Emergence of Women artists in India
CHAPTER – III
EMERGENCE OF WOMEN ARTISTS IN INDIA

As the political, social, economic and cultural changes were happening, new vistas opened for women in India. The change in the socio-economic conditions brought a new hope of change in the status of the Indian woman. Women were venturing into avenues which were earlier considered as male bastions. Besides politics, they were assertive in the creative fields like literature, art, cinema and allied areas. Education became more accessible for them and the encouraging socio-cultural situations allowed women to take a lead in various professions. This further encouraged women to step towards professional art in India. By the 1900’s a woman artist, highly talented, professionally acclaimed, and having a charismatic personality rocked the art scene in India. In the traditional Indian art woman had always been a silent recipient of the male gaze, but the first serious investigation into being a woman was initiated by Amrita Sher-Gil. She established a new and bold iconography of woman form which challenged the traditional norms of beauty and female imagery in Indian art. Did Indian art with its glorious past of many centuries have women artists before Amrita Sher-Gil? We have very little factual information available about the women artist in the past. ‘The woman as an artist has antecedents in Indian art that are frequently touted but historically chequered and do not afford a continuous well-documented tradition’.

India with its rich cultural heritage has had the tradition of ‘shilpkars’ or artisans for a long time. These artisans had for centuries been creating great works of art. Yet there has always been anonymity of

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the artists. We have no evidence as to who these artists were who created great masterpieces in art. Indian art is an embodiment of beauty and grace with specific concentration upon the idealized, sensuous representation of the feminine form focusing primarily on ‘the body’, the image of the woman. Yet the women artists have been denied access to a woman’s body as a means of aesthetic expression for centuries. It had been the privilege and the prerogative of the male artists. In this context it would be appropriate to question, were there women Artists in the history of Indian Art? There have been many recorded evidence of art of the ancient period however, reference about women artists in classical Sanskrit texts is very limited. ‘There are hundreds of references in the classical Sanskrit literature and of the centuries after Christ, to the practice of painting… to illustrate the truths of the Hindu and Buddhist faiths… practiced as Lalit kala, Fine Art, by craftsmen’ yet the evidence of women artists is observed. We do have some references in the ancient texts about a fable from the epic period according to which the first painter of the world was a woman. The fable goes like this, ‘…for many days the princess Usha saw a beautiful youth in her dreams… she told her maid, Chitralekha, about this. Chitralekha was an amateur painter, who painted portraits of all the Gods and Heroes. She painted the likeness of that youth, which led to the marriage of Usha with Anirudha... since then the word chitra meant something wonderful...suggesting... forms, mystery and delight’.

Another mythological reference of Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva says that one day before taking bath Parvati had applied sandalwood paste on her body. While doing so she made an image of Shiva on her thigh. Looking at it admiringly she found it incomplete, so

115 Ibid., 1973, pp. 9-10
she made the eyes black with ‘Kajal’ taken from her eyes, just to add life to it.

‘In Kalidasa’s ‘Abhijnana Sakuntalan’ the women of the king’s palaces amuse themselves by painting, and references to women and the arts abound in Sanskrit literature…’

Another reference is in Jaidev’s ‘Geet Govinda’ which narrates Radha drawing an image of Krishna on a lotus leaf. Ancient times have recorded information of women holding important positions, independently managing kingdoms and being patrons of art. An early references in this context is of ‘the generous support of women to early Buddhist art and the outstanding historical examples of ‘Sembayan Mahadevi’ of the Chola period’.

Except for these few references about the women painters in the ancient period, we have very little by way of names, faces and historical evidence about women painters. The Islamic era brought about many changes in the social and political setup of India. There were changes in terms of the scale, format, organization and the whole genres of painting underwent a change. The artists however continued to be craftsman who had no independent status. Out of hundreds of artists at the time of Akbar, one or two names of women artists surface. ‘…women painters like Nadira Banu and Nini figuring in some inscriptions’. Jahangir’s wife Nur Jahan was a queen with a fine taste for art and had immense artistic sensibilities. She was not an artist herself but was one of the major women patrons of Art and Architecture, and was accorded the rare

