization gave rise. Gandhi rejected Western civilization in all its guises including consumer goods, transportation systems, and factories with their exploitative labor practices, believing that these social ills would prohibit the return to India's earlier and "pristine" state (93) and the integrity of its moral center. But not everyone agreed with this sweeping condemnation. Many public figures, such as Rabindranath Tagore, advocated for a more cosmopolitan outlook that welcomed difference rather than turning toward an illusory past. Modernity, after all, could signal greater communication across cultures, fuel artistic exchange, and spur aesthetic experimentation, contributing to a world-wide modernism. The energy of the anticolonial movement fed new artistic work that didn't fear the new, and instead pressed into its creative possibilities.[5]

Passive resistance belongs not in the political arena but in the realm of aesthetics where the purity Gandhi demanded holds no value; rather, the giving over or surrender to something other is not a disqualifying attribute, but instead creates the ground of artistic invention. Unlike *satyagraha*, which demanded intense activity founded on a principle of absolute truth, the aesthetic – always infected by the passivity that Gandhi rejected – could neither be pure nor bound to any singular truth or prescribed morality. While truth-force and non-violence in Gandhian philosophy were meant to neutralize the "evil" forces of modern civilization and found their appropriate place in political, social, and cultural spheres, the experimental method of resistance, if shifted to the aesthetic sphere, enables the complex, impure, and morally uncertain language of art. Passive resistance names a powerful aesthetic principle that is born of the contradictions between passivity and resistance at a moment when modernity was fiercely contested, both by Gandhi *and* by British efforts to maintain colonial rule, thereby denying India any claim to modernity.

[5] Numerous studies explore Indian modernism: see, for example, Laetitia Zecchini's *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India*; Geeta Kapur's *When Was Modernism*; Partha Mitter's *The Triumph of Modernism*; and Amit Chaudhuri's *Clearing a Space*.

With suffering at its root (from the past-participle of Latin *pati*, meaning to suffer, endure, or undergo), passivity connects human experience (from the same root leaps passion) through shared vulnerability. Even while passivity remains a suspect condition, through it the self might be radically reimagined as object, as collective, as neutered, and as vacated of ego. And a refigured self might provide the necessary grounds for a reinvented culture, one not propelled by violence. Even resistance, in etymological terms, reaches actively beyond activity. From the Latin *resistentia*, and from the verb *resistere,* it means not to push, but instead to hold back. From the knowledge of shared suffering, vulnerability, and this holding back, an ethos of compassion and an ethical relation connecting artist and audience become possible. The phrase passive resistance, then, holds in tense relation a doing nothing and a doing something in the form of a disciplined holding back, aptly describing artistic practice itself. The difficulty embedded in the phrase, from its seeming internal contradiction (the seemingly passive and the seemingly active) to the troubling category of passivity itself, transforms in artistic expression, where its dynamism, ambivalence, and receptivity enable art's capacity to create new forms of meaning and to forge connections founded on a shared vulnerability that fell outside the goals of Gandhi's campaign.

The historical Gandhi functions here then as a point of origin and inspiration for thinking more broadly about art and the idea of India than his nationalist politics narrowly allow. While "Gandhian fiction," or literature that incorporates Gandhian philosophy into narrative form has received critical attention, I turn away from the fiction that is spurred by these politics and the dream of an independent India and instead read those works engaged in ways of being that Gandhi disavowed. That is to say, Gandhi as "father of the nation" does not remain central to my project, unlike Snehal Shingavi's *The Mahatma Misunderstood* that brilliantly reads Gandhi in relation to the literary nationalism of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly the strategic deployment and "critical misreading" of his message, often in the form of an ambivalent "double gesture of critique and collaboration" (4).

