

Beyond Caste Boundaries: Identity, Dignity and Dalit Resistance in Gita Ramaswamy's Memoir *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman*

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Article Received: 28/07/2026
Article Accepted: 30/08/2026
Published Online: 31/08/2026
DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.08.632

Abstract:

The very introspective memoir *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman* by Gita Ramaswamy details her extensive involvement with social movements, especially with Dalit people in Telangana. The narrative is noteworthy because it shows how caste superiority, Brahminical social institutions, untouchability, and the political marginalisation of Dalits evolved from an early lack of caste identification to a persistent struggle. By following Ramaswamy's evolving understanding of caste, her interactions with Madiga communities in Ibrahimpatnam, the growth of Dalit consciousness in her political work, and the struggles of Dalit communities for dignity and self-respect, this essay explores how the memoir transcends "caste boundaries." The memoir's self-critical narrative perspective receives special attention: Ramaswamy realises her place in the savarna social order and the constraints that come with a privileged narrator writing about marginalised people. The essay makes the case that the memoir's significance extends beyond only recording caste persecution to include revealing the ways in which caste can go unnoticed even in extreme political movements. In the narrator's caste consciousness, the Karamchedu massacre becomes a pivotal event that forces a reevaluation of previous political frameworks. In the end, the memoir portrays Dalit resistance as a shift away from forced social marginalisation and toward political assertion, collective consciousness, dignity, and opposition to caste dominance.

Keywords: Brahminism, Gita Ramaswamy, caste awareness, Dalit identity, dignity, and resistance

Introduction

One of the most enduring systems in India for organising social hierarchy, exclusion, identity, and power is caste. Because caste affects social relationships, political representation, public dignity, and access to communal acknowledgement, its relevance goes beyond ceremonial classification. As a result, Dalit literature and life writing have emerged as crucial platforms for contesting prevailing caste portrayals and reclaiming experiences that have traditionally been repressed by popular narratives. Because the narrator of Gita

Ramaswamy's Land, Guns, Caste, Woman does not write from a Dalit caste location, it holds a unique place in this field. Rather, she critically examines her long-standing involvement with Dalit communities and movements in Telangana while writing from a savarna perspective.

As a result, the memoir documents both the narrator's personal caste transition and Dalit resistance. When Ramaswamy declares that she is a member of the "savarna" side, she clearly acknowledges this conflict (23). The memoir's ethical and political complexity is established by this revelation. She recognises the privilege from which she watches, takes part in, and describes Dalit struggles rather than claiming an identity that is not her own. Her acknowledgement that privileged groups continue to be influential "storytellers" (23) is especially significant since it calls into doubt the legitimacy of those who narrate injustice. A key component of the memoir's portrayal of caste is its self-reflection. Ramaswamy recognises that the act of narrative itself can maintain unequal power by admitting that she still has the ability to "frame," edit, and delete. Instead of leaving the story, she responds by pointing out its flaws and inconsistencies. She contends that "realisation" is still possible (24), implying that anti-caste consciousness necessitates ongoing learning and introspection. The memoir also documents a significant shift in Ramaswamy's perspective on caste. She remembers that it wasn't until the Karamchedu massacre in 1985 that caste became a "serious question" for her (60). Caste persisted up to that point, although it was mainly ignored in the radical political context in which she took part. She recalls that caste was "rarely discussed" (60).

The Karamchedu massacre brings caste into political consciousness, making it a pivotal moment. Ramaswamy acknowledges the significance of Ambedkarite politics in making concerns about caste and Brahminism inevitable. This change is furthered by her later interactions with Madiga people in Ibrahimpatnam. According to her, the Dalits in the area, "mostly Madigas," are communities that are subject to long-standing caste dominance (18). As a result, the memoir progresses from encounter to distance, from encounter to consciousness, and from consciousness to resistance. Its importance stems from the way it places caste at the center of political discourse and chronicles the Dalit people's struggle for respect and dignity.

