

## AMRITA SHER-GIL AND HER REVOLUTION IN INDIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

V.A. Pozdnyakova, *student*

Ural federal university named after the first President of Russia B.N. Yeltsin  
(Russia, Yekaterinburg)

**Abstract.** *The female Indo-Hungarian artist Amrita Sher-Gil has her own unique place in the genesis of modern Indian fine art because of the historical situation of the first half of XX century in India within clash of colonial system and revolutionary movements. Indian culture was threatened with extinction. Thanks to the inspiring movement of extremely intelligent and brave personalities like Rabindranath Tagore, his talented family which ran Bengal Renaissance, Mahatma Gandhi, Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy and other essential leaders of this revolution stream the disappearance of Indian self-indication hasn't happened. Amrita got her own impact in this movement since she introduced the rural titles into the art of India with its realistic glimpse of peasants (just like the Itinerants in Russian Empire in the 2/2 of 19 century). Moreover, she was a first feminist painter in India who were talking about female rights in India what was quite a debatable issue among the revolutionizers as civil rights. Finally, Amrita Sher-Gil was a "bridge" between Eastern and Western cultures as this issue has been debatable for many centuries basically due to egoism of colonialist attitude of Western empires.*

**Keywords:** *Amrita Sher-Gil, Indian art, Bengal Renaissance, dialogue of cultures, feminism*

The female Indo-Hungarian artist Amrita Sher-Gil has her own unique place in the genesis of modern Indian fine art. Her spiritual artworks were distinctive bridges in the dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures and her realistic depictions of daily life of Indian people were the key element in the great renaissance of folk art in India.

First of all, to understand the value of her heritage, it would be beneficial to explore the historical situation in India of the first quarter of the twentieth century. For several centuries India, as well as its art, has been occupied by the British hegemony, which was utterly adverse for developing the national school, and consequently affected Indian cultural identity. Irina Sheptunova, the main Russian explorer of her unusual art, notices that «The attitude of the British authorities to the national Indian culture was dictated by the policy of the colonial regime. They sought on the one hand to save the best for his Lord of feudal remnants and on the other to impart external blind imitation of everything English, to create a disregard for national art and culture. » [1]. In this critical situation, where the whole Indian traditional culture was at stake, there has been a great inspiring movement of extremely intelligent and brave personalities like Rabindranath Tagore, his talented family, Mahatma Gandhi, Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy

and other essential leaders of this revolution stream. Sir Aurobindo Ghosh wrote about the Indian art that it «will be the highest and the most perfect art, as it requires the satisfaction of aesthetic needs, compliance with the laws of beauty, the emotional demand of the human in art, the representation of life and the outside world, put forward by the European artist, the Indian contrasts the expression of inner spiritual truth, which is deeper than the obvious reality, which is the joy of God in this world and its beauty.» [2]. Although the explorer of the Indian culture Potrebko notices that the thinkers of these epoch are tending discussing about art of their time in more "spiritual" aspect. «Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of post-colonial India, suggested that India had a long and proud history of incorporating imported inventions, ideas, materials, and turning them into something exclusively Indian. He referred to this tendency as "indigenization." During her lifetime, there was a great deal of debate over whether Sher Gil and her art were "authentically" Indian. I would argue that it is precisely the hybrid nature of her art and persona that reinforce her position within Indian modernism» [3], – mentioning Dinah Holtzman, doctor of Indiana University Bloomington.

According to Karl Khandalavala, remarkable biographer of Amrita: «The art of Amrita Sher-Gil is the reaction to this decadence and a bold declaration that modern Indian painting must henceforth develop on different and more vital lines. «...» When one realizes how few of our fellow beings are quality of serious thinking, one naturally hesitates to single out art as displaying marked paucity of thought and yet all too often a hand which possesses skill and cunning lacks the mind to guide it» [4].