The works I consider, by contrast, gaze away from the national stage and its political activism altogether, including those by Rabindranath Tagore, R. K. Narayan, Amrita Sher-Gil, Ahmed Ali, G. V. Desani, Virginia Woolf,[6] and Le Corbusier all of whom, in distinct ways, pursued

[6] Of course, these figures were often very much engaged in political debate and had a great deal to say about the state of the nation. Tagore famously advocated an internationalism that rejected many of

the idea of India as home, an intellectual problem, a fantasy, the source of vital artistic legacies, and a prompt for exploring the artistic potential of passive resistance. This "idea of India" should not be confused with Sunil Khilnani's investigation of the political history and ideological formation of India as a nation in his book of that title. Rather, I'm interested in the ways that India appears as a rich and unpredictable site for the aesthetic experiments that emerged at the intersection of the English language, colonialism, colonial resistance, and modernist ambition. Nationalist formulations are unavoidable, but India understood solely according to a history of nation-making or through national allegory remains too limited in scope, too coherent, and too focused on activities that lead toward a singular goal. The story that has been regularly corroborated in critical studies, as Amit Chaudhuri agrees, is "a history of the nation" that has consequently "subsumed" other histories (*Clearing a Space*, 27). What gets lost or obscured? What might a weakly configured India make available, unbound from the battle for independence? In *Modernism and the Idea of India*, India is at once passive, malleable, fluid, contradictory, and resistant to the overdetermination of categorical thinking. In other words, the weakness Gandhi opposed in his rejection of passive resistance offers theoretical possibilities that challenge habitual perceptions of the nation itself.[7]

I.2 Passivists, Dreamers, Non-players

The idea of the "non-player" usefully redefines passivity in relation to resistance. I'm referring to Ashis Nandy's formulation for a position that falls outside the "game" of British control and contests the ways the imperial subject has been historically understood within the conventional structures of the Enlightenment. Nandy imagines instead a non-position, what he calls the position of non-player, who is situated outside those

the tactics of the nationalist movement; Woolf's essays made clear her antipathy toward Britain's continued imperial grip; Ali was known for his Marxist affiliations and his work with activist writers' networks, Amrita Sher-Gil counted Jawaharlal Nehru among her friends, and so on. It is not their political commentary that interests me here, however, but their individual works that develop unexpected modernist vocabularies far removed from the high-velocity clichés of the avant-garde.

[7] In "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism," Paul St. Amour claims the passing of strength (and its related terms) and asserts weakness as a more ethical critical position. Like passivity, weakness "sits at the center of a dense array of slurs by which marginal subjects have been kept marginal" (xx), and therefore is located in punishing proximity to power. His essay, following the insights made available by feminism, queer theory and disability theory, invites readings of weakness as a generative condition.

structures altogether. The non-player is a non-participant in the reigning abstractions, such as the West and its notions of freedom, human rights, universalism, and even dissent that maintain the hierarchies of West and non-West. Rather than play according to the rules of colonial power and the epistemologies that support it, Gandhi advocates non-cooperation, which as Nandy writes, "stresses that the aim of the oppressed should be, not to become a first-class citizen in the world of oppression instead of a second- or third-class one, but to build an alternative world where he can hope to win back his humanity. He thus becomes a non-player for his existing system – one who plays another game" altogether (*Traditions*, 34).

While outside Gandhi's sphere of interest, the arts present such an opportunity by unsettling value systems and presenting alternative experience, unmoored from expectation and ideological norms. Political strategists like Gandhi might even have something to learn from the ways artists imagine the complexity of experience: "Gandhi, more than anyone else in this century, tried to actualize in politics what the more sensitive social thinkers and *litterateurs* had already rediscovered," writes Nandy, and that is the imbricated positions of oppressor, victim, and interpreter (*Traditions*, 37). That is, *litterateurs*, if anyone, will understand that there are no pure categories, no position that isn't open to influence and cross-contamination.

