Chapter - V
A Woman’s self: Amrita Sher-Gil and her works
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During the last several decades the study and deliberations on women’s self-image or women’s symbol in painting has been a focal point of substantial attention in Indian art history. Most of those studies observe historically and culturally the art by women who rest themselves inside their imaginative works in autobiographical, quasi-autobiographical, personal or individuality in their representative forms in art. ‘Women’s paintings’, a subject of study is an imperative, since women symbolize not only gender, feminists and sexuality in their concept, but also it replicates the entire modern social crisis in India. For instance democracy and the formation of national identity, class, and race colour, ethnicity, and religion. This dilemma is to facilitate existing negotiations roughly by means of women, not as an artist and their initiation regarded not in favour of ethics and aesthetics. The advance being anticipated to examine this crisis by search of the exploitation of a stylistic and philosophical factor to modern women artists split across historical and cultural borders by woman’s representation of self, which is modern, creative, awake, feminine subject. This chapter peeks at Amrita Sher-Gil, not only the entity as a woman artist in perspective but to observe historically and cross-culturally women’s representation of ‘self’ in her paintings. Her conceptions are an epistemological setback that is in fact fundamental to modernity in the Indian art scene. This significant notion is seen in the works of Amrita Sher-Gil.

The representation of men and women in the early modern period in the Western art particularly from Renaissance, established a historical pressure on the West particularly in Europe and American society. Initially the depiction seen in portraits was of real men and women. Before the Renaissance, the men
and women represented in art were principally religious, Biblical, and mythical figures. In the fifteenth century portraits were developed as the representation of an actual, living human being. Individuals portrayed in these were the rich and privileged, as they could afford to commission paintings of themselves or their dear ones.\(^1\) (Indra Gupta) In reality, for a number of centuries up to nineteenth century, generally the men and women represented in portraits were of the elite, privileged class and their relatives. Most of these portraits reflected one familiar peculiarity; they represent idealized adaptations of the rich. The code of their prominence often had an outstanding role in the portrait, whether heraldic devices to indicate lineage, ornaments and jewellery to denote wealth, or representative attributes in the milieu to propose exacting qualities or events.

In this general sense, these early portraits of men and women were identical. Not only were the women generally more richly dressed in pricey fabrics, occasionally embroidered with gold, they also wore expensive and beautiful ornaments. In assessing from a modern point of view what shows to be a pride, we should be cautious. Women during the Renaissance might have been fortunate but they were typically underpowered. Intentionally these portraits were for the male audience; the women were inactive, powerless objects subject to the dominant look of males. Women’s outfits and jewellery offered a clear and public revelation of a family’s assets. So the female bodies were used to demonstrate the male build-up of power and wealth. The emphasis on female high merit describes greatly in the portrayal of women, as dissimilarity with that of men. There is a little instance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of women artists, to somewhat independent women who made a good living painting. However, independent women were expecting, possibly of simple
virtue as not under the thumb of father or husband. When artists began to depict the nude females in the sixteenth century, she was represented as passive and this proposed her accessibility to the male observer. This type of depiction is constant in the history of art. Next to the seventeenth century, the female nude happened to more popular than the male nude dos and by the nineteenth century, the term nude meant the female figure. The conflicting approaches regarding nudity in the Victorian period and later are too complicated. In this century she was just an object of male desire.

Deliberation on art of women who represents self-portraiture in the visual arts is to challenge male-centred meaning of the kind. The feminist critiques of autobiography developed in literature, argue against unsophisticated psycho-biographical readings of self-portraiture. Focussed on the ideas of autobiography, gender and sexuality it searches out the personal, political and social negations occupied by women artists in a principally male art world and provides insight into how women artists have subjugated the medium of self-portraiture to facilitate influence their own identities. It exposes a display of work by women in the twentieth century in the fields of painting, graphics, photography, sculpture and mixed media.

Amrita Sher-Gil was a volatile personality amongst the artists of colonial India, who burst out across the conventional culture of Indian art in the 1930s and continued up to her demise in Lahore after a sudden illness at the tragically young age of 28 in 1941, unaware of the priceless legacy she was leaving behind. Amrita’s diminutive, chaotic life was as crammed with obsession and colour exposed in her paintings, subsisted it on her vocabulary, disgusting the society of the time with her affection for interaction and exceptional ways.
Paradoxical urge nudged her life of significantly truthfulness and revolting self-absorption and fascination with artistic reliability and a negative resolve to delight life and her creative realization. The bohemian fascination of her individual fable has been predisposed to conceal a stern consideration of Sher-Gil’s art.

