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Reclaiming The Gaze

Feminine Subjectivity and the Art of Amrita Sher-Gil

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Abstract : Through her own gaze, a woman emerges not as a fragment of another, but as a complete creation in herself. Yet, throughout history, she has been cast primarily as a muse in artistic creation, her presence reduced to an object that adds *lavanya*¹ (grace) or beauty to a painting. This perspective, shaped largely by the male gaze, disregards her inner realities, what she thinks, feels, and endures each day. As Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar note in their book, 'Women in Indian Society', when men are asked what their wives do, the common response is "nothing." Such a dismissal reflects how even visible labor remains unrecognized, let alone the invisible layers of emotion women conceal in order to meet societal expectations.

Society has long written women into narrow scripts, casting them as caregivers, keepers of hearth and home, and arbiters of others' needs, while their own inner landscapes remain largely unread. The joys, fears, longings, and silences of women are rarely recorded, except in fragments glimpsed through the eyes of others. It is only when women themselves take up the pen, brush, or voice that these worlds fully emerge, vibrant and unmediated. This study seeks to disturb the authority of male-centred narratives, where "man," "him," and "his" masquerade as the universal, and to place "her" at the centre of discourse.² This paper turns to the work of Amrita Sher-Gil, whose paintings capture women not as silent muses or icons, but as subjects in their own right, embodying moods, emotions, and truths that continue to resonate today. It aims to reclaim the unspoken, to give form to the silenced emotions and lived experiences of women, insisting that their stories, feelings, and perceptions are not peripheral annotations but vital, dynamic, and indispensable threads in the tapestry of human understanding.

Keywords : Feminine Subjectivity, Patriarchy, Artistic Representation, Lived Experiences

¹ *Lavanya* is a Sanskrit term commonly used in Indian aesthetics to denote grace, charm, or beauty, it is considered one of the six limbs (*shadhang*) of a work of art, often in reference to the elegance and refinement of a person, object, or work of art. In the context of art history, it is frequently employed to describe the aesthetic appeal or visual delicacy of female figures in paintings.

² Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory*. Basil Blackwell, 1987.

Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir once wrote that “humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself.” The statement is simple, yet unsettling. It reminds us that throughout history, women have rarely been seen for who they truly are. Instead, they have been measured against men, treated as secondary, and defined as the “Other.” Their emotions, voices, and everyday experiences have too often been overlooked or erased.³

Art history makes this imbalance visible. Women appear everywhere on canvases and in sculptures, yet most often not as themselves. They are depicted as muses, goddesses, or symbols, idealized forms that reflect what others expect them to represent. Raja Ravi Varma painted women as celestial beauties, and Abanindranath Tagore envisioned Bharat Mata as the spirit of the nation. While these images are powerful, they place women on pedestals, celebrated for what they symbolize rather than for the lives they lived. Their inner truths, their struggles, joys, and vulnerabilities, all remain concealed. Beauvoir’s idea of the “Other” explains this absence: women in art are admired as icons, but rarely allowed to speak for themselves.

French theorist Helene Cixous offers a way forward. In her groundbreaking essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, she speaks of *écriture féminine*⁴; a feminine writing that connects language to the female body and lived experience. Her call was to break away from male-centred versions of the world and to create space for the stories, voices, and perspectives of women that have long been suppressed. Historically, two dominant approaches have framed understandings of mental disorders: the “magic-demonological” view and the “scientific” view. In both, women were disproportionately targeted, not only perceived as inherently more vulnerable to mental illness, but also as weak, easily influenced, and somehow “guilty,” whether of sin, hysteria, or failure to procreate. Such frameworks transformed women’s suffering into grounds for scientific or moral bias, what scholars have defined as pseudo-scientific prejudice⁵. This becomes especially evident when women expressed emotions, their inner lives were often dismissed as irrational excess or pathologized as illness. But this raises a crucial question, how can emotions, a universal human experience, be classified as disease, and more importantly, how can they be gendered? Were women truly weaker, or was this another systematic strategy to sideline their voices and diminish the legitimacy of their emotional and intellectual lives?

This idea becomes especially meaningful when we turn to the work of Amrita Sher-Gil. Known as one of India’s most significant modernist painters, Sher-Gil gave us more than celebrated canvases, she gave us women who breathe, feel, and exist in their own right. Her figures are not idealized symbols but women

³ Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage Books, 1989.

⁴ Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 4th ed., Manchester University Press, 2017.

⁵ Angermeyer, Matthias C., Martin Holzinger, Mauro Giovanni Carta, and Georg Schomerus. “Biogenetic Explanations and Public Acceptance of Mental Illness: Systematic Review of Population Studies.” *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, Cambridge University Press.

caught in quiet moods and moments, their emotions etched onto the canvas with honesty and depth. These portraits spoke to the condition of women in her own time, yet they remain strikingly relevant today, resonating with the realities of women's emotions and experiences across generations.

