

Amrita Sher-Gill's Paintings: A Cultural Evaluation

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Introduction

Amrita Sher-Gil is among the pioneers of modern Indian paintings. She was born in Hungary (Budapest, in 1913) and grew up in a Sikh family. Her father was a Sikh aristocrat and her mother was a Hungarian musician. She took her artistic education from Florence and from the world famous Ecole Nationale Des Beaux Arts under the direction of Lucien Simon. After working in Europe, she returned to the Indian sub-continent in 1934 and started to depict the spirit of rural life through paintings. She was an admirer of frescos of Ajanta and Ellora caves and loved Indian miniature paintings. She was wholeheartedly devoted to Indian art and culture and her devotion is immensely blended in her paintings after her arrival in the sub-continent.

She had married her cousin Victor Egan and spent her last moments in Lahore (Pakistan). Her artistic voyage has remained unfinished due to her sudden death at the age of 28. She particularly painted rural women in a strong and powerful manner and almost succeeded in capturing some neglected areas of the life of women in dull color schemes (Lutzker and Ann 2002, Sinha 2003, Sen 2006).

In Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings, a cultural variation may be seen between the two periods of her life, first one during her residence in Europe and the next one after her arrival in the sub-continent. It is her hybridity which made her an accomplished observer of the indigenous spirit of sub-continental culture. She gripped the intimacy of the Eastern culture after exploring the multiplicity of the Western one. She admitted, after coming to the sub-continent, that it is the only solution to her artistic pursuit. This residential switch from Eastern to Western world is not only visible in her life style but is reflected in her paintings as well. Likewise, her personality, living style, dressing sense also changed after relocating. She was fascinated more by folk and rural culture than the urban one (Sundaram 2010).

This paper aims at discussing four paintings of Sher-Gil to understand this “bicultural” lineage (Mathur 2011). Among these paintings, two are of the earlier period and the rest are after her arrival to the sub-continent. The first category of comparison is based on the concept (in both of the paintings, she has chosen two women), depicted in both the paintings and the next category is based on the projection of a body on surface (like the projection of the backside).

Discussion

Culture is a key to access the way of living of human beings and also a medium to differentiate their individual identity. The identity varies from place to place and from religion to religion, which is represented through their customs, traditions and other rituals. The cultural values are also represented through art and visual narrations. Visual culture is significant in defining the role of Indian sub-continent’s antiquities and the recent trends in culture. In this cultural narration, paintings are the best medium to define the socio-cultural aspects of society. For instance, the people of pre-historic times were involved in hunting and gathering activities, so the cave paintings depicted the same. Similarly, narratives of surroundings and way of living of the people have been depicted in the Indus Valley Civilization. To some extent, such narratives have been painted by artists of almost all periods till the 17th century. After the mark of modern concept, paintings have been represented with a more innovative and realistic approach but the basic stereotype of cultural phenomenon has been simultaneously represented by artists. In this way, culture has always remained an essential aspect in representing artistic productions.

During the 19th century, the Indian sub-continent was a land of cultural and political hegemonies of the British and seeking its authentic values with respect to various spheres, including painting. Sher-Gil is not only solicited by cultural and traditional values but she truly lived in its roots (Wojtilla 1981, Tillotson 1997, Tuli 1998, Kumar 1999). Her interest towards the rural life of the sub-continent is not only appreciated but adapted by numerous prominent artists of India. Her portrayal of womanhood, after returning to the sub-continent, is a very concrete instance of her genius. Through this way of projection, she has not only settled a neglected phenomenon of a woman’s life but she has also become a role model for the feminist artists of the sub-continent. To observe cultural variations in

her paintings, some of her paintings have been taken into consideration because before her arrival to the sub-continent, Sher-Gil was inspired by great Italian masters and modern Western artists. She was an academic and her paintings appear to be more connected with academic realism.

After returning to the sub-continent, Sher-Gil's subjects dramatically changed into feministic interventions and tragic display (Kapur 1978). The gloomy faces have been perfectly portrayed to give a glimpse of the life of middle class people, which Sher-Gil found strangely attractive. She depicted villagers and women as either engaged in work or constructed in idle form (Chawla 2003). There are some issues too which are related to their tragic life and trauma due to societal inequality (Doctor 2002).