Sher-Gil was a decisive source to the progress of modern Indian art. Born to a Sikh father and a Hungarian mother in 1913, she was one of the initial Indian artists trained in Paris. She is remembered for her exceptional splendour for five years of her early life in India and left to study art in Paris, carrying out a schooling of five years under Pierre Vasillant at the Grand Chaumiere and later under Lucien Simon at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Since the age of five Amrita learnt drawing and painting in watercolours. Hungarian fairy tales, Hungarian country side, its feudal castles, the peasants in their big coats embroidered with bright colours and their houses painted with daring bright designs prepared a tough visual notion on her. The drawings and watercolours Amrita carried out between the ages of eleven and fourteen are associated with an increasing awareness of herself. By 1927, Amrita had been to India for six years, until then the people and landscape in her drawings and paintings were exclusively European. In her earlier work, she depicted with a skinny unsteady line, pensive maidens uncovered and lost in forests. Afterwards her characters and the women were shown with their faces anxious with concealed emotion of suicide or aggressive to stab the men they were with. During this period she shaped incredible remains of work in which one witnesses a bright merge of Western instruction and an Indian receptivity. In her seven years of artistic life she produced her major paintings like ‘village-scenes’, ‘beggars’, ‘bride’s toilet’,
and ‘villagers going to the market’, ‘a woman sprawled on a charpoy’ or ‘an ancient storyteller in the backdrop of a Sikh temple’. She also made some self-portraits that reflected her as a pulsating woman lively to life and breathing to art. It is not that Amrita did not countenance resistance in her period, for art was definitely a male domain. However, Amrita had an indelible faith on her faculty and revelation that persisted in her effort. Considering Amrita’s passion for drawing and painting, Amrita’s uncle, Ervin Baktay recommended she draw from live models, which she had never done before. The models mainly willingly accessible were servants like the sweeper and his family who posed for her. The persistence with which she worked with her uncle made him help her further. She would pay attention to his criticism and told him afterwards ‘It is to you I owe my skill in drawing’. The progress these drawings must have made a profound and impact on Amrita for it was these looks, which, subsequent to her European academic instruction, compelled her to revisit her native soil.

“She stimulated promptly from academic realism to a vigorous approach that portrayed from both Gauguin and Indian miniature painting. Her individual figures of peasant females transmit an innate and miserable perceptive of a society stirring from feudalism to modernity. So far, her lush palette, among its radiant reds and optimistic yellows, revelry in a sumptuous gets in concert with a jovial steamy customs, defy the apprehension of individuality and fit in with the transcendences of bliss and beauty. Her inventive mission is necessity to observe beside those of Tagore and Jamini Roy, Nandalal Bose and Benode Behari Mukherjee and other revolutionary Indian modernists”.

(Baloon Dhingra. 1981)
The Sher-Gil portraits represent the two facets of her style. The first one is the sensuous portraits through unusual prominence on the soft creases; pleats and rumplest of the costume, the spongy grain of the skin and the sensitive expression in the eyes have an obvious plea and an instant charisma. The other, a fashioned reflection of rural females’ delivery by means of their everyday surrounding, in bright red, orange, white, green colours, reminds the temper of a miniature.

She also proved the diverse artistic traditions merged with foreign and Indian art concepts. In 1934, Amrita came back to India, resolute to stay in the country where she thought, she had a task of reconstructing the life of Indians and predominantly the poor ones. Amrita’s felicity to unify the classical artistic traditions of India with her Parisian training prompted quite a few ingenious works, which exemplify the approach for scores of several generations of Indian artists. After her travels in South India, some of her masterpieces materialized. She was significantly predisposed by the Ajanta frescoes and her palette transformed to deep, earthy colours, her figures permeated with the rich style of the frescoes. Principally The Brahmacharis, presently in NGMA, New Delhi that mounted a crowd of young Brahmin boys with white dhotis blinking against the amber red of the canvas, which made an ideal equilibrium between ritual appearance and the individual description of the figures. In the Ladies’ Enclosure finished at Saraya, viewing an everyday ritual, dressing a woman’s hair which portrayed the woman beautify herself and highlights the grace of a devoted custom. Distant from the Ajanta style, Pahari, Rajasthani and Mughal miniatures had a profound impact on Amrita. In Siesta (1938), Amrita shaped some works that disclosed her experiments with the miniature style and its
capability to summarize an entire extent of activity. One of her paintings had a rural woman relaxing on a cot and fanned by another along with a group spins the charkha. Amrita wrote:

‘The figures in this one are like gems studded on an ochre foreground and a gleaming background afforded by the white walls of the houses. I want to achieve sonorous modulations of colour, an unctuous texture’.iv (Amrita Sher-Gil, 1965).

Amrita Sher-Gil’s 1938 painting Village Scene, was the highest price paid for a painting in India at the time. Her appeal with the composition and lyricism of Pahari miniatures is manifest in her work. It is undoubtedly a masterpiece. The Paris- learned Amrita Sher-Gil mixed Expressionism and her perceptive of Indian miniatures while the studio exercise of working from a live model is appreciable. An incomparable use of white in Amrita’s later paintings as she had exposed the white, liveliness the painting, like a spark of light and elucidate the entire space. In Village Scene, she uses white, for the women’s clothes reflect against their shady bodies, and the white walls in the setting generate radiance roughly over their head, an accumulation of a silent play to the work. The gentle, repetitive pulse of life on this rural land provided Amrita the chance to expend more and more time to detect village women and their chores. The village landscape reflected the elegance and beauty, their unexciting life, the colour, form and composition she portrayed that was breathing country panorama.

“I am personally trying to be, through the medium of line, colour and design, an interpreter of the life of the people, particularly the life of the poor and sad. But I approach the problem on the more abstract plane of the purely
pictorial, not only because I hate cheap emotional appeal and I am not, therefore, a propagandist of the picture that tells a story”.

Her friend and art critique, Karl Khandalavala, on Amrita Sher-Gil that, ‘The span of Sher-Gil’s genius was limited to but seven years...the sheer power of her finest canvases transcended anything that had hitherto been achieved in modern painting even by the most notable pioneers of Bengal Renaissance’.vi (Karl J. Khandalavala 1945)

In reality, an immodest journey of the sensuousness marked a turning point in modern painting. In a letter to Khandalwala Amrita wrote;

‘Erotic painting and sculpture could not possibly have been inspired by religious fervour. In fact I think all art, not excluding religious art has come into being because of sensuality: sensuality so great that it overflows the boundaries of the mere physical’.vi (N. Iqbal Singh 1984)

Geeta Kapur says:

‘Her art language involved the use of indigenous resource in the context of her nascent sympathy for the modernising nation; she hoped to use it as a critical reflex against her personal narcissism’.vii (Geeta Kapur, 1995)

Her exploration of open fortitude was by now obvious, she for a short period turned into infatuated the trend of modern art of Paris and the bohemian lifestyle that left with it. She painted a series of sensuous, vastly stimulating nudes and later in 1934, however, she felt an urge for change. ‘I began to be haunted by an intense longing to return to India,’ and ‘feeling in some strange way that there lay my destiny as a painter.’

Recounting as a ‘sensualist of the eyes’, Sher-Gil happened to be with paintings of the country poor storyteller, camel journeys, villagers, farmers, she
exposed the persuasive eyes of the real peasants of India. Her strong style is obliged to Gauguin as well as her fascination with Mughal miniatures and the Ajanta paintings. Amrita’s gleaming paintings have remained the mainstay of the collection of National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. Amrita’s paintings are marked by an impression of ambiguity immediate to her life and time. In a modest documentary plainly called ‘Amrita Sher-Gil: An Indian Rhapsody’, in French documentary filmmaker Patrick Cazals displays her nudes, landscapes, people and self-portraits, marked by rich colour and Indian themes, credit themselves to loads of elucidations on the composite of a passionate artist, repeatedly referred to as ‘the icon of Indian contemporary art’. It is also an edifying memoir of Amrita Sher Gil, who has provided a representation of modern Indian art since the early twentieth century. Her obsessive passion and fondness to art made her a representative of aesthetics in the Indian subcontinent in the early 1930s as she raged through transversely the Indian art horizon and defied the setting of Indian judgment, view and thoughts. She really made the Indian art modern.