This paper sets out to explore that resonance; how Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings capture the essence of women's truths, and how, through her art, we can glimpse the voices that history too often chose not to hear. By situating Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings within feminist thought, this study examines how her work transforms women from objects of the gaze into subjects of experience. Drawing on the insights of Beauvoir and Cixous, it argues that Sher-Gil's art gives form to emotions long silenced in patriarchal culture, making visible women's truths that have too often remained unseen.

Amrita Sher-Gil and her works

Amrita Sher-Gil, a Hungarian-Indian artist, lived a life as bold and unconventional as her art. Her story is one of defiance, courage, and relentless pursuit of knowledge at a time when most women were confined by rigid societal expectations. While many feared stepping beyond the thresholds of their homes, Sher-Gil carved her own path, pushing herself beyond comfort zones to fulfill her ever-seeking desire for artistic growth. Born to a Sikh father and a Hungarian mother, she stood at the crossroads of diverse worlds and identities, navigating the tensions of tradition and modernity, East and West. This dual heritage, coupled with her uncompromising individuality, shaped both the controversies surrounding her life and the uniqueness of her artistic vision.

This paper not only acknowledges Sher-Gil's remarkable oeuvre but also situates her within a broader feminist discourse that challenges the authority of male-centred narratives in art. By examining her depictions of women, rendered not as passive muses but as subjects with depth, mood, and emotion, this study seeks to reclaim the silenced truths of feminine subjectivity. In doing so, it aligns Sher-Gil's work with the larger effort to disrupt patriarchal traditions of representation and to place women's lived experiences at the centre of artistic and cultural understanding.

Having studied at the École des Beaux-Arts, Amrita Sher-Gil mastered the techniques of representation, learning how to depict what she saw with precision and skill. Yet, what she wished to showcase went far deeper than surface appearances. Her concern was not merely to reproduce outward beauty but to capture the essence and emotions of her sitters, truths that often went unnoticed. In her works, the women she painted are not reduced to muses or ornamental subjects; instead, they emerge as individuals with interior lives, with

stories that deserve to be seen and heard. This desire to give women their own subjectivity may explain her move away from conventional, idealized models.



Fig. 1. Professional Model, oil on canvas, 1933. In Yashodhara, Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life, Penguin Books, 1997.

A striking example is her painting *Professional Model* (1933) (fig.1), which demonstrates both her artistic maturity and her profound sensitivity. The sitter, believed to have been suffering from pulmonary consumption, is depicted not in glamorous poses but in her fragile humanity. Unlike her contemporaries, who often painted Parisian models as icons of allure, Sher-Gil chose to reveal the underside of that so-called glamour. The sagging breasts, limp limbs, and flaccid torso are not distortions but deliberate affirmations of truth, reminding the viewer that even in vulnerability, the woman retains importance. She is not an object of gaze, but a subject with a story, communicated most poignantly through the melancholy in her eyes.⁶

At a time when women were almost exclusively portrayed as embodiments of beauty or desire, Sher-Gil's canvas gave them voice, depth, and dignity. Through this act, she disrupted the dominance of the male gaze and opened a space where women could exist not as fantasies or symbols, but as human beings. When placed against the works of her European contemporaries, Sher-Gil's divergence becomes even clearer. Artists such as Amedeo Modigliani and Henri Matisse, though celebrated for their stylistic innovation, often reinforced the objectification of women in their canvases. Modigliani's nudes, for instance, elongated and eroticized the

⁶ Dalmia, Yashodhara. *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life*. Penguin Books, 2006.

female body, reducing the sitter to an aestheticized form of desire. Similarly, Matisse's odalisques, reclining in exotic interiors, carried forward a long tradition of Orientalist fantasy, in which women were rendered passive, decorative, and consumable by the male gaze.

Sher-Gil's Professional Model, by contrast, refuses this tradition of idealization. The woman she painted is not timeless beauty incarnate, but a living being, fragile, embodied, and marked by her circumstances. Her sagging breasts and frail limbs do not invite voyeurism; rather, they insist on recognition of her humanity. Her brushwork, while trained in the same European academies, reoriented its purpose, from celebrating an aestheticized object to amplifying the silent truths of her subject. This critical difference positions Sher-Gil not only as an artist between worlds, European and Indian, modern and traditional, but also as a radical voice challenging the patriarchal norms of artistic representation. In her refusal to conform, she carved out a space where women in art could be seen not as "others," but as complete beings with their own agency.

Sher-Gil's return to India marked not a retreat from the Western world she had mastered, but a deeper search for authenticity. Dissatisfied with being merely celebrated in Europe, she sought to root her art in the lived realities of Indian people, particularly women. While critics accused her of highlighting India's misery and poverty, such dismissals overlooked her real intent: to reveal voices long silenced, especially those of women confined by tradition and expectation. Unlike her contemporaries who eroticized the female form, Sher-Gil painted women not as sensual objects but as beings shaped by struggle, resilience, and the possibility of transcendence.



