

Becoming the Other: Simone de Beauvoir and the Gendered Marginalisation of Rita Welinkar

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Abstract

This chapter critically reads the gendered marginalisation of the eponymous protagonist of *Rita Welinkar* (1995) adopting Simone de Beauvoir's lens put forth in *The Second Sex*. Rita Welinkar, a forty plus single woman in Bombay is denied her selfhood on the grounds of her femininity. Opening in a hospital where Rita is undergoing treatment for her nervous breakdown, the storyline unfolds through an extended letter she writes to her childhood friend, Saraswati, in which she reconstructs the gendered architecture of her adult life. The chapter illuminates Rita's marginalisation in the novel adopting Simone de Beauvoir's interlinked concepts of femininity as social construction, immanence versus transcendence, and the complicity of women in each other's Othering. The specific episodes of Rita's alterity in the text are studied under the following interlocking gendered axes to bring coherence and rigour to the analysis: the social illegitimacy of her unmarried status,

the perpetual surveillance of her body, the denial of any legitimate social existence to her sexuality outside patriarchal structures, and the policing of her selfhood by women who have internalised their own Otherness. Finally, the nervous breakdown in the novel is not seen as a point of defeat, but as a threshold; one from which the constructed Other gradually begins to emerge as a subject.

Keywords: *Othering, gendered marginalisation, immanence, benevolent sexism, Simone de Beauvoir, Shanta Gokhale*

Introduction

Rita Welinkar (1995), written by Shanta Gokhale, is a novel translated from the original Marathi to English by the author herself. It tells the story of its eponymous protagonist – a forty plus single, middle-class woman who is marginalised by her family and the society. The eldest of four siblings, Rita Welinkar (henceforth: Rita) takes on the responsibility of providing for her family after her father unexpectedly loses his job. Rita is in a romantic relationship with a married man for over fifteen years. When she asks him to openly acknowledge their relationship, he not only refuses to do so, but gives the situation a spin such that it appears what he does is for Rita's good. Rita bears it all, but the accumulated tension of years erupts in the form of a nervous breakdown. The novel opens here with Rita undergoing treatment at a psychiatric hospital for her frayed nerves.

Rita Welinkar is not a novel of dramatic, violent oppression. It is an intimate, everyday portrayal of the myriad ways in which a woman's selfhood is slowly chipped away by the demands of family, social expectations and a clandestine relationship. It is a novel that showcases a protagonist who has spent over fifteen years being everything to everybody, and being nothing to her own self.

This sidelining of the protagonist's self in the novel brought on by societal norms and her romantic relationship is the focus of study of this chapter. We take up Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949/2010) as the theoretical apparatus to understand the protagonist's marginalisation and its implications on her selfhood and identity. Beauvoir's foundational argument that one is not born a woman, but becomes woman, and that this very becoming is the process of construction of the Other against which man defines himself as a subject, is an illuminating light that brings out the nuances of the novel's storyline as it unfolds. This chapter traces Rita's gendered marginalisation through Beauvoir's framework and argues that Rita's nervous breakdown is not her nadir in life, but the threshold: it is that space through which the hitherto Othered Rita pulls herself together and sets about on a life that reclaims that very Othered self.

Beauvoir's Framework: Becoming the Other

"One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir, 1949/2010, 330). This sentence, perhaps the most significant in twentieth century feminist thought, declares Beauvoir's central argument: femininity is not a biological given, but is a social construction that emerges from a systematic denial of woman's capacity for autonomous selfhood. Drawing from Aristotle and Saint Thomas, Beauvoir presents the following picture of woman: "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man [...]; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute. She is the Other" (26). Thus, the construction of femininity and the construction of Otherness are, for Beauvoir, the same process.

Central to this argument is Beauvoir's distinction between immanence and transcendence. Transcendence

refers to the human capacity to project oneself toward future possibilities. It entails pursuing ambitions, creating meaning through action etc. Immanence, on the contrary, is the condition of being confined to the repetitive and the relational; it is existing for others rather than for oneself. Beauvoir's argument is that societal norms deliberately and consistently assign women to immanence, while reserving transcendence for men (Beauvoir, 1949/2010, 37). Women are made to structure their lives around the needs of fathers, husbands and children, thereby obliterating their own desires. In cases when a woman strives towards transcendence, she is very conveniently seen as transgressive and incomprehensible.