The non-player is likewise open and outside of the structure of agonistic relations, such as any binary understanding of activity and passivity. The noun, non-player, itself is both active and passive, nonintentional, dismissive of productive activity, and negates productive economies in its non-play, or play that doesn't recognize another player. Non-involvement takes one away from immediate action and removes one from the circumscriptions of political dogma, making available different modes of perception or something like a politics of heightened perception, what Nandy calls in the subtitle of one of his books a "politics of awareness" (*Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias*). The arts provide alternative ways of perceiving the world, illuminating fresh methods for being outside the familiar narratives posed by liberal and neo-liberal frameworks just as Nandy's non-players resist "the loving embrace of the West's dominance" (*Intimate Enemy*, xiv) by not recognizing it. His non-participants go about their unheroic lives quietly, without will, and without service to governing conceptual structures, which may best be modeled in fictional form as an alternative to economic pursuit in the service of industrial modernity: resistance without resistance, that is to say. Literature and visual art not only challenge and expand perception, but can also model different forms of subjectivity, or

different orientations toward action and attention.[8] The figure of the non-player, exempt from the rules that govern social life, mirrors an ideal of unguarded aesthetic reception.

Writers across the world also sought alternatives to their historical, social, and cultural situations, often locating the best mode of resistance in experiment, and especially experimental prose. Virginia Woolf, for example, facing the rise of fascism in Europe thirty years after *Hind Swaraj*, promotes passive resistance in her polemic, *Three Guineas*. Rather than steer away from the notion of passivity, she incorporates it into her idea of a "Society of Outsiders" consisting of the daughters of educated men. The members of this society would not fight with arms, they would refuse to make munitions or to nurse the wounded, and they would steadily maintain indifference to the question of their brothers' involvement in war. One woman makes headlines by refusing to knit socks, and in this not-doing Woolf finds what she calls a "passive experiment" (139). What happens when the daughters of educated men absent themselves from church, she asks, and adds: "It's the kind of experiment that great numbers of outsiders can practice with very little difficulty or danger . . . it is worth watching carefully to see what effect the experiment of absenting oneself has had – if any. The results are positive and they are encouraging and seems to show that to be passive is to be active" (140).

Not-knitting provides an unexpected site of resistance as Woolf notes how passivity collapses into its opposite, undoing at the same time what seems the self-evident opposition between two binary terms, and overturns the very structure of their opposition. Two temporal orders seem to

[8] In this same spirit of reading against the grain, Aditya Nigam finds in the aesthetic formulations of *Hind Swaraj*, an alternative to the received interpretations of the Mahatma's work, stepping outside the cause and effect sequence of the dominant order. Turning aside from questions of nationalism, Nigam (a political philosopher and social theorist) reads the 1909 treatise as an "ontological drama" (62) or a "philosophical encounter . . . *between two different ways of 'being-in-the-world'*" (italics in original, 63). One way is discernible in Gandhi's counsel "to see beauty in voluntary simplicity, voluntary poverty and slowness" (57), or "the enunciation . . . of *a different aesthetic* that rejects the narrative of Progress and modernity" (italics in original, 63). Nigam goes further to imagine Gandhi as an artist or poet aware of the "limitlessness of the text's meaning" (65), and argues that Gandhi's critique of modern civilization presents "a way of looking at the world that rejected the self-image of modernity and political-aesthetic modernism. As against the beauty of [modernist/futurist] speed," Gandhi posits "the beauty of slowness" (64). "If we read Gandhi poetically, we will be able to see him actually attempting to carve out an alternative aesthetic of slowness and simplicity" (68). While Nigam doesn't comment on passive resistance, his aesthetic analysis of Gandhi's writing shows the Mahatma's textual complexity that refuses to abide by industrial temporality, but instead, slows itself into a kind of non-engagement, thus connecting *Hind Swaraj* to the modernist movement and exploring characters or conditions that appear to be ineffectual, unproductive, listless, vacant, submissive, and so on.

compete within the phrase passive resistance, as one resists change and the other presses its case. Woolf's passive experiment is both genuinely posited at the same time as it is ironized, made resistant to its own ostensible meaning, and yields results that "can best help you to prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods" (169–170). New modes of expression are essential for a peaceful world, and the new methods will be tied to Woolf's experimental prose style. The passive here is hardly a denigrated attribute, but one that opens onto new non-violent avenues of possibility.