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In Kama Sutra, (Written about 2nd century A.D) Vatsyayana mentions sixty four traits of an accomplished woman and painting and making objects and figures from clay are among them.
119 ‘with her most important commission was the Itimad-ud-Daula, the tomb for her father,’ a two-storied white marble sepulcher. A rich texture is provided by delicate pietra dura work... that promises the delights of paradise
honor of having coins made in her name. Some... Royal women, including the daughters of Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and his successor Aurangzeb, were patrons of art and some were amateur painters. Women artists were attached to Jahangir’s Zanana. Among them, we know of Nadira Banu, a pupil of Aqa Raza, and a princess, Sahifa Banu. We have references of a miniature painting by hers titled, ‘Portrait of Shah Tahmasp, 6x3.5”, pigment on paper, early 17th century, Victoria & Albert Museum, London. This painting is a part of the album painting done during the time of Jehangir.

The anonymity of the artist continued even in the Rajasthan and Pahari Schools of painting and only occasional reference found in the Pahari paintings is... ‘a work in the miniature painting showing a woman painter sitting in the courtyard and painting’. By the middle of the 19th century the colonial rule had tightened its grip on the sub-continent, bringing an end to the flourishing tradition of miniature painting. Women, due to social compulsions in the society, were more limited to their home and the community. The curtailment in the freedom led them to express their creative abilities within the parameters of the home, indulging in embroidery, weaving, knitting, quilting, decorating the homes by painting on the walls. All these were termed as feminine art and deemed as lesser than other arts. The finer sensibilities of women art, the tribal and folk art that existed in its own space has had a deep impact on Indian art and has been a source of inspiration for many modern artists including the women painters.

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120 ‘Shah Tahmasp’, Mughal, early 17th C – Sahifa Banu. The princess Sahifa Banu was one of the painters who belonged to Jahangir’s zanana but little else is known about her. However, this is one of the rare paintings that can be clearly identified as the work of a female artist. Her portrait of the Persian emperor was based on stencils available in the Mughal workshop. Partha Mitter, ‘Indian Art’, The Mughal Empire (1528-1757) Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2001, pg. 129.

The folk, tribal and embroidery art are a complete entity in itself and it would not be justifiable to mention them in passing references.

In the context of drawing and painting, it still was a privilege and forte of the high-class cultured women, princesses and often the courtesans of India. Our society being a class conscious society, the contribution of women at the lower social level was hardly ever recognized. Art rendered within the four walls of the house was never really acknowledged as ‘real’ or ‘fine’ art. ‘Female rituals involving art have played a more significant role in Hindu social life... but studies have been preserved for anthropologists rather than art historians...’ 122

Madhubani paintings from the Mithila region of Bihar have been exclusively done by women artists incorporating their traditional values in art, using paintings as a metaphor for expression of their feelings. ‘Since these paintings use cheap and perishable materials that need periodic repainting, mothers need to teach their daughters the techniques of painting in order to ensure continuity’. 123 Women were instrumental in the execution of cloth paintings done in the temples of Nathdwara in Rajasthan that would hang behind the images in the temples, yet because they were participating as cheap family labour, their names hardly surfaced. ‘However, not only did a few Rajasthan women rise to be master of their craft, but some probably worked outside on murals because of their proven skills’. 124 Despite the fact that women were painting these paintings, the woman as an independent artist did not surface as yet. ‘Unlike the Western women artists of the seventeenth,

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122 Jayakar, P., ‘The Earthen Drum’, (Delhi, 1980), 227-65, on the importance of the earth goddess through Indian History. This would include creative rituals like alpana, rangoli, mehandi and Sanjhi.
eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, there is no documented tradition of the Indian women artists before the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{125}

In the 19\textsuperscript{th} century the Industrial schools at Calcutta, Madras, Bombay and Lahore\textsuperscript{126} established by the British gave a new impetus to formal art education in India. The students who enrolled in these institutions were mostly male. They were from different spheres of life and for a very long time we don’t come across women taking training in these schools. Women, till then, did not take up art as a vocation and perused it only as a hobby, taking art classes at home. They did not take art seriously and painted basically to amuse themselves in the privacy of their homes. Women were painting but it is observed that they still did not emerge as independent artists publically.

