Chapter - 1
Amrita Shergil, a legend in the history of Modern Indian Art, a pure Indian spirit, was born on 30th January 1913, at about 11.30 A.M. in the beautiful capital Budapest of Hungary. Budapest which is situated on the banks of the river Danube is about four century old and is famous for its scenic beauty with the snow clad Duela hills in the background, and is quite modern according to contemporary standards.

She was born just before the out break of the first world war which completely transformed the political map of Eastern Europe, and had a great impact on Hungarian social life. The conservative powers headed by the party of National Work under the leadership of Count Istran Tisza, ruled the country and most of the important political and administrative positions were held by the so called nobility.

Politically Hungary was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with Emperor Franz Joseph I as the sovereign. There was a local parliament but subjects like foreign affairs, finance and war, were the joint responsibility of the central government in Vienna.¹ The society was feudal and the economy, by and

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large was capitalist oriented. The main source of livelihood of a majority of the people was agriculture.

In the field of culture, the trend was towards liberalism. One elected Regent, Nicholas Horthy, was to rule over Hungary till the outbreak of the second world war. Horthy's was a fascist regime and resulted in what has come to be known as the White terror. It was in the climate of political instability that the Sher-Gil family found itself in. For a while as their financial position had improved, they shifted to the Grand Hotel in Margaret Island, in Budapest, and lived a life of luxury. They, however, had to go back to their family in Dunaharaszti and it was in the picturesque environs of Dunaharaszti that Amrita began to draw with coloured pencils and in the words of her mother "it was remarkable how well she could copy all the toys around her - dolls, carts and teddybears." Before the age of 7 she would compose her own fairy stories, illustrating with coloured crayons. She would draw or paint on any bit of paper she could find, even on a torn envelope or any scrap paper she could lay her hands on. She would paint on the walls and her house used to be littered with her drawings. She

was not interested in black pencil; it had to be coloured.

The family left Budapest on January 2, 1921 and spent two weeks in Paris en-route. It was here that for the first time Amrita was able to see some great works of art in original including Leonardo Da Vinci's Monalisa at the Louvre.

Her mother Marie Antoinette insisted on educating her at home and caused her to spent a few abortive months in 1924 at Florence studying under an Italian Art mistress. In January, 1924, Amrita joined the school of Santa Anunciata which was known for its orthodoxy and rigid discipline. She was threatened with expulsion, Amrita told her friend Helen, because she was drawing nude. It was not until five years later, however, that her mother took her back to Paris where her actual Art education began. It was novel and daring step from her mother's side. In Amrita's own words "My stay in Italy was to affect my artistic development. Later my stay in Paris was to manifest itself in my manner of Painting."

In her life as an artist, 1927 was to be an important year during her short stay in Shimla. Ervin Baktay, her uncle - an unusual genius who arrived in Simla to stay with her family,

spotted her potentials and suggested to her that she should draw from live models, a practice that she continued to follow all through her life. May be that is how she developed her lifelong affection for the hill men and women and the peasants of Saraya (her village) who continued to haunt her even when she was in Paris. The life-long influence of the artist-turned-linguist-turned-Indologist Ervin Baktay is evident from what she told him - "It is to you I owe my skill in drawing".  

Reaching Paris in 1929, she joined the Ecole Des Beaux Art, and for the next five years was engaged in learning oil painting. She admired Vincent VanGogh and Paul Gauguin. Most of her work, done during the period she was in Simla, with a brief interlude in Florence, consists of water colours and drawings. A majority of water colours were of human figure—some European, others oriental, in the Omar Khayam tradition—with a background of forests and foliage. In those days she was an introvert. In her own words, "Before leaving for Europe as a very young girl, I had been so wholly an introvert that I had never really seen or observed anything around or outside me. I worked entirely from imagination in those days, and living on pictures instead of reality I conceived India through the medium  

5: Singh Iqbal, Ibid, p. 17.
of those unutterably mediocre specimens of fifth rate Western art....."6

Amrita was a woman who stood in symbolic relation to the art and culture of her age and while doing so she was not only revealing her contemporary awareness but breaking new grounds too.

"She understood the hidden value of village culture. This perception in her age was definitely progressive, enough to think of the realistic Indian literature headed by Prem Chand and the Populist movement in Hungary which affected the literature, paintings and the social sciences."7 She sought to awaken the conscience of the people "to the atrocious physiological misery that abounds in my country".8

A daughter of a Sikh father and a Hungarian mother Amrita Sher-Gil never regarded herself as anything but an Indian. Her first eight years, however, were passed in a pure typical European atmosphere. She learned Hungarian language and studied European art which abandent her. from developing

any Indian form of expression in her early art education.

