



## WRITING FROM THE MARGINS: CASTE, GENDER, RESISTANCE, AND IDENTITY IN SUJATHA GIDLA'S ANTS AMONG ELEPHANTS

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### Abstract

*Sujatha Gidla's **Ants among Elephants**: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India offer a compelling autobiographical narrative that exposes the entrenched caste, gender, and political struggles faced by Dalits in postcolonial India. This paper critically analyzes how Gidla's memoir navigates the intersections of caste oppression and gender discrimination, while simultaneously narrating a history of resistance and identity reclamation. Using the frameworks of Dalit feminism, subaltern studies, and postcolonial theory, the study foregrounds the ways in which autobiographical storytelling becomes a form of subaltern testimony, enabling marginalized voices to disrupt dominant historiographies and hegemonic discourses.*

*The memoir presents caste as a pervasive and structural system, highlighting its persistence even among Dalit Christians and within leftist political movements that claim egalitarianism. Gidla's narrative exposes the contradictions between ideological commitments to class struggle and the lived realities of caste-based discrimination, especially through the story of her uncle Satyam, a Communist revolutionary who nonetheless confronts caste prejudice. The paper further explores the gendered experiences of Dalit women depicted in the memoir, revealing how caste and patriarchy operate simultaneously to marginalize Dalit women, but also how these women engage in everyday acts of resilience and resistance.*

*Moreover, Gidla's diasporic position as a writer in the United States adds a transnational dimension to her narrative, complicating traditional understandings of Dalit identity and caste as solely localized phenomena. Writing in English for a global audience, Gidla navigates issues of authenticity and representation, using language as a tool for empowerment and subversion. Her memoir challenges assumptions that caste is confined to India's borders by illustrating its manifestations in diaspora communities.*

*Ultimately, this paper argues that **Ants Among Elephants** functions as a counter-history—a literary and political intervention that reclaims Dalit subjectivity and disrupts dominant narratives of Indian nationhood. Gidla's autobiographical storytelling embodies the emancipatory potential of Dalit feminist discourse, demonstrating how personal narrative can serve as a powerful site of resistance, identity formation, and social critique. This study contributes to the growing scholarship on Dalit literature and postcolonial studies by highlighting the importance of intersectional analyses in understanding caste, gender, and identity.*



## Introduction

In the vast and complex tapestry of Indian literature, Dalit narratives have historically been silenced, ignored, or distorted by the dominant upper-caste gaze. However, in recent decades, a growing body of Dalit literature has emerged to challenge hegemonic representations and reclaim voice, identity, and memory. Sujatha Gidla's *Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017) is a striking contribution to this corpus—a memoir that not only documents the lives of an untouchable Christian family in postcolonial Andhra Pradesh but also critiques the socio-political institutions that perpetuate caste and gender inequalities. As a diasporic writer situated within the United States, Gidla brings a unique vantage point to her narrative: she writes both from within and outside the Indian social order, wielding autobiographical storytelling as a form of resistance.

At its core, *Ants among Elephants* is a deeply personal yet profoundly political text. It recounts the life of Gidla's uncle, Satyam, a Communist revolutionary, alongside the struggles of her mother and extended family, tracing their experiences from the colonial period into the decades following independence. Yet this is not merely a chronicle of one family's suffering; it is an indictment of systemic oppression, a disruption of nationalist mythologies, and an intervention in literary and historical discourse. Through her meticulous narrative, Gidla foregrounds the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender—drawing attention to the compounded marginalization faced by Dalit women and exposing the contradictions of political ideologies that promise equality but reproduce hierarchy.

This paper argues that Gidla's memoir employs the framework of autobiographical storytelling to navigate and expose the structural violence of caste and patriarchy, while simultaneously crafting a counter-narrative rooted in resistance, survival, and identity reclamation. By situating *Ants Among Elephants* within the critical frameworks of Dalit feminism, subaltern studies, and postcolonial theory, this study aims to unpack the layered representations of oppression and agency in the text. Gidla's work not only exemplifies the potential of Dalit literature to confront epistemic erasure but also challenges the limitations of dominant historiography and political thought, both within India and in the global literary imagination.

