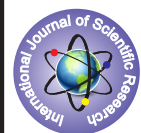


An exploratory study on the life and artwork of Amrita Shergil



Art

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ABSTRACT

One of the most talented painters ever to have graced the Indian soil, Amrita Shergil was an artist beyond compare. Though she lived for just 28 short years, she left an indelible mark on the history of contemporary Indian art. The present study analyzes the various forms of her artwork with the help of secondary data available. It was seen that only few artists in her time, and in our own, develop such a consciousness and how few ever find the idiom the pictorial image to embody it one realizes that Amrita Sher-Gil is a remarkably courageous and relevant artist. It was also observed that she had a desire to understand the sources of the complex Indian tradition and other cultures which made her travel to see for herself and portray the variety of people in art and reality.

Introduction

Amrita Shergil is considered to be one of the India's most celebrated and gifted artists of the pre colonial era. Born in 1913 in Budapest, she grew up in a cultured and intellectual family who initiated and supported her early interest in art. This chapter intends to consider in some depth the content of Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings. This approach seems to be particularly appropriate to her work because of the overt and meaningful role the content of the paintings plays in her development as an artist. It is with this approach that one can evaluate the significance of the images she was nurturing since her return to India. The present study embodies, at different levels of consciousness, her interpretation of the Indian reality, the evolution of this content, and her struggle to achieve a unique and authentic vision based on this reality.

The first female artist, Amrita Sher-Gil, belonged to the early phase of Indian modernist art and has posthumously become a legendary figure in historiography, which casts her as a founder figure of Indian modernism. During recent years Sher-Gil's oeuvre has gained international visibility, through exhibitions at the Tate Modern in London and then at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. Sher-Gil's life has all the ingredients for the making of a legendary figure: she was the first Indian professional women artist of the twentieth century; she was highly talented, stunningly beautiful, and died tragically at the age of twenty eight.

Amrita Sher-Gil was of mixed parentage: her father Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, a Sikh, belonged to the landed gentry of Punjab in Northern India, her mother Marie Antoinette came from a Hungarian middle-class educated family. Amrita was born in Budapest in 1914 and spent the first eight years of her life there until the family decided to emigrate from war-ravaged Hungary to India in 1921.

Sher-Gil's biographers do not cease to point out that otherness was a lived experience for the young artist. Trained in Paris, she was aware of being perceived as exotic, referred to as "la petite princesse hindoue," while at the same time participating in the experiments and new idioms of artists of the bohème.

Her identity as woman introduced another source of marginality, especially in view of the deeply gendered language of the avant-garde in its celebration of masculine genius and its representation of the exotic female body. All these roles—as Eurasian, as artist, and as woman—gave Sher-Gil's art and her prolific correspondence a reflexive quality, a reflexivity so intrinsic to the critical edge of a global modernism.

Life and Career

At the age of sixteen, Sher-Gil and her sister were taken to Paris by her parents to further their artistic education. This was following the advice of their maternal uncle Ervin Baktay: one of Hungary's famed Indologists. Amrita's those paintings are considered the most

significant where she has understood the nature and condition of her subjects – the human-beings she paints; where moreover, she is able to discover their intimate environment, the context in which they are rooted. She has to struggle to attain this sympathy while at the same time overcome certain tendencies which besiege her throughout. She tends to idealize the simple and poor people for being honest, noble and beautiful. This is an attitude typical of the sophisticated and the sensitive people of her class and profession, helps to evade the complex and painful aspects of the condition of such people. If their condition is perceived by her, she tends to romanticize it to the point where her subjects become sentimentally melancholic. This tendency is accompanied by another – to seek and create 'beauty' for its own sake; an aestheticism which is in fact characteristically linked to such romanticism.