Her father Sardar Umarao Singh is known as a philosopher, a student of comparative religion and a pioneer of social emancipation. He was a scholar of classical Indian languages and a great admirer of Tolstoy. He belonged to a leading Sikh family in India. He fell in love and married a Hungarian woman Marie Antoine O' Gottesman who came from a very well to do family and was passionately devoted to music. She was very anxious that her two daughters Amrita and Indra should also achieve a high degree of proficiency in music but Amrita was instead interested in painting.

The most remarkable features of Amrita's artistic personality was the independence but this does not mean that she could not have spontaneous relations. One person seems to have made a deep and lasting impression on her during her Paris sojourn and that was a colleague and painter, Marie Louise Chasseny about whom she spoke with great affection till her very end. Her friendship with Marie Louise did lead to a great deal of gossip and, obviously, there were talks of their having a lesbian relationship which Amrita repeatedly denied.9

Her fond association with the talented pianist girl Edith Lang who had a great crush on Amrita and who chased Amrita around does indicate her partially lesbian ways. From among the opposite sex her disastrous association with the handsome and dashing Yusuf Ali Khan to whom she was engaged for some time - the entire episode acted as a psychological spur to her promiscuity - her life long association with her medico cousin Victor Egan, and her comparatively short interlude with the celebrated writer Malcolm Muggeridge are of significance in her otherwise promiscuous short span of youth.

It was in 1933 that Amrita painted Reclining Nude for which her sister Indira posed as a model. The year 1933 was a remarkable year in Amrita's life, not only was it the year that she achieved the distinction of becoming an Associate of the Grand Salon, it was during that year that she began to think seriously of returning to India. In fact, her professor and mentor, Luxien Simon, inspired her by advising her that her virile art and powerful sense of colour would have greater scope for expression in India than in the dull grey atmosphere of a Paris studio. In her own words, "My professor had often said 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.”¹⁰

After spending several months in Simla till the winters she shifted to Saraya, in Sardarnagar in the district of Gorakhpur, the winter retreat of the Majithia family, in February, 1936, where she started to paint like a mad working literally from morning till evening on a small boy, on a girl, Sir Sunder Singh, and landscape and target was work, work and work.

When Amrita came back to Shimla she met Barada Ukil and his brother, Sarada Ukil who painted in the style known as the Bengal school. Later Amrita held an exhibition with the Ukil brothers which opened on 20 November, 1936 on the First Floor of the Taj Mahal Hotel at Bombay. The Times of India described Amrita Sher-Gil as being, one of the most promising of the younger generation of Indian painters. Her paintings heralded the arrival of a new phenomenal singularity and naturalness and were received with unusual applauds from the distinguished art critics of The Bombay Chronicle, The Bombay Sentinel, The Kaiser-i-Hind. The Evening News of India (in The

¹⁰ Singh Iqbal, Ibid, p. 32.
Bombay Man's Diary), The Sunday Standard and a host of others. The noted and perceptive art critic of The Sunday Standard, Karl Khandalavala described her as "the greatest artist this country has produced and one of the greatest of this century."\(^{11}\) On seeing her paintings he "immediately realised that her was the work of an outstanding genius."\(^{12}\) Maqbool Fida Husain, just a youngster at that time, found her devastating and was much impressed by her work and even made copies of her work - just to make a study. The paintings exhibited included Child Wife, Hill Men, Hill Women, Villagers, Group of Young Girls, On the Terrace, Studio Courtyard and Portraits of My Father.

After she left Bombay in the last week of November 1936, the 46th annual exhibition of the Bombay Art Society (held on January 15, 1937) awarded the Society's gold medal to her Group of Three Girls, one of her four entries.

From Bombay Amrita headed for south and arrived in Hyderabad on December 3, 1936 where an exhibition of her paintings was opened by His Highness the prince of Berar on December 8, 1936 which was visited, among distinguished local

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nobles and dignitaries, by Maharaja Sir Kishen Pershad Bahadur, Prime Minister of Hyderabad, and the famous poet-politician, Sarojini Naidu, popularly known as "The Nightingale of India". She was immensely impressed by Sarojini Naidu and in Amrita’s own words "I have met a wonderful woman at last - Sarojini Naidu."

The Hyderabad Bulletin highlighted her work as attraction in Hyderabad and described her as "one of the most outstanding figures in the younger generation of modern artists".13

Amrita had an interesting encounter with the famous and rich Nawab Salarjung, who after keeping the Reclining Nude and Group of Three Girls for longer than desired declined to buy either, may be in retaliation to Amrita’s blunt comments on his tastes as a collector and connoisseur of art. During her entire stay in Hyderabad, she had been able to sell only one picture and that was Two Children on a Hill-side which she had painted when she was in Zebegeny in Hungary. She sold it for two hundred and fifty rupees.