The passive, dreaming, non-players I consider in the works of Tagore, Narayan, Sher-Gil, Ali, and Desani either do nothing or engage in activity that is circular, ineffectual, or self-effacing. These artists, working in the charged environment of pre-Independence India, were – and in some cases continue to be – figures of suspicion, their contributions illegible in terms of critical engagement, their characters operating as non-players rather than rebels, their art not always or explicitly enough resisting the imperial regime. They drift in reverie, for example, heads in clouds, exhibiting what William Wordsworth once phrased "wise passiveness," and don't contribute in any obvious way to the dream of national sovereignty.[9] To attempt an aesthetic experiment that turns away from a charged political environment at a critical moment in a nation's history opens the artist to accusations of indifference, irresponsibility, or elitist detachment. These artists created work that, in exploring the passive experiment and affirming passive experience, dared to defy activity, political or otherwise, and offered incursions into dominant modes of vision and value that questioned the privileged position of activity (so easily coopted into discourses of productivity).[10] Their art works offer a fascinating view into the possibilities of non-engagement in an age that South Indian writer R. K. Narayan complained had a singular appetite for "tract-writing" or propaganda. Narayan's hapless protagonists, bumbling around some unrealized goal, propose a counter-example to the idealized agent of

[9] See his poem, "Expostulation and Reply," in which a friend asks: "Why, William, sit you thus alone, / And dream your time away?" to which William replies: "we can feed this mind of ours / In a wise passiveness."

[10] Elaine Scarry observes in her work on aesthetics: "passive perception – looking or hearing without any wish to change what one has seen or heard (as often happens in the presence of the beautiful) – is unacceptable; whereas instrumental perception – looking or hearing that is prelude to intervening in, changing, what one has seen or heard (as happens in the presence of injustice) – is good" (61). Here she underscores the disparaged aesthetic sphere that doesn't in any measurable way contribute to the democratic good or the cause of activist change.

change of the 1930s. While Narayan presents the struggles of his protagonists in comic fashion, his novels thematize naïveté or ignorance, narrating these non-dominant ways of being that privilege the open form of the question over the rigid certainty of answers.

The art of passive resistance explores weakness, affliction, and the porous boundaries of self and world. Surrendering any sense of vigilance and autonomy, the artist cultivates ways of being that might align with a desire for freedom, a "tireless passivity" by which "another organ of perception" might be cultivated (Eliot preface to Nagendranath Gangulee's *Thoughts for Meditation*, 11). Art crucially depends upon such qualities as reception, absorption, immersion, or a giving over to its uncharted effects and therefore provides the essential foundation, a dream-space, for passive resistance. In fact, dreaminess will become an important element. There is no irritable reaching after fact, no literalism to hinder the motivating dream of freedom, and no anchoring nationalism. One's rapt attention to the thing – to objects such as works of art – might lead to what Sianne Ngai calls "exaggerated passivity" (93), a state that produces powerlessness and enables exploitation, but might open other possibilities: "art's powerlessness in a society of total exchange and instrumental rationality might in fact be the very source of its aesthetic power" (107). In fact, "art has the capacity not only to reflect and mystify power but also to reflect on and make use of powerlessness" (109). The experience of passivity then necessarily characterizes the encounter with the aesthetic object and may deliver a rich and unexpected source of critical energy.[11]

I.3 The Uses of English

That critical energy has sometimes been misrecognized in the English-language novels of late colonial India, due in part to their use of the colonial tongue. One might be tempted to think of the novel in English as languishing in uncomfortable proximity to the long-held strategy of imprinting British dominance upon a coerced and compliant population, a

[11] The tone and texture of the everyday often falls outside of political discourse and what many proponents of affect theory have taken up becomes the text of literature. This is what lies beyond resistance in Kevin Quashie's phrasing in *The Sovereignty of Quiet* in which he constructs "the case for quiet": His "argument for quiet aims to give up resistance as a framework in search of what is lost in its all-encompassing reach" (5). I'm sympathetic to this reading although I aim instead to soften the edges of our understanding of what constitutes resistance in order to locate its other languages outside the narrowly discursive or political.