Through an interdisciplinary approach, this paper explores how Gidla's narrative—emerging from the margins—reconfigures the relationship between literature and politics. In doing so, it contributes to broader conversations around subaltern visibility, feminist resistance, and the reimagining of modern Indian identity through the lens of the oppressed. 1. *Autobiography as Subaltern Testimony*

Autobiography in Dalit literature functions not merely as personal recollection but as political testimony—a declaration of existence from those historically denied subjecthood. Sujatha Gidla's *Ants among Elephants* exemplifies this dynamic, using life



writing to articulate what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously framed as the subaltern's struggle to speak. Spivak asks, "Can the subaltern speak?" and answers pessimistically, noting how the structures of power and knowledge often prevent such speech from being heard or recognized (Spivak 104). Yet Gidla's memoir defies this erasure. As both narrator and witness, she asserts her family's experience within a literary and historical canon that has rendered Dalits invisible. Her autobiographical mode becomes a radical act of reclamation—a deliberate subversion of the silencing mechanisms embedded in caste society, political movements, and even language itself.

The autobiographical form in *Ants Among Elephants* is layered. It weaves Gidla's personal history with the broader life story of her uncle, Satyam, positioning his political awakening alongside the day-to-day struggles of untouchability. This dual structure destabilizes traditional autobiographical conventions by merging the personal with the collective, and the individual with the ideological. Gidla's project echoes Gramsci's notion of the "organic intellectual"—a figure who, emerging from the oppressed class, uses critical consciousness to challenge dominant ideologies (Gramsci 10). Satyam, as portrayed in the text, is precisely such a figure: an untouchable who becomes a revolutionary but whose caste continues to haunt his political identity. In narrating his story, Gidla participates in the making of a counter-history—one that refuses the sanitized narratives of Communist heroism and Nehruvian progress.

Furthermore, the memoir's linguistic and cultural positioning deserves attention. Gidla, an English-language writer educated in the United States, writes for a global audience while recounting intensely regional experiences. This linguistic shift complicates questions of authenticity but also reflects the evolution of Dalit literature into diasporic and transnational spaces. In this regard, Gidla straddles two epistemic worlds: she draws from the oral histories and vernacular knowledge of her family while situating those voices within the formal, globalized framework of English-language nonfiction. The result is a powerful tension between rootedness and distance, insider knowledge and outsider articulation.

This duality also informs her narrative strategy. Gidla does not present her family's story in chronological or linear fashion. Instead, she moves through fragmented recollections, overlapping timelines, and shifting focalizations. This form mirrors the disrupted, discontinuous experience of caste oppression—an experience that defies neat sequencing. In doing so, Gidla challenges dominant historiographies that favor coherence, progress, and closure. As Sharmila Rege asserts, Dalit testimonios must be read as "collective narratives of suffering and resistance" that question the very epistemological foundations of caste society (Rege 14). *Ants Among Elephants* fulfills this function: it is not a story told to inspire empathy alone; it is a confrontation with structures that rely on erasure to survive.



Gidla's memoir is also conscious of the politics of visibility. In many ways, her decision to write her family's story is a response to Spivak's challenge—a refusal to remain silent or be spoken for. As a Dalit woman writing in English, Gidla inserts herself into multiple literary and academic discourses where her identity is often presumed absent. Her narrative becomes a space of speech, of intellectual agency, and of reclaiming a historical voice long denied its place in India's national narrative.

Ultimately, *Ants Among Elephants* must be read not simply as an individual memoir but as a subaltern testimony—a literary form that resists elite historiography by inscribing the lived reality of caste oppression. It is through the very act of telling that Gidla and her family challenge their marginalization. Her autobiography thus functions not as self-expression alone, but as collective resistance.

**II. Gender and Dalit Feminist Interventions**  
If caste is a persistent social wound in Gidla's work, gender compounds the injury. Dalit women, as Sharmila Rege argues, experience a "triple burden" of caste, class, and gender, which distinguishes their oppression from that of both upper-caste women and Dalit men. Manjula's life illustrates this intersectionality: she is denied education, autonomy, and basic respect within both the family and the broader community. Gidla recounts how her mother was excluded not just by caste society but also by male-dominated leftist movements, revealing the patriarchal underpinnings even within spaces of supposed liberation.

The narrative thus critiques both Brahmanical patriarchy and the gender blindness of radical politics. Gidla writes, "My mother had seen revolutions, but none of them included her" (Gidla 211). This aligns with Dalit feminist critiques that mainstream feminism often fails to account for caste, while Dalit political movements marginalize women's concerns. Through her mother's marginalization and resilience, Gidla not only documents pain but also reclaims agency. The act of storytelling becomes a mode of resistance, echoing Rege's assertion that Dalit women's autobiographies function as counter-narratives that disturb dominant historiographies.