Amrita’s penchant to ‘rediscover her Indian roots’ and her interest in the assorted elements of the country, especially South India, resulted in ‘The Bride’s Toilet’, ‘The Story Teller’, ‘The Brahmacharis’ and ‘Women in Red’, and she painted the scarcity she saw around her.

‘There’s also a kind of deeper sense of existential pain that she carried and transferred to how she saw things. It is romantic in one sense. She is projecting a sense of incapacity, women and men from the hills. There’s a greater vibrancy, colour as a statement and that give strength’, says artist Vivan Sundaram. viii (Vivan Sundaram, 1972)
Sher Gil’s paintings portray exceptionally emaciated, starved men and women, of the Pahari villagers whom she congregated around her Summer Hill residence in Shimla, titled *Hill Men* and *Hill Women* followed by in the identical style such as *Bride’s Toilet, Fruit Vendors, Brahmachari*, and several others. All the figures highlighted by her, principally those of women, have bland eyes, an expression of acquiescence and depression on their drained faces. Being a woman, she was logically more interested in painting women and their deeds. As she was not familiar with their locale, she was attentive to them, with their secluded, bind lives throughout which they stimulated like fogginess. Their tempers of grief are reflected in all her paintings. Sher Gil breathes an extremely tiny life but her involvement in Indian art is radically sensible. All of her works, positively the large works on canvas, are in public or private collections and their possession is accounted for. Her works have also been subject to a ban on export outside India for the past thirty years which reflects her importance as an icon of Indian painting. It is also convincingly merging European inclination with her evaluation of past Indian art, in conjunction with the absorbing facts of her life; terminated in her tragic end.

In her work ‘*Fruit Vendor’s* of 1937 is presently displayed at National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, the study of the figures are most striking which shocks viewers. The *Brahmacharis* is a rectangular oil panel; a group of teenager Brahmins, bare-chested and with lustrous, sacred threads wilted roughly around their chest and seated cross-legged beside a wine-red milieu. One of them looks intently at the observer, one twist away, and the central figure, with a white and red tint stain on his forehead, glance outside, as if detained by an insight. She painted *Brahmacharis* in 1937, when she was twenty
four. Full ‘of dark-bodied, sad-faced, incredibly thin men and women who move silently looking almost like silhouettes’, she determined her chore would be ‘to interpret the life of Indians, mainly the poor Indians pictorially; to paint those images of boundless deference and tolerance, unparalleled in Indian art, substantial canvases with farm workers, storytellers, nurses, camel drivers and minstrels. Determined to represent rural Indians, she strikes upon an approach of distracted, recurring and intensely bright as it motivated by European modernism and India’s ancient sculpture and art.

Sher-Gil was hyper-sensitive in a short life and some of her works seem rapidly self-possessed. However, in her best paintings, bright niceties merge to create an eternal monumentality. In The Haldi Grinders, amidst trees, their bodies distilled into a clutch of hands that grip the crushing wheel, an obscure group of women are engaged in a mundane activity, crushing turmeric and we spy on them and their vivid hands as if trespassing on a religious mystery. The young Brahmacharis, with their typical faces, take a seat alongside in temples of South India, so far as they could also be ancient hierophants sharing a whispered secret. Dalmia writes;

“The contemporary [is] elevated to the level of the classical. In a tragically brief career, Sher-Gil did much to introduce her country to the idea of the free-spirited artist, and to show them that art could interpret Indian life for Indians”. As Dalmia said that, “She introduced the modern into India”.\textsuperscript{ix} (Yashodhara Dalmia, 2006)

Amrita’s approaches and responses to contemporary art are distinct and mystifying. Even though she was in Paris from 1929 to 1934, by which time the crucial styles and movements of twentieth century art had drawn closer, she
however formulated a negative orientation. During September 1934, Amrita was pragmatic with her new direction when she remarked:

‘Modern art has led me to the comprehension and appreciation of Indian painting and sculpture. It seems paradoxical but I know that had we not come away to Europe, I should perhaps never have realised that a fresco from Ajanta or a small piece of sculpture in the Musee Guimet is worth more than a whole Renaissance’.

