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Refusing the Script of Womanhood: Female Autonomy, Feminist Consciousness and Collective Agency in Gita Ramaswamy's *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman*

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Abstract: Gita Ramaswamy's *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman: The Memoir of a Lapsed Revolutionary* provides an important account of a woman's journey from gendered control in an orthodox Brahmin household to political activism, feminist awareness, and support for Telangana's landless Dalit communities. This study looks at how women challenge, negotiate, reject, and change assigned roles rather than just viewing gender as a category of oppression. Bodily autonomy, education, economic independence, marriage, domestic abuse, sexuality, mobility, political engagement, and collective organization are among its main areas of concentration. An overtly political view of women's rights eventually emerges from Ramaswamy's early opposition to menstrual taboos, dress codes, standards of feminine acceptability, educational constraints, and familial power. Her later activity in Ibrahimpatnam demonstrates how gender oppression varies depending on caste and class location, while her interactions with feminist ideas and women's organisations widen this awareness. Women's emancipation is inextricably linked to anti-caste and economic efforts, as seen by *Madiga* women's susceptibility to landlord dominance, sexual exploitation, landlessness, and labour control. However, rather than portraying marginalised women as passive recipients of reform, the memoir shows them as active participants in collective resistance. This essay contends that in the end, Ramaswamy's memoir reconstructs womanhood as a dynamic political identity based on inquiry, independence, solidarity, group

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struggle, and the rejection of inherited institutions as unchangeable.

Keywords: Gita Ramaswamy; collective agency; womanhood; feminist consciousness; female autonomy; Dalit women

Introduction

Land, Guns, Caste, Woman: *The Memoir of a Lapsed Revolutionary* by Gita Ramaswamy might be interpreted as a series of rejections. Ramaswamy rejects the caste privileges she was born into, unchallenged parental authority, forced compliance, political quiet, ceremonial control over her body, and prescribed ideas of respectable femininity. These rejections don't appear at the same time. They grow from early inquisitiveness to feminist awareness and from personal disobedience to group political participation. As a result, gender in the book is more than just a description of prejudice against women. Autonomy is constantly disputed, negotiated, and rebuilt in this profession.

The story opens in an orthodox Brahmin home where gender and caste are deeply ingrained. The parents of Ramaswamy are not shown as particularly violent individuals. Instead, the systems that normalise inequality are the focus of her criticism. Such a strategy is important because patriarchy persists not only via dramatic acts of violence but also through traditions, expectations, family structures, ideas of purity, and conceptions of what it means to be a respectable woman. Over time, Ramaswamy gains the ability to recognise these seemingly commonplace behaviours as tools of dominance.

When feminist criticism recognises the diversity of women instead of portraying womanhood as a uniform experience, it becomes very fruitful. Gopal Guru's seminal statement that "Dalit women talk differently" emphasises the importance of acknowledging social location (2548). His argument challenges frameworks that allow powerful groups to advocate for underprivileged women without acknowledging the uniqueness of their historical experiences. Because the narrator of Ramaswamy's story is a *Savarna* woman who finally collaborates closely with primarily *Madiga* agricultural labourers, it is particularly intriguing in this regard.

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Thus, becoming aware of patriarchy is only one aspect of her feminist development; another is realising the boundaries of her own social experience.

Dalit women are similarly positioned "at the crossroads of gender, class, and caste" by Wandana Sonalkar and Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal (44). Because gender takes on many shapes depending on material and caste location, the metaphor of the crossroads is helpful for understanding the memoir. Ramaswamy encounters expectations related to marriage, familial authority, mobility limitations, and physiological regulation. In the context of landlessness, caste hierarchy, reliance on agriculture, and landlord dominance, *Madiga* women in Ibrahimpatnam face gender discrimination. Although these experiences overlap, they cannot be regarded as being the same.