Fig. 2. Bride's Toilet, oil on canvas, 1937. National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. Google Arts & Culture

Her canvases, *Three Girls* and *Bride's Toilet* (fig.2) among them, become spaces where women's inner landscapes are laid bare. In *Three Girls*, we encounter young women on the threshold of adulthood and marriage, their colorful garments unable to mask the isolation and contemplation etched across their faces. They sit not as symbols of festivity but as subjects weighed down by the inevitability of their fate. Similarly, in *Bride's Toilet*, what outwardly appears to be a celebratory ritual reveals instead the bride's inner uncertainty, the quiet anxieties overshadowing the supposed joy of marriage. Amrita Sher-Gil's *Bride's Toilet* transforms a seemingly ordinary domestic scene into an intimate exploration of women's emotional landscapes, rendered with a sensitivity that only a woman artist could achieve. At first glance, the painting appears to depict a ritual of celebration, a prelude to marriage, but a closer examination reveals the complex layers of emotion beneath the surface. The composition centres on the bride and a small group of women, including a child, whose interactions and postures convey a subtle interplay of anticipation, anxiety, and quiet resignation. Sher-Gil does not dwell on the background; instead, the focus rests entirely on the figures, emphasizing their corporeality and emotional states.

The bride, dressed in a dark red saree with a portion of her breast exposed under the arm, occupies the central gaze, yet her expression is far from the joy typically associated with matrimonial imagery. She embodies a sense of sadness and introspection, a recognition of the constraints and expectations imposed upon her. Two women attend to her, their actions both supportive and yet inevitably complicit in the ritualized passage she must undergo, while another girl in the background mirrors the bride in posture and gaze, creating a subtle dialogue between hope and apprehension. The bride who is delightfully rendered with a fairer complexion, engages the viewer directly, her expression blending melancholy with awareness, further complicating the scene's emotional resonance. Through *Bride's Toilet*, Sher-Gil captures the interiority of her subjects, the anxieties, apprehensions, and muted tensions that colour women's experiences of societal rites. Her gaze is inherently gynological, she sees women as complex beings, capable of emotion, reflection, and subtle resistance, rather than as mere ornaments within patriarchal rituals. This nuanced understanding of female psychology, conveyed through posture, expression, and corporeal presence, is uniquely accessible to Sher-Gil precisely because she was a woman. The painting thus becomes more than a depiction of a domestic ritual; it is a space where women's inner lives are acknowledged, validated, and made visible, a testament to Sher-Gil's empathetic and feminist vision.

As Simone de Beauvoir wrote about humanity in context to male, in much of art history, this "Othering" of women has meant they were celebrated as icons of beauty, grace, or sacrifice, yet rarely acknowledged as individuals with complex emotional worlds. To be the "Other" was to be seen but not heard, adorned but not understood, present but only in relation to someone else, wife, mother, muse. Sher-Gil's paintings disrupt this narrative. She does not paint women as passive reflections of a male-defined ideal; instead, she brings forward their solitude, their hesitation, their courage, and their quiet endurance. By humanizing women in this way, Sher-Gil breaks apart the silence that defined their representation. Her subjects are not idealized fantasies but women who think, feel, and dream, women who exist in their own right, not as shadows of men.

These works align with the central concern of this study: that women in art have too often been reduced to muses or symbols, their emotions unseen and their truths unspoken. Sher-Gil disrupted this pattern, offering not idealized beauty but authentic subjectivity. By centring the unspoken experiences of women, their silences, hesitations, and quiet courage, her art resonates with the larger feminist imperative to reclaim the narratives that patriarchy sought to suppress.

Conclusion

To understand the radical force of Amrita Sher-Gil's art, one must also recognize the role of emotion in shaping artistic truth. Art is not merely about representation but about affect, about transmitting the pulse of lived experience. Everyone is capable of feeling emotions, yet it is empathy that bridges the distance between the canvas and the viewer. Empathy requires a witnessing, an ability to connect with the pain, joy, or solitude of another because one has, in some way, encountered similar struggles. This is where Sher-Gil's vision becomes transformative in the field of art, while male artists could portray women as objects of beauty or sorrow, they could never fully inhabit the consequences of patriarchy, they could never truly feel the silencing, alienation, or the lifelong demands of being married off into unknown households.

Sher-Gil, however, painted from within this condition. Her canvases are haunted by loneliness, by secret longings, by the quiet ache of unsatisfactory relationships, and by the courage it takes to search for meaning despite these burdens. They are not simply portraits of women but mirrors of her own angst-ridden internal landscape, woven with the textures of fear, desire, and resilience. To see her women is to witness a collective memory of female existence, which showcases a memory of constraints endured, of silences carried, and of strength quietly asserted.

In this, Sher-Gil compels us to rethink the relationship between emotion and art. Her paintings remind us that emotions are not ornamental but essential, not universal in the same way for everyone but deeply shaped by the histories we carry. When women are denied subjectivity, art becomes the medium through which their emotions speak, demanding empathy from those willing to listen. Sher-Gil's work thus becomes both personal and political, they are a reclamation of women's voices, an insistence that their inner worlds are worthy of art's deepest attention and not just mere objective gaze. By painting not the "Other" but the "One," she gave women the dignity of being seen in their complexity. Her canvases ask us to see art not as passive beauty but as catharsis, not as patriarchal reflection but as liberation, an emotional testimony that rewrites art history through women's eyes.

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