However, in the year 1879 something remarkable happened that brought about some rapid changes. For the first time women painters surfaced in the forefront and were reported about in the newspapers. ‘The Indian Charivari [8.1, 75, 76], the comic magazine reported about an Art Exhibition in Calcutta where 25 women artists of India exhibited their works. It said along with that that most of these women were Bengali and married’.\textsuperscript{127} This was perhaps the first authentic recording of the works of women artists exhibited in public and advertised about in the newspapers.

Mangalabai Tampuratti (1866-1905) is not well known in the field of painting, but she is known as the sister of Raja Ravi Varma. Documentation about her is very thin with the little known fact that she herself was an accomplished portrait painter. She followed the family tradition of painting but ‘Being a woman Mangalabai was not allowed

\textsuperscript{125} Sinha,G., \textit{op.cit.}, p.9
\textsuperscript{126} The first Western art School was founded by Sir Charles Malet in 1798 at Pune. The Calcutta Mechanics’ Institution and School of Arts was founded on February 26, 1839. The Madras Art School opened in 1850, Bombay School of Art opened in 1856.
the latitude enjoyed by the two brothers but her portrait of Ravi Varma
now in Trivandrum are ample proof of her skill’.128 Ravi Varma was
commissioned by the Gaikwad of Baroda to paint fourteen epic paintings
based on Hindu myths (1885-1905) and to do so he took his sister
Manglabai’s help’.129 Women amateurs participated in art exhibitions in
Calcutta from as early as the 1880’s. The best known early woman
painter at the Bombay Art society was an English woman, Lucy Sultan
Ahmed130, married to an India. Girls generally did not attend art schools,
‘except those who were from Eurasian or Parsi communities in Bombay.
On the other hand, elite families were hiring private tutors to teach
painting to girls at home as part of their accomplishment’.131 Women
already had ventured into the field of music, theatre, and dance and also
taken a step towards the new technological marvel of photography.

‘At the turn of the 20th century, in Calcutta and Hyderabad, women
were practising domestic and amateur photography within the home in
the 1930’s, 40’s, and 50’s… Homai Vyarawalla, India’s first (and the
only one in her time) woman photo journalist till 1970….’132 The women
she photographed were working class women, giving a different
perspective from the Colonial representation of women during those
times. ‘Most academic writing on early photography in India focuses on
canonized colonial photography’.133 This also made classified categories
like the “Nauchgirls” or “Marwaree women”, type casting woman for
anthropological study. Women from the royal families did indulge in

128 Ibid., 1994, p. 75
129 Ibid., 1994, p.204.
photography, but only as a hobby. Social constraints, expensive investment, less access to free and safe travel by women, were some major deterrents to discourage professional women photographers among the middle class. Professional photographers also required patronage which was again a hurdle for women to find during those times. Despite the constraints, we do find references to some women photographers who were much sought after by the ‘elite’ class. ‘In 1882, Lala Deen Dayal, the court photographer of the sixth Nizam of Hyderabad Mahbood Ali Khan, opened a ‘zenana’ photo studio, run by an English woman’.134 Photographing of women in purdah was done with utmost caution and discretion, keeping in mind the need of privacy. Appropriate changing rooms for women were provided within the studios. ‘Given the need for privacy with the negatives, women may also have been technical assistants who processed the film or printed, retouched and painted the photographs’.135 The patriarchal social structure did not allow men into the ‘zenana’ places to photograph women, but a woman photographer doing the same would not challenge the prevalent social norms. Many ‘zenana’ studios were set up, with many British ladies doing photography and gradually Indian women too stepped into this area. However, these photographs were mostly as personal memoires and were not for seen in public domain, and for that matter the identity and the contribution of these unknown photographers is difficult to ascertain.

However, we do observe references of some women photographers who took their hobby more seriously. The first Bengali woman to take to photography as a profession has a mention in’... the ‘Amrita Bazaar

