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Amalgamation of East and West in Art of the Amrita Sher-Gil

By Dr Prachi Priyanka¹

Abstract

An avant-garde aesthete and one of the pioneers of modern art in India, Amrita Sher-gil (1913 – 1941) was a remarkable combination of sensitivity and sensuousness. Her artworks show an array of influences that were sourced from her Indo-Hungarian origin, and her encounters with French and Italian discourses. An iconoclast at heart, she was a social rebel who lived life on her own terms. Some of her works include ‘Village Scene’, ‘In the Ladies Enclosure’, ‘Self-portrait as a Tahitian’, ‘Red Brick house’, ‘Hill Scene’ and the South Indian Trilogy, ‘Bride’s Toilet’, ‘Brahmacharis’ and ‘South Indian Villagers Going to Market’. Her works are a hybrid of multiple cultures that produce a perfect amalgamation of local, regional, national, and international influences. Her art has been known to influence not only generations of Indian artists from Sayed Haider Raza to Arpita Singh; they are also the depiction of the plight of Indian women both in India and abroad. The paper examines how Sher-gil explores interiority to find her authentic voice and thus carve out feminine agency through her immortalized canvases. The paper will examine how Sher-gil’s works manifest artistic acculturation as they draw impressions of the Ajanta frescoes and Pahari paintings alongside the motifs and techniques that are characteristic of post-Impressionist painters. The paper aims to locate the profound entanglements of modernism and cross-cultural currents of the early 20th century that may be witnessed in Sher-gil’s artistic oeuvre.

Keywords: Amrita Sher-gil, east-west encounter, Indian art, Colonial art

Introduction

Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) was an avant-garde artist and an eminent Hungarian-Indian painter. Drawn towards painting from a young age, Sher-Gil started getting formal lessons in art at an early age. She first gained recognition at the age of nineteen, for her oil painting titled *Young Girls* (1932). For three consecutive years, she received accolades at exhibitions in school for her experiments in portraits and still life that she had learned under the guidance of the great maestro, Lucien Simon. Her painting, *Young Girls* was awarded first prize in the Grand Salon exhibition – also earning her the distinction of being elected as an associate member of the Salon. An iconoclast artist, Sher-gil is widely acclaimed and critically well-received in today’s art world although few acknowledged her work when she was alive. Her father was a Sikh man who came from an aristocratic, land-owning family, and her mother was Hungarian and belonged to upper-class society. Amrita Sher-Gil’s life veered between Europe and India. Extensive travel to several countries including Turkey, France, and India gave her the opportunity to assimilate varied art styles and cultures. She was blessed with beauty, breeding, a charismatic personality, and extraordinary talent as a painter. A multi-linguist who knew to play piano, enjoyed ball-room dancing, loved sculpture, cooking, and playing bridge – Amrita Sher-gil was certainly a curious learner. She was also a prolific writer and expressed herself through poems and letters – that give us a

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glimpse into her psychological makeup and provide a subtext to her paintings. Dr Charles Fabri, a noted critic of the time commented that Sher-gil was “nearer to the renaissance ideal of *womo universal* (universal man) than any other he had ever met” (Singh, 1984, 177).

When Amrita Sher-gil reached Europe in 1929, many avant-garde movements like Cubism, Fauvism, and Chirico's Surrealism had already established themselves in the art world. Abstracts of Kandinsky, Delaunay, and Joan Miro were being explored by their followers. That these new movements did not greatly impact Sher-gil is obvious from the fact that she did not attempt any of these styles. She was mostly fascinated by the post-impressionist painters, Paul Cezanne, and Paul Gauguin. In 1929, Amrita joined the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. She learned the technicalities of academic art and soon her painting skills were soon recognized by European artists. Her parents had rich and elite connections and they organized soirees where artists and intellectuals gathered to exchange thoughts on contemporary art, literature, music, and fashion. Sher-Gil's paintings of the 1930s reflect the European idiom with its naturalistic approach and application of textured paint. She also experimented with painting the urban Paris life along with a study of nudes, still-life, and portraits of acquaintances and friends. However, what forms the most significant corpus of her works are the experiments with self-portraits. Captured in various moods – from somber and artistic to thoughtful and relaxed; her self-portraits give us a glimpse of narcissism in her personality. Rendered in an academic style, these paintings show the major influence of the European masters.

