Chapter - 6
Critical Assessment

Art and Criticism have coexisted ever since the first creative endeavour of man - in shades varying in degrees from applause and appreciation down to disgust and disdain. Criticism of art based on a wide umbrella of analysis and synthesis though claiming to be objective in assessments and scientific in approach has often landed to be an ART in itself drawing inspiration from subjective information from a vast multitude of sources, the primary ones being the artist to be criticised and the critic and his fellow clan.

Amrita's work right from the moment she was noticed as an Artist around 1927 received attention and her person and her art have been, before and after her death in 1941, paid attention to by a galaxy of CRITICS, the outstanding names being Karl Khandalawala, Mulk Raj Anand, Charles Fabri, Herman Goetz, Jaya Appasamy, G. Subramanyan, Gita Kapur and Vivan Sundaram. She was adored by the liberal-minded Indians to whom she was a representative, through her life and work, of the freedom of the modern artist and she went on to become a legend even in her short lifetime; her untimely death, an end to a brilliant career, had a touch of poignancy which
shocked them and her work was known all over and reviewed time and again. It is therefore that critics have found it difficult to separate her biography from work to make objective assessment.

Amrita was one of the least secretive persons of her times who had only disdain for the prudish morality of the period and that is why even after 57 years after her death the legend persists. Though her name is not any more a hot name in art circles today it cannot be denied that more than any other artist of her generation and the one that followed, her impact on contemporary Indian art has been profound and inescapable, so much that some critics said that the year of Amrita's entry into Indian art scene can be called 'watershed in the annals of Indian art'.

She fervently hoped that impelled by an inner urge a new and vital movement would come into being. Judging from the vitality of current Indian art scene one can only say that her prophesy has come true.

Most of the pieces on her from Karl Khandalavala's monograph published in 1944 to the critical articles in 'Marg' 

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publication edited by Vivan Sundaram et al. are written under
the biographical details and more often her biography has
become central to the study of her work. Often vindicative
criticism surfaced driven more by her so called audacious, apt
and spontaneous outbursts and her written words wherein she
did not trust the compartmentalization of art into different
schools and periods. She, being a one person crusader against
academic realism on the one hand and revivalism on the other,
brought out the futility of slavish imitation of the mannerism of
the art of the past and would be shockingly blunt in company
of critics of substance. She would find fault with academic
realists who, she opined, would model their art after the fifth
rate western art and go on to compare it to the Bengal School.
She said, "compared to best specimens of it the worst samples
of the Bengal school are works of genius."^2

As a result thereof Amrita faced a two-pronged attack:
attacks by the officially sponsored realistic school and the
attacks by the revivalists who were 'viewed good-humouredly by
the British administraton despite the criticism of Roger Fry and
Benjamin Solomon'.^3 For Amrita art had a binary nature - it

2. Vivian Sundram et.al.: Amrita Sher-Gil, Marg Publication,
Bombay, p. 102.

could be either good or bad. On a proposal to write a book on Indian art, a request of an Allahabad publisher she accepted, as an after thought she expressed her apprehensions to Karl Khandalawala in a letter: "You know my views on art and if I do write I won't make any concessions, I assure you. They will set on me like a pack of hyenas and tear me to bits. Shall I do it notwithstanding?" She spoke of the hostility, the very mention of her name would evoke in artistic circles, despite the efforts of supportive critics like Karl Khandalawala, Hermann-Goetz, Charles Fabri, Mulk Raj Anand etc. Some of the epithets used to describe her art have been listed by: 'hideous faces', 'deformed limbs', 'incorrect drawing', 'faulty composition; 'unnatural colours' 'uncouth' etc. The hostility is evident from the fact that her paintings sent to the All India Exhibition, Trivandrum in 1937 were rejected on the advice of Dr. James Cousins who was incidently an ardent champion of Bengal school of painting. Asit Kumar Haldar of Marg publications felt that despite her Indian father her work "smells of West".

Sharda Ukil thought that her work did not represent "the

feeling of the people". Even her claim as an Indian painter was often questioned. This could be one of the reasons why Karl Khandalwala had to go to extremes to prove that her art was rooted in Indian tradition, and went on to defend her against the criticism that she was inspired by Cezanne and Gauguin. Karl put forward the theory that Amrta's art was a reaction against the Bengal school of painting. He thought that the work of the pioneers like Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Gaganendra Nath Tagore, Venkatappa, Jamini Roy and a few others, who are responsible for the renaissance of Indian painting, was of undoubted value. However, those who followed them lacked in inspiration and they were carried away by the surface effects. Amrta's work was a reaction against the "warped and unmeaning imitation of the masterpieces of the past" and it is therefore that he stresses the need to understand and assimilate the underlying principles of the ancient wall paintings and Indian miniatures. And this is what, he opined Amrta could achieve. Karl was in no doubt as to her Indian inspiration.