Bhushan Sharma and K. A. Geetha have also underlined the significance of these distinctions, arguing that "Dalit women are subjected to intersectional oppression at the hands of caste and gender" (1). Their insight clarifies the need for a gender-centered interpretation of Ramaswamy's memoir to eventually go beyond the narrator. Her own liberation does not necessarily equate to the liberation of Dalit women living in rural areas. Instead, she learns to comprehend gendered power in ways that are distinct from her own experiences as a result of her political journey.

Ramaswamy's book entails "a transition from inherited caste privilege to active solidarity with marginalised communities," according to Visweswara Rao Chenamallu (623). A significant shift in her gender consciousness is likewise described by this change. As a young lady and daughter, her first rebellion is about her personal freedom. Later in life, her politics became more and more focused on the circumstances that allow others to live with dignity and liberty. Therefore, feminist consciousness moves from the individual to the group.

This development is related to Smita M. Patil's description of Dalit feminism as a "epistemic departure" from prevailing feminist frameworks (37). Ramaswamy's interactions with rural Dalit communities force her to reevaluate classifications she has learned via middle-class feminist activism, Marxist politics, and schooling. Ideology is complicated by experience.

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Her comprehension of women's existence becomes inextricably linked to land, labour, caste, state institutions, sexual assault, and community organization.

However, the memoir does not connect marginalisation with powerlessness. The Dalit feminist "New Woman" is described by Kranti Lodhi and Nisha Indraguru as "a figure of transformation as well as uprising" (67). Understanding the rural women who arise inside group fights in Ramaswamy's narrative is made easier with this conceptualisation. In addition to being the targets of caste and patriarchal authority, women are also seen as organisers, workers, demonstrators, decision-makers, and participants in land and dignity fights.

Chenamallu also contends that marginalised individuals might become "political subjects capable of negotiation and resistance" (628) through collective resistance. The main focus of this work is provided by this change. In *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman*, several forms of female agency are traced, ranging from defying family authority and pursuing education to questioning ritual constraints, occupying public space, joining feminist organisations, and taking part in collective activities. Therefore, this essay contends that the memoir redefines women by gradually gaining physiological, intellectual, economic, social, and political agency. Its most crucial gender concern is not just how women are oppressed, but also how they come to understand, face, and change the circumstances that are placed upon them.

Review of Literature

Prof. Visweswara Rao Chenamallu's "Beyond Caste Boundaries: Identity, Dignity and Dalit Resistance in Gita Ramaswamy's Memoir *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman*" (2026) explores the memoir through the lenses of caste identification, resistance, and Ramaswamy's self-aware negotiation of *Savarna* privilege. Because Chenamallu's study does not reduce solidarity to identification, it is valuable. Ramaswamy's acknowledgement of her own caste position is read in conjunction with her involvement in Dalit movements. By differentiating her opposition to Brahminical gender standards from the caste-class-gender oppression faced by *Madiga* women, the current study expands this argument into gender.

In "Dalit Women and Their Journey toward Self-Emancipation," (2026), Prof. Visweswara Rao Chenamallu explores how education, awareness, group action, social

engagement, and resistance help marginalised women achieve autonomy. Particularly pertinent to Land, Guns, Caste, and Women is the idea of self-emancipation. The memoir consistently rejects the idea that passive victims are freed by an outside reformer. Rather, change happens when individuals acknowledge their rights and take part in their own efforts. This framework aids in understanding women's agency as a process involving political consciousness, collective organization, voice, and material independence.

The evolution of caste consciousness in the memoir is examined in P. Gayathri and Dr. Jeripotula Malavi's "From Caste Silence to Caste Consciousness: Dalit Resistance and the Politics of Recognition in Gita Ramaswamy's *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman*" (2026). Ramaswamy's political education likewise moves from comparatively broad concepts of equality toward acknowledgement of historically particular systems, their analysis is pertinent to gender. The shift from quiet to consciousness provides a helpful framework for analysing how issues that were once thought to be private—such as marriage, sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and menstruation restrictions—become political issues.