A third aspect of Beauvoir's framework taken up in this chapter is what she calls women's complicity in the Othering of women around them. Beauvoir astutely recognises that patriarchal structures stand tall not just due to the efforts of men; women too contribute to the perpetuation of these norms. In her own words: "To refuse to be the Other, to refuse complicity with man, would mean for women to renounce all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them" (Beauvoir, 1949/2010, 30). Women who have over time internalised their own Othering, very often enforce it on other women. Ranging from judgment to social pressure to policing of deviance from prescribed femininity, this brand of Othering can take many shapes. This complicity practiced by women may be seen as a psychological consequence of being made to bear the burden of the patriarchal structures.

Finally, Beauvoir anticipates what Glick and Fiske (1996) would later term benevolent sexism -- the very shrewd exercise of control over women through apparent care rather than overt hostility (Beauvoir, 1949/2010, 30 & 161). These are instances when men manage women's existence in ways that benefit them while presenting this management as

the women's welfare. This form of Othering is particularly effective because of the veneer it comes with, which makes naming it difficult. The implication is that this Othering hardly ever is seen as hostile; instead, it is seen myopically by the women themselves as an act of love. This concept plays out in Rita's relationship with Vitthal Salvi as will be discussed in the forthcoming sections.

While Beauvoir was writing about mid-twentieth century France, the structures she identifies translate very well to the late twentieth century Bombay middle-class milieu Gokhale depicts. According marriage the prime place for the social legitimacy of women, the denial of female ambition and sexuality -- these are not cultural or insular manifestations of patriarchal oppression, but universal patriarchal structures that take on different local hues. A close reading of the novel, as will be seen in this chapter, demonstrates that Beauvoir's framework is not particularly imposed from outside as an act of literary criticism, but it is something that reveals itself from within Gokhale's storytelling.

That said, transposing Beauvoir's framework onto an Indian context without a critical mediation runs the risk of flattening the specificities of the social conditions within which Rita's Othering is produced. Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012) is accordingly taken as a complementary companion to Beauvoir. Interestingly, Menon begins her first chapter titled Family in the book thus: "There is zero tolerance for those who breach the carefully produced 'natural' order of society by refusing to conform to norms of looks and behaviour" (3). This chapter indeed takes up for analysis Rita's 'looks and behaviour' that render her a deviant on societal terms. Menon's seminal work interrogates the specific ways in which this comes to be. Her argument that feminist politics in India must contend with an especially dense network

of kinship obligations, community surveillance, and the policing of female sexuality within structures of respectability directly maps onto the world of *Rita Welinkar*. Menon specifically says if what is considered normal in the society (for example, Rita being married would have been normal) had been natural, then it would not require a vast network of controls to keep in place (Menon, 2012, 93). It thus follows that, Rita's marginalisation is thus not a function of not being married in the abstract, but is produced by the specific social grammar of Bombay's middle-class milieu where a woman of her age and background is simply seen as having failed at the task of being a woman. One can therefore argue that the choices Rita makes (and does not make) in the novel are not entirely indicative of her personality or psychology. Instead, it makes better sense to read her life situation being a result of the effects of the patriarchal society in which she is located. Thus, juxtaposing Menon with Beauvoir allows this chapter to hold two things simultaneously: Beauvoir's account of the universal mechanism by which women are constructed as Other, and Menon's grounding of that construction within the particular social and familial arrangements that govern women's lives.

Marriage as the Condition of Female Legitimacy

Beauvoir argues that marriage is the primary institution through which women are accorded social identity and value under patriarchy (328). In a patriarchal set-up, marriage is not a personal decision on how a woman would want to live her life, instead, it is the way to legitimise a woman's existence. That is to say, through marriage a woman becomes a recognised subject in the social order. Outside this set-up, a woman is automatically deemed bereft of social selfhood. This argument finds an evocative articulation in the social world of *Rita Welinkar*.