There took a radical change in Amrita's style by the mid-30s. There was a deep yearning in her to visit India and by 1934, the family returned to stay in India for a short while. The art world in India then was going through a lull period. While the glories of Ajanta and Ellora statues had long faded away, the miniature art had been dormant for some time with little novelty. The two kinds of art that existed then were: the Bengal School which was hailed as “The Renaissance of Indian Painting” and the art churned out of Government art schools that taught some shadow of Impressionist works of the Victorian era. Art historian Charles Fabri described the situation of art in India as “directionless”. He said:

On the one hand, we had here a half-dying art of sentimental painting in watercolors reminiscence of Edmund Dulac. Weak, ill-drawn paintings of no merit, based on the worst period of ancient miniature and mural painting, soft and dripping without mawkish sentiment. On the other hand, the government schools of art imparted a watered-down variety of academic impressionism ... This soulless, imitative, epigoric art did not know where to go. (p. 209)

Amrita herself felt disappointed with the Bengal art school for its “cramping and crippling effect on the creative spirit” of Indian art. She charged the school as “responsible for the stagnation” that characterized Indian painting. And so, Amrita must have resolved towards uplifting the quality of Indian art. Her mission, she writes, was:

To interpret the life of Indians particularly the poor Indians, pictorially, to paint those silent images of infinite submission and patience, to depict their angular brown bodies, strangely beautiful in their ugliness; to reproduce on canvas the impression their sad eyes created on me to interpret with a new technique, my technique, that transfers what might otherwise appeal on a plane that is emotionally cheap to the plane which transcends it, and yet conveys something to the spectator, who is aesthetically sensitive enough to receive the sensation.

It was then that Amrita looked at everything around her with the eyes of an artist. She was fascinated by the rich colors, textures, and earthiness of Indian people. The miniature art popular in North India offered her a completely different perspective to look at things and represent them on canvas. As she spent hours studying the stylization of Mughal portraiture and nuances of Rajasthani miniature art; it slowly transformed not only the subject-matter of

her works but also the spirit of her expression. She felt awed by the rhythm of Ajanta frescoes, the purity of Gupta sculpture, and the humanity in Basohli and Kangra paintings. All of these were found reflected in her paintings during her sojourn in India. During her Shimla period, she made a majority of watercolors with human figures – European as well as Oriental – in the Omar Khayyam tradition – that consisted of forests and foliage in the background.

Amrita married her cousin, Dr. Victor Egan, in 1938 and the couple shifted to her paternal family home in Saraya, a small township in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. In 1941, they moved to Lahore, the cultural and artistic hub of the Indian sub-continent. It was at the peak of her career when Amrita succumbed to death in a mysterious manner. She passed away on the 5th of December, 1941 allegedly due to a mismanaged abortion. Even in her last years spent in Lahore, Sher-gil was experimenting with developing a distinctive style of her own that was to incorporate European techniques and aesthetics into the vibrant colors and stylized modes of classical Indian painting.

Materials and Methods

This paper examines Shergil's work through a qualitative approach and collates materials from varied sources. To gain better insight into the proposed objective, the paper utilizes academic books, research-oriented articles, dissertations, encyclopedias, interviews, criticisms, newspapers, and other media reports. The research meticulously studies the narratives and discourses to decode and categorize ideas and observations. The research uses extensively an analysis of the contents, narratives, and discourses in these modes in order to decode and categorize ideas and observations to come up with a clear assessment of the findings. There is a constant engagement with the artworks of Amrita Sher-gil, most of them being available at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. An investigative approach is taken to analyze the influences and trajectories reflected in the content and style of her paintings executed in different phases and places, India and abroad. The paper explores various circumstances that shaped Sher-gil's art and how she incorporated those ideas and experiences into her visual practice. The study also deconstructs some of her iconic works to comprehend her mind through 'silent speech' (Ranciere, 2004) and brings forth the rebellious, sensuous, and sensitive aspects of her art and personality which blur the boundaries of the east and west.