Apart from this, if the painting is analyzed on the basis of cultural aspects, there are some semiotics of culture which differentiate both of her styles. There is an indigenous mechanism which drives her creativity to reproduce the realistic life of Indian people. This mechanism is also surrounded by some other factors, like social and religious factors, climatic conditions and others. To observe the cultural aspects in Sher-Gil's paintings (Indian sub-continent Period), it is essential to revisit her previous paintings (European Period) through a comprehensive study of both the painting styles.

The painting titled 'Young Girls' was painted when she was in Europe (Figure 1). Sher-Gil was only 19 and for this painting she won the honor of an associate at the Grand Salon of Paris. Her sister Indira and her friend became models for the painting as Sher-Gil used to paint through models (Dalmia 2013).

Figure 1 has been painted in oil colors with an impressionistic style in blue and white tones as Sher-Gil was inspired by Paul Gauguin and Paul Cezanne (French post-impressionist painters). In this painting, both girls are sitting casually and are engaged in conversation. The style of dressing is typically European, in which a semi-



Figure.1

Young Girls (1934).
Oil on Canvas, Size-
134 x 164 cm. Acc.
No-29, Courtesy
NGMA

nude French girl (Denise Proutaux) has been depicted. Another girl (her sister Indira) has also been painted in the same Western outfit. In this painting, ornamentation has also been done through jewelry and other things of beautification, which is particularly related with Western style. The posture of sitting is also Western as the sitting posture with cross-legs was mostly forbidden to the women of the sub-continent at that time. The face of the blonde woman has not been highlighted as her hair is across her face. The blonde woman has a comb in her hand and is engaged in conversation with the other girl. The theme of the painting indicates Sher-Gil's inner dilemma, where she was exploring her individuality not only as an artist but also as a person in the West. It may be assumed that for Sher-Gil, it was very difficult to accept that alien culture as her roots were deeply connected with her homeland. In this painting, Sher-Gil symbolically represents the culture of the West in the form of a blonde girl and herself as the woman sitting in front of the blonde girl. According to Dalmia, the concept of this painting is closely connected with Sher-Gil's Eastern and Western conflict and it is further explored by the artist in the painting titled 'Two Girls', where she has painted two girls with contrasting complexions (2006 and Gupta 2011). The application of colors is also according to prevalent Western techniques. Sher-Gil was influenced by Cezanne and his style of composing things has been carried over into some of the areas of her paintings with 'shape simplification' and 'spatial tilts' (Subramanian 2014). 'Young Girls' represents an elite class of European women as Sher-Gil was not yet familiar with the marginalized or the middle class. The detailing and other aspects have also been structured to give a calm and soothing touch with a balanced color composition. If the painting is observed without comparing it with her later paintings, it has a feminist approach. Women are portrayed as engaged in conversation and in sensuous display, which was in fashion at that time. The women are busy in themselves and display their individual identity rejecting the male-oriented stereotype of female projection.

The same concept of depicting two girls or women has been painted again by Sher-Gil after returning to the sub-continent titled, 'Woman Resting on a *Charpoy*' (Figure 2). The painting was made at Saraya, Gorakhpur (India). At first glimpse, it is difficult to find out that this painting has been made by the same artist (of 'Young Girls'). There is only one similarity in both the paintings, the concept of depicting two

females together on a dull background. In this set of observations, the same tool of socio-cultural and religious aspect can be used to study the Indian semiotics in Sher-Gil's painting. Their titles are also very different from each other; the title 'Young Girls' is simple and the concept is not entirely clear by the title itself. On the other hand, 'Woman Resting on a *Charpoy*' explains most parts of the painting through its title as it narrates the theme behind it.