Rita is in her forties, financially self-sufficient, professionally accomplished, and socially illegitimate. Her unmarried status is not a neutral biographical fact but a form of deviance; it is her failure to fulfil the primary social obligation of femininity. Every relationship in the novel is inflected by this illegitimacy. Her parents look at her independence as ingratitude and her spinsterhood as obstinacy. Salvi himself, who has been in a relationship with Rita for more than fifteen years tells her parents that she should get married. At the hospital her nervous breakdown is viewed through the frame of her singlehood. The nurse's question, "Aren't you married?" is posed in such a way that the answer to the question would explain everything to Rita (Gokhale, 1995, 35).

A very revealing expression of this dynamic unfolds when Rita purchases a flat for herself using her own savings. Instead of rejoicing on her accomplishment, Rita's family (except her sister, Sangeeta) turn this purchase into a grievance against her (Gokhale, 1995, 71). Her father "threw a tantrum, slapping his forehead again and again with the palm of his hand," while her mother "wept noisily." Their gripe is that the money spent on the flat should have been used for Sangeeta's marriage. "What did she need a flat for?" is their fundamental question. This episode places centre stage Rita's marginalisation within her own family. As somebody who had been supporting her family financially for the past two decades, the same is expected of her forever. For Rita, the flat represents independence from marriage, for her it is a space that does not require a husband. Worse still, Salvi too is incapable of seeing the flat through Rita's eyes. When Rita invites him to the flat, he "stood on the threshold, mouth hanging wide open and eyes rolling around the flat [...]" (Gokhale, 1995, 61). He sees the flat as sending a confirmatory

message to his family about their suspicions regarding his relationship with Rita. Oblivious to what's going on in his mind, when Rita says that they can meet here in the flat with a clear conscience, Salvi curtly responds that only his wife has a right to a clear conscience (Gokhale, 1995, 61), implying that unlike Rita, she upholds societal norms. In Beauvoir's theorisation, the flat may well be seen as an act of transcendence: a woman taking charge of her own life rather than meekly waiting to be incorporated into someone else's. The family's rage at it is the rage of people who experience a woman's transcendence as an affront.

When Rita is hospitalised, her two sisters Dolly and Sherry write identical letters counselling her to adapt to societal norms. "That's the only way to sanity," according to them (Gokhale, 1995, 28). It warrants mention here that it was Rita who found grooms for Dolly and Sherry and married them off, spending money that she had earned. It is further fair to say here that Dolly and Sherry's letters to Rita do not portray sibling concern, but they are the voice of women who have chosen immanence and now see it their duty to pull other women into their ambit. Rita's furious response – "Do all married women have an automatic right to counsel me merely because I'm single?" (Gokhale, 1995, 28) is not just personal, it is a cry that refuses to bow down to the call for social conformity.

There's also a particular instance in the novel, when due to the mounting pressures of her life, Rita begins to lose focus in her work. Once considered smart and promising by her colleagues, she was now at the receiving end of jibes from them. Of her, they said: "She's out to catch a man at any cost. Poor thing. No husband, no kids. Wasn't bad looking at one time. Wonder why she didn't marry. Don't you know why?" (Gokhale, 1995, 91)

The Female Body Under Surveillance

Beauvoir argues that women's bodies are not experienced as their own but as objects under perpetual external evaluation. A woman's body is her primary social currency; its value determined not by how she inhabits it but by how it meets the standards of those who assess it. In *Rita Welinkar*, the body is a sustained site of gendered Othering, and Gokhale's narrative portrays the process through which Rita moves from internalised shame to hard-won recognition of herself.