Gopal Guruoffers a crucial conceptual foundation for differentiating Dalit women's experiences from both male-centric Dalit discourse and mainstream feminist representation in "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1995). His essay is particularly significant while reading a *Savarna* woman's memoir on her extensive involvement with Dalit communities because of his insistence on autonomous articulation. The critic is encouraged by Guru's viewpoint to acknowledge rural Dalit women as providers of political knowledge rather than merely characters that are understood through the narrator's consciousness.

Sabharwal Nidhi Sadana and Wandana Sonalkar's "Dalit Women in India: At the Crossroads of Gender, Class, and Caste" (2015) provides a structural analysis of various forms of marginalisation. Their research shows that gender discrimination, caste marginalisation, and economic hardship are mutually reinforcing. This strategy is extremely pertinent to Ramaswamy's portrayal of female farm labourers as gender is insufficient to explain their vulnerability. Due to their lack of land and reliance on labour, women are more vulnerable to caste and patriarchal dominance.

In "Revitalising Dalit Feminism: Toward Reflexive, Anti-Caste Agency of Mang and Mahar Women in Maharashtra" (2013), M. Smita Patil makes the case for an anti-caste feminist politics based on the unique social positions of women. Her focus on agency and reflexivity is very helpful for this research. Ramaswamy frequently questions herself throughout her narrative, and the rural villages she visits compel her to reevaluate her inherited ideological frameworks. Instead of viewing female agency as a universal form of personal empowerment, Patil's study helps understand it as socially situated.

Sharma Bhushan and K. A. Geetha's "Casteing Gender: Intersectional Oppression of Dalit Women" (2021) critiques feminist theories that universalise women's oppression while examining the relationship between caste and gender. Their paradigm makes the distinction between the experiences of landless Dalit women who are subjected to the economic and sexual power of dominant castes and Ramaswamy's fight against familial and Brahminical constraints. Therefore, the study lends credence to the idea that gender is structurally separated by caste and class.

The shift from marginalisation to self-assertion is highlighted in Kranti Lodhiand Nisha Indraguru's "Resistance and Resilience: The New Woman in Dalit Feminist Narratives" (2026). Their idea of the New Woman emphasises individuality, resistance, transformation, and resiliency. Their paradigm is useful for analysing rural women who take part in collective struggles, even though Ramaswamy's memoir deviates from the Dalit literary texts that are their main focus. It refocuses critical attention on how marginalised women become socially and politically visible rather than just their suffering.

Objectives

To analyse how Gita Ramaswamy's autobiography subverts traditional notions of submissive and honourable womanhood.

To examine how female selfhood, education, economic independence, and bodily autonomy relate to each other in *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman*.

To examine Ramaswamy's shift from personal rebellion to political and feminist awareness.

To look into how *Madiga* women in Ibrahimpatnam experience various forms of gender oppression due to caste and class.

To investigate how women are transformed from marginalised individuals into active participants in social and political battles through collective organization.

To assess how female agency is portrayed in the book as a shift from individual rejection to solidarity, group resistance, and structural change.

Methodology

The study uses intersectional, feminist, and Dalit feminist techniques to qualitative close reading. It looks at incidents including the control of the body, menstruation, education, marriage, sexuality, domestic violence, economic independence, public mobility, labour, caste dominance, feminist organisations, and rural women's political involvement. The research leverages specific secondary scholarship to contextualise female autonomy, intersectionality, resistance, and collective agency while differentiating Ramaswamy's *Savarna* feminist experience from the caste-class-gender realities facing *Madiga* women.

Discussion

The Making of the "Good Woman"

Gita Ramaswamy explores how families and communities educate girls what it means to be a "good woman" in *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman*. Appropriate attire, ceremonial purity, parental obedience, sexual modesty, limited mobility, and ultimately marriage are all necessary for respectability. Although these expectations seem like commonplace aspects of family life, they influence a daughter's ability to use her body, pursue her education, and envision her future. In retrospect, Ramaswamy notes that "caste and patriarchy are normalised everywhere, made to appear as natural and permanent as sunrise" (21). Such laws are hard to question since they seem inevitable due to recurrence, as demonstrated by the analogy with sunrise. Her story challenges that seeming inevitability by viewing customs as agreements made and upheld by individuals.

