



# “Pain And Suffering In The Art Of Frida Kahlo And Amrita Shergil: A Comparative Exploration”

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**Abstract-** The connection between life, pain, and artistic expression creates a powerful story in the works of Frida Kahlo and Amrita Shergil. Both artists transformed their personal struggles and suffering into great masterpieces. Kahlo's physical suffering and Shergil's cultural displacement beautifully turned into bold and meaningful visual expressions. This paper explores how Kahlo's autobiographical paintings reflect her ongoing battle with chronic pain and numerous surgeries, while Shergil's art highlights the emotional and social struggles faced by Indian women. By analysing their use of the body, symbolism, and self-portraiture, this study sheds light on how both artists turned their suffering into powerful artistic statements, ultimately using art as a way to rise above their pain.

**Keywords:** Frida Kahlo, Amrita Shergil, pain, trauma, feminism, body, self-portraiture.

**1. Introduction-** Art and pain have always been deeply connected. When words aren't enough, people turn to painting, music, or writing to express what hurts. Through art, pain becomes visible and sometimes, more bearable. Everyone experiences pain, but not everyone knows how to speak about it. That's where art comes in. It lets people turn their struggles into something others can see, feel, and even understand. Throughout history art has always been a way to express human pain and emotions, from ancient cave paintings to modern masterpieces. Among the most powerful examples stand Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) and Amrita Shergil (1913-1941), two visionary artists who turned their personal suffering into art. Kahlo underwent over 35 surgeries following a life-altering bus accident at age 18, a journey that ended with her death at 47 (Herrera, 2018). Her paintings and writings reflect the deep layers of both emotional and physical struggles, often blurring the lines between personal heartbreak and body pain (Artforum, 2023). On the other side, Shergil, born to a Punjabi father and a Hungarian mother, explored the psychological weight of her dual heritage and the oppression of women in Indian society (Dalmia, 2013). This paper tries to look at how both artists used their own bodies like a canvas to express their pain, and how their work still offers us fresh ways to understand human emotions and artistic expression.

**Research Methodology-** In this paper, I have used qualitative and descriptive method to study pain and suffering in the artworks of Frida Kahlo and Amrita Shergil. My approach towards this study and findings is mainly comparative, where I tried to see how both artists used their own life experiences and pain in their paintings.

I have taken primary sources like their original paintings and self-portraits, and also personal writings like Frida's diary and Amrita's letters. These helped me to understand their emotions and struggles better. I also used secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and art criticism which discuss their life and art style.

The artworks are analysed through visual study, where I look at colours, composition, and symbolism used by both artists. I also used feminist theory and psychological approach to understand how their personal pain becomes part of their identity in art.

Few selected paintings like *The Broken Column*, *The Wounded Deer* by Frida and *Three Girls*, *Bride's Toilet* by Amrita are discussed in detail to show how they turned private pain into visual language.

This research also focuses on self-portraiture, how both artists used their own image to speak about inner emotional and physical pain. While Frida painted her physical suffering after her accident, Amrita mostly painted emotional pain of being a woman and outsider in society.

This study is limited to selected paintings only, and my aim is not to cover their full body of work, but to understand how they both used art as a way of expressing trauma and strength.

## 2. Frida Kahlo- The Body as a Site of Pain and Identity

**2.1 Physical Suffering as a Central Theme-** Frida Kahlo's art was born from a life full of deep physical pain, which started with a serious bus accident when she was just a teenager. That accident, along with the endless surgeries and health problems that followed, shaped her identity, making her both a victim of life's cruelty and a strong, unbreakable woman. Painting became her safe space, a way to pour her pain onto the canvas and slowly take control over her own story (Google Arts & Culture, 2023). Unlike mere documentation, her works transform suffering into strength, inviting everyone who looks at them to feel her fight and her courage.

**2.2 Self-Portraiture as an Expression of Pain-** Kahlo's self-portraits are like windows to her soul, showing her inner world full of raw emotions. In *The Broken Column* (1944), she portrays herself with a shattered spine, her body pierced by nails, a symbol of the never-ending physical pain she lived with (Frida Kahlo Foundation, 2023). Another powerful example is *The Wounded Deer* (1946) where she painted herself as a deer struck by arrows, yet calmly facing the world, showing both her suffering, silent strength and her despair following a failed spinal surgery in New York (Frida Kahlo Foundation, 2023). These works stand out for their raw honesty, merging personal history with universal themes of vulnerability.