134Mitter,P., ‘Art and Nationalism in Colonial Indian 1850-1922’, Cambridge university Press, 1994 ‘There is another reference to women operators in the zenana studio... on Raja Deen Dayal in ‘The Advocate of India’ dated June 5, 1897... referring to Mrs. Dinbai Kaka, the Parsi Lady assistant employed at the Salon by Raja Deen Dayal and sons. p.34.  
135 Rosenblum, Naomi, ‘A History of women photographers’. Abbeville Press Publishers, New York, 1994. She points out... how even in Europe, this skill remained women’s work as they could be paid less than men.
Patrika’ of 1899 to the Mahila Art studio run by Sarojini Ghosh. This was probably a ‘zenana’ studio that was run exclusively for women...One of the first professional woman photographers in Calcutta, Annapurna Dutta (1894-1976) operated from her own home from the early 20th century...there is also reference in the Thackeray’s directory of 1932 to two other professional women photographers, Edna Lorenz and Chanchala Bala Devi.136 It was Annapurna Datta who as a professional photographer gave ‘a new dimension to this profession and women photographers from their stereotypical ideas of just photographing women behind the ‘veils’ in the ‘zenana’ culture. Though she too concentrated on portrait photography but the subject could be anyone irrespective of caste, creed and gender.’137 Women from the royal families also took to the passion of photography, though only to satisfy their creative urges. ‘One reference we have is of Maharani Manomohini, the third wife of Maharaja Birchandra of Tripura... there may be a possibility that some of the photographs acknowledged to the Maharaja of Tripura were actually taken by his wife.’138 ‘Rajendra Kunverba (1920-2000), the late Rajmata of Kutch, who spent her life in extreme purdah,139 had taken to photography only to rescue herself from the life of isolation, as the camera gave her an access to a world that she was otherwise not able to be a part of. By the 20th century the changing social scenario made it more acceptable for women to be seen in public domain and the need for exclusive zenana studios was also not required.

136 There is also a reference in the Amrita Bazaar Patrika of January 11, 1899 to a firm called Mitter and Co. at 107, Radhabazaar street, advertising their services. “Ladies are photographed by accomplished female artists either in our studio or at their homes.” Sabeena Gadihoke, ‘Looking Back at women looking: Early photographic practices of women in India’, ‘The India Habitat centre’s Art Journal, Vol. 3, April 2002-March 2003, New Delhi, pg. 37-45.
137 Maiti, Sarmistha, ‘Annapurna Dutta’, Art & DEAL, Vol.6, No.4, Issue No.30, New Delhi. ‘The other Bengali women who picked up this profession after Annapurna Datta were Chambalabala Dasi, Mira Chowdhury, Indira Devi, Annapurna Goswa I, Debalina and Manobina Debi.’
139 Ibid.,2003, pp. 37-45.
The contribution of the Tagore family in the nationalist movement and the revivalist art of the Bengal school had a deep impact in the rooting of modernism not only in Indian art but related fields like literature, drama, theatre and later on cinema. The Tagore’s were an aristocratic family and the women in their families enjoyed much more freedom than their counterparts at that time. Jnanandini Devi (1852-1941) married into the Tagore family is also considered among the early women photographers of India. However, in the field of painting the first significant change occurred around 1920. It was the time when the art schools started having girl students with the earliest being at Visva Bharati University at Shantiniketan. During the early years of the twentieth century, we come across names of some women artists like ‘Lucy Su, Sultan Ahmed and Razia Siraj-al-din in Lahore...’

Some other artists name we come across from Bombay like... ‘Anjela Trinidad, Bannerji and others...’ Women artists were now seriously into painting at Shantiniketan where the Bengal School of painting was developing rapidly and contributing immensely to the development of Indian art. Names of some women artists like... ‘Sunayani Devi, Sukumari Devi, Gauri and Jamuna...appear...’ However we have very little information available about most of these women artists, but we do know that these women took to painting seriously.

Sunayani Devi (1875-1962) the lesser known sister of Abanindranath and Gagendranath Tagore is among the first woman

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140 Jnanandini Devi was married to Satyendranath Tagore, the elder son of Debendranath Tagore. Being married to an ICS officer, she had traveled abroad and had been educated. Sabeena Gadihoke, Looking Back at women looking: Early Photographs Practices of women in India.’ The India Habital centre’s Art Journal. Vol. 3. April 2002 – March 2003, Delhi, pp. 37-45.
143 Ibid., 1975, p.31
painter to gain public recognition. Sunayani lived at the ancestral home of the Tagores at Jarasanko after her marriage. She was a self taught artist and a house-wife. Her exposure to the world of art and the encouragement from the family led her to paint more seriously. ‘...there she was exposed to folk painters, Japanese art and studied works of Raja Ravi Varma and Mughal miniature paintings... ‘Sunayani...as a child was fascinated by the devotional pictures that hung in her aunt’s room, the Ravi Varma prints, making the strongest impression on her...’