When Ramaswamy rejects the laws governing her own body, her resistance starts. Ritual limitations during menstruation call for separation and forbid interaction with household items. "Nothing, absolutely nothing, was touched while menstruating," she remembers (Ramaswamy

32). She examines the theory that menstruation causes contamination by touching food and sacred objects, drawing on her science knowledge. The anticipated outcomes don't materialise. The authority of inherited knowledge is challenged by what starts off as a private experiment. She writes, "I learned to question everything" (Ramaswamy 33). Her later political activity is built around this questioning tendency.

Another early lesson in the enforcement of female respectability is seen in clothing. "Girls from good families do not flaunt themselves like that," Ramaswamy's mother reminds her when she wishes to wear a brassiere (Ramaswamy 35). A personal decision is seen as a sign of sexual integrity and respect for one's family. In response, Ramaswamy earns money through sewing and tuition, which she then uses to purchase necessities. The event links material independence and bodily choice. Economic reliance allows people to control a young lady if she has to ask for money for every choice she makes with her body.

Education, Marriage, and the Claim to an Independent Life

Ramaswamy has opportunities through education that go beyond what is expected of a respectable girl. Although her parents provide their daughters with an education, this does not grant them complete control over their future. Ramaswamy's father protests in part because the course would force her to live away from home, despite the fact that she does well and wants to attend an IIT. Although her accomplishment is acknowledged, her movement is still governed by her parents. Her mother advises her to "get a job and stand on your own two feet" at the same time (Ramaswamy 43). Thus, education has two conflicting meanings inside the family: it helps a woman become self-sufficient, yet it doesn't always provide her the freedom to choose where or how to study.

An additional barrier to financial freedom is revealed by her sister's experience. Her sister is employed and educated, but her husband abuses her because he wants to control her income. The violence demonstrates that a husband's claim to power is not automatically terminated by a woman's wealth. Ramaswamy decides, "I wouldn't kowtow to any man" and "I would do my best to fulfil my potential" after observing its consequences (40). While the second

commitment affirms that a woman has the right to develop capacities beyond those authorised by her family or marriage, the first commitment rejects subordination.

As a result, Ramaswamy challenges the idea that marriage is a woman's obligatory life goal. Her stance is a rejection of the loss of identity and reliance that marriage may entail. An alternative possibility is demonstrated by her subsequent connection with Cyril Reddy. He "had no problem with me being the more public figure," according to her (Ramaswamy 19). Because political exposure is sometimes viewed as a male privilege, the statement is significant. Their relationship shows that a woman's autonomous public role and closeness may coexist when neither partner believes that the woman's goals must take a backseat.

From Personal Anger to Collective Feminist Consciousness

Ramaswamy's time at university provides a vocabulary for the experiences she had in her family. She can link limits on menstruation, control over schooling, domestic violence, and sexual harassment to broader patterns of power by reading feminist literature and talking to politically engaged women. According to her, she and her companions "metamorphosed from helpless angry young women to being persons with entitlements" (Ramaswamy 49). The term "*entitlements*" signifies a change from asking for permission to asserting one's rights.

Ramaswamy's perception of public space is likewise impacted by this shift. Even in the absence of a clear ban, sexual harassment on the road and in educational or recreational contexts might restrict women's mobility. A woman who fears harassment could refrain from going to meetings, travelling alone, or being outside during specific times. Through travel, discussion, friendship, and political engagement, Ramaswamy challenges those boundaries. One aspect of her growth as a political subject is her increasing freedom of mobility.

This process is advanced through organised discussion with other women. Problems like dowries, harassment, and the objectification of women are no longer seen as discrete challenges that affect individual people. By contrasting their experiences, women find commonalities and shift accountability from individuals who are harmed to the behaviours that allow it. Women can identify issues, provide mutual support, and take action based on their common understanding through collective organization.