In her Paris residence, she had painted numerous paintings which were titled in a simplistic manner; for instance, Two Girls, Torso, Reclining Nude, Portrait of a Lady, and Portrait of a Young Man. These titles are not associated with that culture or tradition and fail to narrate the story of the painting. In contrast, the titles of her paintings from the sub-continent indicate the theme and its cultural association. Sher-Gil became more expressive after coming to the sub-continent with respect to elaborate titles as they played an important role in the sub-continent's paintings. 'Child Bride', 'South Indian Villagers Going to Market', 'Story Teller', 'The Musicians', 'The Swing', and 'Bride's Toilet' are some of the titles of her paintings in the sub-continent. A painting's perception, which is generated through the combination of title and representation, varies from person to person. According to Sen, these two paintings (Figures 1 and 2) are better instances to observe the approach of Sher-Gil's treatment of subjects after returning to the sub-continent (Subramanyan 1978, Thompson 1982, Sen 2006).

In 'Woman Resting on a *Charpoy*', red is the dominant color, while in 'Young Girls' red has not been used at all. This dominance of red color may be understood through certain socio-cultural and psychological parameters as red is the most auspicious color in Hindu religion for married woman. In this painting, a woman is depicted laying on a *charpoy* or cot and is attended by another woman. The other woman is depicted as holding a hand fan and sitting in a tense mood. The slightly

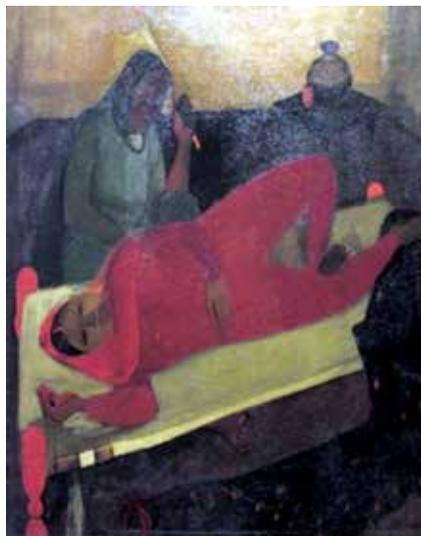


Figure.2

Woman resting on a charpoy (1040).
Oil on Canvas, Size- 74.5 x 87.5 cm. Acc. No-129, Courtesy NGMA

constructed dullness through the background in 'Young Girls' has been changed into the focal point in the 'Resting' as all adjustments have been made to represent the traumatic state of rural women. Most of her paintings depict the realistic phenomenon of a woman's life which was rarely observed at that time (Kapur 2000, 2009). Before Sher-Gil, women had mostly been painted to display patriarchal hegemonies or to promote religion. Women were often treated as an object in paintings and represented as engaged in erotic display or to simply meet the need of the theme. In Indian miniature paintings, the depiction of a woman was based on gender politics, where a man's power was celebrated through the projection of a woman. In numerous miniature paintings, women are offered to onlookers through symbolic arrangements (Aitken 1998). A woman is mostly depicted as engaged in love-making, preparing for a meeting with her lover, waiting in a lovelorn condition, taking care of the child, serving her mistress or master and participating in social activities and so on. Those miniature paintings may be a reflection of that society in which the kings had been represented as heroes, surrounded by women as attendants, concubines, mistresses, queens and such.

The miniature painting style collapsed after the establishment of East India Company; at that time, art of the sub-continent had lost its identity and the artists had lost patronage. During that time, the Bengal School also emerged to set new paradigms of modern art. Raja Ravi Verma, Abanindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and other prominent artists were also engaged in depicting women with beauty and sensuousness. In such an ambience, Sher-Gil had chosen her subjects without any political or sensual display. Amrita Sher-Gil picked up only those subjects which had conceptual beauty and which were avoided by her contemporaries. Her contemporary artists were engaged in producing paintings after being inspired by the Western technique and style. For instance, Ravi Verma, one of her contemporaries, painted Hindu mythological subjects in Western style and technique; in most of his paintings, the spirit of contemporary culture of the sub-continent has been lost entirely. Abanindranath Tagore was involved in experimenting with Indian miniatures for the establishment of a national Indian style, mostly related to history and mythology. Sher-Gil used her genius to capture the contemporary view of the sub-continent rather than its historic events. The concept of a reclining woman was very much in fashion and was depicted by numerous eminent artists such as Eduard Monet, Picasso and many more. This subject had also been painted by Verma.