Result

Sher-gil's hybrid identity certainly played a trigger in allowing her to free herself from the entrapments of societal mores. Her fleeting flings, bisexual associations, frivolous temperament, and carefree lifestyle – all of these were a behavioral extension of a lonely upbringing. The conflicting relationships of her parents also had an impact on her. She herself confessed: "I am unable to use the capacity of conviction because I don't have faith in accepted values" (Dalmia, 2013, 51). One of the early influences that played a crucial role in developing Amrita as a painter was the style of Nagbanya school in Hungary. Encouraged by her maternal uncle, Ervin Bakhtay, an orientalist and a painter himself – Amrita went to study art initially at the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere under Pierre Vaillant in 1929 and later with Professor Lucien Simon of the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1931-33. Her work during this period was largely academic in nature and explored the boundary between subjecthood and objecthood through the torse, nudes, still-life and portraits (Rana, 2017, 38).

In her well-acclaimed painting *Young Girls*, we witness the obvious east-west encounter where Sher-gil's sister, Indira is dressed in European clothing, sitting across a partially-dressed French woman in the foreground. The two girls are of the same age but different racial identities and even their postures are in contrast to one another. While the French woman is causally careless and relaxed, Indira is sitting cross-legged, neat, and proper in her manner. It is often implied that the two postures and identities reflect on the artist's own divided self, and, possibly, colonial relationships, even sexual ambiguity. By the year 1934, however, Amrita was restless and felt a craving to return to India (Dalmia, 43). Lucien Simon advised her that her sense of color would find better expression in India, and as Amrita put it later "My professor had often said that judging by the richness of my coloring, I was not really in my element in the grey studios of the west, that my artistic personality would find its true atmosphere in the color and light of the east" (Sundaram, 2010, 139-140) and she returned to India in 1934. She writes: "As soon as I put my foot on Indian soil, not only in subject, spirit but also in technical expression, my painting underwent a great change, becoming more fundamentally Indian" and went on to add:

I realized my real artistic mission then: to interpret the life of Indians and particularly the poor Indians pictorially; to paint those silent images of infinite submission and patience; to depict their angular brown bodies, strangely beautiful in their ugliness; to reproduce on canvas the impression their sad eyes created on me; to interpret them with a new technique, my own technique, that transfers what might otherwise appeal on a plane that is emotionally cheap, to the plane which transcends it and yet conveys something to the spectator who is aesthetically sensitive enough to receive the sensation. (Archer, 1959, 93)

In 1937, Sher-gil henceforth went on a self-exploratory journey to the southern part of India and discovered novel pathways in her artwork. In her short sojourn, she painted a south Indian trilogy that brought a significant evolution in her art style – amalgamating the aspects of temple art and western forms. Karl Khandalavala, noted art collector comments on Sher-Gil's three iconic paintings: "In studies such as *The Bride's Toilet* and *South Indian Villagers Going to the Market*, she has captured the spirit of Ajanta in a manner that no other modern Indian artist has done...the construction of the frescoes, their design, their plasticity, their line, and their atmosphere have been remolded by her into another but vital and living achievement."

These have one common thing between them – large, mournful eyes of their subjects. Sher-gil's deep concern for women is reflected in the 'Bride's Toilet' where the girl gets ready to be flanked by her friends. In the Brahmacharis, we meet dark young men with bare torsos clad in stark white dhotis. The painting not only echoes strong social and political developments of the period but also raises questions central to the anti-colonial nationalist movement. The notion of brahmacharya as a phase in Hinduism and one of the four stages of life among the 'twice-born' varnas (castes) was given a new, anti-colonial stance by Gandhi who interpreted it as control, of the senses and 'technologies of the self' (Martin, et al. 1988). According to Khullar (2015, 47), in Brahmacharis, the principles of Indian painting and sculpture enlivened the past for the present and were brought to bear on western modern art in order to generate a new proposition for a 'new national art' and worldly belonging.

