



Representation Of 'SELF' In Art: A Critical Analysis of the Self-Portraits of Two Contemporary Women Painter-Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo

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ABSTRACT

Self-portrait is a unique psychological process which takes place when the 'sitter' and the 'artist' become one. The muse for the artist becomes the 'SELF'. Oscar Wilde says, "Every Portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter." Throughout the History of art many celebrated artists have chosen self-portraiture as a means of Expression. However, it was not until the Early Renaissance in the mid-15th century, that we come across many artists depicting themselves as either the main subject or as major character in their works. "A pictorial or literary portrait of oneself, created by one" is termed as Self-Portrait. It can be in the form of a painting, drawing, and sculpture and more recently as a creative photograph as well.

Being a practicing woman artist, I felt very inclined towards understanding, the way a woman artists "sees" herself when she paints a self-portrait. In this research paper my area of focus will be to study of Self-portraits of two very famous contemporary women artist- Frida Kahlo, a Mexican painter and Amrita Sher-Gil, an Indian painter. In context to their works, in this paper I will attempt to understand some questions like: Is Self-Portraiture a means of self – representations? Is it reflective of Narcissism?

Keywords: Self-Portrait, Contemporary Women Artists, Frida Kahlo, Amrita Sher-Gil, Narcissism.

To love others you need to be in love with yourself, and If you are a visual artists what better way of representing this feeling, than portraying yourself in your works. "A pictorial or literary portrait of oneself, created by one" is how we define as self-portraiture. It has been a well celebrated category of art done by artists for a very long time, and continues to be popular genre of creativity. It is an artist's most intriguing vehicle for analysis and self-expression, at the same time a very challenging task. It involves a process of self-introspection and of "seeing" oneself then co-relating the visual and psychological perception into articulate expression. Self-portrait serves the dual role for the artist as creator and the subject. It is also seen as a natural progression for many artists who are more inclined to draw self, whose muse



is none other than the 'SELF'. As Oscar Wilde puts it, "Every portrait that is painted with a feeling is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter".

Frida Kahlo, a Mexican artist and Amrita Sher-Gil, an Indian artist were very accomplished women artists of the 20th century. Their creative pursuits have created a benchmark for women artists in the history of Contemporary Art. Their self-portraits as a means of insertion of their personal ethics and idiosyncratic identity is my area of research in this paper.

Self-portraits in Art:

Throughout the History of art, there have seen many celebrated artists, who have chosen self-portraiture as a means of expression. However, it was not until the Early Renaissance in the mid-15th century, that we come across many artist works depicting themselves as either the main subject or as major character in their works. There are abundant examples of self-portraits by famous painters like Durer, Raphael, Rembrandt, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Picasso and many significant women painters doing self-portraits like Caterina Van Hemessen, Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun, Alice Neel, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Jenny Saville, Mary Cassat, Tina Modotti, Rene Magritte, Kathe Kollowitz, Cindy Sherman. Indian artists like Raja Ravi Varma, Rabrindra Nath tagore, M.F.hussain, Manjit Bawa have done self-portraits.

Why artists make self-portraits/self –representations? Can it be Narcissism?

Well if you really look at the self-portraits the great artists have done, I think, to paint oneself is one of the hardest things to do, especially if the painter is honest. You know yourself best but the hard part is in being honest and not dolling nor dulling yourself down. If you can do it for yourself, you can do it for others.

Self-portraiture is in no way a depiction of narcissism¹ and women artists who have chosen themselves as their muse have often been labelled as narcissist. "Men can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects, surfaces, but when women use their own faces and bodies, they are immediately accused of narcissism...because women are considered as sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful...she is narcissist..."² This is a misconception as doing a self-portrait does not make an artist self-indulgent, rather psychologically it is a very penetrating exercise for any artist. It is a process of creative self-discovery which requires an individuality of style, deeper insight and a connection with one's "Self". The moment you look into your eyes to paint yourself, your face suddenly becomes a mirror to your soul, to the real you. As Frida Kahlo said, when asked about her self-portraits, "....because I am the subject I know the best".