‘The Indian Society of Oriental Art, founded in 1907...in its 1915 exhibition...included Sunayani Devi, a member of the Tagore family...’ ‘In 1927, she was included in the exhibition held by the Women’s International Art Club in London.’

‘From 1915 onwards she and Pratima Devi, Rabindranath Tagore’s daughter-in-law, took part in exhibitions at the Indian Society of Oriental Art run by the Tagores.’

She had no formal training in art her style was raw yet modernistic, epitomizing the Indian primitiveness. ‘Her art is a rare example of genuine naive art no longer found in the west...her best works are to be of two kinds of rhythm: a measured tranquility and dignity that gave the works their unity and truthfulness; and the very opposite, a light touch full of high spirits and movement...’ For her art and domesticity co-existed as she would paint within the household premises with her

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144 Her husband, Rajani Mohan Chatterjee, a direct descendant of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, initiated her into painting.


147 The Statesman, 24th December, 1922; two of her works were displayed in the exhibition. see also The Statesman, 30th January, 1925.

148 Sinha, G., op.cit., p.15

149 Kramrisch, Stella in a German periodical translated into Bengali as, ‘Svatasphurti (Spontaneity) Prabasi, xxii,1/4(quarterly) {Sravan, 1329[1922] } ,p.543-44. Stella Kramrisch is an Austrian national, who studied at the Visva Bharti University at Shantiniketan, who later became the voice for indigenous nationalist movement in art. She was the first scholar to provide a serious study to the style and art of Sunayani Devi.
children playing around. ‘The subject matter of Sunayani Devi’s art belonged to a private inner world...Her naïve work was singled out as a continuation of the ‘simple’ art of the Indian village, a contemporary expression of authentic India’. Paintings on the theme of goddesses, nayika, Radha, mother and child comprised a major part of her work, titled as ‘Saraswati’, ‘Radha Krishna’, ‘Milkmaids’, ‘Ardhanarishwara’.

The time when Sunayani Devi started to paint, the social scenario, especially in Bengal was quite paradoxical. The men, influenced by the colonial culture spoke and used the English language, while the women majority of them being illiterate and some who had been taught within the domesticity of the home used the regional language as a means of communication. It was the women who were expected to uphold the responsibility of the Hindu value system, carrying on with the traditions and the rituals in the society. Painting by women at a professional level was unheard of before Sunayani Devi, and the fact that she was able to do so was the fact that she had the opportunity and the advantage of being from the family that encouraged artistic pursuits. She painted from 1905 to 1938, starting at the age of thirty years, supported by her husband who gave her the freedom to express herself. She did not shun her family responsibilities and painted everyday in the midst of her family chores and household supervisions. Despite the encouragement from her husband, after his death in 1938, she stopped painting. ‘It seemed she had lost the impetus to paint...’ She bid a voluntary goodbye to the world of art in the year

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150 Mitter, P., op. cit., 2007, p.42
1940, after the death of her husband. Her works are studied from a perspective that she balanced between a career and a home and was not a trained professional artist.

Slowly and gradually, the change was being witnessed and women were coming out of the veiled four walls and expressing themselves seriously in creative fields. ‘Nathdwara – a small place close to Udaipur in Rajasthan, has documented account of a woman artist ‘Indumati’ who worked on a mural in a palace in Jhalawar in 1919’.

‘During the year 1920 to 1930 about 500 works of Jamani Bai have been found, which she had painted for a Bombay agent, no two works of her were alike and she was famous for painting ‘sceneries’ – ‘rapidly painted landscapes with a vaguely Japanese look…featuring sunsets or dramatic moonlight over lakes with palm trees…Other artists like Kankudevi, Indumati and two sisters Illachi and Kamala, who were daughters of a painter Damoder Das. Kamla is remembered throughout Nathdwara as a fine and gifted artist…her sketch book has survived in which she has signed as Kamala Devi Chitrakarin’.153

Even in the ‘...first half of the 20th century women, when they were academically trained to be artists, seldom thought of it as a vocation, their profession, their mode of living. Most were claimed by marriage and for those who continued, this added qualification was a diversion, a hobby.154 Vishva Bharati University at Shantiniketan can be credited to a certain extent for bringing into the forefront women artists and art critics of prominence who seriously pursued the field of art around 1930’s.