Though most of her paintings evoke a sense of boredom, ennui, or idle pastimes of Indian women; *Woman Resting on a Charpoy* goes a step further to also reveal a tinge of sexuality in the posture of the subject and the choice of colors that create the desired effect. The painting has won the accolade, especially in recent years. Sher-gil acknowledges the influence of Mughal miniatures in the way the woman in the painting reclines in flamboyant clothes. The painting resonates as a powerful image of a woman's unfulfilled desires – the yearning and despair felt more sharply because of the red-flowered attire of the woman

(Dalmia, 2013: 150). Amrita might not have been familiar with the semiotics of Indian aesthetics, but the influence of miniatures in her work can be seen in her deliberate reduction of earlier range of color tones and putting emphasis on splurging red on the canvas. Further, the color red can be associated with the Indian concept of Raga, which extends to mean passion or to be reddened. In art and music, there has been the recurring reference of color to evoke a mood – where red stands for ‘inflamed with passion’ or to ‘redden’. In the painting, *Woman Resting on a Charpoy*, the fragile young woman is clothed in red with no clear physical contours and legs that spread at a typical angle suggesting erotic desire and longing. The entire room is blazing with the color red to such an extent that the body of the woman becomes synonymous with her psyche. Thus, *Woman Resting on a Charpoy* situates the subject in history where it offers a national allegory in which the woman’s body becomes a site of myriad celebrations and contestations.

A striking feature of Sher-gil’s paintings is that her subjects do not establish any eye contact with the viewer. Dalmia rightly observes: “Her portraits have a sense of interiority” (35) and is always self-enclosed, lost in a reverie, transcending the fixity of the moment. The way Amrita abstracts a woman’s body to express her ideas on form and color show a blend of post-impressionist techniques that add an objective approach to her works. And yet again, the diffusing of ideas that locate themselves in the subject portrayed makes them her visual statement on Indian women. Geeta Kapur (2000) opines that Sher-gil’s subjectivity turns a narcissistic turn when she rebels against the rigid social structures and in the process discovers aesthetics in that poverty. Her self-portrait *Torso* is a classical nude very strategically arranged to include a framed painting of a nude woman in the background. The bold modeling and simple handling of the medium make it exemplary work. Sher-gil’s *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian*, a tribute to Gauguin is a striking mix of east and west where the post-impressionistic technique is employed on a subject who expresses herself as ‘The exotic Other’. The self-portraits can be interpreted as a display of the artist moving from girl to woman to artist as she explores sensuality that ranges from the heavy-handed to the subtle.

When Sher-gil moved to Saraya, she found new ground to discover and new subjects to paint. Just as the south India trip was an authentic and novel experience for her, similarly, Saraya was untouched by urban influence and European modes of living. Sher-Gil’s three works of this period — *Siesta*, *Red Verandah*, and *Ganesh Puja*—engage with objects of rural life like charkha, charpoy, handwoven textiles, and terracotta images. And the simplistic lifestyle of the local community modes of living in Saraya: the charkha, charpoy, handwoven textiles, and terracotta images. Sher-gil painted them based on the principles of ‘hot colour’ and ‘flat relief’ which derives from the principle of *alankara* or ornament in classical Indian philosophy and art. Khullar believes that ‘hot colour’ and ‘flat relief’ in Sher-gil’s paintings gave them a kind of sensual appeal. The use of red pigment in her later works defines her aesthetic philosophy with an art that is closer to life. Amrita introduced red clay images, a village scenery set up with trees and yellow mud huts, bullock carts laden with food grains, and lumbering elephants of the local landlords. She painted some of her well-liked paintings like *Siesta*, *Hill Men*, *Hill Women*, *Elephant Bathing in a Green Pool*, and many others. It was in this period that she engaged with decorative motifs like trees, flowers, and foliage in her paintings. (Singh, p. 58)

Discussion

Amrita Sher-gil’s art shows a beautiful synthesis of her Hungarian countryside experience along with roots of culturally rich Indian traditions exhibited in her later creations. The influence of Hungary can be seen as much in her scenic countryside depictions as in her intellectual discussions with some of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. Hungarian

literature: Margit Gasper, Bezso Szabo, and Frigyes Karinthy impressed her forthwith. She enjoyed painting trees, clouds, horses, cows, and calves she saw in Dunaharaszti, a village located on the bank of the River Danube some 20 km from Budapest. Amrita would often spend her summer breaks in the countryside and the Hungarian landscapes gave her inspiration for sketch. Her visit to Zebegeny in 1932 was marked by some fresh artistic sketches of a facade of the Transsylvania church. When Amrita visited Kiskunhalas in 1938, she closely observed the neighboring villages where the peasants would dress up in colorful costumes at weekly fairs – something that reminded her of similar experiences in Indian towns and suburbs- of the neighboring villages in their colorful folk costumes offered a very picturesque milieu at the weekly fairs, and could draw a parallel with her experiences of Indian towns. Amrita writes about how she saw in the milling market at Kiskunhalas “the reflection of Indian women carrying carpets, jugs, banana. The corn cobs have symbolic power as the old people dressed in black too, who were characterised ethnographically in a very precise way.” (Wojitilla, 1981, 72)

