



REVIEW ARTICLE

Vol.2. 2.,2015

ISSN  
INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

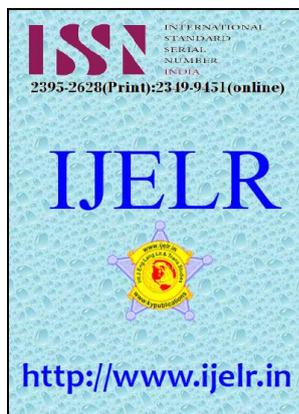
WOMEN AND THEIR REPRESENTATIONS IN AMRITA SHER-GIL'S PORTRAYALS

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ABSTRACT



In this article I wish to examine the work of extremely celebrated and the most initial modern woman artist of India, Amrita Sher-Gil, which will cover her autobiographical expression in the form of letters and a few articles as well as her paintings that show an array of influences that were sourced from her Indian-Hungarian origin, her encounters with French and Italian discourses. The article, very closely, studies the shades of women characters and the subjectivity that reflect from these portrayals. It observes the bourgeois Viennese lifestyle of Amrita Sher-Gil and her family in the Austro-Hungarian times and the way in which it has affected the 'self' of Amrita as well as her women representations of her real world and her art. According to Thomas Mann, autobiography serves as a genre for the marginal by which they are able to enter from a de-phased point into the mainstream by imitating them. Thus for a narrative of the life of Amrita in her own words, the only resort available is her letters. The article would thus discuss that, including the autobiography, all the other forms of self-narratives like the letters or the dairies or journals, fall under the same category where it becomes a genre easily available to women and through which they enter into the mainstream. Although Amrita never wanted to enter into the mainstream of writing but her letters, as the only literature available as her contribution, serves great to understand her ideology and art. Amrita had tried to flaunt the 'Indian' side of her parentage through the medium of writing and paintings which we can clearly see the reflection of all that had offered her writing and painting a multicultural outlook.

**KEY WORDS** – Amrita Sher-Gil, Women Representations, Subjectivity, Female 'Self'

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the nineteenth century there were arguments about the proper sphere of women, and during this time only women obtained some limited legal and financial rights while still struggling for the social equality, and began to have access to some professions. The aim of universal suffrage was achieved in Britain in 1928, and in the twentieth century women generally had more independence. The two world wars had significant effect on perceptions of what women were capable of doing and were encouraged to take work in the national interest. The fact that their ability to do 'men's work' could no longer be denied. Yet the return of

peace in each case was held to be a signal to return to 'normality' and women were urged to return to home to make space for men in the work place.

It was during this time that Amrita Sher-Gil, India's first woman modern artist, entered into the swarming landscape of the country of India and gained immediate consideration because of her half Indian-half Hungarian lineage that was obvious in her outlandish charm. That was the society which was under the grasp of the dominant currents of change and was struggling from the colonial systems in order to achieve its own identity. Amrita, with her arrival into this new world captured the society with her intellect, boldness in her art as well as her words, her wit and magnetism. She was also concerned with a sensitivity for all leading to a more equal and just society that had stronger values for its people. It was combined with a true love for her country India and its people with a quest to find original and unique way to express her creativity. As Geeta Doctor announces her arrival, 'she plunged into the Indian landscape drinking in the colours, with orgiastic glee'.

#### **AMRITA AND HER LETTERS**

Amrita was a prolific writer and the only form she indulged in was the letters which she wrote to family and friends. None of these were written with even a slightest thought of them being published. While Amrita was the one who would wear her heart on her sleeve, her letters were a clear-cut glimpse into her life and art. They have been a greatest offering for those who studied art or history, feminism or colonialism, or literature of any ages, in terms of the direction and insight it gave in into the mind and psyche of this unmatched artist of India. There is hardly a letter which does not contribute in understanding the nature of her art or herself. A piece of information or a viewpoint is guaranteed with each and every letter of hers, however short. From a letter describing a twelve year old bride to a letter talking about a powerful female goddess at Mahabalipuram to some of her last letters which she wrote to her parents in Simla, these letters cover a life time period of Amrita. In the letters, which are the invaluable collection now with the Indian art history, she has her views on the Indian art, the western art, the Hungarian art scene, Schools of painting, the Indian independence and almost everything that became a part of her life. We can say that her letters have become a seriatim account of her private affairs and a transparent commentary on times she lived. The letters she wrote also spoke about her literary interests and the strong views that she held for different poets and writers. The letters have recorded a most fulfilling account of the development and the journey of her art philosophies and witness a growth of herself from a young and intelligent, a way beyond kids of her age, to the most celebrated woman artist of the country. As they are also a personal account of her life, they have also revealed her relationships with many men of her times including the then most popular political figure Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