### Visual Interpretation by the Researcher:

***The Broken Column* (1944)-** Frida Kahlo's *The Broken Column*, evokes a deep sense of sorrow and isolation. The researcher perceives the painting not merely as a visual composition, but as an emotional conversation initiated by the artist herself. The expression on Kahlo's face, calm yet tearful, communicates silent anguish. The white tears falling from her eyes shows her inner turmoil. The emotional weight of the composition resonates with the viewer, creating a space where Kahlo's pain becomes both personal and universal.

In this painting, Kahlo portrays herself half-nude, not as an act of vulnerability alone, but as a powerful assertion of truth. Her lower body is modestly covered with a hospital-like white sheet, suggesting clinical vulnerability. A fractured classical column replaces her spine, a direct and symbolic representation of her physical collapse. The researcher interprets this column not only as a reference to her medical condition but also as a metaphor for a crumbling internal foundation. Kahlo's long, loose hair and the 57 visible nails embedded in her skin serve stark symbols of psychological and bodily suffering. These nails appear as physical manifestations of unseen wounds that may suggest piercing and painful pain, each representing trauma or memory. Additionally, the metallic orthopaedic brace she wears recalls the one she used during her childhood struggle with polio, thus merging past and present pain into one visual narrative.

The background intensifies the emotional gravity: a barren green landscape marked with visible cracks lies under an empty blue sky. Though natural tones like green, brown, and blue dominate the palette, the landscape offers no life, only emptiness and desolation. The composition places Frida's body in the centre,

making her the emotional and symbolic axis of the artwork. The colour choices ranging from earthy tones to white, red, and black add layers of emotional tension.

From the researcher's perspective, *The Broken Column* is more than an autobiographical self-portrait. It is a bold, persistent visual testimony of survival through suffering. Kahlo does not dramatize her pain; instead, she transforms it into a powerful, communicative gesture, inviting the viewer not just to see her wounds, but to feel them.

***The Wounded Deer (1946)***- Frida Kahlo's *The Wounded Deer* presents a surreal and haunting image of suffering, wherein the artist depicts herself as a young deer struck by multiple arrows. The researcher interprets this painting as a symbol of both physical agony and emotional misery. Despite the visible injuries, the deer's face bearing Frida's own likeness remains calm and composed, inducing a sense of silent strength. This visual contrast between bodily pain and stoic expression deepens the psychological impact of the work, suggesting a kind of suffering that is endured quietly, without protest.

The researcher observes that the surrounding dark forest is not merely a natural setting but rather a symbolic representation of psychological confinement. It appears dense and impenetrable, strengthening the deer's isolation. The arrows piercing the animal's body, nine in total, become metaphorical for the many disappointments, betrayals, and physical traumas Frida endured throughout her life. One of the most touching aspects of this composition is the artist's choice to paint the deer in mid-motion, with one front leg raised, implying that even in injury, there is an effort to move forward. The duality between stillness and motion, pain and poise, is central to the painting's emotional weight.

Visually, Kahlo uses earthy tones like browns and greens, intermixed with the deep red of blood and the pale sky above. The broken tree trunks and distant clearing in the forest add to the overall mood of abandonment and sorrow. From the researcher's perspective, this composition is not just a visual narrative of physical suffering, it is a portrait of the emotional numbness that follows chronic trauma. The animal form allows Kahlo to detach slightly from herself while still making the pain visible.

In the context of her failed spinal surgery shortly before this painting, the deer becomes a stand-in for her exhausted body and spirit. The researcher views *The Wounded Deer* as a moment of surrender, where strength is not shown through resistance, but through the quiet act of enduring pain without dramatization. It is Frida's silent scream, painted not in bright colour or exaggerated emotion, but in stillness, nature, and metaphor. Through this, she expresses not only her own suffering but offers a mirror to the viewer's own hidden wounds.



Plate 1: *The Broken Column* by Frida Kahlo



Plate 2: *The Wounded Deer*

**2.3 Symbolism and Surrealism in Depicting Trauma-** Kahlo's art beautifully mixes real life details with surrealist elements, creating dreamlike scenes rich with meaning. She filled her paintings with powerful images like thorns, butterflies, and dismembered body parts to convey the emotional and physical toll of her experiences (Daily Art Magazine, 2023). Her use of personal animals, such as monkeys, adds a layer of intimacy, suggesting both companionship and isolation. This surreal approach, as noted by art historians, distinguishes her from traditional portraiture, offering a window into her psyche (The Art Story, 2023).