It is a striking element of Amrita Sher-gil’s art that the colors in her Hungarian pictures are different from those in “Indian” ones. The European canvasses carry with them the color, mood, and sensibility of the west and reflect the inspiration she derived from the post-Impressionists. She uses a unique blend of green black and grey that is repeated to paint the sky, water, or general background. The paintings like the *Hungarian Market Scene* and the *Merry Cemetery* stand out among her various paintings done in Hungary. In her portraits, still life, and compositions, the bold treatment of subjects, the solidity of lines, and the uniqueness of colors in her portraits and still-life compositions clearly - Cezanne and Gauguin in particular. Amrita's paintings done in Hungary are entirely European in their choice of colors, manner of execution, and sensibility aroused. *The Hungarian Market Scene* (1938) is her most well-known canvas, and in a letter to Karl Khandalava, she writes:

I am going to paint a picture, a village church in the background, a market place with little figures in black, the sky grey and the church tower white. Rather Breughelesque, I imagine it. Do you know the work of Breughel the Elder? I have developed a regular passion for it. (Wojitilla, 1981, 23)

In Europe Amrita got the opportunity to study the works of Italian, French, and German painters from the fourteenth century onwards. This gave her exposure to different art forms practiced by the 19th and 20th century French masters. She was also inspired by Breughel’s works however, what occupies a central place in her artworks is her own connection with common people. It is the simplicity of rustic life that captured her attention and she painted their everyday lives in India and Hungary. Besides being an ardent follower of Cezanne and Gauguin, Sher-gil also admired the primitive and Negro-inspired art of Modigliani. Amrita’s canvasses celebrate some of the richness and decorative quality of Gauguin, while the pictorial structure that she created echoes Cezanne’s artistic rendition. Denise Droutaux observed that Sher-gil’s art stood apart “because of the exceptional vigor of her brush and sharp realism of her subject” (Singh, 1984, 25). Certainly, she borrowed the art of simplification of objects into cylinders, cones, and cubes from Cezanne’s canvases. This manner of simplification is what gave grandeur and aesthetic appeal to the artworks. In many canvasses, Amrita tried to mold her forms “in a Cezannesque manner, conveying a strong sense of volume but expressing above all, a monumental dignity” (Archer, pp 85-86). Her painting *Hungarian Village Church* was created during the summer holidays which she spent in Zepengeny, a village on the Danube about 40 km from Budapest. Zebengeny had a rustic charm and was a refuge from the humdrum of city life. This Catholic Church that Sher-gil painted on her canvas was built primarily by a Transylvanian architect who was influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement – and incorporated elements of Art Nouveau styling that reflected a cultural awakening in Hungary during the period. Inspired by

Cezanne's pictorial architecture, Amrita too simplified the exterior of the church by choosing to eliminate its windows. Her focus was on the form of the structure and the sensuous appeal of the building – with its rounded door and archway, the triangles and cones of the towers. It is interesting to study how Sher-gil captures the church in ways that remind us of Van Gogh's old church tower in Nuenen with a combination of gothic elements added to the traditional style of Dutch painting.

Amrita's nudes and self-portraits are significant and striking in the way they are not self-projection intended for the male gaze; instead reflect her interior being. Thus, she not only bares open her own self in portraits but also introduces the leitmotif of 'female subjectivity' and desire in Indian art. Women had been a fascinating subject for artists since ages. They were often depicted as idealized versions – whether in traditional setups or as mythological nude figures, they were projected as objects for the male gaze: sensuous, carefree beautiful creatures. By the middle of the twentieth century, few women artists experimented with nudes and approached the female body in a new light. As against the earlier paintings, these women on canvas did not look away but made eye contact with the viewers.