It is a fact that the letters of the eminent personalities are ardently followed by the people and enthusiastically read as they give a close peep into the personal lives of these people. It gratifies the inquisitiveness of the reader who is at once interested in getting the story of the private affairs of these celebrated people. Amrita's life was extraordinary as she was a passionate artist and a passionate person too who was known for her sensuality and was believed to have innumerable affairs too. Her description of the figures allowed a language that was sensuous to the readers. Therefore, for all of these above and much more to be explored in this chapter, her letters are believed to be exciting. She was also a skilled writer and had astonishing articulation skills which made her writings a treat to the intellectuals. There was a precision and a keenness which made her writings nothing below any of the known literary personality that the world knew of. One would not be surprised if she had taken over some of the most popular literary celebrities of her times, had she been as passionate to writing as she was to her painting. Such was her skill in writing that came only from a lot of reading of the literary texts.

Paintings are an art form that does speak of the artist but it depends on the interpretation of the viewer, while writing or literature is sometimes a clear window to the self of a person that is writer. Many artists of the world have expressed themselves with the writings in the form of letters and of all, letters of Vincent Van Gogh have been very popular and are widely read by people all over the world. These letters were originally written in French or Dutch and some may be in English and most of them are undated. He too was a

prolific writer when it came to writing letters and has nearly a thousand of letters of which most were written to himself and many from the rest to his brother Theo. These letters have been very important source of information and knowledge about the struggle that his life had been. It not only sketched to the world a chronology about his life, but also gave a clear glimpse about the artistic journey and creative ambitions that he had. His biographers have studied these letters extensively and extracted each and every information about him to understand his personality and nature. Certain interpretations have also been made about the paintings that he made from the narratives that he made in his letters. About the letters of Van Gogh, *Washington Post* wrote 'Van Gogh's letters....are one of the greatest joys of modern literature, not only for the inherent beauty of the prose and the sharpness of the observations but also for their portrait of the artist as a man wholly and selflessly devoted to work he had to set himself to.' (Van Gogh, 2003)

The inestimable contribution in terms of the information and understanding that letters or similar kind of self-narratives offer on various kinds of matters form a system within which one is able to find the significance of such form of literature. Moreover it may not be enough to understand the importance in isolation but only when seen as a whole, keeping in mind the impact and learning for present and the future academicians and historians, can we estimate the same. It holds true to letters of any age as they stand very near to the genre of autobiography in terms of the picture of self is concerned, with only a difference that letters could be called 'an accidental or unintentional autobiography'. According to James Olney, autobiography is both the simplest of the literary enterprise and the commonest. Anybody who can write a sentence or even speak into a tape recorder or to a ghost writer can do it; yet viewed in a certain light it might fairly be seen as very adoring, even foolhardy, undertaking – a bold rush into an area where angels might well fear to tread.

In the recent times, from the evidences of the publishing history, it is seen that autobiography has achieved quite a popularity and rather than 'the genre of marginal', it is practiced by everyone. Perhaps this is so because there are no rules of formal requirements binding the prospective autobiographer – no restraints, no necessary model, no obligatory observances are imposed on the one who wishes to translate his/her life into a piece of literature. At the same time it is, apart from the simplest and the commonest, also called the least 'literary' kind of writing, practiced by people who would neither imagine nor admit that they could be writers. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche remarked that every great philosophy of the world has been the 'confession of its originator and a species of involuntary and unconscious autobiography', and much the same could be claimed, in fact it has been claimed about psychology, history, poetry and literary criticism.

