



ORIGINAL

Cultural Encounters and Ethical Resistance: A Hermeneutical Study of *Satyagraha* in South Africa

Encuentros culturales y resistencia ética: un estudio hermenéutico de *Satyagraha* en Sudáfrica

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Cite as: Raj GA, Lazarus AD. Cultural Encounters and Ethical Resistance: A Hermeneutical Study of *Satyagraha* in South Africa. Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología - Serie de Conferencias. 2025; 4:1345. <https://doi.org/10.56294/sctconf20251345>

Submitted: 26-05-2024

Revised: 02-09-2024

Accepted: 16-12-2024

Published: 01-01-2025

Editor: Prof. Dr. William Castillo-González 

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: this research presents a hermeneutical study of Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha during his period in South Africa. It examines the complex cultural encounters he faced within colonial South Africa, marked by racial segregation and discrimination, and how these shaped his philosophy of Satyagraha, a principled, nonviolent resistance grounded in truth and love.

Method: a close reading of Gandhi's autobiography *Satyagraha in South Africa* from this period forms the methodological basis. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of Satyagraha's ethical dimensions as a response to injustice.

Results: the analysis reveals how Gandhi's South African experiences profoundly influenced his understanding of injustice and commitment to nonviolent resistance. Satyagraha challenged prevailing power structures and cultural norms by offering an alternative resistance mode emphasizing ethical principles and nonviolent action's transformative potential. The study highlights the interconnectedness of truth, love, and self-suffering as core tenets, informing Gandhi's approach to social and political change. It also illuminates Satyagraha's lasting legacy in South Africa and its influence on subsequent movements.

Conclusion: Satyagraha, born from specific cultural encounters in South Africa, provides a profound framework for understanding and engaging in ethical resistance against oppression in various contexts. It offers enduring lessons for contemporary struggles for social justice and nonviolent change.

Keywords: South Africa; Reading; Social Segregation; Philosophy; Writing.

RESUMEN

Introducción: esta investigación presenta un estudio hermenéutico del Satyagraha de Mahatma Gandhi durante su período en Sudáfrica. Examina los complejos encuentros culturales que enfrentó en la Sudáfrica colonial, marcada por la segregación y la discriminación racial, y cómo estos dieron forma a su filosofía de Satyagraha, una resistencia no violenta y basada en principios basada en la verdad y el amor.

Método: una lectura detallada de la autobiografía de Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, en Sudáfrica de este período constituye la base metodológica. Este enfoque permite una exploración en profundidad de las dimensiones éticas de Satyagraha como respuesta a la injusticia.

Resultados: el análisis revela cómo las experiencias sudafricanas de Gandhi influyeron profundamente en su comprensión de la injusticia y su compromiso con la resistencia no violenta. Satyagraha desafió las estructuras

de poder y las normas culturales prevalecientes al ofrecer un modo de resistencia alternativo que enfatiza los principios éticos y el potencial transformador de la acción no violenta. El estudio destaca la interconexión de la verdad, el amor y el sufrimiento personal como principios fundamentales que informan el enfoque de Gandhi hacia el cambio social y político. También ilumina el legado duradero de Satyagraha en Sudáfrica y su influencia en los movimientos posteriores.

Conclusión: Satyagraha, nacida de encuentros culturales específicos en Sudáfrica, proporciona un marco profundo para comprender y participar en la resistencia ética contra la opresión en diversos contextos. Ofrece lecciones duraderas para las luchas contemporáneas por la justicia social y el cambio no violento.

Palabras clave: Sudáfrica; Lectura; Segregación Social; Filosofía; Escritura.

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi's formative period in South Africa (1893-1914) proved crucial in shaping his philosophy of Satyagraha, a concept central to understanding his approach to social and political change. Arriving in South Africa as a young lawyer, Gandhi encountered a system of racial segregation and discrimination that profoundly impacted his worldview.⁽¹⁾ These experiences, marked by both overt prejudice and subtle forms of cultural marginalization, led him to develop Satyagraha, a philosophy of nonviolent resistance rooted in truth, love, and self-suffering.⁽²⁾ Satyagraha, meaning "holding onto truth," became Gandhi's primary tool for challenging injustice and advocating for social and political reform.⁽³⁾ It emphasized the importance of ethical conduct, even in the face of oppression, and sought to transform adversaries through dialogue, persuasion, and nonviolent direct action.⁽⁴⁾ The cultural encounters Gandhi faced in South Africa, particularly his interactions with both the Indian diaspora and the dominant colonial culture, played a pivotal role in shaping his understanding of ethical resistance and the transformative potential of nonviolent action.⁽⁵⁾ These encounters underscored the interconnectedness of cultural understanding, ethical principles, and effective resistance strategies, forming the core of Gandhi's philosophy and his enduring legacy.⁽⁶⁾