In answer to the criticism that her works showed the

influence of Gauguin, Karl brings out a vital truth by putting forward the argument that the principles of form underlying post-impressionism are the very principles which underlie much of the art of India and the East.

Karl believes that the synthesis of form and colour leads to the aesthetic organization. Amrita used colour as a powerful element of expression and not to create superficial prettiness. Like the Coleridgean defence of metre as a restraining power Karl thinks that colour is a controlling force and Amrita's colours apart from imparting visual quality to her pictures add to their significance. Critics had pointed out that Amrita used water-pots in her pictures mainly as 'space-fillers' without adding to the organic unity of the pictures. Karl does not agree with them and thinks that the water-pots have instead a symbolic value in the Indian context. To him the water-pots spelt harvest to the tired anxious tillers of the parched soil.  

Karl simply accepts Amrita's own statements regarding change of style in 1937 in the face value. He feels that painting of 'the Trilogy' taxed her considerably and she sought relief in a different expression. Karl saw a joyous note in the

later painting, a shift in emphasis from the earlier tragic outlook.

Karl's monograph which came out in 1944 as a companion volume to the portfolio of Amrita's painting brought out by the Kitabistan of Allahabad in 1943 was reviewed by the noted Mulk Raj Anand who considered her as a genius of first rank who as one of the first of the few Indian painters gave a new direction to the Indian art and while examining the finer aspects of her works put emphasis on the structure of objects in terms of paint and canvas, organisation of form and colour which are indicative of his loyalty to modernist aesthetics. Unlike Karl he is not apologetic about her taking cue from Cezanne and Gauguin and goes on to write; "The broad planes in colour and plastic effects which she tried to achieve in her canvases own themselves to Cezanne's reduction of objects to their essential planes." 8 To Amrita's effort at simplification of form Anand traced as much to the western art as to the early Indian sculpture and medieval Indian paintings and goes on to place her among the initiators of a great new tradition in India and lists her efforts to steer clear of the romantic, transcendental

strain of the revivalists and the literariness of the realists to emphasize upon the "technique of painting as such, the organization of colour and form and light the relations of masses and planes plasticity and rhythm".  

This statement makes Anand a vocal champion of formalism though he reads humanistic motives in her paintings. To him, Amrita blended the new values she learned from the west with the "compassionate vision of the unhappy Indian people." Years later he called her a visionary when he said, "Her paintings glowed with an extra-ordinary fusion, a fusion of sensibility, which had grown out of realism into an imaginative process". In 1944 Karl Khandalavala felt it necessary to emphasize the Indian elements in her work to the exclusion of things having Western or Hungarian elements. Chales Fabri, one of the most radical of art critics, felt that she harmonised both Western and Indian elements in her person and art and went on to observe: "Amrita was a product of East and West Confluence. She was exposed to Western art as her mind was suffused with Indian feeling and attitude. Therefore, he asks

whether it would be more correct to stress the astonishing combination of the two strands in her make up, the Western and Indian. Later critics like K.G. Subramanyan, Gita Kapur and Vivan Sundaram have highlighted the East West dilemma as manifested itself in her works. The Hungarian critics have on the other hand pointed the strain of her maternal country in her art especially in those works she painted during her brief sojourn in Hungary. Thus efforts to claim and project her as totally Indian are no doubt creating insularity.

Some of her early critics failed to find the 'Indian feelings' in her art. With time, however, more and more writers have come to recognize this quality in her work. Thus Shamlal wrote in 1961 "for all her Western background her work carries richer intimations of Indian life than the feeble work of many whose background is wholly indigenous". S.K. Bhattacharya (1966) notices in her 'Bride's Toilet' "a lyrical grace and purveyance of rural innocence in the face of the bride which is peculiarly Indian phenomenon."

Amrita's use of oil colours was one of the causes for the antipathy of traditionalists with the ancient and medieval painters using tempera or water colours and excluding oils as medium for expressing Indian sensibility. With time, however, perceptive critics have realised the potentialities of the medium in the hands of a competent artist. Jaya Appasamy, herself an accomplished artist trained in the traditional school notes in her book, "Abanindranath Tagore and the Arts of his Times". that Amrita's mastery in oils showed what could be done with this new medium which was not necessarily incapable of expressing Indian feeling.