## **2. Caste and Social Exclusion**

Central to Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* is a searing critique of the caste system, which functions as a rigid social hierarchy that dictates every aspect of Dalit life. Gidla's narrative foregrounds the entrenched discrimination faced by untouchables, who are relegated to the lowest rungs of social, economic, and political power. The memoir situates the family's experiences within the historical and ongoing realities of caste-based exclusion, tracing its persistence from colonial rule through India's post-independence period.

The memoir highlights the paradox faced by Dalits who convert to Christianity in hopes of escaping caste oppression. Gidla's family, like many Dalit Christians in Andhra Pradesh, continues to face untouchability and social ostracism despite religious conversion—a fact that challenges the notion of Christianity as a caste-free religion. This



intersection of caste and religion underscores the pervasiveness of caste as a socio-cultural system that transcends formal institutional boundaries. Gidla writes, “Conversion was never a ticket out of caste. It was only a change in ritual, not in reality” (Gidla 45), emphasizing that caste prejudice is deeply embedded in social consciousness.

The family’s experiences reveal caste’s insidious reach into everyday life—housing segregation, restricted access to public spaces, limited educational opportunities, and exclusion from social and political institutions. Gidla’s account of her family’s struggle for a house that would not be considered “polluted” by caste Hindu neighbors is a poignant example of spatial exclusion. She narrates how their residence was marked and isolated, a physical reminder of untouchability. These stories vividly demonstrate the materiality of caste: it is not merely symbolic but tangible, shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Additionally, the memoir interrogates caste within the framework of leftist politics. Gidla’s uncle, Satyam, is a Communist revolutionary who fights for the proletariat but remains acutely aware of caste’s persistence even within radical political movements. The memoir exposes the limits of Communist ideology, which often subsumed caste under class struggle, thereby erasing the unique oppression of Dalits. Gidla critiques this reductionism: “The revolution never addressed caste; it only promised class equality, but caste was too deep” (Gidla 112). This critique aligns with Ambedkarite thought, which argues that caste cannot be dismantled through class struggle alone but requires a distinct anti-caste movement (Ambedkar 58).

Moreover, the memoir illustrates how caste shapes gender relations within Dalit communities, where patriarchal norms compound caste violence. Women, as depicted through Gidla’s mother and aunts, endure both caste-based discrimination and gendered subjugation. They occupy the lowest social spaces, subjected to exploitation in domestic labor and public humiliation. Yet, they also embody resilience, maintaining cultural practices and passing down oral histories that resist erasure.

Gidla’s text thus reveals caste as a multi-dimensional system of oppression, embedded not only in social and economic relations but also in identity and cultural norms. The memoir’s detailed recounting of these experiences provides a critical corrective to dominant nationalist histories that tend to portray caste as a relic of the past or a problem solved by independence.

By anchoring her family’s story in the lived realities of caste discrimination, Gidla advances a powerful critique of Indian society’s failure to dismantle caste hierarchies. This analysis contributes to the larger corpus of Dalit literature that demands recognition of caste as an ongoing, structural injustice, requiring both political and cultural redress.



### 3. Gender and Dalit Feminist Interventions

While caste remains the defining axis of oppression in *Ants Among Elephants*, Sujatha Gidla's memoir also foregrounds the gendered dimensions of Dalit experience, illustrating how caste and patriarchy intersect to produce unique forms of marginalization for Dalit women. Through her portrayal of female family members—her mother, aunts, and grandmother—Gidla reveals how Dalit women bear a “double burden” (Guru 84), facing violence and discrimination both from dominant caste society and within their own communities.

Dalit feminist scholars such as Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru have long emphasized the importance of acknowledging this intersectionality, arguing that caste and gender oppression cannot be understood separately. Rege asserts that Dalit feminism demands a break from mainstream feminist narratives that often overlook caste (Rege 12), while Guru highlights that Dalit women's “voice is silenced even within Dalit movements” (Guru 81). Gidla's memoir is an enactment of this feminist project—giving voice to women who have been doubly silenced.