Her talent for drawing was further encouraged by her art teacher Hal Bevan Petman, a fashionable socialite painter who had previously taught at Slade School of Art, London. Where she attains the quality of sympathy for her subjects – a deeper level of understanding of the social and psychological state of the people she paints. It is difficult to say whether her paintings would have been more significant if she objectively knew more about the Indian social reality or felt more committed to its problems. The sympathy arises because she possesses a humanness that is intuitive and palpable. She reacts best that level, avoiding the philosophic-moral attitude which is typical of the apologetic elite, but seldom productive. She possesses an intelligence which is not always successful in defining categories and making arguments (e.g., her anti-romantic statements are very unconvincing) but which enables her to sort out her problems with amazing clarity – particularly her artistic problems, which in turn lead her to consider carefully the content and meaning of her work. Underneath the arrogant veneer of her person and her aesthete's tastes, she possesses a curiosity and concern with a people so irrevocably removed from her own life.

If we recognize how few artists in her time, and in our own, develop such a consciousness and how few ever find the idiom – the pictorial image to embody it one realizes that Amrita Sher-Gil is a remarkably courageous and relevant artist.

These years in Paris were lived with a passionate intensity and freedom in the bohemian milieu of art students. She as aware and involved with the best in art and literature and through she cannot be considered exceptionally enlightened; she was always sensitive and critically discerning in her judgements. The extent of her familiarity with and understanding of contemporary western art remains a puzzling question. She knew of the modern art and movements but how she saw herself in relation to them is not clear at all. There is not enough evidence in her letters, and only a kind of negative evidence in her Paris paintings which are competent but unoriginal, and indeed academic. Her prideful reference to her Associateship of the Grand Salon, Paris, should be extremely revealing of her artistic

backwardness. But it is explained better by a deplorable personal trait of showing off haughtily before the unsophisticated Indians, even such honours as would seem dubious to herself. Except for Picasso and Braque, most other artists whom she mentions, belong to the end of the 19th and first two decades of the 20th century. She seems oblivious of the major art movements of the 1920's.

When she was getting taught by Petman, Sher-Gil soon became a very competent draughtsman, which allowed her to later experiment with a less orthodox approach to her paintings. The majority of her paintings in Paris consist of posed studio models, portraits and self portraits. Only in the last two years of her stay there, her paintings acquire a reflective quality, a 'romantic' melancholy which remains a characteristic of her work throughout. In the early work the paint is obviously laid on with that typical combination of academic, romantic and impressionist techniques which art school students often display. In the last years, her painting is much refined; she develops the technique to paint sensuous, subtly modulated color surfaces and simple stylized forms.

Whilst in Paris, Sher-gil initially studied at L'Academie de la Grande Chaumiere, and was admitted to Ecole nationale superieure des Beaux-Arts where she became a pupil of Lucien Simon.

Sher- Gil won many awards at Ecole and was elected as associate member of the Grand Salon in 1933, becoming the youngest ever and only Asian to have received this recognition.

Her biographer and friend Karl Khandalavala reveals that, 'the Paris sketchbooks show her as talented hard-working student, imbibing various influences and displaying in her drawings a suggestion of that powerful handling of form she was later to develop.'

She returned to India in late 1934 when she was 21. Because of her class background and European education, she automatically moved into the milieu of upper class westernized Indians in Simla, indulging in a fashionable, glamorous life. This class of people had no roots in Indian society and no cultural identity except such fragments of it which some of her more 'intellectual' and 'bohemian' friends tried to conjure. Amrita, on return after several years of stay in Paris found her semi-homeland strangely beautiful. She gave up European dresses and adopted saris. Dozens of photographs show her decked in gorgeous saris and Indian jewellery, though unmistakably posing in the European manner. The artificiality of posing for a photograph and models posing for a painting have underlying similarities of attitudes. Perhaps this is why she failed to express (if not to understand) the gait of Indian people.

Yet from the very beginning she painted simple and poor people of rural India from whom she was completely alienated; the hill men and women of Simla, the villagers from South India, the peasants of Punjab and Northern U.P. Fortunately she did travel a lot in India, and assimilated with an intense and avid eye at least the cultural and artistic manifestations of traditional India.