Amrita Sher-Gil, the future revolutionary in art was born in Budapest (30 January 1913), in an Indian Sikh family where her father was an aristocrat and an important scientist-philosopher. Her mother was a Hungarian musician. Amrita mentioned in her diary: «Rather independent at that age, it will be of psychological interest to note that I detested the process of 'colouring in' the drawings of picture books. I always drew and painted everything myself and resented correction or interference with my work» [5]. Her early years took place in the Hungarian countryside what has been captured in the heart of this young girl and perhaps then influenced her to draw life of a simple peasants. Her first serious art education has been taken in the world famous Ecole Nationale Des Beaux Arts under the direction of Lucien Simon. «Student years remained the toughest time in her life. A child of two cultures, she eagerly absorbed all the knowledge, skills, influences that could get in Europe. Passionate about Cezanne, Modigliani, Gauguin in painting "...» was combined with the study of philosophy and The Museum of Indian art. The summer, as she did in a childhood, was spent in Hungary. In winter she can be found not only in the School of Fine Arts, but also in libraries, museums and in cafes of Montmartre, where she was a valued member of the community of young artists» [6].

After working in Europe, she returned to India in 1934, which changed her line in art dramatically. According to her diaries: «I realized my mission: to show the life of Indians and particularly the Indian poor, to write those silent images of infinite submission and patience, to draw angular brown bodies, strangely attractive in their clumsiness, to rec-

reate on canvas the impression that left me with sad eyes» [7]. Dinah Holtzman also mentioning that: «Once Sher Gil had made up her mind to return to India, her art and persona became far less European and more overtly Indian. She began to wear saris and introduce brighter colors into her palette. It is the purpose of this essay to explore Sher Gil's transition from an art student almost wholly submerged in European styles and themes to a young adult artist in India attempting to make space for herself within a modern Indian art tradition. Toward the end of her stay in Europe, Sher Gil had decided that the way to make her mark was to return to India and create a modern Indian art that fused her European art training with her formal re-working of traditional Indian art styles. She returned to India in 1934. There were a number of strands of contemporary Indian art that she encountered upon her return.» She was much inspired by Murals of Ajanta, Mughal, Pahari and Rajasthani miniature style, which was one of the inspiration for the Bengal Renaissance movement. K.G. Subramanyan giving the following opinion about that period: «There was more than one circumstance that made it so for Amrita; the scene in India she came into was not only idyllic simplicity, not was she, like Gauguin, a complete cultural expatriate» [8]. The thing is that Amrita before her very personal acquaintance got quite a pale glimpse on a Indian culture and her artworks were attracting but not so deep and thoughtful what was quite suitable for the atmosphere of French saloons. Consequently, it was her personal revolution to find a title which reflects her vibrant soul. Although it still feels a distance between artist and the models, the plain people of India.

Talking about valuable contribution of that unusual female artist, it would be logical to mention some peculiar aspects of her art. Firstly, Amrita Sher-Gil was a true poet of a rural life. It was basic title for Bengal Renaissance, which was adored by the ancient Indian culture and first acquaintance of her in 1930 on Parisian exhibition of drawings of Rabindranath Tagore. «However, A. Shergil believed that many masters of the "Bengal Renaissance", the leading trends in Indian painting of the early XX century - superficial-

ly approached this issue and their work are characterized by more external by copying the techniques of classical art of antiquity and the middle ages, than penetration into their essence» [1]. Certainly, her distinctive synthesis of styles can be considered as the next step in the development of modern Indian art. More then, «Respect for him [Indian laborer], admired his natural grace combined with a sharp sympathy for "the insulted and the injured" - the most important and maybe the most sincere attitude of Amrita heroes» [6]. Consequently, it is obvious that her penetration of the title related to the simple life of India creates more depth.

Secondly, her contribution in feminist art cannot be underestimated. Like Prof. Mandakini Sharma noticed in her article, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Paintings: a Cultural Evaluation": «Her feministic approach and remarkable persona is entirely reflected in her painting of womanhood. She also was the first Indian women artist, who portrayed herself nude and took an enterprise to depict tensed faces with powerful appeal. «...» Moreover, it can also be observed that Sher-Gil captured the realistic glimpse of Indian rural women but, the reasons behind climatic condition, traditions, and socio-religious factors and so on» [9]. Nevertheless some French inspirations gave to her «...early Indian painting, reclining woman has only been associated with erotic sentiments. All of these reclining nudes were made in a seductive way with inviting attitude. » [9], her subsequent masterpieces of that period (Mother India, 1935; Bride's toilet, 1937) are focused on the social problems of women such as early marriage, the poverty, heavy female work.