This study examines the development of Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha philosophy within the context of his experiences in colonial South Africa, analyzing how racial injustice and cultural marginalization shaped his core principles of truth, love, and self-suffering, and how exposure to diverse cultures influenced his approach to peaceful resistance. A hermeneutical approach, emphasizing interpretation within historical and cultural contexts,⁽⁷⁾ is employed to understand Gandhi's writings and speeches, recognizing the interplay between personal experience and dominant cultural norms. This lens reveals the profound significance of Gandhi's words and actions, highlighting the intricate relationship among cultural interactions, ethical values, and Satyagraha's evolution. The research posits that Gandhi's South African experiences significantly molded his ideology of Satyagraha as a strategy of ethical resistance, demonstrating the substantial impact of cultural interactions on the development of nonviolent resistance strategies. A hermeneutical approach is particularly relevant as it allows for in-depth interpretation of texts within their historical and cultural context.

Literature review

Previous Studies on Gandhi's Time in South Africa

Existing scholarship on Gandhi's time in South Africa has explored various facets of his life and work, from legal activism to evolving political philosophy,^(3,8) often providing detailed accounts of his experiences with racial discrimination and early experiments with nonviolent resistance.⁽⁹⁾ However, these studies often lack a comprehensive hermeneutical analysis of how his cultural encounters shaped his Satyagraha philosophy.⁽⁸⁾ A hermeneutical approach moves beyond mere chronological recounting, delving into the deeper meaning embedded within Gandhi's experiences,⁽¹⁰⁾ recognizing the interconnectedness of his encounters with racial discrimination, dialogues with diverse communities, and reflections on conventional political strategies within a larger narrative of social and political transformation.^(11,12) By situating Gandhi within colonial South Africa's complex cultural landscape, a hermeneutical analysis reveals the intricate relationship between cultural context, ethical principles, and nonviolent resistance strategies.⁽¹¹⁾ This study addresses this gap by exploring how Gandhi's experiences of marginalization shaped his understanding of injustice,⁽¹³⁾ how interactions with diverse traditions influenced his worldview,⁽²⁾ and how reflections on conventional politics led to Satyagraha as ethical resistance,⁽¹³⁾ offering a nuanced understanding of this period's significance for his philosophy of nonviolent resistance.

Hermeneutical Approaches in Historical Studies

Hermeneutical approaches, shaped by scholars like Ricoeur and Gadamer,⁽¹⁰⁾ offer valuable tools for interpreting Gandhi's Satyagraha. Ricoeur's emphasis on narrative structure allows us to move beyond

chronological recounting to explore deeper meanings within specific cultural and intellectual contexts, while Gadamer's concept of "horizons of understanding" emphasizes the interplay between interpreter and historical context.⁽¹⁰⁾ Applying these insights, we can situate Gandhi within colonial South Africa's complex cultural landscape to uncover deeper meanings embedded in his experiences with racial discrimination, dialogues with diverse communities, and reflections on conventional political strategies,^(8,12,13) all contributing to his unique philosophy of nonviolent resistance. This approach reveals Satyagraha's dynamic and evolving nature, recognizing how Gandhi's understanding of truth, justice, and social change was continually refined,^(13,14) while acknowledging potential limitations and contradictions within his philosophy.^(12,15)

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a hermeneutical approach, to investigate the intricate relationship between Gandhi's cultural encounters in South Africa and the development of his philosophy of Satyagraha. The hermeneutical approach, in particular, is well-suited for this study as it emphasizes the importance of understanding texts and actions through the lens of the author's lived experiences and the prevailing cultural norms of the time.⁽¹⁶⁾ This method allows for a nuanced interpretation of Gandhi's writings and actions, recognizing that meaning is not fixed but emerges from the interaction between the text, the interpreter, and the historical context.

Data Collection

The primary source for this study is Gandhi's autobiography, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, which provides a firsthand account of his experiences and the development of his philosophy during this formative period. Secondary sources, including biographies, historical accounts, and scholarly articles on Gandhi's life and work, will also be consulted to provide a broader context for understanding his South African experiences and the development of his philosophy.

Data Analysis

A hermeneutical analysis of the selected texts will be conducted to uncover the deeper meaning embedded within Gandhi's writings and actions. This analysis will involve a close reading of *Satyagraha in South Africa*, paying attention to the language, metaphors, and narratives Gandhi uses to convey his experiences and ideas. The interpretation will be guided by the principles of hermeneutics, as outlined by theorists such as Gadamer and Ricoeur,⁽¹⁰⁾ emphasizing the importance of understanding the text within its historical and cultural context. The steps involved in this analysis include: 1) identifying key themes and concepts related to Satyagraha and cultural encounters; 2) analyzing the interplay between these themes and concepts within the text; 3) interpreting Gandhi's writings and actions in light of the historical and cultural context of colonial South Africa; and 4) drawing conclusions about the relationship between cultural encounters and the development of Satyagraha as a method of ethical resistance.