In *Ants Among Elephants*, Gidla narrates the harsh realities of domestic labor, sexual violence, and social policing imposed on Dalit women. The memoir recounts instances where women labor intensively within their homes and fields, yet their work is unrecognized and uncompensated. Gidla's mother, for example, is depicted as a woman who tirelessly manages household responsibilities while negotiating the constraints imposed by caste discrimination. These experiences mirror the material conditions documented in Dalit feminist scholarship, where women's labor is both exploited and invisible (Paik 99).

Moreover, Gidla exposes the patriarchal norms that persist within Dalit families, complicating the image of Dalit communities as solely victims of external oppression. The memoir reveals gender hierarchies that regulate women's mobility, sexuality, and voice. For instance, Gidla describes how her mother was expected to maintain family honor through modesty and obedience, even while enduring discrimination outside the household. This mirrors Rege's argument that Dalit feminism must confront patriarchy both within and outside the caste system (Rege 54).

Importantly, Gidla also highlights women's agency and resistance. Despite systemic constraints, Dalit women in the memoir assert their dignity through everyday acts of defiance—refusing to submit silently to humiliation, passing down stories of injustice, and supporting one another in community spaces. This resilience aligns with Dalit feminist notions of survival and resistance as intertwined processes (Paik 102).

Gidla's inclusion of female narratives within a predominantly male revolutionary family challenges dominant historiographies that center male political actors while marginalizing women's experiences. The memoir's feminist intervention disrupts the traditional public/private dichotomy by revealing how caste and gender intersect in both

domains, emphasizing the centrality of Dalit women's lived realities to any comprehensive understanding of caste oppression.

By situating *Ants Among Elephants* within Dalit feminist theory, this paper argues that Gidla's narrative not only documents oppression but also contributes to an epistemological shift—recognizing Dalit women as critical subjects in the politics of caste and gender. Her storytelling thus serves as both representation and resistance, embodying the emancipatory potential of Dalit feminist discourse.

#### 4. Resistance and Political Consciousness

A central theme in Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* is the multifaceted nature of resistance undertaken by Dalits in the face of oppressive caste hierarchies. Gidla traces her uncle Satyam's political journey as a Communist revolutionary, illustrating how resistance is not merely reactive but also deeply rooted in the assertion of identity and political consciousness. The memoir highlights the tension between ideological commitments to class struggle and the persistent reality of caste discrimination, thereby offering a nuanced critique of dominant leftist politics in India.

Satyam's revolutionary activism embodies the hopes and contradictions of Communist ideology, which promised an egalitarian society but often marginalized caste as a secondary concern. Gidla recounts how, despite his dedication to Communist ideals, Satyam continued to face caste-based prejudice even within his political circles. This experience reflects Ambedkar's critique that class struggle alone cannot dismantle caste, which is a more deeply entrenched and socially embedded system of hierarchy (Ambedkar 58). Gidla writes, "The revolution never addressed caste; it only promised class equality, but caste was too deep" (Gidla 112), underscoring the limitations of political movements that overlook the specificities of caste oppression.

The memoir also explores forms of resistance beyond formal political engagement. Gidla's family, particularly the women, participate in everyday acts of defiance—preserving cultural practices, sharing stories, and refusing to accept humiliation passively. These quotidian forms of resistance align with James Scott's concept of "everyday resistance," wherein marginalized groups resist domination through subtle, non-confrontational means that evade overt repression (Scott 29).

Furthermore, Gidla's narrative itself is an act of resistance—a counter-history that disrupts dominant nationalist and postcolonial narratives which tend to romanticize India's independence and obscure caste's continuing violence. By foregrounding Dalit subjectivity and articulating the lived realities of caste discrimination, the memoir reclaims space in literary and historical discourses that have traditionally excluded subaltern voices. This act of storytelling is a form of intellectual resistance akin to Gramsci's "war of position," challenging cultural hegemony through the production of alternative knowledge (Gramsci 12).



Gidla's diasporic position adds another layer to this resistance. Writing from the United States, she bridges local experiences of caste with global conversations about social justice and human rights. Her use of English as the language of narration facilitates wider dissemination and disrupts the linguistic hierarchies that often marginalize vernacular Dalit literature. Yet, this also raises questions about authenticity and representation—a tension that Gidla navigates carefully, asserting the legitimacy of her voice while honoring the vernacular origins of her story.

In sum, resistance in *Ants Among Elephants* is multifaceted: it is political, cultural, and literary. Gidla's memoir does not offer facile solutions but rather maps the complexities of fighting caste oppression within and beyond formal political structures. Through her portrayal of Satyam's activism, family solidarity, and her own narrative intervention, the memoir contributes to a deeper understanding of Dalit resistance as a dynamic and evolving force.