‘Amongst the popular women art students to take to art history and teaching were Sucheta Kripalani, Jaya Appasamy, Stella Kramrisch, Lisa Van Pott and Gouri Devi, daughter of Nand Lal Bose and Kamala Das

152 Lyons Tryna, _op.cit.,_ 2004, _The Tribune_.
153 Ibid., 2004
154Sengupta, Ratnottama, ‘Amina Kar’, _Art& Deal, op.cit.,_ p.43
Gupta, wife of Prodosh Das Gupta, exhibited professionally in the Calcutta Group of 1940'. These women contributed in their own right in the field of art, but with the appearance of Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) in the art world, emphatically changed the perception and the role of women in contemporary Indian art, both as an artist and as the subject of art. Amrita Sher-Gil, one of the pioneers of women artist of India, came on the Indian Art scene and achieved what no woman artist before her had accomplished. She came from Paris, searching for her Indian roots, at that time when the Indian artists were searching for and trying to establish an ‘indigenous’ art. In the history of modern contemporary art of India, Amrita Sher-Gil is of prime importance not only for the Indian Art in general but for the women artists of India in particular.

The Bengal revivalists’ movement had picked up momentum with the Tagore family in the forefront. Artists like Nand Lal Bose and Jamini Roy, were amalgamating traditional and folk styles with modernistic approach. Despite many talented and committed male artists seriously trying to establish a national identity, no artist singularly had the impact which Amrita Sher-Gil’s paintings had. Her academic training from one of the best art schools of Paris, along with her professional approach to art, made a mark on the Indian art scenario. Being a woman, and perhaps amongst the first of professional women artist in India, played to her advantage. Her mixed parentage, charm and charismatic personality, a bold and a controversial life style, made her no less than a celebrity in Indian art circles. Amrita Sher-Gil was an academically accomplished painter, a keen observer and her quality to emulate her thoughts, feelings and emotions in her paintings made her one of the most important women artist of India to be recognized internationally till now.

Amrita Sher-Gil is not only an icon but the single biggest role model for the post-independence women artists, in search of their roots and identity. She was a source of inspiration to many women artists of India and carved a niche for herself and her projection of woman led to a new perspective, creating an image of woman not projected before in Indian art. Her mixed western and eastern influence present two different genres of painting and this is reflective in her approach to the image of woman in her paintings. Her self-portraits done during her stay in Paris were also the first nude study of a woman artist of India. ‘Her self-portraits stand distinctly apart in a different category from anything else she ever painted; they became in every sense her exploration of her complex self-image.’156 In most of her self-portraits, Amrita has depicted herself as the luscious woman, yet in no portrait the gaze meets the viewer. She painted more than twelve ‘Self-Portraits’ while she was a student in Paris.

Sher-Gil obviously enjoyed the fervor and attention created by her several nude self-portraits. Nudity was never an issue with Amrita ‘...who painted it with ease, for her nudity was a ‘virtual mirror’ that reflected a woman’s true

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being',157 ‘Highly sexed, Sher-Gil led a wild life in Paris with multiple lovers, showing off her voluptuous body without inhibition in sensuous nude self portraits, notably ‘Torso’ dated 1931’. In these images of innocent narcissism, Sher-Gil turned the gaze upon herself, taking sensuous pleasure in her own body as she did of her sister Indira in a nude study of her’.

The explicit sexuality depicted by her is an example of the maturity of her pictorial language. ‘...Nude (1933) is so sexually convincing that the crotch of this figure was vandalized by an unknown visitor at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi in 1982 and had to be restored and placed behind glass...’159 In some of her self- portraits, the seductress in her takes the fore front while in some she depicts herself as an introvert. ‘...How she looked and how she looked at the world seemed to have been intrinsically related...’160. These portraits provide a visual progression of her from a teenager to a mature woman. Amrita did not eroticize her woman forms, even her painting ‘The Nude’, in its frontal voluptuousness, ‘depicts a seduction and a counter seduction...with the lizard and pink scarf breaking the seductive spell...’161 Her own nude self portraits always projected a vulnerable self. Her high profile life style in Paris definitely had an impact on her paintings, especially her projections of her own self image in her self- portraits. However it was her coming back to India and internalization of the various experiences of India that brought a change in her narrative and most importantly in her projection in the image of woman.