Critics like K.G. Subramanyan and Jaya Appasamy have highlighted the parallelism of romanticism, lyricism and depiction of poverty as social theme in the paintings of the revivalists and Amrita. It may be noted that representation of poverty as a subject matter in art is essentially a contribution of British influence to Indian art, starting from the East India Company era so much that even Ravi Varma, painted pictures like 'Alms giving at a temple' and 'poverty', a sympathy he shares with many academic painter of India. a theme which becomes an obsession and passion with Amrita. Such works of the two artists have been called the sympathies of aristocrats.
K.G. Subramanyan and Jaya Appasamy associate a case of romantic nostalgia and the latter opines that many of Amrita's works are imbued with a poetry, an indicator to the Bengal school of art. Jaya explains why Amrita's distortions from reality were possibly more and more acceptable presumably. She thought it was because Amrita was later in time than the fore runners of Bengal.

G. Venkatachalam, one of the severest critics of Amrita Sher-Gil, known for his fiercest loyalty for Bengal school, brought out some of the finer points of her art. It was, however, Amrita's frank criticism of the revivalist art that provoked him more than her art. He observed: "She herself created more sensation with her words than with her works. She talked louder than she painted. She wanted to be an artist as critic with the inevitable consequences." The 'consequence' he speaks of points to the hostility her criticism generated among the supporters of the revivalists. Her ideas on tradition, concept of art, ideas of colour, drawing etc. did not appear original to him and he viewed her as the representative of the smart set who superciliously 'passed judgements of things Indian when they are ill-informed or ignorant'. It may be recalled that

Amrita herself thought that the audience who appreciated the Bengal school comprised mostly of the "middle class Indians". Notwithstanding his 'feudal loyalty' for the revivalists he described her as a gifted painter having a robust feeling for form and a rich sense of colour and went on to opine that this was due to the influence of the 'Neo-Impressionists', especially Gauguin. Observing that her strong point as a painter is the colour harmony of her pictures he declared "that the Indian feeling" was absent in her works. In reply to her criticism of the way female figures were represented in Bengal school paintings Venkatachalam retorted that it was because of her un-Indian outlook and went on to observe that her kinship with real India was only skindeep.

What gives the Indian feeling to art of India is a question that has much been debated but seldom answered by writers. The celebrated art writer E.B. Havell observed that the weight of ideals or the motives forces behind art creation would render a sensuous art work insignificant and that, tracing back to the vedic era he established that in India these motive forces existed in full strength long before it found concrete visible expression in fine art and said: "India needs more art in its

archaeology and less archaeology in its art", the wise words that were seldom listened to by Indian scholars till B.K. Sarkar made a frontal attack on tradition-mongers in 1922 which was inevitable in the backdrop of national struggle. Amrita's art with its patent stamp of modernism naturally evoked the old question of Indian tradition. Her mixed parentage, westernised life-style, European art education and the smart set in which she moved were all resented to by the critics who stood for and favoured the revivalist school. When she exhibited her works for the first time in Shimla and then later in Bombay most of the critics who viewed her work were in little doubt as to her kinship with the French post-impressionist school. The need for asserting the native inspiration was so keenly felt by Karl Khandalavala that in his monograph on Amrita he carefully avoided pictures of works she had done while in Europe. It is interesting to note that although to the present day painters and critics Amrita is known for her humanism than avant-garde modernism, G. Venkatchalam could not see even a shade of humanism in her art.

It is interesting to probe whether Amrita is a modernist? Early critics considered her as an artist influenced by the French painters especially the post-impressionists like Cezanne.
and Gauguin and no one had any doubts about her modernity. Karl Khandalavala was the first Indian critic to project her as the exponent of an original personal style which though modern in spirit and technique was rooted in the Indian cultural matrix or ethos: even critics who did not agree with him felt that she was appreciative of Ajanta and later the Pahari, Jain and Mughal miniatures. However, they were never in doubt about her modernity. P.R. Ramachandra Rao the first historian of Modern Indian Art felt that the striving for simplicity of form in her painting had all the "vitality of primitive art".  

He felt that except toward the last artistic phase her formulations of art were derived from Gauguin and it was by her choice of subject and medium that she deviated from the revialist and achieved "contextual modernity" and became the window of India on to the International art expression. He observed that "Her importance is that the window was opened sooner rather than later, that her work became the starting point of experimental forays, for striding impulses unshackled by imitative stagnant art forms."  