Skin colour is the first and most persistent marker of bodily Othering in the novel. Rita's mother, Nalini, is a fair-skinned Brahmin woman whose complexion was her primary social asset. It was the quality that made her desirable, and more importantly, compensated for her eloping and marrying a casteless man. Rita has not inherited her mother's fairness, and its absence runs through the narrative as a conspicuous deficit. The run-up to Rita's nervous breakdown has been particularly difficult on her, so much so that she puts on a lot of weight. This is also the time when Rita decides to experiment with bright colours in her outfits which causes her mother to comment: "Why must she dress like a *kamati* woman?" (Gokhale, 1995, 19) That is to say, the colours of Rita's outfits are vulgar and are not appropriate for a dark-skinned woman. One can well discern that this comment by Rita's mother does not come from a place of maternal concern for her daughter, but is a transmission of social hierarchy that confers value exclusively on fair skin. This has a specifically Indian dimension that Beauvoir's framework unwittingly accommodates: caste and patriarchy intersect here, with fairness coded as upper-caste, marriageable, and legitimate. Rita's body thus marks her in this system as doubly insufficient. Nivedita Menon's remark mentioned

earlier about society being dismissive of those who do not conform to norms of physical appearance finds a resounding resonance here (3).

The moment that materialises the novel's argument about bodily Othering is Rita's mother's response to Rita's hospitalisation. When Salvi visits her parents, her mother's first questions to him are: "How is she looking now? Is she slimmer?" She then goes on to say, "It would be good if the illness helps her slim down" (Gokhale, 1995, 19). The casual cruelty in this situation is a laying bare of the operative mechanism of a social system in which a woman's physical appearance trumps everything else in her life. This is Othering in play: the reduction of a person to the appearance of their body, evaluated by one-dimensional, unintelligent external standards one cannot meet.

Rita's own relationship to her body is complex and undergoes a change as the novel progresses. With her gaining weight, she is infuriated at people calling her fat (Gokhale, 1995, 2). She takes up severe dieting, but even that doesn't help her. This causes her to wonder: "Could Salvi possibly really love me if this was what I looked like?" (Gokhale, 1995, 91) From tying her self-worth to her appearance and consequently to Salvi's validation of her, Rita comes around to see herself for who she really is. Convalescing in the hospital, when she looks at her face in the mirror, she finds her eyes beautiful. "Large. The colour of the golden surangi flower" (Gokhale, 1995, 6). This honest tête-à-tête with the self may be taken to understand that Rita is perhaps for the first time seeing herself through her own eyes rather than through the social gaze that has assessed and found her wanting. This moment may be read as a woman, at long last, beginning to reclaim her body as her own.

Female Sexuality Without Legitimate Structure

The relationship between Rita and Salvi is the novel's most pertinent and poignant demonstration of how female sexuality is structured and constrained by patriarchal social arrangements. It is also where Beauvoir's framework operates with the most analytical force.

Salvi is Rita's former boss. He is fifteen years older than her and married with two children. When Rita joins the workforce fresh out of high school at eighteen, he funds her college education, supports her professional development, involves himself attentively with her parents, and becomes—in a scene of quiet intensity on the eve of her sisters' double wedding—her lover. The relationship that follows spans more than fifteen years and is, for Rita, the most sustaining emotional connection of her adult life. Salvi's care for her is genuine. But the relationship has a structural asymmetry that Beauvoir's analysis of women in love illuminates with precision. In their relationship, Salvi retains his public life, his marriage, his social legitimacy, and his family; Rita has none of this. She cannot claim the relationship publicly, build a future around it, or be recognised as his partner in any social context. His desire for her is accommodated within his social arrangements. Her desire for him has no social existence at all. She is desired but not chosen. The relationship sustains her, but can never give her social standing.

The foregoing is, in Beauvoir's terms, a precise enactment of Othering through sexuality. Female sexuality is made socially legitimate within the structures that men devise and control. Outside these structures, a woman's sexual and emotional life is invisible, shameful, or both. Rita has given Salvi love, loyalty, and what the novel makes clear is, genuine intimacy. In return, she has received genuine

affection exercised entirely within the limits of his social comfort. The relationship could not, by its structure, give her what she needed: public selfhood.

An important aspect that warrants discussion here as it complicates the relationship between Rita and Salvi is the question of structural power, which extends beyond the emotional asymmetry already discussed. When Rita enters the workforce at eighteen, Salvi is not only significantly older than her, but holds institutional power over her as her boss. It is therefore evident that their relationship originates within a hierarchical framework that shapes its subsequent development. While the narrative casts light on care, mentorship and emotional intimacy, it cannot be ignored that these elements are embedded in a set up with blatantly unequal distribution of power.