Water pots and water vessels are motifs that recur in many of Sher-gil's paintings. They are not merely for compositional ends or to give a tactile sensation of form – but stand as a symbol of harvest. Her compositions of two or more figures like *Group of three Girls* evoke a sense of balance and form that adds a magnetic charm possessed by all great art. 'The Story Teller' is almost a portrait in the style familiar to the Pahari miniatures. *The Haldi Grinders* completely eliminated the faces of the subjects making them the most daring and successful essays both in form and color. Arrangement of space is another defining factor for any great work of art. We notice how Amrita's compositions are strategically arranged in a defined frame, allowing empty space for the eye to rest upon and yet making the central subject prominently placed in the painting. *The Haldi Grinders* and *Women Resting on Charpoy* are outstanding examples of the carefully husbanded space. The pictures become a representation of an actual background of a village household. They also reveal the artist's sense of scientific perspective and balance of composition. Amrita wrote about the picture, "In the Ladies Enclosure" that she had painted while at Saraya – she talks about the role of form and color:

It is a composition in which horizontal lines dominate. A slab of pale green sky, a horizontal coral coloured wall in the distance, slice of flat ground dotted with tiny figures carrying pitchers, and enclosed by a low alive green grass studded with pink and red birds. A row of sitting women in pungent colours and a thin black dog accentuates the horizontal lines. A couple of hibiscus bushes with crimson blossom and standing girls break the horizontal accent even so slightly. (Singh, 1984, 125)

Conclusion

Amrita's life was a product of mixed parentage and her art school background in Paris made her both, an insider and outsider on both the continents. Also, her sexual orientation pushed her to constantly reinvent her visual language. She was a perfect amalgamation of modern sensibility that was infused with her enthusiastic response to traditional art-historical resources. The socio-cultural traditions of the Occident and Orient – both heavily influenced Sher-gil's approach to art. What makes her harbinger of modern art in India is the connection between past and present, east and west, tradition and modernity, countryside and cosmopolitan – that she establishes through the paintings (Khullar, p. 47)

Often compared with legendary artist Frieda Kahlo; Amrita Sher-gil holds a distinct place in the Indian art world. She displays a striking mixture of sensitivity and sensuousness

towards her subjects and one tends to agree with Kapur that Amrita 'feminized' modern Indian art. (2000, p.7) Women in her works are "carriers of histories" from different geographical locations that are engaged in their traditional or cosmopolitan worlds. And yet, they are also global in their approach, which means they are not bound by the nation (Khullar, pp. 41-89). It is important to note here that modernist art, aligned with transnationalism, played an integral role in the formation and dissemination of anti-colonial, and post-colonial cultural movements. This cultural diffusion elicits Edward Said's notion of 'affiliation'² "where Sher-gil questions and complicates the boundaries of East and West and challenges values of cultural purity and national authenticity during the 1930s, 40s and afterward." (Rana, p. 42)

Amrita Sher-gil's art was undoubtedly modern in its concept and craftsmanship. Due to the exposure to the best art academies; she nurtured a superior and steady drawing – powerful enough to be an inspiration for many Indian painters. She worked as if on a mission and experimented with various styles and forms to find her own voice. Amrita advised her contemporary painters not to cling to "traditions that were once vital, sincere and splendid and which are now merely empty formulae, nor to imitate fifth-rate western art slavishly and to break away from both and produce something vital connected with the soil - something essentially Indian" (Wojtilla, 67). To accomplish this task, Amrita focused on representing the gloomy side of human life in India which was soaked in sorrow, exhaustion, and gaze of empty eyes struggling for basic amenities. She was firmly set to explore the roots of India and depict them in her artworks. Her canvasses became a window of India for the international audience. Despite a western background, Amrita's work was more authentic in Indianness than the native artists who had been born and brought up in the country. Her most fascinating subjects became studies of Indian women and children that connected her to the essence of being a native in spirit. Though she was severely criticized by a few critics, her works encouraged the study of Indian frescoes and book illustrations. We cannot deny the many features she derived from European art but in a short span of her life, she produced several works where her identification with the Indian tradition and spirit was completely absorbed. Mulk Raj Anand observed:

For the first time an Indian painter had the courage to paint ordinary people; human beings even of the down trodden world of the hill state of North India. And she reproduced in their agony the sadness in their faces, and the colours the grey colours in the hill men. (Singh, 1984, p. 162)

Amrita was critical of the art in India that allegedly were "consciously naturalistic" – for, according to her, they "destroyed" any aesthetic enjoyment of the "portraits of beggars, of the miserable, the proof of India viewed as objects of the topographical interest without an atom of either artistic or human understanding". However, Dalmia observes that despite her claims to view the essence of India and the poorer sections of society:

Amrita's own paintings like 'Mother India', 'The Beggars' and 'Woman with Sunflower', she seems to find a rather literal and romantic version of India, steeped in poverty yet aesthetically pleasing. Despite the rich colours, there is no peeling off of superficial aspects to reach a deeper understanding of India. Amrita herself seems to be seeing people and landscapes through a tourist's lens, the very attitude she was reacting against in her letters. (p. 277)

Despite the efforts of supportive critics like Karl Khandalavala, Hermann-goetz, Charles Fabri and Mulk Raj Anand – it was unfortunate that Amrita was not well received in the Indian art world. Art critics and art practitioners criticized her works harshly and in an

² A mimicry of the centre from a desire not only to be accepted but also to be adopted and absorbed (Said, 1984).

unjust manner calling them faulty, deformed figures and incorrect in their drawing as well as execution. The hostility towards her was evident from the fact that her paintings sent to the All-India Exhibition, Trivandrum in 1937 were rejected on the advice of Dr. James Cousins who was incidentally an ardent Champion of the Bengal School. The critics and contemporary artists also questioned her authenticity as an Indian painter. Francis Newton Souza dismissed her art as wholly derived from Gauguin. Iqbal Singh, however disagreed with such opinion when he insisted that “Amrita was never either derivative or imitative” (Singh, 1975, p. 212). According to him, she “liberated Indian art from the shackles that had bound it for decades.” (p. 216) Besides, many European artists have used the artistic idioms of other cultures and epochs. We find that Henry Moore has drawn heavily on Mayan sculpture and in some of his paintings; Gauguin has deliberately tried the idiom of ancient Egyptian murals. But these inspirations do not make them derivations in true sense. And when inspiration from other nations’ arts is to be taken into account – it can be argued that there are more German expressionists in Souza’s art than Gauguin in Amrita’s art. And again, there is far more of Ajanta than of Gauguin in her paintings. This may have been the reason for Karl Khandalavala to go to extremes to argue in Sher-gil’s favor to establish her art as native and connected to the roots. According to Karl, Amrita's art was a reaction against the mindless imitation of Bengal School artists. He agreed that the work of the pioneers like Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Gaganendranath, Venkatappa, Jamini Roy, and a few others were of undoubted value. But the mere copying of the masterpieces of the past practiced by lesser artists was a thing to which Amrita responded through her own artworks. (Khandalawala, p. 4)

It is an undeniable truth that Amrita survived and shone bright irrespective of the hostility she faced from the contemporary Indian art environment. There was constant strife between the western and eastern identities that lay at the heart of Sher-gil’s paintings. In paintings like *Self Portrait as a Tahitian*, Sher-gil transposes herself as a Tahitian but yet carries her characteristics identity: dark skin and full lips. Sher-gil was in a way, trying to bring together European techniques and aesthetics and the vibrant colors and stylized modes of classical Indian painting, creating a distinctive style of her own (Rana, 41). Her canon of art prove that she had managed to harmoniously blend both the influences in her art. Even when she turned towards Indian sources from the past or the countryside simplicity - she was in a critical conversation with western art forms and artists. It was “the desire to cultivate organic art that was connected to the past and the West sustained Sher-gil’s practice” (Rana, 42). We tend to agree with art critic Subramanayam’s observation on Amrita Sher-gil’s art:

The unmistakable honesty and sensitivity of her work, their considerable virtues, her perspicacious if limited awareness of India's artistic past and her deep concern with overcoming the constrictions of her academic training to getting a fresh contact with the local environment and its history, all too rare among the Indian artists of her time, and rather remarkable in her, considering her divided ancestry, training and social environment. (Chaitanya, 1976, p. 182)

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