Threads of Commonality between the Two Artists: Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo

¹ Meaning -excessive interest in or admiration of oneself and one's physical appearance.

² Jones,Amelia, 'Body Art/Performing the subject', " The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke", p.no.175, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998



Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo though they lived in two different parts of the world, never met each other in their life time, yet had many threads of commonality binding them together.

They both had mixed parental heritage:

Amrita Sher-Gil, born in 1913 in Budapest, Hungary, to Umrao Sher-Gil, a sikh aristocrat-a scholar in Sanskrit and Persian and Marie Antoniette Gottesmann, A jewish opera singer. Amrita was the eldest of two sisters. Frida Kahlo, was in 1907, in Coyoacan, a small town in the outskirts of Mexcio City. Her father Guillermo Kahlo was a German, but had come to Mexico at the age of 18 and changed his name to Spanish equivalent. Her mother Matilde Calderon y Gonzalez was a devout catholic and was of Spanish descent. Frida was the third among their four daughters.

Both of them came across as small-boned, yet bold, vivacious, intelligent and witty women. Amrita and Frida were both very grounded to their roots. Amrita loved to dress in traditional silk saris and heavy jewelry, even when she was studying art in Paris, similar was Frida's love for traditional Mexican dresses, which she wore very often, along with elaborate hair styles.

Style and Inspiration:

In Frida Kahlo's paintings we see a strong influence of indigenous Mexican culture along with European influence of Realism, Symbolism and Surrealism. As for Amrita's inspiration, it too had a mixed influence of Post- impressionists like Paul Gauguin, Cezanne and the mystic grandeur of Ajanta, Ellora and Tanjore. Both these artist were fond of vibrant color palette. Her style is an eloquent fusion of the east and the west.

Personal Life:

In their personal life both of them had a troubled and disconnected married life. Amrita Sher Gil had many extra marital affairs³ and was very open and unapologetic about them. Frida Kahlo married Diego Riveria,⁴ in 1929, who was 20 years her senior and she had gone to him for painterly advice. They had a tumultuous marriage as both had fiery temperaments and both had numerous extramarital affairs. The openly bisexual Kahlo had affairs with both men (including Leon Trotsky) and women; Rivera knew of and tolerated her relationships with women, but her relationships with men made him jealous. For her part, Kahlo became

³ An early suitor was Yusuf Ali Khan, son of the Nawab of Akbarpur. He made her pregnant and infected her with venereal disease as well. She turned to her cousin Victor Egan, a medical student, to get rid of the unwanted foetus and the disease. Amrita remained reckless in her affairs with men and women throughout her short life. One of her lovers was Malcolm Muggeridge, her close affinity with Jawaharlal Nehru is also known to all. She married Dr. Victor Egan, her Hungarian cousin whom she knew from her childhood.

⁴ At the age of 22, Kahlo married Diego Rivera 21 year her senior, the creator of monumental murals. He had a reputation of being a womanizer. Together they lived in San Francisco, New York, Detroit and Mexico City. They divorced ten years later and remarried one year after the divorce.

outraged when she learned that Rivera had an affair with her younger sister, Cristina. The couple eventually divorced, but remarried in 1940. Their second marriage was as turbulent as the first. Both Amrita's and Frida's personal lives were very much strewn with controversies and both were very open about their sexual desires and openly talked about the men in their lives.

Personal Domain: Physical/ psychological trauma and pain:

Frida she was stricken with polio at the age of six. It affected her right leg and she spent nine months in bed. As a young girl she met with an accident and had to undergo several spine surgeries. The accident left her in a great deal of pain while she recovered in a full body cast; she painted to occupy her time during her temporary state of immobilization. Another seven spinal surgeries in 1950 forced her to endure a nine-month hospital stay. During this time she continued to paint and remained politically active. It has been conjectured that she also suffered from spina bifida, a congenital disease that could have affected both spinal and leg development. Besides her illness she had many miscarriages and was unable to bear children.