This essay makes the case that Land, Guns, Caste, Woman should be seen as a story of caste awakening rather than just a chronicle of activism. It shows that overcoming caste limits does not include eliminating caste distinctions; rather, it necessitates acknowledging caste advantage, paying attention to marginalised groups, challenging ingrained presumptions, and aiding in the fight for equality and dignity.

Review of Literature

A helpful conceptual framework for comprehending emancipation as a process of self-assertion rather than passive liberation bestowed by others is provided by Chenamallu

Visweswara Rao's "The Path to Self-Emancipation of Dalit Women" (2026). Because the battles depicted in Land, Guns, Caste, Woman are ultimately struggles in which Dalit communities themselves become political agents, its emphasis on the journey of Dalit communities toward self-emancipation is pertinent to Ramaswamy's narrative.

In a same vein, the memoir refrains from portraying Dalits as simple victims. The emergence of political consciousness from inside oppressed groups is demonstrated by the Sangam's mobilisation, collective resistance, and declaration of dignity. Thus, Chenamallu's focus on liberation sheds light on the difference between activism carried out on behalf of Dalits and resistance shown by Dalits.

Because it highlights the use of biographies and life writing in recreating caste histories, Gogu Shyamamma's PhD thesis "Using Biographies to Understand Caste History" (2018) is particularly pertinent. In order to understand caste relations, community memory, and resistance, her work examines human narratives as historical sources.

Tharu Susi's "The Dalit Woman Question" (2014) offers a significant contribution to discussions about Dalit political representation and the uniqueness of Dalit experiences. Her explanation shows that because caste creates unique historical and political experiences, Dalit movements cannot be comprehended through homogenised categories. Tharu's work is helpful for the current study mainly because it emphasises the political distinctiveness of Dalits. In a similar vein, Ramaswamy's autobiography shows that caste cannot be ignored in the context of larger political conflicts. The Karamchedu massacre is significant because it highlights the shortcomings of governmental systems that do not acknowledge caste. Political engagement is highlighted in Muddepaka Narender's "Empowerment of Dalit Women via Political Involvement" (2023) as a crucial Dalit empowerment strategy. The argument is helpful for comprehending the connection between political agency and social dignity, even though the current research does not concentrate on political participation as a distinct institutional category. Ramaswamy's narrative frequently shows Dalit groups transitioning from marginalisation to organised political participation. Instead of being passive receivers of decisions made by dominant groups, participation in the Sangam allows individuals to articulate collective interests. Thus, the narrative lends credence to the more general idea that political engagement can serve as a tool for dignity and social acceptance. "Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Vision for Dalit Emancipation for Social Justice" (2025) by M. H. Hullur situates Ambedkar's anti-caste ideas in the larger context of social justice and emancipation. It highlights liberty, equality, fraternity, and the eradication of untouchability while identifying education, agitation, and organization as key components of Ambedkar's strategy. Ramaswamy's description of the shifting political consciousness regarding caste is especially pertinent to this approach. The memoir recognises the role Ambedkarites played in making caste and Brahminism inevitable issues following Karamchedu. As a result,

Ambedkarite methods of anti-caste reform are highly compatible with the memoir's shift toward caste consciousness.

In his seminal work, "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1998), Guru Gopal makes the case that Dalit political experiences result in unique kinds of political discourse and knowledge. The idea that dominant organisations can speak for Dalit communities is called into question by his work.

This argument is particularly helpful in understanding Ramaswamy's self-critical stance. Her admission that she is still a privileged narrator is important because it highlights the distinction between identity and solidarity. Therefore, the significance of the narrative comes from recognising the limitations of speaking across caste barriers rather than from asserting Dalit experience.

Singh Preeti's "Autobiographies of Dalit Women: Gender and Caste Issues" (2022) highlights autobiography as a way to subvert prevailing portrayals and looks at caste as a fundamental component of Dalit women's life stories. Singh's focus on life narrative as a site of caste consciousness is pertinent, even though Ramaswamy's memoir differs from Dalit autobiographies because the narrator is not Dalit. By analysing a memoir in which caste consciousness emerges via political interaction and introspection, the current study expands on this viewpoint. Ramaswamy's story illustrates how life writing can reveal the narrator's own caste privilege.

