Chapter - 4
Amrita discovered herself and established her unique image of the genius that she was when the mature artist in her fulfilled her urge and intense longing to return to India of her dream only to observe the other side of it, a side which presented the misery, the poverty, the sufferings of the people and resolved to paint their silent images of infinite submission and patience, to depict their angular brown bodies which to her were strangely beautiful in their ugliness and to reproduce the impression their sad eyes created on her.

To fulfil her resolve she harnessed the methods of modern French painting, she learnt in Europe, taking more influence from Gauguin rather than from Cezanne. In the architecture of her pictorial relations reaching out for a monumental simplicity in the patterning Cezanne was the obvious preceptor but for her very imager, the sensuous outlines and symbolic colours in primary oppositions, the posturing of the human types and their welding in compositions of solemn grandeur, in a rediscovery of abstraction within realism, her debt was clearly owed to Gauguin. She became an exponent of an original style rooted in the matrix of India, in its ethos and
imagery, but stridently modern in its execution with a contemporary awareness.

While Amrita was a great appreciator of Ajanta — "that really superior and eternal example of pure painting" — for its enshrinement of "the principles of the primordial importance, of significant form" and was later fond of Mughul, Rajput, Jain and Kangra paintings, her own formulations appear to have been clearly derived from Gauguin and not from these Indian examples except toward the fag-end of her brief truncated life. Although Gauguin is said to have himself arrived at his basic elements of the expressive paintings via Japanese paintings, which have semblance with Ajanta, Amrita made a forthright departure from the prevailing values of illustrative and effeminate art, enmeshed in mythology and romance, in her depiction of a dark-bodied, sad-faced humanity, strangely beautiful in its ugliness.²

In her choice of the medium of oil colour, Amrita achieved a contextual modernity and her decision to concentrate on painting of oils was probably the turning point in her

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1. Appasamy Jaya, Dhingra Baldoon: Sher-Gil, Contemporary Series of Indian Art, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1965, p. 4.
artistic development. "In the arrangement of her Palette she found the emotional outlet for a strong sense of colour, and her forthright approach to her subject, deftness of outline, and confident presentation of bold planes would have been impossible in any other medium" but some times she also practised in water colour. "A majority of the water colours are of human figures, some European, other oriental, in the Omar Khayam tradition with a background of forest and foliage."³

Her work became the starting point of experimental ventures, of striding impulses unshackled by imitative, stagnant art forms. It was eventually to the heritage of India that she turned naturally. She thought that she could no longer paint at all in Europe, and that she could only paint in India so much so that she was shy of her, elsewhere, self confidence as she thought she was not natural otherwise".

She returned, emancipating herself, to the plastic rhythm of the Ajanta frescoes, the glyptic purity of the Gupta sculpture and the calligraphic delicacy and vivid humanity of Basoli and Kangra painting, which she integrated to re-create a vital, living India of dark bodied, sad faced, and indefinable pathos.

She had an insatiable appetite for pure decorative colours which she put to very original lyrical or romantic uses, disposing them in planes of flat relief. Her uncanny facility in placing sheer blacks and white to stress emotive points of focus is brought out by her "Bathing Elephants" a compositional success painted in glittering black against a decorative ribbon of bullock carts done in translucent white.

Her unquestioned mastery of style and technique derives from brilliant draughtsmanship, of which her early "Resting Nude" is a fine example in which the adventitious detail is ironed out to mould the fundamental plasticity of the human form which she was more specifically to organise under the inspiration of Ajanta. More notably in her "Bride's Toilet" and in the "South Indian Villagers Going to the Market" she recreated the architectural rhythm, the plastic design and the ineffable atmosphere of the Buddhist frescoes rather than their format symbolism, while the tones of heightened colour and the warm humanity of her "Story Teller" are clearly assimilated from the lively lyricism of the Pahari minatures. She strove continually towards the purity of basic forms in plain relief, without the slightest concession to their abiding humanism she achieved in her more outstanding figure studies, such as "Three
Young Girls" and compositions "Hill Men" and "Child Wife". The monumental simplicity and vitality of primitive art with something of its primordial quaintness and naivety is vivid in her later "Ganesh Puja".

The appraisement of her work, like her own tragic life, must end in a broken arc because its perfect round was never to be. Amrita introduced a certain coldness, detachment and asceticism, which were to her, characteristic features of Indians; the passionate intensity she kept to herself. Her painting thus became controlled rather than effusive, poised rather than passionate.4

As her technique improved a greater degree of coldness set in which is reflected in one of her most important works — "The Brahmacharis", which makes one feel she was painting for the sake of painting. The social critic she was at the start vanished. She was very keen to bring out in her painting the precision and technical skill acquired in the west with the rich exuberance which nature and man provided.