Thirdly, Amrita inspired a new wave of Bengal Renaissance for a way more deeper exploration of indian culture. «The post-independence are opened with Amrita Shergil (died 1941) already having passed into a legend receiving the stature of a mythical genius» [10], «Expressionistic experiments Rabindranath, stylistic search of Jamini Ray, «Westernism» of Gogonendranath Tagore

and Amrita Sher-Gil gave end to isolationism and rejection of European artistical culture. This new phase in development of Indian culture has ended in the end of the 30s, opening a new path for genuinely fruitful searches of the merger contemporary forms with the national tradition and the possibility to follow the Western modernist themes» [11]. «standing on the solid ground of reality and based on the tradition of folk art, Indian artists over the past two decades have been able to touch a very strong artistic expression images» [12]. For example, «in 40s forming Caltutta group (1943), where have been included various artists, as well as Group of progressive artists in Bombay (1947). Their manifestos and art were associated with refusal of stylization, the interest to new themes and forms».

Finally, Amrita Sher-Gil was a "bridge" between Eastern and Western cultures as this issue has been debatable for many centuries basically due to egoism of colonistical attitude of Western empires. Apart from ignorance of exploitators, they were blind to cultures which were a way more ancient then these what leads to ethnographical view in every aspect of relationships (for example, thanks to the founder of cultural anthropology Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (2 October 1832 – 2 January 1917) the vision of the civilized "western men" has been formed as more privileged rather other non-capitalistic nations. Hopefully, this chauvinistic point of views is getting less powerful but behind this process lays thousands of lives, companies of Mahatma Gandhi and his powerful impulse. Additionally, it is important to stay conscious about the power of cultural process which has also the great ability to change human minds. Partly, this role was made by respectable and enlightened literature of Rabindranath Tagore and a short but productive life of Amrita Sher-Gil.

Only because of significant figures like her it is finally appealed possible to make a dialogue of civilizations – that truly gives her the right to be called revolutionary in the Indian modern art.

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## АМРИТА ШЕР-ГИЛ И ЕЕ РЕВОЛЮЦИЯ В СОВРЕМЕННОМ ИНДИЙСКОМ ИСКУССТВЕ

**В.А. Позднякова**, студент

Уральский федеральный университет им. первого Президента России Б.Н. Ельцина  
(Россия, г. Екатеринбург)

*Аннотация.* Индо-венгерская художница Амрита Шер-Гил занимает свое уникальное место в генезисе современного Индийского изобразительного искусства. В первую очередь, в следствие исторической ситуации первой половины XX века в Индии в условиях столкновения колониальной системы и революционных движений. Индийская культура оказалась под угрозой исчезновения. Благодаря вдохновляющему движению чрезвычайно смелых и благоразумных личностей, таких как Рабиндранат Тагор, его талантливая семья, которая дала начало Бенгальскому возрождению, Махатма Ганди, Нандалал Бозе, Джамини Рой и другим важным лидерам, исчезновение индийского самоназвания не произошло. Амрита внесла свою лепту в это движение: она ввела сельские темы в искусство Индии с ее реалистичным взглядом на крестьян. Кроме того, она была первой художницей-феминисткой в Индии, которая говорила о правах женщин в Индии, что было довольно актуальным вопросом среди революционеров на равне с гражданскими правами. Наконец, Амрита Шер-Гиль была "мостом" между Восточной и Западной культурами, поскольку этот вопрос был спорным на протяжении многих веков в основном из-за эгоизма колониистического отношения западных империй.

**Ключевые слова:** Амрита Шер-Гил, Индийское искусство, Бенгальский возрождение, диалог культур, феминизм