She spent two days, accompanied by Barada Ukil in Madurai and Rameshwaram, which she found "exceedingly

interesting" and then they drove to Trivandrum. She found the road between Madurai and Trivandrum to be "wonderful". She visited the New Art Gallery in Trivandrum, and travelled to the shores of Cape Comorin. There during her stay of eleven days she painted Fruit Vendors showing Women on the Beach, a tiny composition - 'one of the best things' by her own standards - a woman with two children on an apple green background. It was a coincident that Mahatma Gandhi paid a visit to Cape Comorin while she was there. Although she did not make an attempt to meet him she nevertheless made a sketch of Gandhiji addressing one of his prayer meetings. From Cape Comorin, Amrita went to Cochin, via Trivandrum where she stayed a few days. There she devotedly visited and studies the marvellous old paintings and frescoes of the deserted Matancherry palace and she thought the frescoes to be comparable, though quite different in style, to the frescoes at Ajanta. She was escatic about her findings.

God had given Amrita almost everything - beauty, sufficient means, genius, perseverance, and an extraordinary capacity for work. She was great scholar of art. "Amrita's fame as an artist, her glamour as a women of great beauty short, sallow complexioned, black hair severely parted in the middle; thick sensual lips, stubby nose passably good looking which she
gave credence to in some of her self portraits"; are also described by the Indian Civil Servant and later a diplomat and Vice Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, Badr-ud-Din Tyabji who found her "a delightful person with whom to banter over trivialities and personalities. She was a really strikingly beautiful woman. Her wit and gaiety, her power of articulation on a wide variety of subjects, her careful choice of words; her remarkable eyes; in which intelligence, sensibility, mischief, and coquetry, seemed always to be playing a non-stop show, either singly or in combination with each other made an entrancing companion" and regarding her paintings he thought them in every way worthy of her own personality.

She was married "on the ground of belief and conviction" to Victor Egan, her mother Marie Antoinetto's sister's son, a Hungarian doctor. She stood out also as a unique product of her society which was both orthodox and chauvinistic.

By studying in Paris for five years Amrita was able to do what no other Indian artist had done before her as she learnt different styles of painting and acquired thorough education
which was in modern art an education was to prove the foundation of her art.

The villages of both south and north inspired her very much. Her spiritual world was very much influence by the greatest poet of 20th century Hungarian literature writer Endre Ady. She was very much inspired by Dostavesky and by the great thinker and writer Leo Tolstoy.

Her life was completely dedicated to art. She remained, rock like true to her principles and she was deeply conscious of "her mission".

She felt she had to decline a prize offered to her by the Simla Fine Art, society so as not to identity herself with prevailing trends feeding exclusively on mythology and romance. Many ultra-conservatives lamented that this aggressive tendency in a woman half-European was a present day evil. They spoke with hushed reverence of the time when feminism was unknown. There were moments when she was little dismayed; but loyalties to tradition, pluck and abnegation made endurance possible.

Faced with a lack of appreciation she was amongst those talented souls whose merits had also been ignored. The history of art was full of such instances for at the stony feet of Apath
lay a number of pearls scattered by talents whom the world did not give their due.

To a feminine penetration, Amrita Sher Gil joined a vigour and directness of mind which are essentially masculine. She never split hairs or softened a hard saying. "She seldom indulged in ambiguities or compromised a principle to justify a violation because it were a sentimental aura."\(^{16}\)

Talking about her last few hours many years later Victor Egan said "she never complained. She never said anything, she went, first into a sort of semicoma, she kept on numbling about colours, blues, reds and greens and violets all sorts of colours unconsciously or subconsciously she was still thinking about colours and light and shade."\(^{17}\)

Her contribution to Indian painting will be ever remembered. She represented through her life and work the freedom of the modern artist. Her name will ever remembered in history of art.

She always painted like mad. She was a real artist. She paid a rich tribute to the magnificance of our art and culture.


Her early death was a dark page in the dictionary of art.

It was the December 1941, where Amrita died. Amrita died at about the bewitched hour of midnight. The funeral was held on Saturday morning, the 7th of December. As her parents had decided that she would be cremated and it would be a Sikh funeral, her body was taken to be burning ghat on the bank of the river Ravi.

The last rite was performed by Amrita's father, Umrao Singh. He lit the funeral pyre and the body of that precious, elegant and beautiful Amrita was consumed by the leaping flames.