The first phase of Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings in India lies between 1935 and 1937. At the very beginning of this phase she paints a good painting – *The Three Girls* – where there is a direct carryover of technique and style from her late Paris paintings. The two excellent paintings of this period, substantially different from her Paris work, are *the Hill Men* and *the Hill Women*. At the other point of the qualitative scale is the painting *Mother India* accompanied by such paintings as *Beggars*, *Two Women*, *Woman with Sunflower*, *Child Wife*, *The Untouchable*. All the paintings aside from the two or three best mentioned above are uneven in quality and haphazard in intention and subject matter. The enormous gap between her successful and unsuccessful works – mostly bad attempts – continues through every phase of her career. It represents rather significantly, her undeveloped intentions, her different levels of understanding at a given period. It can also be seen as the scale of her striving and in that sense, traces the very uneven path of her achievements.

It becomes evident from the very beginning that she is attempting to evolve an Indian type of face and figure, and introducing within that a range of physiological and psychological variations. She does this by generalizing and simplifying her observations - deriving her types by a process of stylization.

The emotion she characterizes in her subjects flows from sources in herself rather than from the subjects. Her own brooding and melancholic temperament was fed since her girlhood, on the European tradition – a tradition whose greatest achievements are born of a humanistic vision. She directly relates to this tradition through the Romantic Movement. The most important of her favorites are Beethoven, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, and Van Gogh – all in different ways, painfully, intricately introspective and passionate, all partaking of a tragic consciousness. But it is the weaker version of these values which Amrita brings into her treatment of human beings. And here she is akin to the attenuated emotionalism of the lesser romantics whose humanism is prompted more by sentiments than by understanding.

Techniques and style

Amrita's academic training retained its impact on her art until long after she left Paris. It partially thwarted her attempts to incorporate in her work what she saw and understood of Indian art, but it also opened to her areas of exploration. Intense observation and concentrated efforts to study the basic features of Indian people revealed startling complexities of their behavior, which she struggled to paint throughout her stay in India. What she saw in traditional Indian art was conditioned by her academic training as well as understanding of modern European art. She vaguely imagined figures of Ajanta, Basohli etc. as living personages and sought their types in the people around her. As a matter of fact, her attitude to traditional Indian art is not basically different from Gauguin's to Egyptian or Tahitian art or Picasso's to African masks. She too, like her mentors, tried to adjust her discoveries within the already prescribed framework of simplified academicism; linear perspective, a simplified Whistlerian formalism and a Rembrandtesque device of the distribution of dark and white, all rolled in one.

Thus Amrita's Parisian education was a boon as well as a shortcoming. A boon because it opened the doors of both modern and traditional art of Europe for her and a shortcoming because it conditioned her expression as an artist. She chose the convention of using models for composing figures in her paintings (she could not work from memory, she confessed in one of her letters). As a result she drew nude and semi nude figures rather deftly with an obvious simplification of details to make hirelings look authentic in the new roles she assigned to them (the middle figure in 'Brahmacharis' was a Sikh). But when it came to drapery she extended this 'simplification' a bit too far, into bravura of brush-work, thus avoiding opportunities to reveal the bodies of figures she fell into traps of academic and formalistic clichés (i.e. Ancient Story Teller, 'Siesta' etc.)



Brahmacharis, 1937

A tendency to 'finish' objects of focal point and regard the rest of the area as a fuzzy, splashy backdrop is also a hangover of the academic portraiture she learnt in Paris. This tendency got so ingrained in her personality that most of her paintings suffered from uneven accent on various parts of a painting. In 'The Swing', a dash of white on the horizon and impatient smudging of brown-green ground are

sufficiently indicative of this, the pot and table in 'Woman Resting on Charpoy' hardly appears to have been painted by the same person who marvelously modeled the figure below.