Beauvoir's analysis of how immanence is produced is clarifying here. Immanence is not only enforced through social norms and family pressure from without; it is also built into the structures that shape the self before one has the tools to recognise or resist them. Notably, Rita does not come to Salvi because she freely chose him for a partner. Instead, she comes to him as a young woman whose entire formative adult life was guided and shaped by Salvi. To wit: her education, her professional choices, her confidence to care for her family etc. The fifteen-year age gap between Rita and Salvi is not merely a biographical detail; it is an undeniable marker of mismatch in experience, worldliness and social knowledge that compounds the existing asymmetries of employer and employee, patron and dependent. The very structure of this relationship is such that Salvi's choices, social arrangements and comfort set its terms. Rita's desire, as one can surmise, has no existence independent of Salvi's willingness to accommodate it.

While Beauvoir's framework provides a structural account of female immanence, Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist* offers a culturally specific "Reveal Formatting" function for the Indian landscape (vii). Menon argues that the social order in India functions much like "nude makeup": it requires the faithful performance of prescribed rituals to produce an effect of "untouched naturalness" (vii). In the world of *Rita Welinkar*, what is experienced as a personal choice or emotional connection is always already embedded in institutional arrangements that have pre-formatted the conditions under which those feelings become possible and legible (ix).

Crucially, Menon draws attention to how Indian patriarchal arrangements persist through the active cultural valorisation of dependency as care (20). In the Bombay middle-class milieu, Salvi's patronage would be recognised not as a hierarchical organising of the world around gender but as its opposite: the behaviour of a responsible, generous man. The social field does not present this arrangement as an exercise of power to be questioned; it presents it as a form of private protection to be grateful for (vii, 222). This represents the complex formatting that goes on below the surface of what looks like a smooth, consensual relationship, ensuring that the power-laden values of the patriarchal society remain invisible to those they constrain (vii, 212).

Salvi's behaviour after Rita's breakdown makes evident what Beauvoir anticipates that Glick and Fiske (1996) would later name as benevolent sexism. Salvi refuses to visit Rita in the hospital claiming that his visit would not be good for her mental health. He further suggests to her parents that Rita should get married. He even tells her she would have a pick of men to choose from. All the while that Rita is hospitalised, Salvi visits her parents every day. Each of these acts is the behaviour of a man managing a woman's existence in order to

make his life comfortable, but all the while doing it under the garb of keeping the woman's welfare in the forefront. In the usual sense of the word, Salvi cannot be considered a villain; it is sad though that he is undeniably more insidious than a villain. Salvi's behaviour is the benevolent exercise of control over a woman who has been constructed as Other, sustained in that position by a man who benefits from keeping her there.

Women's Complicity in Gendered Othering

Beauvoir's most uncomfortable argument is that patriarchal structures are not sustained by men alone. Women who have been Othered and have internalised this Othering are its most efficient enforcers. Because they know what the stakes here are, they police deviance from prescribed femininity in other women with a thoroughness that men could not achieve. *Rita Welinkar* portrays this Othering by women in such a way that these women, like Salvi, cannot be reduced to villains. Behaving so has become their way of life so much so that they see no fault in it.

Rita's mother, Nalini Welinkar, is the novel's most sustained example of this complicity. Born into a Brahmin family, Nalini elopes with a casteless man. She is promptly ostracised by her family due to which much of her married life is spent in social precarity. She survives by internalising the very hierarchies that damaged her, i.e. by accepting the terms of her own Othering and making them her own. Her caustic comments on Rita's skin colour, her body weight and her outfits are a reflection of the social code against which she has measured herself all her life. She enforces these constraints on Rita because she simply cannot see any other standards by which to live life. Her tragedy, in Beauvoir's framework, is not that she is cruel, but that she is trapped: a woman who has accepted immanence so thoroughly that she experiences her

daughter's reaching for transcendence as incomprehensible and threatening.

Dolly and Sherry, Rita's two married sisters, represent a different variant of this complicity. Their identical letters counselling compromise cause Rita to liken them to "the chorus of a bloody Greek tragedy" (Gokhale, 1995, 28). They speak from within marriages that Rita relentlessly worked hard to make possible. Their advice, again, is not malicious, but comes from the only place they know. They are defending the choices they have made by insisting that those choices are the only ones that keep a woman sane in this world. They are women who chose immanence and their lives have meaning only as long as they see no meaning in any other options by which to live.