She always dreamt of a kind of harmony between contemplation and activity. And yet the contemplative side of

her detached passionless nature was far more reflected in her painting. The figures she painted had a certain inner peace which is reflected in her illustration to a volume of "my poems", which she did in 1938. In the background is a village scene with villagers and cattle, in the foreground four women huddled together, one of them playing a Veena. The way she arranged these figures is really remarkable and application of colours are beautiful.

Though she had a chequered and tragic life but the shadow of her work stretches over the entire panorama of contemporary Indian art.

Amrita's drawings are vast in number in her limited life time and varied in technical interest. She was indefatigable in her search for forms and colours and had an unusual perception of the true spirit of Indian tradition.

Having studied the Ajanta paintings she had no difficulty in understanding that the ancient artist used human figures not as an end in itself but as a creative means. While India was passing through a period of cultural discovery, in her own art, Amrita blended the new formal values she learnt in Paris with

those she discovered from the study of Indian murals and minatures. Naturally her concept of tradition was different from those of her contemporaries. She observed "I am an individualist evolving a new technique which though not necessarily Indian in the traditional sense of the word will yet be fundamentally Indian in spirit".  

Young Amrita came like a compete innocent upon the methods and techniques of the artist of her day and their forerunners; true to her nature, she reached to them almost like an unschooled bungler, but a bungler with flashes of genius. She insisted on learning for herself. Essentially a self taught artist, she seems from the outset to have carried over something of her originally into her mental and moral make-up. Even at this stage she banked on colour as the form of expression that best suited with her temperament.

She painted her art pieces with new hopes and confidence. She hammered out her genius on the forge of hard work; she willed her progress and deliberated in advance. On the course it should take, a frame of mind reflected in her increasing need for architectural order and structural solidity. She looked upon

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the new emotions stirred within her.

She visited the different European art museums and started a new style of painting flats colour patterns, instinct with a quaint melancholy.

Diffidently at first she modified her palette. The old, ill considered lossing of colour, as advanced towards a new conception of colour, simpler, wider in range, much more refined.

Mostly she would put her colour directly on the canvas without bothering about a ground sketch, and take obvious pleasure in extending the variety of her tones and stepping up yellows, greens and reds to a rich and sonorous pitch, destined to revolutionize the art of painting by her special style and technique.

Amrita painted quite freely. We find originality and progressive nature in her art. She painted rural life in her own style. "Red clay Elephant" and "Banana Seller" are some of her best paintings on rural life.

Her picture "Swing" was inspired by the "Swinging Krishna", a miniature by Pal Mersesizinyes, and the memory of her own swinging in Dunaharzti.
She also admired the work which combined the fascinating simplification of Persian art with preciosity and the more profound critical perception of the Indian artist.

In an article "The Art of Amrita Sher-Gil" Prof. R.C. Tandon of Allahabad University traced her background and her achievements till 1937, and went on to observe:

"Even during the last days of her stay at Paris Kumari Amrita Sher-Gil had begun to depart from the academic style of her early training. This departure has continued to become more and more pronounced in her work, so that today, she may be said to be nearing the achievement of a new style altogether, and a technique all her own. The artist herself regards her pictures in her newer style better than her former work which followed the trend of the more academic western schools. Tandon quoted the French art critic Gaston Dery's opinion that in her more recent work "her powerful and individual talent seems to have found its climate." Rabindranath Deb, writing for "The Leader" found that Amrita's technique "according to modern western canons" was "perfect", and went on to add: "But perfection in technique in a young artist is not an unmixed blessing. And one feels happy that Miss Sher-Gil is emerging out of the danger zone. There is more meaning in her
later works". He, however, did not elucidate on his 'danger zone'.

Amrita painted village life of India in her own style. She was curious about drawing, tonality, brush work, the norms of physical beauty in men and women she considered as elements essential in a good composition.

She looked for literary flavour and content in her creations; the dramatic grouping; the hill view of the valley and the valley view of the twilit mountains; ice show; rain, monsoon, weather, etc. but she took an idea for painting from local colours from common people. she always tried to understand the pain of her society, — the struggle of the life and sufferings have been intersperced in her compositions. Thus in her painting 'Winter' she does not depict only the outer scene of winter but in reality she shows inner sufferings of people associated with winter.

It establishes that though she did enjoy painting landscapes she could always highlight her interest in common people because of her highly emotional, sensitive and touchy nature.