Verma Nikita's "A Study of Selected Dalit Women Autobiographies: Caste, Patriarchy, and Resistance" (2025) uses caste, resistance, self-representation, and assertion to analyse autobiographical writing by Dalit women. Its approach integrates subaltern viewpoints, Dalit studies, and attentive textual reading. Verma's focus on resistance and self-representation offers a helpful foundation for comparison in the current study. Although the narrator position in Ramaswamy's memoir is different from that of Dalit autobiographical writing, both consider writing as a means of challenging social exclusionary institutions. Its courage to reveal rather than hide the narrator's own caste privilege is its greatest contribution.

Objectives

To investigate how caste consciousness is portrayed in *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman* by Gita Ramaswamy.

To examine how Dalit identity, dignity, and resistance relate to each other in the memoir.

To look at Ramaswamy's introspective struggle with her Savarna caste.

To examine how the Karamchedu massacre affected the narrator's perception of caste.

To look at how the memoir incorporates Ambedkarite consciousness and Dalit mobilisation.

To examine the memoir as a story that emphasises Dalit dignity and collective resistance while questioning caste limits.

Methodology

Based on a close reading of Gita Ramaswamy's *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman*, this study uses a qualitative and interpretive methodology. Caste consciousness, Brahminical privilege, Dalit identity, Karamchedu, Madiga communities, Ambedkarite politics, and collective resistance are the main topics of the analysis. The narrative is contextualised within Dalit studies and anti-caste rhetoric through a selection of secondary material.

Discussion

The Politics of Recognition and Caste Consciousness

The growth of caste consciousness is the main theme of *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman*. Ramaswamy does not portray herself as someone who has always had a thorough awareness of caste. Rather, she reconstructs the slow process by which caste became apparent to her on a political level. This revelation is significant because it casts doubt on the notion that anti-caste consciousness is a natural byproduct of progressive political philosophy. The memoir shows that one might engage in radical politics without addressing the particular ways in which caste operates. According to Ramaswamy, caste was "rarely discussed" in the political circles she was involved in (60). A significant flaw in political universalism is revealed by this discovery. The unique experiences of Dalit groups may vanish from political analysis when caste is viewed as secondary to more general political concepts. Thus, the book poses a crucial query: what happens if a political movement aims to change society without adequately addressing caste? In retrospect, Ramaswamy's response seems clear. She acknowledges the existence of caste. Although it was ubiquitous, it had not been sufficiently identified or examined.

The Savarna Setting and Narrative Ethics

The memoir's acknowledgement of the narrator's caste placement is one of its best qualities. According to Ramaswamy, she is on the "savarna" side (23). There is political significance to this disclosure. She does not assert that her political affiliation made her a Dalit. Rather, she admits that her caste placement grants her perks that action cannot easily eliminate. As a result, the memoir distinguishes between solidarity and identity. Ramaswamy cannot claim the historical experience of Dalit oppression as her own, but she may collaborate with Dalit communities, take part in their battles, and fight against caste discrimination. The memoir's intellectual integrity is largely attributed to this distinction. The narrator also acknowledges that wealthy individuals continue to be influential "storytellers" (23). Because it recognises that representation is a type of power in and of itself, the statement is important.

Who tells the tale of Dalit history?

Who decides which experiences are made public?

What is remembered is decided by whom?

By revealing her own narrative authority, Ramaswamy addresses these issues.

The Anti-Caste Practice of Self-Criticism

Ramaswamy's self-criticism goes beyond simple admission. It is incorporated into the anti-caste politics of the biography. She is aware that Dalits can accuse her of repeating paternalism or invading their political space. She accepts these potential criticisms as

important challenges rather than brushing them off. The prospect of change is expressed in her claim that there is yet room for “realisation” (24). This position’s rejection of moral perfection is what makes it significant. It portrays anti-caste consciousness as an incomplete endeavour. Even if someone from a privileged caste acknowledges caste discrimination, they still need to be receptive to criticism. This distinguishes the memoir from stories that portray the affluent activist as a straightforward saviour. Rather, Ramaswamy reveals her own ambiguity and constraints.