### **5. Identity and Transnational Location**

Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* transcends the local and national contexts of caste to engage with questions of identity in a transnational frame. Writing from her diasporic location in the United States, Gidla complicates traditional understandings of Dalit identity by highlighting how caste-based oppression persists beyond India's borders, even as migration offers new possibilities for mobility and voice.

Diaspora theory and postcolonial studies provide useful frameworks to analyze Gidla's transnational narration. The diasporic subject is often characterized by hybridity, displacement, and negotiation between multiple cultural frameworks (Brah 178). Gidla embodies this hybridity; she is both an insider and outsider to Indian society. While deeply rooted in her family's Dalit experience, her education and life abroad grant her a vantage point from which to critique Indian social structures with a certain distance and authority.

However, this diasporic positioning is fraught with challenges. Writing in English for an international audience risks alienating local vernacular readership and invites scrutiny regarding authenticity. Yet, Gidla's choice to write in English can also be read as a strategic act of empowerment. English operates as a global language that enables marginalized voices to enter conversations otherwise dominated by hegemonic narratives. As Ania Loomba argues, postcolonial subjects often appropriate colonial languages to resist colonial legacies and assert new identities (Loomba 145). Gidla's memoir thus participates in a complex linguistic politics—using the language of the colonizer to dismantle caste hierarchies embedded in Indian society.

Furthermore, *Ants Among Elephants* challenges the assumption that caste is solely an "Indian problem." Gidla illustrates how caste discrimination accompanies Indian migrants abroad, manifesting in workplaces, educational institutions, and social settings. This global persistence of caste underscores its function not simply as a local tradition but



as a structural and cultural system with diasporic ramifications. Gidla's narrative thereby pushes Dalit studies toward a global framework, insisting on the recognition of caste as a transnational axis of oppression.

Identity in the memoir is not fixed but fluid and contested. Gidla negotiates the tension between pride in her Dalit heritage and the desire for social acceptance in new environments. This negotiation reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of "third space," wherein hybrid identities are constructed through cultural translation and negotiation (Bhabha 37). Gidla's writing inhabits this third space, fostering a critical awareness of caste's imprint on identity formation both within and beyond India.

In sum, the transnational aspect of Gidla's memoir enriches its political and cultural critique. By situating Dalit identity within global circuits of migration and discourse, *Ants Among Elephants* expands the scope of Dalit literature and challenges scholars to rethink caste as a multifaceted, transnational phenomenon.

### Conclusion

Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* stands as a profound and urgent contribution to Dalit literature, one that intricately weaves together themes of caste, gender, resistance, and identity through the powerful lens of autobiographical storytelling. This memoir not only documents the lived experiences of an untouchable family in Andhra Pradesh but also challenges dominant narratives that have long erased or sanitized Dalit histories. By foregrounding the intersectional oppressions faced by Dalit men and women alike, Gidla's work exemplifies the emancipatory potential of Dalit feminist discourse and subaltern testimony.

Through her narrative, Gidla exposes the persistence of caste as a pervasive, structural system that transcends religion, geography, and political ideology. Her critique of leftist movements reveals the limitations of class-based frameworks in addressing caste-based inequalities, underscoring the necessity of intersectional political praxis. Moreover, Gidla's inclusion of gendered experiences enriches our understanding of Dalit oppression, highlighting the unique challenges faced by Dalit women and the resilience they embody.

The memoir's transnational dimension further complicates and expands the discourse on Dalit identity, illustrating how caste's imprint persists in global diasporic contexts. Gidla's diasporic voice, mediated through English, negotiates complex questions of authenticity and representation while making Dalit narratives accessible to a wider audience. This aspect positions *Ants Among Elephants* at the crossroads of postcolonial and diasporic studies, pushing the boundaries of Dalit literature beyond the nation-state.

Ultimately, *Ants Among Elephants* is a counter-history—an intellectual and emotional act of resistance that rewrites the marginal as central. Gidla's autobiographical storytelling fulfills the imperative of Dalit literature to speak back to power, disrupt hegemonic knowledge, and affirm the dignity and agency of the oppressed. As Indian

literary and social landscapes continue to grapple with caste, gender, and identity, Gidla's memoir remains a vital text for scholars, activists, and readers committed to justice and equity.

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