Analysis

Cultural Encounters

A hermeneutical analysis of Gandhi's experiences in South Africa reveals how his personal encounters with diverse groups, including British colonizers, Indians, Zulus, and Afrikaners, shaped the development of his philosophy of Satyagraha.⁽¹³⁾ Rather than simply recounting events, this approach explores how these cross-cultural interactions influenced Gandhi's evolving understanding of injustice and ethical resistance.⁽⁸⁾

Gandhi's arrival in South Africa as a young lawyer was a pivotal moment of cultural confrontation. The stark realities of racial segregation and discrimination, particularly within the colonial legal system, challenged his preconceived notions and became a catalyst for his philosophical development.⁽¹³⁾ His experiences with the British colonial administration, marked by prejudice and disregard for Indian rights, exposed the limitations of conventional legal activism.⁽³⁾ This disillusionment propelled Gandhi to seek alternative forms of resistance grounded in ethical and moral principles.

Furthermore, Gandhi's engagement with the diverse Indian community—Hindus, Muslims, and Christians—highlighted the complexities of navigating internal cultural differences while simultaneously confronting external oppression.⁽¹³⁾ This interplay of internal and external pressures became a crucible for the development of Satyagraha, emphasizing the importance of understanding diverse perspectives and finding common ground for collective action. His interactions with the Zulu population and Afrikaners further broadened his understanding of cultural difference and its implications for social and political change.⁽¹³⁾

A critical hermeneutical analysis reveals Satyagraha as a dynamic and evolving philosophy, deeply rooted in the socio-political context of colonial South Africa. Gandhi's experiences of marginalization and discrimination were not merely personal hardships, but formative influences that shaped his understanding of power, injustice,

and the potential for social change.⁽¹³⁾ His encounters with diverse communities, including Indians, Africans, and Europeans, exposed him to a range of perspectives and experiences, enriching his comprehension of the complexities of social relations within a colonial setting.⁽¹²⁾ These interactions challenged his initial assumptions and prompted him to develop a philosophy of resistance that transcended conventional political strategies.⁽¹⁷⁾

Gandhi's reflections on the limitations of traditional political approaches, particularly those relying on force or coercion, led him to explore alternative methods grounded in ethical and spiritual principles.⁽¹³⁾ The concept of satya, representing not just factual accuracy but a deeper understanding of reality rooted in moral and spiritual values, became central to his philosophy.⁽¹³⁾ This emphasis on truth, combined with his commitment to ahimsa, formed the foundation of Satyagraha, a unique form of resistance that sought to transform both the individual and society through moral persuasion and self-suffering.⁽³⁾

The situatedness of Gandhi's thought within its specific historical and cultural context is crucial for a nuanced understanding of Satyagraha.⁽⁸⁾ His experiences in South Africa, including the 1913 Great March against discriminatory laws, provided a testing ground for his evolving philosophy, demonstrating its practical application and effectiveness in mobilizing resistance.⁽¹⁸⁾ These events also highlighted the challenges and complexities of nonviolent resistance, revealing the need for strategic adaptation and ongoing dialogue with both opponents and allies.⁽³⁾

Furthermore, a critical hermeneutical analysis recognizes the potential limitations and contradictions within Gandhi's thought.⁽¹²⁾ While his emphasis on nonviolence and moral persuasion was undoubtedly transformative, questions remain about the applicability of his methods in different contexts and the potential for unintended consequences.⁽¹⁷⁾ Examining these limitations and contradictions is essential for a comprehensive understanding of Satyagraha and its ongoing relevance in contemporary social and political struggles.⁽⁴⁾

Ethical Resistance

From a hermeneutical perspective, Satyagraha transcends mere political strategy, representing a profound ethical and spiritual practice.⁽¹⁹⁾ Gandhi's commitment to truth, love, and self-suffering stemmed from a deep belief in their transformative power,⁽¹⁹⁾ emphasizing the inherent dignity of all human beings and love's power to overcome hatred.⁽¹¹⁾ Events like the 1913 Great March demonstrate Satyagraha's move beyond passive resistance, integrating moral and spiritual transformation into the struggle for social and political change.⁽¹⁸⁾ A hermeneutical reading reveals the interconnectedness of Satyagraha's core elements. Truth and nonviolence, intertwined principles forming the foundation of Gandhi's philosophy,⁽¹⁹⁾ are essential for lasting change. Nonviolence becomes a positive force of love and compassion, aiming to convert rather than defeat opponents. *Satyagraha in South Africa*⁽¹³⁾ offers numerous examples of these principles in practice. Self-suffering takes on deeper meaning through a hermeneutical lens,⁽³⁾ representing a willingness to embody commitment to truth and justice through personal sacrifice. Moral persuasion, central to Satyagraha,⁽¹¹⁾ aligns with a hermeneutical understanding of dialogue as a means of achieving mutual understanding and transformation. Finally, Gandhi's constructive program demonstrates Satyagraha's holistic nature,⁽¹⁸⁾ aiming not only to resist injustice but also to build a more just and equitable society. His vision of Swaraj encompassed both political independence and individual and collective self-realization.