The Caste Issue in Radical Politics

The memoir provides a critical analysis of the connection between caste and left politics. Caste was frequently eclipsed by more expansive revolutionary categories throughout the Naxalite era. Ramaswamy acknowledges the shortcomings of this strategy in retrospect. She clarifies that although Dalits and other members of disadvantaged castes participated in the movement, their caste issues were not always expressed. As a result, caste may continue to exist structurally while receiving little political attention. Therefore, the issue was not that Dalits did not participate in political movements, but rather that there was not enough room for caste-specific expression. The episode involving Rajari, a full-time Dalit employee of the party, makes this especially clear. The political organization was obliged to face a caste-specific reality when he clarified his need for more financial backing. The event serves as an example of how ostensibly universal political frameworks might not take various socioeconomic settings into consideration. Therefore, the memoir implies that true equality necessitates the capacity to acknowledge differences rather than repressing them in the name of unity.

Karamchedu as a Pivotal Event

Ramaswamy’s caste consciousness undergoes a significant shift after the Karamchedu slaughter. She claims that it wasn’t until 1985 that caste became a “serious question” for her (60). In a manner that abstract political theory had not, the massacre revealed the cruelty of caste. According to Ramaswamy, the massacre involved the murder of Dalits and the sexual abuse of Dalit women by members of the upper caste. The incident proved that caste could not be included in other political categories, which was more significant for her political growth. The slaughter increased Ambedkarite political consciousness and contributed to the formation of the Dalit Mahasabha movement. According to Ramaswamy, caste became inevitable at Karamchedu. This change signifies the shift from caste blindness to caste recognition, which makes it significant.

Ambedkarite Politics and Caste’s Recovery

According to Ramaswamy, Ambedkarites forced individuals who had before disregarded caste and Brahminism to consider them. The term “Ambedkarites” (61) becomes important since it signifies a change in political terminology. Ambedkarite politics maintained that caste was a system of tiered inequality that needed to be drastically changed rather than just a cultural custom. Ramaswamy was able to reframe experiences that had previously been explained by other political categories thanks to this framework. Thus, the book highlights the intellectual significance of Ambedkarite ideas in changing the way

progressive activists perceived caste. It took more than just seeing violence to create caste consciousness. Additionally, it resulted from coming across a political tradition that could account for such violence.

Interaction with the Madiga Community

When Ramaswamy moves to Ibrahimpatnam, the shift in her political perspective becomes tangible. The Dalits in the area were “mostly Madigas,” according to her records (18). The transition from abstract political identification to lived social relationships is what makes this encounter significant. Ramaswamy moves in with the Madiga communities and takes part in their battles as a group. She characterises herself as someone who entered a setting where she had no prior experience but was eventually welcomed into the lives of others around her. Thus, the memoir shows that long-term interaction with real communities fosters the development of caste consciousness. Concepts may be introduced through books and political theory, but real-world experiences show how caste functions in daily life.

Social Dehumanisation and Caste

The memoir depicts caste as a dehumanising process rather than just a classification system. Dalits’ experiences in Ibrahimpatnam are characterised by their marginalisation, forced work, humiliation, and the power of landowners from the ruling caste. The region’s description makes it evident that caste functions through social interactions in which some communities are viewed as intrinsically inferior. Residents in the village attest to this understanding. According to GattuVijayendar, his people were confined in conditions akin to slavery and were not considered truly human by the ruling castes. This testimony is significant because it changes the focus of the story from intellectual discussion to real remembrance. Humiliation is one way that caste is experienced. As a result, resistance turns into a fight for acceptance as a complete human being.

