

Decolonising Art and Feminism - Shergil & Khalo

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In her prolific collection of essays 'When was modernism', Geeta Kapur posits two contemporaries, of the colonial era to compare and analyse the positionality of separation between the artist and the work itself and the gap within which the masquerade of feminism exists in modern art. She lays emphasis on the respective oeuvres of artists Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo as women artists who laid the foundations for a frame work of revolutionary nationalistic art movements.

Through this essay I aim to reconstruct Kapur's critique of both artists through the following points; first the position of the 'feminine' in vastly historicised and nationalised backdrops and the way in which their work overlaps as a means of reflexivity, not only of their hybridised ancestry, their relationship to the work itself but also their respective political affiliations and influences.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, we will look at Kapur's critical analysis on the concept of 'female valor' in art, the 'woman as masquerade'<sup>2</sup> which Kapur cites as an opportunity for an interrogation of female narcissism itself and to present a type of 'nascent feminism'<sup>3</sup> in largely patriarchal structures.

To contextualize the work of Sher-Gil and Kahlo it is important to consider the cultural and political milieu of their own individual lives within which they created these works of art. Both artists were of multiethnic ancestry, Amrita Sher-Gil was born to a Hungarian mother and an Indian father; who was deeply nationalistic, and often disapproved her international artistic aspirations.<sup>4</sup> However, many argue that Sher-Gil's attitude to contemporary European art has always been 'ambiguous'.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Frida Kahlo was born during a period of intense political upheaval in Mexico, which characterized diverse ideologies — anarchist, liberal and populist, among others. Her father was a photographer of hybridized European ancestry, and her mother was primarily of indigenous blood. Thus, Kahlo grew up amidst surroundings that allowed for a synthesis of cross cultures, she was thus engaged in a discourse of the ideological definition of Mexican identity, and a recognition of the *mestizo culture*.<sup>6</sup>

In the late 1930's, India was still under the British rule and its people were witnessing the early foundations of a revolutionary nation state. It was during this time Sher-Gil arrived in India to explore neorealist ways of expression, although having trained in European styles of art she sought a means to bridge the gap between her dualist identities by rejecting the formalist ideologies of art and using a realist stance to depict the lives of her fellow Indians. Kapur terms this as her way of establishing a cross cultural vocabulary. Much in the same way as her contemporary, Kahlo's art was performative; a meta reality of the critique of ethnic art and its otherness, the third world art space's modern aesthetic. Her work included an expanded notion of marginalised groups, and primitivism.<sup>7</sup> Within Kapur's critical framework, these works served as powerful perspectives of political resistance, and patriarchal hegemonic normativity.<sup>8</sup>

Geeta Kapur further illustrates that both artists present significantly similar analogies through iconographic and surrealist aesthetics, a quest for expression that lent a reflexive as well as a revolutionary quality. It is important to note that Kapur's most pivotal point of critique and analysis throws light on the position of female artists and the '*woman as masquerade*'.<sup>9</sup> Both artists were famously known to paint varied portraits of themselves, Kapur deems this practice as an aim to not only project their own respective dualist identities but to also free themselves from the fetishism of the female body in social cultures. Here the feminine or the woman as a masquerade

acts as a canon of intervention and frees the artist, as the subject and the object from the commodification and fetishisation of society. Thus, in turn freeing the mode of expression to fully articulate the female experience in its own respective cultural subjectivities.

For example, if we were to apply these parameters of critique to one of Frida Kahlo's famous paintings, *'Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick'* (1954), here Kahlo paints herself as embracing the utopian belief that political conviction can free her from pain and suffering. This is termed as one of her many explicitly political works where she depicts herself in a leather corset, dressed in a traditional Mexican skirt (*Tehuana*) — dress was a motif she often used to express her feminine Mexican and anti-colonial identity; behind her is a divided backdrop representing earth as half peaceful and half destructive. Karl Marx is depicted as a saint who will save the world impending doom. In this work she is said to have employed a narrative style of votive pictures and iconography.<sup>10</sup> It lends a depiction of her anti-imperialist, and antifascist beliefs, as a post-revolutionary Mexican Avant-garde. Through this piece it appears that Frida aims to problematize the notions of nationhood as well as the paradigms of gender in radical movements. Taking into consideration her other works of art such as *Henry Ford Hospital*, *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* or *My nurse and I*, she adopts an unconfined form of expression that posits the concept of the female or woman outside of a traditional patriarchally defined sphere of femininity — an anarchical depiction of the never- before-seen version of the feminine, the Lacanian *objet a*;<sup>11</sup> where identities of a daughter, sister, wife etc. do not define her.

To summarize, Kapur's essay also highlights and constructs a way new way of seeing female artists challenge the hegemonic and societal norms that attempt to regulate the significance of a woman. Through their works, both artists realised a re-conceptualization and re-appropriation of the realities of the female experience, that lend confessional and performative reflexive qualities to modern art, that reposition the oeuvres of both artists as political resisters to dogmatic societal and cultural frameworks.

1. Kapur, (2001), Body as Gesture, *When was modernism*, Tulika, 17-22
2. Ibid
3. Betterton, R. (1987) 'How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon', in Hilary Robinson (ed.) *Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today*, London, UK: Camden Press, 250-271.
4. Dalmia Y, (2006), Amrita Sher-Gil a Life, 'Search for Roots', 59-70
5. Balasubramaniam A, Rethinking Occidental Paradigms in the Discourse of Art
6. Kettenmann, (2016) Frida Kahlo, TASCHEN
7. Ibid
8. Kapur, (2001), Body as Gesture, *When was modernism*, Tulika, 17-22
9. Ibid
10. Kettenmann, (2016) Frida Kahlo, TASCHEN
11. Grimberg, S (1998) 'Frida Kahlo: The Self as End' in Whitney Chadwick (ed.), *Mirror Images: Surrealism and Self-Representation*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: MIT Press, 82-105.