DISCUSSION

This study's hermeneutical analysis of Satyagraha reveals its profound ethical and spiritual dimensions, emphasizing truth, love, and self-suffering as core principles for transformative social and political change. This aligns with existing scholarship on Gandhi's philosophy, such as Kurtz's work on Gandhi's legacies⁽¹²⁾ and Brown's exploration of Gandhi's significance today.⁽¹⁸⁾ These scholars similarly highlight the transformative potential of Satyagraha and its emphasis on ethical and spiritual principles.

Our findings also resonate with Tinker's analysis of the political power of nonviolent resistance,⁽²⁰⁾ which emphasizes Satyagraha as a potent political tool. However, this study goes further by delving into the interconnectedness of Satyagraha's core elements, revealing how truth and nonviolence are intertwined principles essential for lasting change. This nuanced understanding builds upon existing literature by highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of Satyagraha, as Gandhi's understanding of truth, justice, and social change was continually refined through his experiences and reflections.^(13,14)

Furthermore, our analysis of self-suffering as a crucial element of Satyagraha aligns with Goswami's work on its contemporary relevance for community organizing.⁽³⁾ Both studies emphasize self-suffering as more than just a tactic, representing a willingness to embody commitment to truth and justice through personal sacrifice. This interpretation contrasts with some earlier interpretations of Satyagraha that focused primarily on its political and strategic aspects, overlooking its deeper ethical and spiritual dimensions.

This study's focus on the transformative potential of Satyagraha also connects with Bitinayte's exploration of Gandhi as a subject of intercultural dialogue.⁽¹¹⁾ Both works highlight the importance of moral persuasion and dialogue as means of achieving mutual understanding and transformation. However, this study adds a

unique perspective by situating Gandhi within the complex cultural landscape of colonial South Africa,^(8,13,15) revealing how his experiences of racial discrimination and cultural marginalization shaped his philosophy. This contextualization enriches our understanding of Satyagraha's development and its potential for addressing contemporary social and political challenges.

Finally, this study's exploration of Gandhi's constructive program and his vision of Swaraj builds upon existing scholarship on Gandhi's social and political thought. It aligns with works like Hanham and Kettler's study of Adam Ferguson,⁽⁴⁾ which explores the social and political dimensions of philosophical thought. However, this study goes further by demonstrating the holistic nature of Satyagraha, emphasizing its focus not only on resisting injustice but also on building a more just and equitable society. This holistic approach offers a more nuanced understanding of Satyagraha's transformative potential and its relevance for contemporary social and political struggles.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the profound influence of Gandhi's cultural encounters in South Africa on the development of Satyagraha, demonstrating how his experiences of discrimination shaped his understanding of injustice and commitment to nonviolent resistance. Through hermeneutical analysis of *Satyagraha in South Africa* and other texts, the research reveals Satyagraha's deep ethical and spiritual dimensions, emphasizing truth, love, and self-suffering as core principles for transformative social and political change. The study also shows how Gandhi's concept of Swaraj evolved into a nuanced understanding of freedom encompassing individual and collective self-realization,⁽¹⁴⁾ enriched by his interactions with diverse cultural and spiritual traditions.⁽¹¹⁾ Further research could explore Satyagraha's comparative aspects by examining its application in different contexts, including its influence on movements like the American Civil Rights Movement and the anti-apartheid struggle,⁽¹⁸⁾ and delve deeper into its spiritual and ethical dimensions, exploring its potential for addressing contemporary challenges like environmental degradation, economic inequality, and political polarization, and its practical applications in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.⁽¹⁹⁾ Gandhi's life and work exemplify the transformative potential of cultural encounters and ethical resistance, his South African experiences becoming a crucible for Satyagraha, a philosophy inspiring movement for social justice and nonviolent change worldwide. By embracing truth, love, and self-suffering, Gandhi demonstrated the power of ethical resistance to challenge oppressive systems and create a more just world, his legacy reminding us of the importance of engaging with cultural difference, promoting dialogue, and upholding human dignity in our pursuit of a peaceful future.⁽¹⁸⁾

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FUNDING

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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