Respect as the Foundation of Opposition

The narrative revolves around the idea of dignity. The Sangam’s struggle is portrayed as more than just an effort to obtain financial advantages. Regaining self-respect and being able to engage in social interactions without feeling ashamed is difficult. For this reason, the title *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman* links several aspects of Telangana’s historical experience. The caste story in the memoir illustrates how resistance takes on significance when oppressed groups start to reject the identities that have been thrust upon them. Refusing the caste hierarchy’s allotted social station is a show of dignity. Sangam members’ increasing political confidence is indicative of this development. Individuals who had previously been marginalised started to organise, communicate, bargain, question authority, and take part in group decisions. As a result, resistance alters oppressed populations’ political self-perception in addition to their exterior environment.

The Sangam as a Place of Group Awareness

One of the most significant locations in the book is the Ibrahimpatnam Taluka Vyavasaya Coolie Sangam. Ramaswamy makes it clear that the book is primarily on the Sangam and its accomplishments (23). By making this claim, the focus is shifted from the individual activist to the group effort. People who had previously been subjected to caste

dominance start to recognise their common interests as the Sangam establishes a political community. Its significance is found in group organization. Dalit communities become an organised social force rather than isolated people. As a result, the Sangam serves as a counter-space to the caste system. Dalits are defined by the prevailing social order through exclusion, but they are able to define themselves through resistance thanks to collective organization.

From Quiet to Confirmation

Silence is frequently the key to caste oppression. Dominant perceptions of society are not challenged when suppressed communities are unable to publicly express their experiences. This issue is shown by Ramaswamy's assessment of the absence of caste articulation within radical political formations. Although there were Dalit participants, she notes that they did not always express caste concerns. This is altered by the later emergence of more assertive Dalit political movements. The rise of Dalit organisations following Karamchedu serves as an example of how political voice can replace quiet. Because it denotes a communal identity rather than just an administrative category imposed from without, the term "Dalits" itself takes on political significance.

The Need for Political Space for Dalits

The call for a distinct Dalit student organization is among the memoir's most illuminating passages. When discussing the opposition to the political party's failure to acknowledge a distinct organization, Ramaswamy mentions the term "Dalit students" (62). The episode shows that allowing suppressed communities to join in organisations created in accordance with prevailing assumptions is insufficient to achieve equality. The ability to freely express issues unique to a community is also necessary for political organization. Therefore, the call for a distinct Dalit organization did not always imply a rejection of more general political unity. It was an appeal for acknowledgement. Dalit political consciousness necessitates an institutional setting where caste-specific experiences can be freely shared.

Caste Divides and the Potential for Unity

The phrase "Beyond Caste Boundaries" does not mean that caste distinctions no longer exist. Instead, the narrative shows that acknowledging caste disparities is the first step toward genuine solidarity. Ramaswamy's story serves as an example of this idea. She doesn't identify as Dalit when she joins Dalit areas. Rather than disputing her inherited privilege, she acknowledges it. She pays attention to groups whose experiences contradict her preconceived notions about politics. She acknowledges criticism as a necessary component of political education. She acknowledges the restrictions of her position while taking part in group struggles. Paternalistic intervention is not the same as this kind of solidarity. Recognition is the foundation.

Opposition to Brahminical Privilege

The perks connected to her own caste location are also examined in Ramaswamy's narrative. The institutional and cultural benefits of Brahmin identity are revealed by her family history. Later, she is forced to reevaluate those benefits due to her political work. Therefore, the memoir's reference to the "annihilation" of caste (24) is not coincidental. The

statement situates her observations within the broader Ambedkarite issue of caste abolition. Better treatment within the current hierarchy cannot be the only goal. The transformation of the hierarchy itself is the underlying goal. Because of this, the memoir's criticism goes beyond specific instances of prejudice. It challenges readers to consider the societal mechanisms that normalise caste privilege.

Political Universalism's Boundaries

The memoir's critique of political frameworks that presume that all oppressed people experience oppression in the same way is among its most important contributions. The memoir's portrayal of the early radical movement tended to highlight broad political themes. However, Ramaswamy later acknowledges that caste created certain experiences that were not well captured by these classifications. This inconsistency is demonstrated by the Rajari event. The organization had decided on a shared stipend, but Rajari had to justify his need for extra help because of his caste and family situation. Caste became apparent inside a purportedly universal political organization as a result of the discussion that followed. As a result, the book implies that real equality necessitates consideration of tangible social differences.