Amrita was an admirer of realism and liked to depict the sorrow of Indians, particularly those people who lived under depression of poverty, who lost the hope of life, and lived without ambitions: through their dead big black eyes and tanned skins she emphasised the weaker and backward constituents of our society which indicates her devotion to her country and its culture.

She was striving towards an epic in painting, a something sadly absent in the compositions of her contemporaries whose inspiration seemed spasmodic and directed to finish a cameo. Along with Abanindranath Tagore and Rabindranath Tagore she is in the direct line of authentic Indian expressionist.

Her paintings, had an addition of strangeness to beauty and had what all romantic art must have.

Normally, Amrita's pictures were built up round a central core that was simply a daub of paint; this she proceeded to "modulate" as she described the operation broadening it with successive strokes and patches of colour until the whole canvas stood covered and above all balanced. She would coordinate her magnificent colour sense and exceptional sensitivity for form into certain combination which would become very great work.
of art, due to the action of some mysterious laws that awaken a deep emotional response in a knowledgeable spectator.

Her art was based on subjects she looked outwards rather than within, and her normal practice was to paint from human models.

Amrita unexpectedly and suddenly broke into artistic world by her surprising and perturbing art. Even her offenders understood that this is something new and different. She was modern, in the best sense of word, but her style in contrast to the modernism of so many painters did not cover the lack of knowledge and imperfection in craftsmanship because her drawings were superior and steady and her constructive structuring of forms were so powerful.

Besides the feminine delicacy of intuition and instinctive feeling, robust and expansive power pulses are found in each and every work of Amrita Sher-Gil in her thorough study of India, through which she discovered an entirely new face of her country, a face for which the westernized Indian or Anglo-Indian painter had no eyes at all. She could discover the deep sorrow of India, the hopeless endurance of a lonely and destitute nation, the poverty which gazed on us from big black eyes.
Amrita's art, after her return to India became radically Indian, yet her universal expression grew stronger, her way of seeing became more distinct, clear and simple and readily a private and original style emerged.

Her greatest pictures were painted between 1935 and 1937, and in all of them her own style is plain. Certain elements—the melancholy, aloofness of the figures, the air of huddled grouping, the eyes gazing in different directions, spring from partial adoption of Gauguin's manner. But many of her colours were absent and the result was totally new. She surged ahead to establish her own style of painting which she nursed to interpret the solemn gravity of Indian life in the then stark and brutal age.

Amrita was acutely conscious of her Indian identity. She was avid to be Indian and, although contemptuous of the then Bengal painters, was proudly aware of India's artistic traditions. Accordingly, in announcing her artistic mission - 'to interpret the life of Indians and particularly the poor Indians pictorially' she had no illusions about her style. She would interpret them with

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a new technique, which though not technically Indian in the traditional sense of the word will yet be fundamentally Indian in spirit. It would be a technique in which experiences are transmitted not on the descriptive plane but the plane of deep, emotional significance line, colour and design. And it is this manifesto which in fact explains her style.

There is no evidence that in the period in which this style emerged she made any close study of previous Indian paintings. It was not until 1936 that she actually visited Ajanta. Nonetheless, it is Ajanta paintings which most nearly resemble her acclaimed greatest pictures.

The main Ajanta style expressed a fundamental aspect of Indian sensibility, and in responding to India, Amrita became more vitally and deeply Indian. Indian qualities of feeding took command, and the result was a style which despite its western affinities had a vital relation to its ancient Indian form. Indianness of feeling was, in fact the clue to Indianness of style.

All her acclaimed paintings are done in oil, and through her chosen large canvases there is a surprising amount of force.

evident in her work. She could thus make a growing impact on the young generation of Indian artists. She did foresee the numerous dilemmas of sentiment and style that Indian artists would experience for the next several decades. Avid for colour she understood how traditional Indian painting counterposes the sensuous and decorative use of colour. At the same time she shed her academic competence in favour of an economical, stylized delineation, and was beginning to use the narrative format of Rajput miniatures to portray the cloistered reverie of the women in Zamindar households.

"She was fascinated by handicrafts and she was also fascinated by the rich and exciting colours of phulkaris and jewellery."11

Her most successful early works are her nudes also and some of her compositions which shocked to the contemporary Indian Artists, were entirely different from others. Her graceful, gentle style was particularly suited to paintings, contrasting cool with warm colour. She was able to suggest the brilliance of her ideas of compositions. She used bold and flat brush strokes in their paintings. She always did her paintings or compositions in a sophisticated manner.

Someone wrote of the Indian art of her era and her: "In an age of effeminate painting she was singularly masculine in her approach."