It is not very difficult to separate the letters from the autobiographical element of the writers are they become necessarily an essential part of the writing. Amrita's letters project her to be honest and straightforward and this becomes even more priceless as it gets pooled with the sharp and judicious verdicts about almost everything that she witnessed. She was blunt in her criticism of everything that she did not approve of according to her own standards of originality and modernity.

#### **AMRITA AND HER WOMEN OF WORDS**

Amrita's paintings depicted people and more often women. She was fascinated by the female figures who became subject in most of her paintings. As an audience, we know that we have become habituated to the portrayal of women in paintings and art as most of the artists who ever painted had to do with women as subject. Women, for ages have attracted the artists either because of sheer beauty or because of the form that we know as female form. Most frequently this portrayal has been the idealized representation of women. They have been portrayed in all ways, as the traditional or in the form of nudes who offered a treat to the viewers. Most of these depictions had women at the disposal of men, lying merrily, care-free, sensuous, or sycophantic subject for them. Until some of the artists, of whom most were women, started projecting themselves and other women in a different way by the middle of the twentieth century. Nudity, which was earlier seen as a part of the art practice and only seen from the perspective of men in terms of the beautiful, sensuous female body, started getting a different perspective as it moved beyond just the body or the watcher's object and came out as a powerful aspect of woman's strength. As against earlier paintings where these women never or hardly looked into the viewer's eyes, now the women confronted the observer with a contact of eyes. The

nudity or the nakedness also was dealt with a confidence and conviction. This may be with or without a dash of sensuousness or sexiness and while a viewer looks at the women, it's not the body but the mind which gets the focus. This suggested the artistic development in favour of the women lending them an empowerment. The main cause behind this enablement could also be attributed to the feminism which was holding a stronger and stronger footing in the society then. At one point of time, this female body was relished, then it was taken for granted and then a time came when this female body was celebrated. It was during the middle of the twentieth century only that the women came out of their bodies to form a 'self' and drew into characters. Some artists also took a complete control of their self and the body and on the contrary to the earlier times, took a stance that entirely dismissed the presence of the audience. The 'woman' in the painting became just herself, gave a damn to the world and was only concerned about her situation. The feminist movement began to show in the art making women reach out to their own selves which was not the case earlier – this was the principle that began to present a more empowered position of women in the art as well as the women Artists.

Amrita's portrayal of women time back to the images of women that were a part of her childhood and the first image that comes to the mind of her readers is that of her mother. Marie Antoinette as represented by Amrita in her letters was a very vibrant and talented lady. She had good taste in home furnishing and artefacts and it is suggested that Amrita inherited the scholarship and high standard intellect from her scholar father Umrao Singh, while her talent and good taste in the décor came from her mother. Amrita also developed a liking for the 'people' and social gatherings and parties as her mother very much liked them and always insisted on her children to project themselves as high class and elite. Although Amrita was exposed to these social circle parties, she was quite down to earth and her art too vouched for that.

Amrita knew that her mother was very talented and clever too. She also found her quite understanding as she raised both her daughters very lovingly and took great care that they get the best in their lives. Most of the letters that Amrita wrote in the beginning, when she was studying in Hungary and Paris, were all written to her mother. She trusted her mother for the understanding that is required to talk about love, marriage and sex, and would share everything with her.

Amrita knew that her mother had a narcissistic streak in her character and she definitely thought very high of herself and sometimes disregarded many around her. She was the central character in her house. Among her husband Umrao Singh, her two daughters, they all seem to revolve around her. She also had an affair with the Italian sculptor and a teacher of Amrita and followed this married man to Italy too in the name of children's education in music and arts and exposure to the Italian language. Once Amrita does mention this in a letter written to her sister Indu, while showing her disapproval of the proposals that her mother had sent, she says, 'Mother is trying to make a scapegoat of me now, as she had done with the Italian sculptor'. Moreover, though she was intellectually sound and well-read too, she was not quite amiable and genial but in the words of Malcom Muggeridge, 'extremely vulgar, Hungarian Jewess'.