Concerning her optimistic desire for return to India, she said:

‘Towards the end of 1933 I began to be haunted by an intense longing to return to India, feeling in some strange inexplicable way that there lay my destiny as a painter.’ In the same article ‘Evolution of My Art’ she naively agreed with her professor’s comment that ‘judging by the richness of my colouring, 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 colour and light of the east’. (Amrita Sher-Gil, 1965)

During her stay in Europe, Amrita went every year to Hungary, on the one hand to get away from Paris and the French and on the other hand to be amongst her own people and the Hungarian country side. For her, Hungary was a country of craze and beauty and she loved its ‘honest’ simple peasant folk, their language and their culture. In Paris, the stuff of modern art had appeared from a culture where the historical advance of capitalism had achieved its imperialist supremacy. Various experiments of modern art were associated with technology and the forms frequently revealed the mechanisation and dehumanisation of the society. All this was strange to the environment in which Amrita was brought up. The twentieth century suited her own experience only
when she went to Paris. Amrita’s approach to those of her own class background is vague, and in a way, her activities often reveal her words. Following the initial ecstasy of determining her power to excite and humiliate this westernised choice, she realised that their conservatism and undignified admiration for the British way would result in rejection and assist her own consideration of India. However, her class surroundings, and the actuality that she was both a woman and a painter made it unfeasible for her to reject them completely. In her initial year in India she painted several portraits of her family and friends, the most prominent being The Three Girls. In the same year, she produced soppy and romanticised adaptations of Indian poverty in paintings like Mother India, The Beggars and Woman with Sunflower. Her true artistic task, she asserts, ‘was to interpret the life of Indians and particularly the poor Indians, pictorially’. Nevertheless, she was fascinated by them only as aesthetic objects ‘strangely beautiful in their ugliness’. For her the poverty of India was gorgeous, and the people who hardly lived inhuman and primeval situation were simply the moving images. She experienced that conditions in India could not vary and that poverty was an eternal feature. For her the masses were like profiles and dumb quiet images of countless compliance and patience ‘who would fatalistically admit their lot for time immemorial’. During the winter, she completed two of her most important paintings: Hill Women and Hill Men. Even though in Hill Men, Amrita created massive forms, which communicate a sense of gravity to the figures, yet overcome a passive, gloomy mood in the still images. The variation in the quality of her painting is here in all the phases of her work and it appears powerless of nourishing the strength and pressure of the mood formed in her best works. In South India, she visited Cochin, Thiruvananthapuram, Cape
Comorin, Madurai, and Mahabalipuram, and many temples, in those places both for sculpture and for frescoes especially in Mattancheri palace. She saw Kathakali dance drama also during her visit. The scene of the semi-naked black bodies of the south Indians, dressed largely in white against a background of rich emerald green vegetation made a sturdy visual impact on her. As a result, she was eager to paint this scene in terms of the form she had been so energized after seeing Ajanta. While at Cape Comorin she executed the ‘Fruit Vendors. Conversely, on her return to Shimla, she painted her South Indian Trilogy, The Bride’s Toilet, The Brahmcharis and South Indian Villagers going to Market. She later on expressed The Brahmcharis as a hard obsession she had ever done. Certainly, Amrita was concerned in portraying an outlook of feudal and the harsh realities of modern life in India. Amrita did very few paintings in 1941 in the last year of her life. Four of her most important works done in the first half of 1940 were The Ancient Story Teller, The Swing, The Bride and Woman Resting on Charpoy. The last three paintings are about women, the secluded life of tradition adjusted by Indian women, made her aware of their social and psychological problems. Woman Resting on Charpoy appears to convey a calm, but sensitive understanding of the psychology of feudal Indian women, a realization of the chains forced on her by her social situation. Amidst the excitement of her new environment, she started her last work, a courtyard scene from above, and in the painting, she had even more implicated in planting down her love for India in a straight and easy form, whereas pathetic missing from her affinity of enhancing formalism, she seemed determined for a blend of content and form, eager to establish the dialectic between art and life. In 1941, just days
before the opening of her first major solo show in Lahore, she became perilously ill and slipped into a coma. She died soon afterwards.