Testimony, Memory, and Caste

Ramaswamy's reconstruction of caste heavily relies on memory. She freely admits that the memoir is retroactive and selective. Her self-awareness enhances rather than detracts from the writing. She challenges readers to discern between personal experience and universal truth by recognising the limitations of memory and narration. She also has essays, interviews, press materials, and legal documents in her archive. According to her, these resources aided in reconstructing the Ibrahimpatnam movement's activities. The memoir has a collective dimension because to this archival approach. It is more than just one activist's remembrance. It is an effort to preserve the experiences of those whose hardships could otherwise be lost to official history.

Historical Understanding of Dalit Resistance

The memoir questions the notion that official documents and elite political narratives are the only sources of historical knowledge. Sangam members' life serve as sources of historical information. Their recollections show how caste functions at the village level. Their difficulties highlight the shortcomings of governmental institutions. The ability of oppressed communities to create their own forms of knowledge is demonstrated by their political organization. Ramaswamy's claim that the memoir is essentially the Sangam's story is crucial because of this. The novel turns into a counter-history. It moves the focus of historical narrative from well-known political figures to historically marginalised communities.

From Political Assertion to Marginality

A sequence can be used to comprehend the movement described in the memoir: Caste exclusion leads to consciousness, organization, resistance, dignity, and political assertion. At first, affluent viewers might not see caste. It is impossible to maintain that invisibility when one encounters caste persecution. Consciousness is the result of

recognition. Organization results from consciousness. Resistance is a result of organization. Opportunities for dignity are created by resistance. Political assertiveness is based on dignity. One of the main accomplishments of Ramaswamy's memoir is this sequence. The book does not advocate for political activism to eradicate caste. Rather, it demonstrates how oppressed groups gain the ability to contest the interpretations that are thrust upon them.

Dalit Dignity's Importance

Identity and resistance meet at the point of dignity. In the memoir, Dalit identity is more than just a symbol of past injustice. It serves as a foundation for societal political awareness. The individuals portrayed in the memoir reject the notion that their value is determined by their caste. As a result, their resistance opposes both symbolic humiliation and material dominance. The fight for dignity turns into a conflict about who gets to decide what constitutes a community's social values. This is where Ambedkarite philosophy and the memoir have a significant connection. In addition to legal changes, social attitudes and relationships must change in order to eradicate caste.

Beyond Boundaries of Caste

Therefore, it is important to understand the phrase "Beyond Caste Boundaries." Caste should not be forgotten, according to the memoir. Because those who profit from the caste order might continue to deny its existence, forgetting caste would perpetuate privilege. Rather, overcoming caste barriers necessitates facing caste head-on. Ramaswamy's voyage serves as an example of this procedure. She starts by knowing very little about caste. She comes across Dalit communities. She is aware of her privilege. She challenges radical political movements' constraints. Karamchedu changes her awareness of politics. A foundation for comprehending caste is provided by Ambedkarite philosophy. The Sangam offers a venue for group activity. Dalit communities become subjects of resistance as well as objects of advocacy. The main political accomplishment portrayed in the memoir is this change.

Conclusion

Land, Guns, Caste, Woman by Gita Ramaswamy provides an important examination of caste awareness, Dalit identity, dignity, and resistance in Telangana. The narrator's determination to face her own savarna location while chronicling the political struggles of Dalit communities is what gives it its unique strength. Karamchedu turns as a pivotal event that turns caste from an understudied fact into a major political issue. Her interactions with the Ibrahimpatnam Sangam and Madiga communities serve as additional evidence of how collective organization transforms caste marginalisation into political assertion. In the end, the memoir makes the implicit and explicit argument that facing caste head-on is necessary to transcend it. An anti-caste social system requires acknowledgement, self-criticism, group opposition, and the pursuit of dignity.

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