It was difficult for Amrita to believe that her mother whom she always saw as thin-skinned and touchy, has become so insensitive and careless about others' concern and especially her daughter and her husband. The whole episode where Marie Antoinette is shown no very happy with the marriage and is seen trying to inquire all the time about the happiness of Amrita suggests that she was feeling insecure by the fact that Victor is unskilled and doesn't know either English or Hindi and so his future in India is uncertain and therefore her daughter too has uncertain future. She was just being mother! Umrao Singh too is trying to explain the same to Amrita in his letter how Marie felt for Amrita. How Amrita had been a special one to them and it's only out of love and care that she was disturbed about the situation. Thus we can undoubtedly say that Marie Antoinette's feelings were quite intense but she was not able to come out of her own aura to feel for the couple.

One thing that the readers of Amrita cannot skip noticing is the centrality of the women characters. Whether it is her writing or the letters. Most of the action of the life of Amrita revolve around the women who have been close to her and play a very important part in the development of herself. This could be her mother Marie Antoinette, or her friend with whom she was assumed to have a lesbian relationship – Marie Louise, or her dear sister who was the companion of Amrita's storm and struggle, or her very close friend to the end of

her life – Helen ChamanLal or the innumerable female models who became a part of her love – her paintings. All of her characters represent a moral landscape of the age and more importantly portray the self of Amrita. Although she had very close relations to many men of her times and she is very precise and particular in depicting these male figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru, where fascination was mutual between the two.

It's not just Nehru that saw her skillful depiction with words, she also wrote gracefully about Mahatma Gandhi when she was visiting south, Malcom Muggeridge, Ervin Baktay, Karl Khandalavala, Iqbal Singh, Boris Taslitzky and many other eminent people who shared her times. Most of the feminist women writers as well as the artists of her age portrayed feminist women characters very easily but it was the representation of the male characters which is challenging and less attempted.

Another important character that she portrays is that of her close friend Marie Louise Chasseny, who shared studio with Amrita in Paris when she was studying at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. That was the time when feminist movements projected women as an empowered and strong individual and also led the bold women of the society to adventurous and experimental sexual encounters. As a result of this, the relationship between women came out more clearly and confidently with no shame to be felt for the same. Amrita was also doubted to have a lesbian relationship with Marie Louise, to which she clearly wrote to her mother denying the relationship.

There is a strong presence of Marie Louise in the life of Amrita in terms of the mentions that Amrita does throughout. It is mentioned by Iqbal Singh in his biography of Amrita, how when he interviewed Victor, he came to know that Amrita talked a lot about Marie Louise when she visited Victorevery year during her vacations. Victor also said that Amrita used to even write a great deal about her and she had abundant trust in her art however unattractive. Amrita had great respect too towards her attitude which was quite strong and projected Marie Louise as an independent woman. It is believed that, although the Paris exposure gave a network opportunity and enabled Amrita make memorable contacts, the impact that Marie Louise made on Amrita was ever-lastingand very deep. She has been portrayed as not just a friend or a colleague but woman's companion. Although she denied having all doubts regarding a lesbian relationship with Marie Louise, there could be a possibility that Amrita found more satisfaction and content with stronger and talented women than the male friends as it reassured her own identity as a strong and powerful self.

Apart from Marie she was also believed to have had some connection with a young and well-known pianist of her times, a woman named Edith Lang. She too, like Marie Louise whom Amrita admired very much for her talent, was very talented and a brilliant musician and the recipient of many awards in the international competitions and it is probably due to these reasons that Amrita again didn't mind any relationship with her.

All the female characters in the life of Amrita drove the action in their respective fields of influence. They were either very talented or brilliant in their own domains like Marie Antoinette, Marie Louise Chasseny or Edith Lang or they were closer to her because of emotional bonding like her sister Indu or Helen ChamanLal. Although Indu and Helen had been a very passive characters but they have been able to be a strong emotional and moral support to Amrita at all points in time. They have also been able to influence Amrita and her life by simply being who they were although they did not drive much action from their part. Her writings suggest that these even the passive characters have been able to create comfort and easiness many of the times for Amrita. Amrita also looked for solace and motivation sometimes whenever she was either upset or depressed with the people or society around her. Hence they have been a constant source of inspiration and an indirect ways to confide. She wrote many of the times to her mother about how she got exhausted while painting and how she wished she could give more time to it. She wrote to her mother in a letter in 1932, how she had been working like mad on her paintings as she was preparing to participate in Concourse. Although she had been working for the weeks on some of her paintings but because she was working on a very large work, it was taking too much of herself and her time too.