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Later critics, however have been hesitant to give the label modern to Amrita. Ajit Mookerjee when he wrote "Modern Art in India" did not include her as one of the modernists. He thinks her "affinities with the modernists are not deep" and "Her India of misery and frustration, occupied a secondary position as she tried to Indianise the emasculate tradition of the French modernists and even the boroque through sensuous colour and form".¹⁹

K.G. Subramanyan and Ghulam Muhammad Sheikh addressed the ambivalence i.e. coexistence of opposing emotional attitudes in Amrita in regard to the artistic tradition. Subramanyan, in line with the British critic Phillip Rawson questions the basics of modernity and with critical examination exerts that tradition is additive in nature as new elements got to make inroads for various reasons - history, scientific and technological growth etc. so that in cultural matters geographical barriers become unimportant to the extent that art merely acquires the status of a language of communication and the artists own identity becomes more important than cultural or geographical identities.²⁰

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Critical Assessment

More often than not Amrita's critics built their theories on speculation. During her student days in Paris she was considered an Indian whereas early Indian critics have considered her as an outsider emphasizing the Western elements in her work. Critics who saw pronounced influence of Gauguin in her work similarity between Gauguin's journey into the Pacific Islands and Amrita's decision to return to India. Subamanyan speculated that Amrita, like Gauguin, sought escape from the "overcultured European metropolis". Whereas W.G. Archer advocates a very strong Gauguin influence and goes on to think (speculate) that Amrita rejected Gauguin's sensous eroticism and settled rather for his melancholy. K.G. Subramanyan sees simultaneous juxtaposition of sensual delight and concern for poverty in her work. The sensual delight is seen as the driving force behind her formalism, whereas the concern explained the 'emotional realism' in her work. Subramanyan treated her effort to depict Indian life 'pictorially' as one similar to the reconciliations between political and artistic radicalism which artists have found very difficult to express. Thus Amrita's modernity is only contextual and her problem was to find a corresponding form to be able to penetrate the deep tragic core of life.
Krishna Chaitanya has compared her works with those of Sailoz Mukerjee for subjects like women gossiping or relaxing which are common in both the artists. In Sailoz, he says, "the primary concern is pictorial." But in the visages of Amrita, "the hard earth broods as fatality or destiny; to see revealing visages of this type again, you have to wait for the sixties, for Padamsee, Tyeb Mehta and Souza." Amrita's statement concerning the pictorial quality of works must be taken only as the natural search of an artist, for no artist can ignore the formal aesthetic element which is the distinguishing mark of art.

Amrita was inspired by Ajanta and declared that she learned something from someone else's work; her love affair with Ajanta was however short lived. Gita Kapoor assigns her fickle mindedness as reason for that. Subramanyan traces it to her method of painting which was that of an academic realist who tries to transform the model into a final picture by deletion and simplification. According to K.G. Subamanyan the "mobile terminology of the sophisticated pictorial language of Ajanta is not an abstraction of the static realist scene." When Amrita could realise this intuitively she gave up her brief

love affair with Ajanta and explored in more impersonal and less human fields.

It was W.G. Archer, the author of the theory of 'Poetic parallelism' who assessed Amrita according to this theory and about the influence of Cezanne and Gauguin. Archer found that she learned from Cezanne simplification and 'building' as in architecture "conveying a strong sense of volume but expressing above all a monumental dignity."^22 Arthur found that between the two it was Gauguin whom she liked more and argued that there are qualities in Gauguin's work which make him the most Indian of all Western artists - Gauguin's delight in eroticism, according to Arthur, has its parallel in traditional Indian poetry and religion. Yet it is their melancholy in the midst of joyous abandon that influenced Amrita so that she rejected Gauguin's sensual exuberance and accepted his melancholy, which he traces to an element of frigidity in her temperament.^23 Archer did not see the billowing sensuality of Gauguin in her work and opined that some of her paintings, like the 'Hillmen' and 'Hillwomen' have 'stony' chiselled hardness.

Gita Kapur studied the evolution of content in Amrita's

paintings and tried to see life inside the frames. She has concentrated on the aesthetics and the subject part rather than probing into her style, attitude to tradition, influence, colour etc. Gita Kapur asserts that Amrita's most significant paintings are those in which she had understood the nature and condition of her subjects i.e. the human beings and their environment. She thinks that Amrita's best painting is 'The Brahmacharis', a painting Amrita painted after her whirlwind tour of the south India. Gita emphasises that it is her most completely successful painting which is also important in terms of content, and goes on to say with authenticity "Each character is subtly differentiated from the others yet belongs to a social context which is specified by hints of dress and habit."^24

N. Bhuvanendran questions this argument by pointing that it was a Sikh who posed for the central character of the group and that if Amrita had any intention of capturing the authenticity of the social context she would not have sought a Punjabi model for posing. The success of the painting, as has been observed by many critics, is because of its aesthetic qualities which was mainly the result of her learning lessons from Ajanta and Mattancheri.