Amrita's discovery of India is genuine and simple, beautiful and painful. She saw a vision of brooding multitudes in destitution which she characterized in her paintings through a subdued atmosphere of sentimentality. She also saw exuberance and sensuality which bore a special meaning to her personality deeply receptive of these attitudes. Her first pictures in India are characteristic of these dual tendencies, at once sorry and sympathetic for the fate-sundered, lonely women and children, yet lovingly colored and sensually modeled. A desire to understand the sources of the complex Indian tradition made her travel to see for herself the variety of Indian peoples in art and reality.

She saw figures of Ajanta (and found them inimitable) and was charmed by Mughal portraits and color of Basohli painting. Yet when it came to her own art, she, instead of distilling the experience of grace through contemplate memory, chose to paint through models posing in such postures. The posing stance in 'South Indian Villagers going to Market' is easily discernible (evident in the sharp difference of movement between the upper and lower half of the painting). 'Bride's Toilet' is at the crossroads of her academicism and fascination for Indian art. Academically the figure of the bride is unconvincing because of the curious elongation of the front arm and distortion of face, while referring to Ajanta or Western Indian paintings; it neither shows the innate poise of the former or sprightly movement of the latter. This forced marriage of styles mars the otherwise restful atmosphere of the scene. In 'Fruit Vendors' she copiously extends her love for linear treatment of certain Indian painting, by adding lines over her figures, which instead of lending further dimensions or defining contours, become distracting clichés. Basically Amrita was a figure painter. She seems to be tremendously involved in the act of painting human figures and shows scant regards for landscape. Perhaps this was yet another impact of Parisian training. During the entire period of her art education she hardly painted outdoors - a tendency she generally displayed throughout her career, which provides a clue for enclosed isolation of her paintings, figures (or models for that matter) appear as independent entities, indifferent or oblivious of each other. This isolation curiously corresponds to her inability to group her figures. In a majority of her paintings, figures (or models for that matter) appear as independent entities, indifferent or oblivious of each other. This isolation curiously corresponds to her inability to group her figures. In 'Hill Men', but for the cold, steely formalism of the robes there is nothing that binds them in a group. In 'Hill Men' a variation of blue-green film occupies a large part of the painting - an implicit device to link the otherwise solitary figures withdrawn into shrouds of funerary elegance.

She discovered for herself the sculpture of Mathura, Ajanta, Mattancheri paintings, Kangra, Basohli - all these appealed to her by their innate sensuality and brilliance of colour. The Parisian background and give greater meaning to these discoveries and she wrote ecstatic letters about them. Out of all the elements of Indian painting, colour appealed to her deepest, the feeling of which she was able to carry through with conviction in her paintings. Passionately inspired by the use of bright colours in some Indian miniatures, she clothed her figures in equally brilliant garbs and to further emphasize the role of colour, she flattened out large, spatial areas and filled them with bright hues or luminous darks.

This love of colour is clearly manifest in most of the paintings she did in India; rather she could not desire to import the love for colour she so profusely displayed in her paintings made in India. Her active career in India had matured her vision as well as technique, and now she could see the development of her personality in retrospect. She aimed to paint a theme dear to her heart and came very near to her intention in displaying her confidence and competence in 'Two Girls'. Here she is relieved of the necessity of adjusting between two or

more conflicting stylistic tendencies which she felt was inevitable while in India, nor there was a need to hark back to a remote past tradition for inspiration. She did not have difficulties in posing or grouping her models either. T

There is only one extraordinary painting of this time: *The Two Girls*, which has ambiguous, many-layered meanings. Both girls, one dark and the other white, are in their early adolescence and both are posed nude.