In Indian miniature paintings, a reclining woman had only been associated with erotic display. All of these reclining nudes were made in a seductive way with an inviting attitude. On the contrary, Sher-Gil subverted this imagery of a woman without distorting her art and created a unique representation of the sub-continent's culture through the portrayal of women. It is a unique virtue of Sher-Gil to paint reality in modern style; her women, therefore, belong to the group of ordinary villages of the sub-continent and the Western elite class. Sinha states that this painting is a subversion of that representation of a woman in miniature, which is often associated with bed as waiting for her lover or in highly enchanting mood. They (Sher-Gil's women after coming to the sub-continent) do not belong to any character that is narrated in ancient Hindu literature or painting; they are "modern", "recognizable" and "common" with its "striking spontaneity" (Sinha 1996).

In 'Woman Resting on a *Charpoy*', the resting woman looks unhealthy (possibly with a stomach ache as her hand rests on her stomach) while the other woman seems to be her attendant as it was very difficult for a rural woman to spare time for herself. This subject matter was entirely avoided by the artists of that time and sensual imagery was the focal point in the portrayal of women. A resting woman was also usually depicted with the same erotic or sensuous display surrounded by a group of females.

The resting woman in the painting appears to be married as indicated by the red powder lining the middle partition on her scalp - a sign of marriage in Hindu religion and prohibited for unmarried and widowed women. This line is applied with auspicious red pigment called *sindoor* by the Hindu women after marriage and this custom is strictly followed till the time of their death. In this painting, Sher-Gil has focused on a major aspect of paintings in which a woman is depicted without a man but his presence is construed in a symbolic way. She took this concept for sarcasm after using some signs of marriage by the use of red color but her depiction does not support the male presence but criticizes the situation of a married woman.

In Western culture, marital practices were not as complicated as in the sub-continent; therefore, in 'Young Girls', Sher-Gil chose casual themes. In 'Young Girls', women have been painted as involved in objects of amusement - one is holding a plate of apples and the other one a music script in her hand. They are well educated and beautifully dressed with

fine makeup. On the contrary, the 'Resting' woman and her attendant have been portrayed in simple appearances. There is no sign of male presence in 'Young Girls' because this painting is not interrelated with patriarchal politics or male dominance like the 'Resting'. In 'Resting' the pillars of the cot are also painted in bright red, which may be an effort by the artist to project the boundary of the painted woman's in-laws house which she wants to cross but always fails to do so. The women in 'Resting' have been painted in traditional Punjabi dress but this dress is also worn by the women of Uttar Pradesh (India) where the painting has been painted. It is mentioned by Sher-Gil, in one of her letters to Karl Khandalavla, that "I have just finished a picture -- a girl in red-flowered clothes (the Punjabi dress, tight red trousers, shirt and veil)" (Sundaram 2010). The dress is known as the *Salwar Kameez* (fully covered upper and trouser) and worn with a long scarf (*dupatta*). The scarf is used by the women to cover their head and was mandatory for all women in the culture of the sub-continent. In 'Young Girls', the women have uncovered heads as this trend was mostly avoided in the Western culture.

Another painting of Sher-Gil, titled 'Female Torso' (Figure 3) has been taken to compare with the painting titled, 'Woman at Bath' (Figure 4). Firstly, the theme of both paintings is different from each other. In both paintings, the woman is depicted as showing her back to the onlookers

Figure 3 (L)

Torso (1931). Oil on Canvas, Size-62x 81 cm. Acc. No- 50, Courtesy NGMA

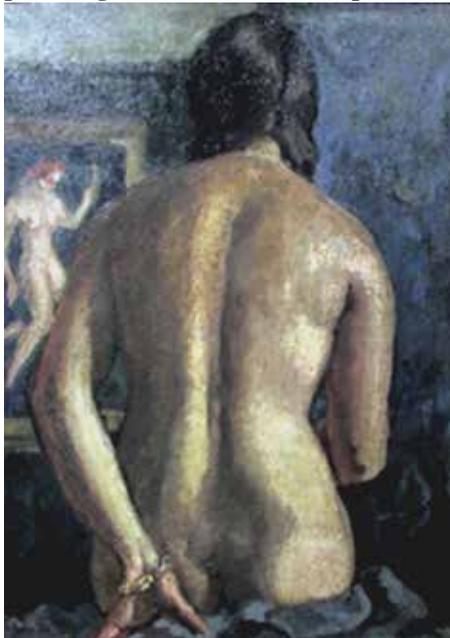


Figure 4 (R)

Woman at bath (1940). Oil on Canvas, Size- 68.5x 92.4 cm. Acc. No- 41, Courtesy NGMA



but the handling of structure, theme and sites is entirely different. In 'Torso', the woman is posing as a model, whereas in 'Woman at Bath', the woman is depicted as slightly showing her face and bathing in a bathroom.