As for Amrita Sher Gil, she did not endure as much trauma and physical pain as Kahlo did, but Amrita had a few abortions and contracted venereal disease. Her untimely death at the age of 28 is also shrouded with mystery



Search within and around:

Both of them kept searching for intellectual stimulation, which reflected in their art eventually. This stimulation came in the form of interaction/closeness with male friends, lovers, to which both had openly admitted. Amrita Sher-Gil had written many love letters to her male friends, mentioned them in letters to her younger sister as well. Frida too had talked openly about her affairs. Both were interested to search beyond the image of the person they were painting. It is interesting to note that the time both these artist were creatively active, it was also the time when political freedom was being felt in Asia, Africa and South America. Poets, artists and writers were coming ahead with radical views and Paris, the epicenter of art was a hub of new energy and new ideas. Also this was the time when many different schools of psychoanalysis had put forward the many facets and theories of consciousness.

Self- Portraits of Amrita Sher-Gil:

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. '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'.⁵ She painted more

⁵ Sen, Geeti, 'Feminine Fables : Imaging the Indian Woman in Painting, photography and Cinema,' Mapin Publication, Ahmedabad, 2004, p.67.

than twelve 'Self-Portraits' while she was a student in Paris. Sher-Gil obviously enjoyed the fervour 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 being',⁶ 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'.⁷ This self-portrait was done in 1932, during her student period. In this she is sitting at her easel, with the light falling from her left from the window. This depicts a little serious mood, though the colour of her dress is vibrant red. She is severely dressed yet there seems a hint of sensuality in the soft roundness of the body. Another of her self-portrait, done in 1939, is oil on canvas work. She has depicted her vivacious self with her body turned towards the viewer. It seems like a deliberate attempt to engage the viewer with her flirtiest gaze. This is her representation of self as the lushly young woman, full of life with vibrant red lips, open hair cascading around her. Her arms and neck adorned with beads of necklace and bracelets. It seems she is presenting herself, as the world wanted her to be. As her bold personality reflects, she is not caught in the male gaze; in fact she is the one giving the gaze back to the viewer.



Self Portrait, oil on canvas, 1939

Inspired by Paul Gauguin's stylization of the female nude, and that is the reason she has titled this self-representation as "The Tahitian". In this painting her body is shown in its simplicity in own brown color, black hair tied in a simple ponytail, "...making simplicity or indigently as the absence of contour"⁸
(The Tahitian, Oil on Canvas)

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...'⁹. 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...'¹⁰ Her own nude self-

⁶Dalima, Yashodhara, *Ibid.*, 2006, p.146.

⁷ Borzello, 'Seeing Ourselves,' p.137-9, 'The naked self' on female nude self- portraits. repd in Mitter.*op.cit.*,p.51

⁸ Mathur, Saloni, " A Retake of Amrita Sher Gil's Self Portrait as Tahitian", "Critical Inquiry", Vol.37, No.3 (Spring 2011) Published by University of Chicago Press, p.515-44

⁹ Borzello, cit...op p.51-52

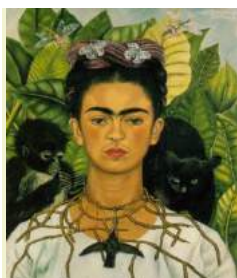
¹⁰ Yashodhara Dalima, *op.cit.*, 2006, p.146.

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. Amrita loved to paint, and also loved to paint herself, for she was honest in her projection, with no remorse or guilt and was in peace with herself. This reflected in her pure, vibrant colours, which had the fresh exuberance filled with rhythmical brushstrokes.