### 3. Amrita Shergil: Emotional and Existential Pain in Art

**3.1 Cultural Displacement and Identity Struggles-** Amrita Sher-Gil was born in Hungary and spent her childhood between India, Europe, and France. Because of her mixed background, she often felt she did not fully belong to any one culture. Her paintings reflect this inner conflict. While studying art in Paris, she felt even more separated

from her Indian roots. This feeling of being caught between two worlds shaped her art deeply. She explored questions of identity and loneliness through her work (Feminism in India, 2023).

**3.2 Feminine Suffering in Her Paintings-** Shergil's depictions of women highlight the silent struggles within patriarchal structures. In *Three Girls* (1935), she showed three young Indian women sitting close together, looking down, with sad faces. Their expressions suggest the quiet pain of women living under social pressure (Dalmia, 2013). In *Bride's Toilet* (1937), she painted a young bride preparing for her wedding, but her body language shows fear and sadness about her future. Through these paintings, Sher-Gil expressed sympathy for the emotional lives of women, and she made their hidden pain visible to the world.

#### Visual Interpretation by the Researcher:

***Three Girls (1935)***- Amrita Sher-Gil's *Three Girls* presents a powerful yet calm and controlled portrayal of feminine sorrow. The researcher observes that the three young women, seated close to one another yet emotionally distant, reflect a shared condition of silent suffering. Their downcast eyes and solemn expressions evoke a sense of resignation, not to fate, but to the weight of social expectations and suppressed desires.

The artist's use of earthy, muted tones such as terracotta, brown, and olive green further enhances the quiet mood of the composition. From the researcher's perspective, this restrained palette mirrors the emotional mood of the subjects, one that is heavy with unspoken emotions. The background is minimal, offering no distraction from the women themselves, who become the absolute focus of the viewer's gaze. Their stillness suggests not peace, but a state of emotional confinement.

The researcher interprets *Three Girls* as a collective portrait of Indian womanhood under patriarchy, where their voices remain unheard. There is no display, no obvious rebellion, but the sadness is palpable, and through this subtlety, Sher-Gil allows the viewer to feel the depth of everyday pain that women carry. This painting becomes an intimate space for reflection, not only of the subject's emotions but of the viewer's own relationship with silence and suppression.

***Bride's Toilet (1937)***: In *Bride's Toilet*, Amrita Sher-Gil offers a moment of private vulnerability, capturing a young bride preparing herself, presumably for her wedding night. However, rather than evoking romance or joy, the painting radiates an atmosphere of uncertainty and emotional uneasiness. The researcher notes that the bride's semi-nude body, while calmly composed, carries within it a visible hesitation. Her eyes avoid contact, and her posture seems guarded, as if bracing herself for an unknown that is not entirely welcome.

The domestic setting, painted in soft warm hues like beige, brown, and pale red, feels intimate yet emotionally sterile. The researcher interprets this space not as a celebration of femininity, but as a confined ritual, where the bride's physical beauty is prepared not for herself, but for the expectations of others. Her nudity, in this context, is stripped of sensuality, it becomes symbolic of exposure to judgment, to obligation, and to social performance.

From the researcher's viewpoint, *Bride's Toilet* quietly critiques the ceremonial transformation of a woman into a wife, a shift that often lacks emotional preparedness or consent. There is no external force visible in the painting, yet the internal tension is deeply present. The subdued tones and soft lighting add to the psychological weight of the moment. Through this work, Sher-Gil highlights the emotional alienation that can exist beneath the surface of culturally celebrated rituals.



Plate 3: Three Girls by Amrita Shergil



Plate 4: The Bride's Toilet by Amrita Shergil

**3.3 Self-Portraits and the Reflection of Personal Feelings-** Sher-Gil's self-portraits give a glimpse into her private feelings. She often used soft, muted colours like ochre and terracotta, making an emotional and serious mood (Dalmia, 2013). In many of her nude self-portraits, she showed herself struggling with her identity. Her paintings focus more on inside emotions rather than outside beauty. This personal style made her artworks very powerful and different from others.

## 4. Comparative Analysis: Similarities and Differences

**4.1 Personal vs. Collective Pain-** Frida Kahlo's paintings are very personal. She showed her own physical pain and emotional wounds in her art. But Sher-Gil's art talks about the pain of many women in India. While Kahlo's paintings show her private sufferings, Sher-Gil's work speaks for a larger social struggle. Frida Kahlo's art is a direct reflection of her personal world- her body, her pain, her emotions. Her paintings almost function like visual diaries, documenting her physical injuries, heartbreaks, and internal wounds with fearless honesty. She didn't hesitate to bare her vulnerabilities on canvas, making her pain a central part of her identity as an artist. Each painting becomes a piece of her soul, speaking to the viewer about what it feels like to live inside a broken yet fiercely alive body.