The hospital's role in the participation of the gendered Othering of Rita warrants mention here. "You must not brood, Miss Welinkar", says Dr. Chandran, the psychoanalyst to her (Gokhale, 1995, 41). Rita finds the doctor's voice syrupy and totally phoney. The hospital's role in Rita's treatment is to return her to a state of functional social existence. It does not concern itself with the underlying cause of what might have led to Rita's nervous breakdown. The hospital treats her suffering as a condition to be corrected rather than an experience to be understood. This too is a form of Othering: the refusal to recognise a woman's inner life as worth taking seriously on its own terms.

The Letter as Gendered Resistance

Beauvoir argues that one of the primary mechanisms through which woman is maintained as Other is by denying her the legitimacy of her speech (25). Her experiences, her desires, her longings, her analysis of what afflicts her are not considered worthy of articulation. She must either learn

to speak in ways the social order can accommodate—the language of gratitude and self-effacement—or she must not be heard at all. This denial of speech has been the defining condition of Rita's adult life. When Dr. Chandran rebukes her for brooding, Rita thinks to herself: "So what am I supposed to do? Give me someone to talk to then. I've nobody to talk to" (Gokhale, 1995, 41). Rita has people around her, but they aren't the ones who would listen to her because they are all invested in not hearing what Rita has to say.

It is while recuperating in the hospital that Rita decides to write a letter to her only childhood friend, Saraswati. She decides this as she surmises that she must come face to face with what her life has been if she is to rebuild it in any meaningful way. She primarily wants to write of her relationship with Salvi, thereby giving voice to her experiences that she could not share with those around her. What started as a clandestine relationship, could no longer remain covert for Rita. She needed Salvi to openly acknowledge what they shared, but that was not to be. Hence her letter to Saraswati is a significant act of resistance in the novel. It can also be read as an act of transcendence in Beauvoir's sense. "I need your shoulder," she writes to Saraswati, but what she really needs from Saraswati is not support or comfort, but for her to be a witness to Rita's life (Gokhale, 1995, 45). Rita needs somebody to receive the gravity and heft of her life story without reducing it to a cautionary tale or a call for compromise. That said, she also doesn't want anyone to laud her choices, she just needs to see that her life story is worthy of attention.

Rita's choice of Saraswati as the recipient of her letter is appropriate. This is because Saraswati knew Rita before she got ensconced into the maws of patriarchy. Rita and Saraswati studied in the same class; it was the time when Rita danced freely. Seeing her dance, Saraswati could sense even

then that Rita moved her body with a freedom and authority that was entirely her own. Writing to Saraswati, is therefore, writing back to her own self; to the younger Rita who hadn't yet become sullied by the social machinery of immanence. That this letter is addressed to a woman, and not a man, is also of significance. Writing to Saraswati denotes that Rita isn't seeking validation from a patriarchal order, instead she is only seeking recognition from another woman.

The effect of the letter on Saraswati, an aspiring writer, is worth paying attention to. Reading the letter in her Chembur house—husband travelling for work and so free from the obligation of cooking a hot lunch for him—Saraswati finds herself examining her own marriage, body, choices, desires and resentments. The letter does not merely describe Rita's Othering to Saraswati, its effect on her is something akin to the removal of a veil from in front of her eyes such that she sees for herself the limiting social structures around her that she has refused to see until then. Rita's letter thus performs what Beauvoir's entire project in *The Second Sex* demonstrates to be necessary: making the structures of Othering legible rather than allowing them to pass as natural.

The Breakdown as Threshold

A nervous breakdown is usually seen as a culmination, the point at which the self can no longer function. Gokhale gives a refreshing spin to this; Rita's breakdown, in her own words is a beginning. "What a gift this nervous breakdown is. A miraculous escape from bullockness" (Gokhale, 1995, 13). The bullocks of Rita's metaphor are yoked to the water wheel and go round and round all day because they have no minds to do anything else. These are the people who have accepted immanence without question. Rita has had a mind, and the breakdown is what happens when a mind finally refuses, after long years, to keep going round and round.