The standing, sitting and reclining figures seem to be specifically modified to her scenery, as if these were the lone places where they could survive. Each painting has a pictorial ambience that floats in proximity to our shared dreaming of normal, everyday life, so far as this world has deserted the relaxed balance of generations and genders. The actors in the scenes are human beings. Most of them are young women, middle-aged homemaker, and young men also. The women always seem formally bound to their surroundings; most often, walls and clothes that vibrate, or bodies and objects, or all of the above in a kind of sticky visual ballet. Moreover, the facades that people stop to occupy in a given space or situation. Better to say the situations and spaces occupy them. Their compassion begins to emit less superficiality. The mysteriously simple facial expressions and timid hand gestures begin to reveal a wider background of desire and anxiety. A psychological tracking attempt starts to disclose, flaking colour, the wall and towels, the shrubbery and dark corners, the expression of drapes all open to indicate something a representation of atmosphere, and even near-monochromes. Amrita conveyed those colour-attentive eyes in her artistic progression.

The subjects expose the intention behind all the choices Amrita made in the process of her paintings. Beyond the colour, so much so that, her choice of space, position, and particulars, all seem to have moved inward the same studied attention. She perceptively combined a vertiginous view of background with a purposefully upward glance from her model or the figures to emphasize her own
self-contained, self-minimizing bend at the base of the theme. Amrita chose locations in her paintings, most often interior and exterior spaces that strategically reflect the privacy of an implied domesticity, bathroom, mirrors, clothes, doors, windows that repeat the self-presentation of suggested socializing. The details added to these environments only enhance the psychologically penetrating and self-possessed attitude of the work in the subject matter, deployment of a traditional dressing of the figures, and the excessive feelings of the eyes. Most of her works not only explore the impact of presentation on ideas of female representation and self-presentation, but also impersonate her style. Not surprisingly, all her paintings end up looking like an appropriation of typical images from a visual culture, specifically because this is the collective source material that both the models and the artists drawing upon for inspiration. As a result, the paintings are explorations of how popular descriptions structured the women’s self-presentation and representation. Amrita had the knack of looking into the power of painting and not only imitate its procedures, but also the subject’s impact on both fictional and surviving modes of representation. Amrita’s paintings thus give the impression of visual manifestation of the ideas and questions of immediate audience, intention, representation, self-presentation, and self-construction that impacted her inspiration.

Theoretical accounts of the history of modernism are usually linked with the city and urbanity; they present the development of the processes as surrounding in different artistic styles, which then provide the base for the artistic movements. Art produced in the framework of modern school of painting focuses on the scenery of the space with its new technologies and the
commotion of urban life. However, this version of modernism leaves out the fact that lot of artists left the rural environment of artistic culture to pursue their work in the urban shelter of colonial rule. Moreover, there are further reasons for the prevailing narrative of modernism blocks as to why art was produced in these colonies. It is not only a narrative that can make sense of the group character of artistic practice in the colonies, but also centred as it is on the individual practitioner of art. Ultimately, because modernist histories deal with only auxiliary significance of extra-pictorial factors, they do not propose methodologies for the perceptive of the rural framework for artists in villages. Through problematizing the art of rural areas in relation to the history and the dominant structural models of the concept of modernism, and postscript to the major artistic and aesthetic movement has become so fundamental to the discipline of art history.

The following paintings of Amrita Sher-Gil are chosen for the study and evaluate her contribution as a major boon in the modern Indian art scene.

Plate number 1- ‘Fruit Vendors’, Amrita Sher-Gil’s one of the major paintings of an anxious state of life of the peasants in rural south India, represented one lady and two children sitting on the ground of a market place to sell bananas. A generalized style all three dark figures are in white cloths. Two of them, mother and the girl child, are looking at the buyer and the other is looking at the yellow coloured soil. The background of the painting is filled with hazy grayish blue and pale white textures. Simplified shapes are heavily outlined in black, the vendors created by Amrita, perceptually haunted by sickness, who used all her intuitive limitation to create a stimulating feelings of the theme.
Plate number 2- ‘Haldi Grinders’: The focus of this Amrita’s painting is intended for a ‘showcase’ on the burden life of women in India. Here in this painting three women are portrayed in the centre of the picture plane with yellow, white and red saris, placed within the background of nature. Bright colouring on the dress against blurred and faint brown background with two massive trees provides an immense stress on the viewers. Amrita Sher-Gil completed this painting with very simplified subject matter, and is filled with weak, yet commanding the ordinary females with depth, strong sense of dignity and massive power on their livelihood.