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Ramaswamy's engagement in revolutionary politics highlights inconsistencies between political movements while strengthening her dedication to group transformation. Comradery, intellectual independence, and a purpose outside of traditional domestic life are all provided by left activity. However, women may continue to be under-represented in leadership roles and male activists may still depend on women's household work. An essential component of the memoir's feminist critique is its readiness to look at these disparities inside movements that Ramaswamy herself belonged to. A political organization's daily treatment of women must be compared against its emancipatory goals.

Family Authority and Female Citizenship

Conflict with her family escalates as Ramaswamy grows more self-reliant. Her parents want to take back control of a daughter whose decisions no longer align with their goals. When they confine her, the struggle intensifies to its highest level. She claims to be "twenty-one years old, locked in by my parents, and needed to be freed" in her need for assistance (Ramaswamy 76). Her emphasis on her age is noteworthy because she claims that being a daughter does not negate her status as an adult with the right to choose where to live and what to do.

The event demonstrates how a limitation of autonomy can be hidden within the rhetoric of familial protection. While Ramaswamy views her imprisonment as a limitation on her independence, her family comprehends its actions via parental concern. Her answer gives female citizenship a tangible form. If an adult woman is unable to leave her parents' house, her right to pursue a political career is meaningless. Her fight thus connects more general issues of personality and rights with the private domain of the family.

Caste Privilege and Different Experiences of Patriarchy

Ramaswamy's feminism is altered by her work in Ibrahimpatnam. She has encountered limitations due to her gender, but she has not encountered landlessness, untouchability, or reliance on landlords from the dominant caste. Her schooling, fluency in English, metropolitan connections, and *Savarna* identity give her access to resources that many of the individuals she starts working with have not. "I know that I belong to the *Savarna* side of the fence," she says,

clearly acknowledging this distinction (Ramaswamy 23). The metaphor acknowledges a structural gap that cannot be closed by benevolence alone.

Therefore, it is necessary to take into account both her early experiences and those of *Madiga* women without seeing them as the same. Ramaswamy faces pressure to marry, limitations on his freedom of travel and education, and ritual regulations. In addition to landlessness, caste hierarchy, agricultural labour, and dominant-caste authority, *Madiga* women confront gendered constraints. The intersecting framework developed by Sabharwal and Sonalkar explains why all of these experiences cannot be explained by a single category. While caste and class influence the types of power that certain women are exposed to, gender influences how women are treated.

These disparities are highlighted by Ramaswamy's description of landlord dominance. "Newly-wed *Madiga* brides were first brought to the dora'sgadi" for allegedly "breaking in," according to her account (18). Here, sexual compulsion demonstrates a landlord's authority over a woman and, via her, over her neighbourhood and family. The violence is a part of a social structure where claims to women's bodies and caste position support control over land and labour. The framework that makes these women more vulnerable would be missed if the practice were simply described as violence against women.

Another example is how nursing agricultural labourers are treated. "The breasts of lactating women labourers were pressed to check if they really needed to feed their infants," according to Ramaswamy (18). The women's own description of their physical demands is deemed inadequate. Because labour reliance and caste hierarchy permit such humiliation, their bosses assert that they have the authority to inspect them. The show also highlights a discrepancy between how poor working women are treated and how the public respects motherhood. Demands for labour take precedence over their need to care for infants.

Land, Labour, and Women's Material Freedom

There are clear gender undertones to the memoir's land struggles. A household without land may rely on landowners for resources, employment, pay, and credit. This reliance can make women more vulnerable to pressure and diminish the usefulness of their rights. A woman and her

family may be more equipped to negotiate, resist exploitation, and question authority if they have more control over their land and means of subsistence.

As a result, women's involvement in battles for rights, land, pay, and bonded labour broadens the definition of feminist politics. The freedom to select a personal connection or reject a custom is important, but those decisions are made under quite different material circumstances. Ramaswamy's travel raises issues of women's autonomy in relation to economic survival. It also demonstrates why the experiences of an educated urban lady are insufficient to comprehend the politics of rural Dalit women.