Each section of this chapter has traced a different dimension of Rita's gendered marginalisation: the social illegitimacy of her unmarried status, the perpetual surveillance of her body, the structural denial of legitimacy to her sexuality, and the complicity of other women in maintaining these structures. The breakdown is the point at which these accumulated dimensions exceed what the self can contain.

The hospital, paradoxically, becomes the space for Rita's first real freedom. For the first time in her adult life, she has unstructured time; time not organised around anyone else's demands. Rita uses this time to think and to write, which unsurprisingly, gives her a sense of the shape of her life. She understands that her recurrent dream of giant balls of hair rolling silently toward her is her psyche's image of the accumulated immanence she has been living. The dream recurs in the hospital, signalling that the work of confronting what has been done to her has only begun. But the letter to Saraswati is evidence that Rita is doing that work, and is tentatively, beginning to become a subject rather than remain an Other.

Crucially, the novel offers no easy resolution. Rita ends the unacknowledged relationship with Salvi without any rancour or hostility. Impressively, she acknowledges what Salvi has done for her right from providing for her education, guiding her in her career and for loving her in the way only he could. Very significantly, she tells him, "You made me question the ideal and the reality of love between a man and a woman. I came to a new understanding of people and their relationships" (Gokhale, 1995, 172). The doors to her flat—which she will now share with Saraswati and Sangeeta—are still open to Salvi, but not in any romantic sense. As readers, we therefore, don't know what exact direction Rita's life will

take. Instead of conventional narrative closures, Gokhale here leaves us with a Rita enlivened by self-understanding. Rita is still examining her life, and therefore in Beauvoir's terms, it is a transcendence begun.

Conclusion

The mirror Rita receives in the hospital, in the beginning of the novel, is a cheap one, full of hidden air bubbles that distort the details of her face. "But there's truth to be found in between the bubbles," she says, and finds it: in her eyes, large and surangi-gold, quite beautiful in fact (Gokhale, 1995, 6). Gokhale sets up this scene on the tenth day of Rita's hospitalisation. By then she has had some time to take stock of her life. Rita's request for the mirror is intentional as she thinks to herself: "[...] a mirror should be part of the therapy for a nervous breakdown. You have to look at yourself closely to get to know yourself again, don't you? You have to live with yourself for the rest of your life, after all. You've got to be able to say to yourself, this is me. This is me. This and none other is me" (Gokhale, 1995, 3). This internal monologue of Rita may be taken as the moment when she sees herself for the first time in her life. This is important for Rita as after being continually judged by others for the past twenty years she has finally found something in her worth acknowledging. In Beauvoir's terms, she is beginning to become the subject she has been denied being.

Rita Welinkar portrays the Bombay middle-class world of the 1980s and 1990s. It constructs Rita's Othering by deploying specific instruments, namely: caste-inflected standards of beauty, the marriage market, and the illegitimacy of female sexuality outside patriarchal structures. Her Othering is not a single event but a slow accretion, each instance small enough to be overlooked, but taken in totality, it is the decimation of the female selfhood.

What makes Gokhale's novel an important contribution to the literature of marginalised identities is its insistence on Rita's intelligence and self-awareness throughout this process. She is not a victim who does not understand her situation. She understands it with painful clarity; she recognises herself as one of "the eldest daughters of non-earning fathers," and she reads the dynamics of her relationship with Salvi with forensic honesty. Her understanding makes her marginalisation all the more devastating because she is unable to step outside it. What this chapter ultimately contends is that knowing one is being made Other does not set one free; one has to look oneself squarely in the eye, as it were, and find something worth acknowledging as one's own. Rita faced herself, recognised herself and so began the process of rebuilding her life. She is no longer the inessential; she is essential to herself.

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Latha R is an Associate Professor of English with nearly thirty years of teaching experience in higher education. Her specialisation is in English Language Teaching (ELT) and online pedagogy. She is an award-winning academic and has delivered several invited talks on English language acquisition, digital learning etc. Additionally, she is actively involved in curriculum design and development.