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160 Borzello, *op.cit.* p.51-52
Amrita primarily depicted woman form in her paintings, because she could relate more easily to the form of the woman. In her woman forms she attempted to depict the essence of womanhood by trying to emphasize on the subjective depiction more than on the body or the form of woman. This was perhaps an interesting shift in her narratives depicting the image of the woman in her paintings. Amrita Sher-Gil was instrumental in breaking the conventional stereotyped imagery of the woman projected so far in the Traditional Indian art. ‘A great number of works in Amrita’s oeuvre feature women, primarily because she could lend her emphatic self most easily to their condition...Amrita grew increasingly aware of women’s lives in India, they metamorphosed in her works from objects of desire to assertive subjects’162. Women for her were not sensuous products of nature, but rather those who had suffered great handicaps and were capable of a new world. Amrita’s women were those who were aware of their forlorn fate but also knew they were capable of transcending it...163

Her return to India in 1934 leads to ‘...an almost immediate thematic, stylistic and palette change in Amrita Sher-Gil’s canvas, which reflect her immediate environment...altering her pictorial imagery...a swift radical change,...because it formed a linkage with traditional Indian art’164. Her colours become more vibrant and earthy with a predominant use of the colour red. ‘The fact that she consistently uses a female figure, never a male, to make manifest her sense of angst is amply evident of her

162 Ibid., pp.145-46.
concern..." 165 Some of the paintings done in the last six years of her tragically short yet productive life as an artist show a change in her creative process as she probes into the woman’s psyche --how she looks at herself and how she depicts the ‘self’ in her art.

‘A recurring theme throughout Sher-Gil’s oeuvre is the representation of women in seclusion or in moments of private thought. 166 These paintings add essential concerns regarding the Indian woman; concerns which would affect the work of women artists decades later in India, in the 1980’s and 90’s. Amrita was able to change from the conventional image of the woman as an ‘object’ to a ‘subject’ in her paintings. ‘What a woman artist made, and what she aspired to make, were, then closely connected to the spaces she might inhabit and to the webs of social and spatial relations in which she was placed: subjectively, sociability and spatiality were intimately entwined’ 167.

Amrita sought inspiration from the Indian miniature paintings and her painting Woman at Bath, oil on canvas, 92x70cms, 1940, ‘...is inspired by the miniature tradition, yet goes beyond it. Sher-Gil explores the mood of a bathing nayika while playing with eroticism, expressed through visual metaphors which are used to convey the state of her subject. Traditional symbols of desire and fecundity appear through the vermillion pot and its deep interior, which are reinforced by the brown pot. This imagery continues into the knob of the wooden sandal (Kharavan) and the foot, both of which point towards the hanging drapery and its soft vaginal slit. The cloth is a modification of the curtain used in traditional representations, whereas the hanging brassiere is

166 Bawa, Seema, op.cit., pp40-42.
167 Cherry, Deborah & Helland, Janice, ‘Women Artists in the Nineteenth Century,’ Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Burlington, USA,2006, p.6
The best painting depicting the predicaments of the woman as a subject rather than as an object of desire is ‘Woman resting on the charpoy’. This painting is of great importance because for the first time in the twentieth century the importance was given to the body of a woman subjectively. Critically acclaimed the approach to the projection of the image of woman breaks all conventional boundaries of woman imagery represented so far. Though lying on the bed, yet unlike the earlier images, she is not the nayika or the seductress, enchantress but a woman who is herself more so. ‘...There could not be a more powerful image of a woman’s unfulfilled desire; this is a masterly depiction of yearning and disappointment, felt even more sharply when contracted with the woman’s flamboyant clothes...’

The horizontal placement of the woman is so much like the western perception of depiction of objectification of woman, but Amrita has taken inspiration of the nayika of miniature painting, lying forlorn, waiting on the bed, but this painting depicts an anti-thesis of a projection of Naiyka, for there are no decorating beds, pillows, elaborate dressing, flashing of lightening, but only the interior of a room.