The Sangam and Rural Women as Political Subjects

Collective organization becomes crucial to the memoir's description of change when it delves into Ibrahimpatnam's problems. The book is "more importantly, the story of the Sangam's struggles and achievements," according to Ramaswamy (23). This remark aligns her own growth with the accomplishments of organised communities. Additionally, it opposes portraying rural residents as passive recipients of an activist's action.

The Sangam makes it possible for complaints that could be risky to speak individually to be brought up collectively. If a woman confronts a landlord or official on her own, she might be retaliated against; nevertheless, organization fosters collective strength and a way to pursue requests. Women take engage in battles for entitlements, land, salaries, bonded labour, and dignity. They continue to be workers, spouses, mothers, and members of the community, but they now start challenging authority and engaging in institutional negotiation. This process is pertinent to Chenamallu's description of collective resistance creating "political subjects capable of negotiation and resistance" (628).

Poverty and caste discrimination do not instantly vanish as a result of collective agency. It implies that women learn to understand and respond to their circumstances collectively. According to the memoir, relationships, local knowledge, organization, and persistent activity are what lead to political transformation. Dalit women from rural areas participate in that effort with their own perspectives on what needs to happen.

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Solidarity, Narrative Authority, and the Reconstruction of Womanhood

The fact that Ramaswamy wrote the memoir begs the question of who narrates the tale of group struggle. In retrospect, she frames interactions, chooses events, and interprets them. Narrative authority is also a topic of contemplation in the book because of her recognition of *Savarna* privilege and the Sangam's pivotal role. Guru's claim that "Dalit women talk differently" highlights the need for solidarity to take into account the disparities in women's socioeconomic statuses (2548). Although Ramaswamy has a platform thanks to her education and activist networks, her experiences are not equivalent to those of the *Madiga* women whose sufferings she describes.

When she portrays herself as someone who also learns, her most compelling explanation of solidarity is revealed. People who are subject to caste and agricultural dominance are aware of how those systems function. Realising this keeps political work from turning into a one-way process where a privileged activist teaches others. It enables the memoir to depict women creating collective action while preserving their unique backgrounds and viewpoints.

Thus, a singular model of femininity is rejected in *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman*. An adolescent questioning menstrual restrictions, an educated daughter seeking autonomy, a violent wife, students facing harassment, women navigating male-dominated politics, *Madiga* brides exposed to landlord power, mothers humiliated at work, and rural women participating in collective struggle are all included in this account. Although their situations are different, they all highlight the conflict over who has the authority to define a woman's body, labour, choices, and political voice.

Ramaswamy's personal journey progresses from challenging family norms to collaborating with others to alter material and social circumstances. Although the memoir does not portray one woman's liberation from limitations as the culmination of feminist emancipation, her unique revolt is nevertheless important. It locates the ongoing emancipation effort in challenging inherited authority, obtaining material resources, bridging social divides, and organising as a group.

Conclusion

Because it follows female agency from private acts of refusal to collective political engagement, Gita Ramaswamy's *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman* presents a unique gender narrative. Ramaswamy's opposition starts in the Brahmin home, where gendered norms govern menstruation, attire, education, marriage, sexuality, and mobility. She progressively gains the ability to see personal limitations as systemic injustices thanks to her education, economic independence, feminist literature, university politics, and involvement in women's organisations.

This perspective is greatly expanded by her later interaction with Ibrahimpatnam. *Madiga* women's experiences show how caste, gender, landlessness, work, and dominant-caste authority all contribute to forms of oppression. The humiliation of female farm labourers and the sexual vulnerability of Dalit women serve as examples of why universal conceptions of gender are still insufficient.

However, gender politics in the book cannot be boiled down to oppression. Women are frequently shown to be inquisitive, mobile, economically engaged, politically aware, and organised as a group. By acknowledging *Savarna* privilege, Ramaswamy further changes solidarity from an exploitation of Dalit women's experiences to a self-reflexive practice. Thus, *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman* reimagines womanhood as a changing political identity rather than a fixed social duty. Female autonomy starts with rejection, develops by education and independence, and gains its greatest social significance via solidarity, group resistance, and the fight for dignity.

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