Amrita found strength in the women that were around her. She was equally comfortable with her male friends like Karl Khandalavala, and her father but she was seen most of the times sharing with either her mother or her sister. She shared a very loving and warm relationship with her sister Indira, whom family used to call 'Indu'. Many believed that Indira was more beautiful than Amrita but because of the unmatched talent

and the intellect that she possessed, Amrita caught more attention and attraction of the people around. She painted Indu many a times, with a masterpiece reclining nude 'Sleep' which features Indu in a very original style. Both of the sisters spent joyful holidays together in Hungary at their maternal home. Because there was not much of the age gap, they enjoyed doing everything together and shared each and everything of their life. As when they grew, they still shared a good relationship with Amrita sharing almost all the incidences to her and even the mental stress and depression that she faced because of the struggle that she and Victor faced after their return to India after their marriage. She wrote a lot of letters to Indu after her return.

The character of Indu as portrayed by Amrita, suggests that her younger sister was not as strong as Amrita herself as there is often a mention that Amrita can't 'weep' like Indu. The passive, yet influencing role of Indu has been a soother for the rebel Amrita. Indu did show the streaks of jealousy from Amrita as she was more out-going and gifted and thus was more known and talked about by the people wherever she went. She also envied to some extent the beauty of Amrita for which she had so many loves and could enter into any eminent or less known man of their society. Amrita was able to charm anybody by her wit and intellect and this was begrudged by Indu which created a barrier between the two as they grew.

Amrita Sher-Gil's letters laid bare even more of her understanding and views on the art and her own self than what her paintings did sometimes. Her letters speak undoubtedly about the psyche of this artist who had an upbringing which was different than the most common people would have. The fact that she was born in an aristocratic family, and was exposed to the education and culture of Europe, with a topping of the brilliance and intelligence that she inherited from her scholar father and a talented mother was enough to make her what she was. Her perception and her art was built on these foundations and so the women of Amrita were all offering the centrality to her life and art. However, if the portrayal of her women characters is observed very closely, it can be found that her women are not only in the 'proxy' state or the 'superficial' or 'political' state but are real figures who contributed substantially to her life. Apart from these 'real' women, there too were the artistic representations which were new for the era in which she lived. Most of these 'real' or 'artistic' representations of women were not necessarily portrayed because Amrita was just attracted to the female form. In fact it would be the last reason to believe so as Amrita painted and came closer in real life to both men and women equally. All these portrayals were a part of either Amrita's writings or her paintings because she could understand them and identify with them. There was a sense of familiarity that she very strongly felt for these women. She never looked for an attractive face, either in the real life or in the models who posed for her. Amrita's portrayals of women depict the understanding of the agony and the struggle of these women which was transferred to her paintings or her words in the form of letters. She did not much see the compromises and complexities that Indian women faced as her mother was a different kind of woman and more than that her father was a different kind than rest of the Indian Men.

However, she had an Indian background and was aware of the situation of women in Indian societies that helped her in her representations. She was exposed to the Indian society and women in it right from the childhood when she wrote in her diary about the little bride that she saw in a wedding. She even painted this bride. She wrote about how 'forlorn' she looked and had no other choice but to follow her destiny which was decided by Rajah and Rani and her relatives. She wrote in her diary page on 25 August 1925, when she was barely twelve years old, that the poor girl has become a helpless toy in the hands of people. She added 'Poor little bride you little know that perhaps you might live a year, you are doomed and yet you do not realize'. The portrayals also do get interpreted in a sense of autonomy, self-determination and action that Amrita had in her own attitude. All the women that we read about in Amrita's letters or in the paintings were not only the characters as Amrita herself was or how she perceived them, but also how she thought they ought to be. Vivian Sundaram, her nephew, wrote "She lived during a period of great political and social turmoil in Paris. It was the age of disease, economic depression and rise of Fascism. When she returned to India, it was this melancholy that got transferred to her canvas when she portrayed the poverty and the sadness of Indian peasantry." And also, says Sundaram, "She was an artist representing India in national cultural terms. The tragic melancholy in her earlier works that had a contemporary vocabulary continued to haunt her work even

when it gradually became more detached and de-romanticized, such as in paintings of women in Indian feudal setup.”