It has a middle aged attendant sitting next to the bed instead of a young maid or attendant as in the miniature paintings. The attendant woman is also heavily and unimpressively clothed. It is most fascinating to see ‘...the physicality of her presence, the corporeal body of the young

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woman, which strikes even the casual viewer...a young woman lies resting on a village charpoy. She is resting but not asleep; her eyes narrowed down to black slits, are open to gaze at you, the viewer. She is conscious of your presence as much as you are of her still, languorous body..."170

In Amrita Sher-Gil’s works, her woman form represented a persona, a complete will of their own. She metamorphed her own life and experiences in her woman forms, as if she could feel the enclosed and circumscribed lives of her woman subjects in her paintings. It depicts the intense desire and yearning for freedom, yet their inevitable surrender to their present situation. ‘What is equally fascinating to note is that unlike other women artists, Amrita preferred not to document her own physical body in all its ‘peculiarities’...Her paintings bridged the distance between the standard masculine gaze and her own feminine view that seeks to be a more compassionate equalizing one...’171

Thus Amrita Sher-Gil’s contribution to Indian Art is far more than we realize. ‘...Her importance goes beyond this however. She liberated the Indian women painter in more ways than one...She gave probity to Indian painting and forced the art loving public, limited as it was, to look at the paintings by women not only in a playful and indulgent way but seriously as an object created with imagination...’172

Though Amrita Sher-Gil laid the foundation of Modern Indian Art, and achieved what no Indian Woman artist had achieved so far, yet despite her individual genius and her path breaking success, it could not become precedence for the emergence of many other professional women artists in the art scene till the 1950’sThere were many women artists, but they still did not count much as among the higher bracket of artists,

170 Sen, Geeti, op.cit., p.63.
except perhaps Amrita Sher-Gil, who also was not alive by that time. The transition from painting as a hobby to being trained professional painters has not been easy for women artists. It took a long time for them and the efforts of artists like ‘Reba Hore, Damayanti Chawla, Shanno Lahiri and Amina Kar\(^{173}\) are being recognized. The name of Amina Kar\(^{174}\) (1930-94) can be attributed as one of the early few women painters to have impact upon mainstream contemporary Indian art. Yet these were cases of singularity as ‘It was a rare case where an Amrita Sher-Gil, a Devyani Krishna or an Amina Kar shone on the scene in her own light’.\(^{175}\)

However, it was only around the 1950’s and 60’s we witness the emergence of many women artists with greater self confidence, who had chosen the field of art not as a hobby but were serious professional artists, perusing creative arts not due to any compulsions, but the desire and the will to paint professionally along with the male artists. Fighting against gender discrimination and social barriers, women were coming out of the shelters of their four walls and carving a niche for themselves. ‘...the process of demarginalization was gaining momentum as they sought to establish their aesthetic niche. Nevertheless, so slyly implicit and in-built are the attitudes of chauvinism into a ‘normal’ Indian way of life, that the absolute waste of female energy and talent is unfathomable. Though the artistic community may not see the man- woman difference as a division, the infrastructure\(^*\) that facilitates the opportunities has no such sense of equality,’\(^{176}\)

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\(^{173}\) Sen, Geeti, \textit{op.cit.}, p16

\(^{174}\) She is the wife of the famous artist Chintamoni Kar and after studying from Calcutta did her postgraduate study from Paris.

\(^{175}\) Sengupta, Ratnottama, ‘Amina Kar’, \textit{Art& Deal, op.cit.}, p.43

\(^{176}\) Tuli, Neville, \textit{op.cit.}, 1996, p.243. *By infrastructure is understood as the social construct, the gender bias, the cultural ethos, the role definition given by society, all of which were still not very conducive to woman’s growth and development.
Though very slowly a change was taking place in India. With political, social, economic and cultural changes happening after Independence, women were more assertive and independent. As artists many women were coming in the field with professional qualifications from the best of institutes from India and abroad. The new brigade of confident women artists were working and exhibiting professionally with much more freedom and confidence than their predecessors. They not only made a mark for themselves in the contemporary Indian art world, but as women artists were able to add a new dimension and perspective in the rich repertory of Contemporary Indian art.