Frida Kahlo:

Frida made more than 55 self-representations of herself symbolically expressing her own pain and sexuality of her life events. Frida has de-objectified the body and herself portraits are more like her journey of self-discovery. She has included many animals and her pets like spider monkey, parrots, dogs and cats along with herself representations. This portrait of her titled *"Self-portrait with monkey and thorn necklace"* 1940, has drawn a lot of interest from critics and art lovers. It is a very symbolic painting. Frida faces the viewer. The thorn necklace around her neck is making her bleed. There is a cat, a monkey and a humming bird in the painting. The pain and turmoil in her real life is being symbolically represented by her.

Another of her very compelling work is titled, *"The Broken Column"*, It expresses her anguish and sufferings in a most straightforward way. The nails are stuck into her face and whole body.



A split in her torso looks like an earthquake fissure. In the background is the earth with dark ravines. At the beginning she paints herself nude but later covered her lower part up with something looks like a hospital sheet. A broken column is put in place of her spine. The column appears to be on the verge of collapsing into rubble. Penetrating from loins to chin, the column looks phallic, and the sexual connotation is all the more obvious because of the beauty of Frida's breasts and torso. This painting Frida looks pretty and strong. Although her whole body is supported by the corset, she is conveying a message of spiritual triumph. She has tears on her face but she looks straight ahead and is challenging both herself and her audience to face her situation. The style of this painting is very unique. She laid down each stroke firmly to build a simple and clear image. There are no virtuoso flourishes of the brush and the colors are as neatly contained within contours.



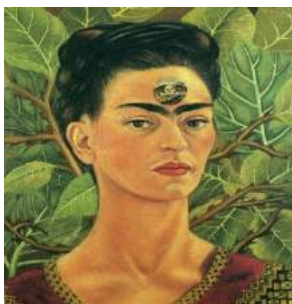
The Broken Column, 1944

In 1946 Frida Kahlo had an operation on her spine in New York. She was hoping this surgery would free her from the severe back pain but it failed. This painting expressed her disappointment towards the operation. This painting has multiple interpretations from different people. Some said it expressed her frustration over the botched surgery. Others said it portrays her incapability to control her own destiny. And some people said it has sexual implication and expressed her struggles in different relationship.



The wounded deer, 1946

During the later years of Frida's life, she was tortured by numerous illness and complications. This self-portrait was painted in 1943 and Frida's health was deteriorated during that period and she had to be bedridden most of the time. Due to her poor health condition, death is an inevitable thought which lingering over her mind. In this painting, death is symbolized as a skull and crossbones which shows up in her forehead. In ancient Mexican culture, death also means rebirth and life. In this portrait, she put herself against a background with lavish green leaves, which is a symbol of life. It seems Frida understood that death is a path to another form of life.



Thinking about Death, 1943



Conclusion:

Both these celebrated artists have put into play through their self-representative body of work- their psychological, social concerns with mind –body duality. Their self-representations are less narcissist and more autobiographical interpretations of their social and psychological compulsions. It has been their way of projecting an enigmatic presentation of their multitude identities with those of their viewers.

For Amrita Sher-Gil, self-portraiture was a way of celebrating womanhood, a celebration of self, and had she lived even as much as Frida, we would have seen more self-representations as a means of self-expressions. As for Frida Kahlo self-representative portraits were more a means of documenting her life and the events that made her life. She had a more painful life experiences both physically and psychologically. Her portraits are a means of overcoming her personal loss, her pain in the form of lost love, her unborn children and her fight with her physical ailments. She has internalized her sorrow and pain and externalized it into her self-portraits as a means of cathesis, her salvation and her courage to face adversities of her life and to fight them boldly.

The journey of both these women artists is the one towards self-realization through their self-representation. The question of ‘Self’, what it constitutes and how it manifests itself is a complex human dilemma. It has puzzled and intrigued great number of artists, critics and psychologists.

This genre of self-expression is touching as you need to be true to yourself .Have the courageous to represent yourself with complete honesty because not only are you showing the world who you are, but more so you are “seeing” yourself.

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