The portrayals of women in Amrita speak loads about the feminist movement that not just challenged the way women were seen and represented but also about women antagonizing their secondary roles in the society. Of all the forms, art was one of the ways in which this movement put their ideas forth through the artists’ feminist representations of women who looked at their women not as objects but as subjects gifting them with the deserved subjectivity. The movement’s time also saw many political as well as economic changes worldwide and women enjoyed more independence than the earlier times. The rising of women in all fields from the precincts that earlier held them back from the rest of the world started to get projected in the arts of various cultures. We may not very explicitly call the portrayals of Amrita as the feminist representations as it is very difficult to define the premise of the feminist art, but if we look at it from the perspective that they are the representations by a woman artist and a very powerful and forceful clear projections of an empowered female self, then we can definitely categorize her as a feminist art. The portrayals certainly does not show any anti-male feeling. One thing that may be clear here that it is a feminist depictions as we cannot deny that the gender of the artist that is Amrita did influence her women and their shades.

Amrita has portrayed some of the very powerful figures in her letters like Sarojini Naidu. BaradUkil, and artist and Amrita’s friend had set up on an expedition with a series of exhibitions in various cities starting from Bombay to the south. They also had a halt at Hyderabad where they exhibited and saw a grand opening where a lot of eminent personalities had come including the much celebrated poet and politician Sarojini Naidu. Although Amrita had missed the inauguration of the exhibition, she got the opportunity to meet the vibrant lady later. As YashodharaDalmia writes, Amrita said, ‘The old lady is a darling. She makes the most killing remarks, ridicules people in her own inimitable way, has no respect for anyone, but at the same time she treats everybody from the highest to the lowest with a broad humanity that is admirable. I loved her’ (Dalmia, 80). There cannot be a more powerful portrayal in words than this which is attempted by Amrita. Apart from sheer power that is flowing, there is an extraordinary balance of the attitude that is evident. The portrayal definitely has a character that is absolutely under the control of the self and defying all societal norms and stereotypes that follow them.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The portrayals of women of Amrita which came out from approximately 250 letters that she wrote to different people, did bring out to her readers her amazing writing skills. The way she writes about the women who held places in her life suggest that she was capable of making a good writer too. Many, including her mother Marie Antoinette, had faith in her writing.

Her portrayal of women would remain incomplete without the mention of Helen ChamanLal, who met her very late in her life but ended up becoming a very close friend of Amrita. Helen’s sound artistic sense and a taste to recognize a good art impressed Amrita and brought her nearer as time went by. It was Helen who supported her and helped her in Amrita’s thick and thins and allowed to get the two friends closer to each other. It was Helen, to whom she resorted in the middle of the night when she left her house because of the fight flare that she had with Indu when she had come to Simla for a radiocast of hers on art.

Amrita Sher-Gil’s letters have been accepted as the only available literature written by Amrita and the sincere-most autobiographical elements that her readers have found from them have contributed a lot in understanding her as an artist as well as the people whom she attempted to depict. She worked on both male and female characters but the difference lied in the portrayal of women some of whom were absolutely autonomous and empowered. The women representations of Amrita have all kept their gender at its own place and have never tried to escape from it, which makes these representations remarkable and distinguishes them from the representations of other artists of India. Amrita projected them outside the contexts that they were traditionally assigned. There were other women too around Amrita who fell under the societal stereotypes, however it was the talented, independent and powerful woman that caught the attention of this artist for her perusal.

The females of Amrita have been a symbol of influence and supremacy as against the traditional representation. It defies, in most of the cases, the constructed ideas about the image of women in society and the assigned roles too. Although Amrita, like many other women artists of those times and even today refrain from being called a feminist artist, never called her a feminist, her writing and art is considered as the most modern in its sentiment and the treatment and definitely shows an impact on the representation and role of women in the society.

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