Plate number 3- ‘South Indian Villagers Going to Market’: This is an added market subject matter of Amrita’s temptation to show peasants at work. In this painting, encircled by six figures, with two half naked men, two women and two fully naked children going to the market with some personal belongings. Crowded with figures, the composition is filled with shabby colours. Black striped dhotis of men and plain coloured saris with strong colour boarder of women and their progression prove the fleeting effects of dullness and give the real impression of a momentary movement in the painting. Dry background, muddy shadows on the soil and the drama, project the ‘academic’ conventions of the artist aligned with the solid social realization of the subject matter.

Plate number 4- ‘Self Portrait’: This is one of the major paintings made by Amrita, and she was strangely fascinated for the one who so openly professed contempt for woman’s body. This half nude figure with a profile look and crossed hands has all the tender charm of its subject, delicately un-emphasized, not sentimentalized, but clearly cherished. Flesh-tint colour is applied to the whole visible body and the back-ground, predominantly the glow of flesh gets
an enormous anxiety and impulsive stunt of the viewers. Her influence on oriental traditional decorative patterns is also seen in the unsympathetic coloured background of this painting, which is an innovative component of modern notion in art.

Plate number 5- ‘Hill Women’ Amrita Sher-Gill shaped again an immense cluster of female figures, which converse a sagacity of significance and it beat a reactive, dull temper in the still images. The variant in the quality of four female figures is placed in the whole picture plane of the canvas and depicts a weak, gloomy and freezing outlook of hilly terrain. The central figure in white cloth is looking at the floor and the others are in compassionate mood. A pot is impressively coloured with red at the top and centre and a smoky grey colour deliberately lays on the background to symbolize the sensation of the setting.

The five paintings of Amrita Sher-Gill selected for the study are about women, their isolated life compelled by tradition made her aware of their social and psychological problems. These representations in her paintings also transmit a serene insightful understanding of the psychology of the feudal Indian woman. Even then, she had her love for India, her people and their survival to a thematic representation to establish the dialectic between art and life.

Very few artists in modern Indian art have been as involved in their self-portrait as Amrita. Her self-portrait is intense in its purity and realism with a smooth, flesh tint, miserable look with opened eyes. This is the ‘self’ hardly apprehended in her artistic existence under the stress of the chaos in the modern art scene in India. The skilful usage of tolerable colours, sensitive ability, and the sense of mature control on superior mind however, disturbed feelings can be seen in her portraits.
The evolution from the insight of visual expression to an individual capacity on art of a woman artist is an adventure in exploring the use of stylistic and philosophical factors. In modern Indian art scene, one also has to look at the historical and cultural borders integrated with women’s representation in art, literature and ‘self’ as identity. This chapter has addressed Amrita Sher-Gil, not only as a woman artist in perspective but also the way she observed the historical and cross-cultural women’s symbol and interpretations as ‘self’. Her images are built up of invariable shapes of soft colour, so that the intensity in each painting has to be sought for. The surface planes of her early paintings are prepared by a degree of a relief, the immense stain and mature colouring, pleasing on a roughly self-determining reality. The sweep of her speedy colouring supremacy is clearly visible in her later paintings, as she forces herself to seize the reality of the subject before it fades away again, becomes a constant exercise, and she has achieved new insights throughout her experimentation. Her character representation on Indian issues also has certain ambiances and relevance. In early rational approaches, it may possibly be a mere representation on the basis of some interpretation of the real, but later she moved against the imitating reality of her subject and its representations. For this reason, a re-understanding of the concept of ‘mimesis’ even in the sense of representation and depiction in the framework of modernity is necessarily mesmerized by her for making a new kind of Indian painting.
i Gupta Indra, India’s 50 Most Illustrious Women, 1993.
iii Dhingra Baldoon. Amrita Sher-Gil, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1981.
iv Sher-Gil Amrita, Sher-Gil, Lalit Kala Akademi, 1965.
vii Kapur Geeta, “When was Modernism in Indian Art”, Journal, Arts and Ideas, Tulika print communications, 1995, New Delhi.
ix Dalmia Yashodhara, Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life 2006.
x Sher-Gil Amrita, Sher-Gil, Lalit Kala Akademi, 1965.
Amrita Sher-Gil

Plate No. 1
Plate No. 2

Haldi Grinders
South Indian villagers going to market

Plate No. 3
Self Portrait

Plate No. 4