On the other hand, Amrita Shergil's pain was quieter, more collective in nature. Rather than focusing solely on herself, she turned her gaze outward- toward the social realities of India. Her works reflect the unspoken sorrow, quiet despair, and psychological burden faced by women in a patriarchal society. In this sense, her pain is not just personal, but a mirror to the emotional suffering of countless others. Through her, the silent voices of many women begin to speak.

Thus, where Kahlo's art is raw and intimate, almost like a scream from within, Shergil's expression is subtle and empathetic, capturing the shared emotional fatigue of generations of Indian women.

**4.2 Autobiographical vs. Social Commentary-** Kahlo's paintings are like a diary of her life. She recorded her accidents, surgeries, heartbreaks through her paintings (Herrera, 2018). Frida Kahlo's canvas was her body and her life story. She used painting to process her trauma, each brushstroke a way to deal with the emotional and physical torment she endured. Her works are full of symbolism that directly reflects incidents from her own life: her bus accident, her multiple surgeries, her stormy relationship with Diego Rivera, her inability to bear children. Her art is deeply autobiographical, focused on turning personal chaos into something beautiful and meaningful. In contrast, Amrita Shergil used her own experiences as a lens, but she went beyond the personal to make broader social statements. Her aim wasn't just to show her own suffering but to critique the rigid cultural norms and gender roles of Indian society. Paintings like *Three Girls* and *Bride's Toilet* don't show Amrita herself, but the emotions she felt as a woman observing other women, trapped within social expectations.

Kahlo painted the pain of being Frida, while Shergil painted the pain of being a woman in India. One artist looks inward, the other outward, yet both give voice to suffering.

**4.3 Use of Colour, Symbolism, and Composition-** In terms of visual language, both artists had distinct yet powerful styles. Frida Kahlo used strong and bright colours like red, yellow, and piercing greens, filling her paintings with energy and emotions that mirrored her Mexican heritage (The Art Story, 2023). Her works are full of powerful symbols. Her use of symbolism is deeply personal: thorns, blood, animals, and anatomical elements speak of her inner turmoil, fertility, death, and identity. Every object in her painting is loaded with layered meanings, often surreal and disturbing, yet emotionally honest.

Amrita Sher-Gil's palette is more muted, earthy, and reflective. She often used warm browns, soft ochres, deep reds, and pale whites. Her brushwork is calm, introspective, and less dramatic. She employed a classical composition style influenced by both Western training and Indian miniature traditions. Symbolism in her work comes not through surreal metaphors, but through posture, facial expression, and mood. Her women are not surrounded by fantastical elements, but by stillness, silence, and shadows, tools through which she conveyed longing, helplessness, or resistance.

She used softer colours that reflect India's natural beauty. Her paintings are calm and makes the viewer think deeply, not just react emotionally (Feminism in India, 2023).

Where Kahlo's paintings shout with symbolism, Shergil's paintings whisper with emotion. One unsettles, the other soothes and both succeed in making the viewer pause, reflect, and feel.

**5. Conclusion-** Frida Kahlo and Amrita Sher-Gil changed their personal pain into beautiful art which touch people even today. Kahlo's colourful and dream-like self-portraits shows her physical and emotional suffering, while Sher-Gil's quiet paintings talk about sadness of women's life in India. Both artists used their own pain but made it something bigger, something that talks to many people. Their works shows how private pain and social problems are sometimes connected. Their stories tell us that it's okay to feel broken sometimes, what matters is how we express it. Kahlo and Shergil turned their pain into power, their sorrow into beauty. In a world where we often hide our scars, they wore theirs with pride, through art. Their journeys give hope to anyone battling with inner wounds, that healing can be creative, personal, and meaningful. Even today, their paintings inspire other artists, feminists and people who are finding strength in their own struggles. Their legacy reminds us that showing weakness is also a form of big courage.

They teach us that being vulnerable is not a weakness, it's a path to deeper truth. Through their canvas, they whispered to the world: "You are not alone." And that message, perhaps, is the most powerful art of all.

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## Picture Details

Plate 1: The Broken Column by Frida Kahlo (fridakahlo.org)

Plate 2: The Wounded Deer by Frida Kahlo (fridakahlo.org)

Plate 3: Three Girls by Amrita Shergil (Wikipedia)

Plate 4: The Bride's Toilet (Wikipedia)