Sher-Gil has again painted two diverse cultures and ideologies. At first glance, the 'Torso' represents an artist's studio while the 'Bath' is based on a private practice. Nude model study was prohibited in the sub-continent in the pre-colonial era; it particularly came into practice after the arrival of East India Company and was then practiced by male artists only. For female artists, it was taboo; Amrita Sher-Gil is the first noticeable female artist of the sub-continent who did so. Sher-Gil painted a woman as showing her back which was singular in itself. The depiction of 'Woman at Bath' is also connected with traditional culture of the sub-continent. In the sub-continent, the girls and women have to follow a set of do's and don'ts from their childhood in which their body is restricted by certain rules. In these rules, they have to maintain and hide their sexuality. Shyness and morality are considered their virtues but these norms of society might have looked strange and shocking to Sher-Gil as she had spent most of her time in the West. Such subjects, which are related to social customs, were projected by Sher-Gil in a very different way.

Bathing women have also been painted numerous times by artists but like the 'Resting', Sher-Gil again subverted the female imagery from sensual to rational in the 'Woman at Bath'. The title 'Torso' is again unexpressive as compared to 'Woman at Bath'. The background and interior of both the paintings is very different from each other. In 'Torso', a studio scene has been created through a painting hanging on the wall. In contrast, the interior of 'Bath' is typically rural because in rural places, this kind of bathroom may be seen till today. These small and congested bathrooms are constructed without any decoration because in rural areas interior decoration was not preferred as in the urban areas. In 'Woman at Bath', the woman uses a clay pitcher and a small clay pitcher jug for the bath. The rural women use the clay pitcher to carry water from ponds, riverine and wells, while in urban areas plastic buckets are used. The pitcher of water is also painted by Sher-Gil in 'Resting' and in many of her paintings. The sitting posture in the 'Bath' is also to be noted as in rural India, women mostly take bath or change their clothes in the same

posture. The woman is wearing traditional footwear of wood called *Kharanu* (wooden sandals). This kind of footwear is particularly used by woman for doing domestic chores and frequently mentioned in Hindu and other religious myths. In Hindu religion, *Kharau* is considered very auspicious. The woman's undergarments have also been shown hanging in the interior. However, in 'Torso' these details have been avoided by the artist. Red is again dominant in the background. The woman in the 'Torso' appears to be from the elite class while in 'Woman at Bath' the subaltern or lower class woman has been shown. Similarity in both paintings is in the treatment of onlookers by positing the back side of the body towards the onlookers.

During her residence in Europe, such type of depiction (Torso) was very common because each and every artistic production is, most of the time, based on the observation of the individual. In Europe, she painted subjects but in the sub-continent, she painted the reality associated with subjects. At that time, rural women mostly belonged to domestic and isolated spaces.

While in Europe, her subjects were entirely based on studio practice and she painted nudes as well; however, when she arrived in the sub-continent she developed a strong sense in the selection of her subjects. She usually avoided nude depiction in the portrayal of women as they remained mostly fully covered. This custom of remaining fully covered is not only limited to her painted women but also influenced her lifestyle. She was mostly found in a *Sari* (a traditional outfit of Indian women), with the *Bindi* (a red dot, usually applied by married Hindu women) on her forehead. In her painting style, she switched from urban and elite class into rural and traditional after being influenced by the local culture.

Conclusion

In this cultural evaluation, it is observed that her paintings of the later period have two major approaches. In the first approach, she explores early Indian art and then molds its virtues and attributes in her own way to represent true indigenous culture. She took subjects which are contemporary to her rather than mythological history. In the second approach, she particularly focused on the depiction of rural women and changed the sensual or political depiction into significant forms with the help of cultural semiotics.

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