The Two Girls, 1939

The one aspect of this painting which relates to the theme of this essay is her attitude toward the Eastern, the Indian girl revealed by her juxtaposition with the white girl. The latter is conscious and assertive of her young womanhood; the dark one, innocent, withdrawn, though not less sensuous. With her subtle intelligence, Amrita is able to identify the crucial difference between them – the different levels of their self-consciousness.

hus, her formalistic bravado, her academic flourish and a touch of arrogant mannerism found their true expression in the haunting images of the 'Two Girls'. On the one hand, it revealed her personal dilemma - a vaguely symbolic amalgam of her personality split in two opposites characterized by the juxtaposition of a dark and a fair girl. On the other, it is reminiscent of her initial response to Indian people as she painted them in 'Hill Men' and 'Hill Women'. The enclosed isolation in these paintings curiously link them. The positioning of a dark figure draped in a pearl-white robe as well as her submissive look against an aggressive fair girl, naked and charged, sums up Amrita's role as a modern woman and artist living in a man's world. But this discovery of the self was stark and unnerving, besides her renewed interest in the western idiom of painting was no less disturbing, as it aroused fears of losing links with Indian art that she had established after a long struggle. She looked for an oriental prototype in European art and found Brueghel an ideal example. Brueghel's narrative style distantly matched certain narrative features of Indian painting, besides she found herself more comfortable in the setting up a scene in a real locale. No wonder she is more successful in 'Hungarian Market Scene' (in which she celebrates her discovery of Brueghel than in 'Elephant Promenade' or 'Ancient Story Teller' which have a similar leisurely mood and outdoor setting. These paintings suffer from an obvious lack of idiom suitable to the theme. Brueghel thus became her touch-tone and sparked off in her art another area of exploration; painting of landscape.

But the influence of the Brueghelian idiom only served as a take off point rather than a sustained discipline. On her return to India after this trip she again submitted to her previous dilemma. She appears restless when she attempts to model her paintings on Indian art, and in desperation she resolves the tension of this conflict by making the colour Fauve in sensibility and application, and the spatial organization semi-Cubistic. (This phase of her art is facile and flavourless i.e. 'Resting'; 'Haldi Grinders' etc. and understandably found much favour amongst her imitators).

The important differences amongst her miniature based paintings are most often ignored. There is a significant difference *between The*

Swing, The Bride, Woman Resting on Charpoy and the Last Painting (unfinished) and the imitative-decorative works where the miniatures become an excuse for her own taste for the picturesque.

In these paintings she seems to have sensed the flavor of the Indian sensibility in the lyrical-sensuous 'romanticism' of the miniatures and she attempts to translate this into her own figurative genius. The characters in the *Woman Resting on Charpoy* and *The Swing* are more intimately perceived- they are cast in a mood of longing that flows from their impassive lives and pervades the entire atmosphere. Significantly, these paintings, though influenced by the miniatures, become poignantly realistic.



Resting, 1940

Here she also frees herself from academic hangover of tonal distribution and responds to colour naturally. Spontaneous in execution with a touch of expressionistic bravado, makes her pictures most significant since in these are contained symptoms of much of the modern art of following years.

Thus, it may be said that, one of the most talented painters ever to have graced the Indian soil, Amrita Sher-Gil was an artist beyond compare. Though she lived for just 28 short years, she left an indelible mark on the history of contemporary Indian art. She is often referred to as India's Frida Kahlo, but the comparison doesn't seem to do her justice—she was a wonderful artist in her own right, not someone who needed to be compared to another person for greatness. She began painting by herself as a five year old and her parents arranged for her to have lessons later on after seeing her talents. When she grew up into a gifted teenager her mother took her to Europe to expose her daughter to various genres of paintings. However, it was only after coming back to India did Amrita realize her full potential. Her paintings were the perfect blend of Western and Indian techniques which gave them an exotic appeal combined with earthiness.

Conclusion

Despite of her so much travelling, Amrita had a skill to learn from every part she visited. Her artwork has vast varieties i.e. she painted from beggars to sophisticated girls. Her paintings illustrated her experience at such a young age. Though she died at just an age of twenty eight but she still she definitely left a mark on Indian art history and most important of all, became an inspiration for the women artists who were struggling for their identity during that era.

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