Gita Kapur touches upon the incidence in which Amrita returned the prize awarded to her by the Shimla Fine Arts society and goes on to accuse her of show off, to show off to the unsophisticated Indians and misses that her defiance was rather something unique in the history of Indian painting in that over the ages an Indian painter had been identified with the outcastes and even considered unfit to be invited for auspicious occasions, a tendency which continued even during the Moghul period. The treatment meted out to the artist according to Bhuvanendran, smacked of supercilious patronage to which Amrita rebelled thereby asserting the independence of the artist and went on to become a one person demolition squad. "Edifices which were never considered shaky fell like the bastion of Bastille before her storming. That is why Indian art was never the same after her." Critics found faults, critics saw experimentation, critics reacted, critics appreciated and critics attacked Amrita's work in her life time and after her final abode. Western critics such as Charles Fabri, Leyden or Henderson who have studied Indian Art and its various aspects viewed Amrita's experiments with sympathy and encouragement. When the first International Exhibition of Art took place in

New Delhi in 1946 Henderson in his review of the exhibition appearing in Rooplekha explicitly stated: "They (Amrita's paintings) are fine and more than hold their own among all the paintings shown." 26

Amrita's most fascinating subjects are studies of Indian women and children which shows that she was totally Indian by spirit. Her exquisite art is originally rooted in the most valuable Indian tradition though some critics opposed her in the way that she never painted a single Indian figure in action, running or gesticulating or dancing or rejoicing; that all her figures are like her huge elephants or buffaloes - lazily lounging or placidly moving with gentle steps. Great dead walls, large, static trees add to the peace and breathless silence of her work. And it is because of the static peace and extreme simplicity of her work that one constantly feels that most of her great paintings were meant for large wall surfaces, and that she would have made a superb mural painter.

The few critics in India who blamed her for being too Western are usually those who have never studied the ancient art of India carefully. Otherwise they must have observed that

Amrita's work had instead bought back into modern Indian painting several, important characteristics of ancient Indian frescoes and book illustrations. The use of great, even, flat surfaces, covered with a single tint, without shading is the most important among these. Gauguin and other post impressionists have gone a long way in the simplification of their colour patches. In Amrita we have the simplicity of Ajanta frescoes, or Pahari painting, in which a face is painted in one single tint, with hardly any shading at all. The East and the modern West meet in her in a remarkable manner. Her style is much nearer to ancient Indian prototypes than the works of those modern painters of India who relish soft transitions and gentle shading both absolutely alien to the whole spirit of Indian painting in the past. In the treatment of shadow too, Amrita Sher Gil through the post-impressionists has come much nearer to ancient Indian miniature work or the wall-paintings than other present day Indian artists. Manet "abbreviated" his shadows almost into a line; and Vincent Van Gogh often eliminated shadows altogether as in his famous picture of his chair. Amrita hardly used shadows, she would use cast shadows, often on the ground, but otherwise she would reduce shading to a minimum, and it is often a single black line that takes the
place of naturalistic shadows. In the 'Ancient Story Teller' none of the human figures show any shadow at all; there is a little cast shadow under the woman's feet and under the cupola of the background; in the swing there are hardly any shadows at all and certainly none in the faces.27

Keeping in view the above critical account it can be said that she was a so called modern artist but basically her art was not truely modern. There can be no doubt that she was the pioneer of oil technique and among her Indian contemporaries Amrita become a champion of oil painting which she learnt from Europe but her subject target was always Indians or their culture. Her spirit was an Indian though she was great follower of western technique using which she gave a new outlook to Indian art which was her gift to modern art of India and to her contemporary Indian artists. She was all for the Indian traditions, values and culture with special concern for poor Indian. She always tried to interpret the conditions of Indian villagers, their sufferings, pains, loneliness, misery, fear and their innocence. Amrita's fascinating subjects are studies of the hidden values of the village culture.

Amrita's paintings left an indelible mark upon whole modern art of India. This young artist half Indian, half European was able to paint like a European and feel and see like an Indian. Some Indians especially in her life time, before she was recognized universally, blamed her for being too western. Others, including her chief biographer contest that she was utterly Indian. These completely opposite views just prove that she was neither Western in the extreme nor Indian: she was rather a perfect blending of the two artistic traditions.

*She came, she saw, she conquered.*