

SEMINAR ON “AMRITA SHER-GIL, THE MAGYAR CONNECTION”

29.JANUARY 2013, HICC, New Delhi

INTRODUCTION

Navina Sundaram:

Bold, unconventional, hugely talented and very beautiful – the painter Amrita Sher-Gil is the stuff that legends are made of. “Europe belongs to Picasso, Matisse and Braque and many others. India belongs only to me”, declared the daughter of a Hungarian opera singer and a Sikh aristocrat four years before her premature tragic death. She died in 1941. She was 28 years old. Hers is an unfinished project, but today Amrita Sher-Gil is an icon of Indian modern art. Intuitively cosmopolitan, she navigated with ease the deep waters between Europe and South Asia. She once wrote: ‘It always surprises me to hear that those who can recognise the good in Western art are unable to do so as regards Eastern art. To me it seems incredible. But perhaps this is due to my double atavism’.

The dual Indo- Hungarian ancestry can be read either as a fairy-tale union of diverse cultures, or, in today’s terms, as part of the history of migrations and mixed marriages that informs the global Diaspora. This is something that I can also directly relate to – not only literally, since Amrita is my mother’s sister, but also because there is a similar trajectory in my life. The question of shifting identities, multi-layering, patchwork identities, takes on new relevance – but during Amrita’s life time, and yes till the end of the 20th century it was more nationalistically defined.

Anecdotally, on her return to India in 1934 after the four years in Paris and Europe she writes to Marie Antoinette, her mother, thanking her “for having knitted those heavenly pullovers but I have decided that from now on I shall only wear saris and Indian dresses. First of all, they are much more beautiful. Secondly, since here in India only Eurics (Eurasians) wear European clothes and as I do not fancy this race and I do not want to identify myself with them, I will not wear European clothes any more. Thirdly, because it is much more economical. Now you know wearing saris is forever....”

This is a conscious bid to don another garb, change her style, underscore her Indianness. Criticism rained heavy from a certain section on the count that she was foreign and she was often being told she didn’t belong: to her friend the art-critic Karl Khandalavala she wrote on 13.2.1937: “I was amused to hear that the Principal of the Lucknow School of Art [*Asit Halder*] deplored the fact that in spite of my Indian father my work “smells of the west”. He also resents my intrusion into the field of Indian art “because the Indians (represented of course by him) don’t want another “Solomon”!!! to be thrust on them.” [*Gladstone Solomon 1880-1965, British painter and writer on Art was the Director of the J.J School of Art in Bombay in the 1920s and 30s*] (These were his very words, not directly to me of course) Sarada Ukil declares that my work does not represent the feeling of the People (with a capital P). How some of these creatures loathe me almost as much as I detest their work.”

And in a similar vein:

“It is curious, that these very Indian artists who spend their lives concealing the tragic face of India behind rose bowers and who can’t even justify their escapism by original or powerful *pictorial* interpretations should decry my work because it is not what according to them true interpretations of India should be! To those who say that I look at India with the eyes of a “foreigner” (I am amazed that at least they concede that I

am a “sympathetic foreigner”) I answer, granting that it is not “from within”, granting that I am just Kipling turned “sympathetic,” granting that my work “smells of the West”, in the face of the blindness a worse still, voluntary blindness, of most Indian artist, isn't it something that I should see?”

It would have gratified Amrita to know that in the summer of this year at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris a huge exhibition is going to be mounted which revolves around non western artists who have worked or had some association with Paris from the early part of the last century. One of the curators will use her “Selfportrait as Tahitian” done in 1934 the year she decided to leave Europe for India as a pivotal point hoping to suggest, that a historiography of modern art can advance beyond a Eurocentric worldview by highlighting certain works that demonstrate a counter modern discourse. Works that reveal a dynamic interplay between different cultures, in which non western artists have used established modes of representation to foreground their own changing identities, while simultaneously interrogating western authority. And to quote art historian, Saloni Mathur :”the ‘Selfportrait as Tahitian’ speaks in powerful ways to a number of contemporary intellectual concerns: the profound and intractable global entanglements of modernism, the cross-cultural currents of the early twentieth century, the place of primitivism and orientalism within the discourses of the modern; the avant-garde’s treatment of the female nude; and the bravado of the young woman who issued the statement while studying in Paris at the age of twenty-one... Today, we no longer regard Sher-Gil as an anomalous exception, as a “highly Europeanised artist” or “a complication to the social formation” of modern Indian art. Instead, she has been increasingly redefined, by the digital retakes of Vivan Sundaram and the work of other critical writers, artists, and curators, as a paradigmatic figure of the twentieth century, one that embodied the most painful paradoxes of a postcolonial modernity, and bore the melancholic imprint of its greatest dilemmas. Feeling alien, standing outside of one’s traditions, receiving a western education, seeking authenticity and belonging -- these aspects of Sher-Gil’s life have resonated for artists, both male and female, throughout the subcontinent, and indeed across the world, in her wake.”

Tomorrow, 30th January is Amrita’s birthday. To mark the centenary of my aunt this seminar and the exhibition with wonderful photographs taken mostly by my grandfather ,Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, will highlight and focus on the Magyar connection – the Gottesmann Erdöbaktay side of the Sher-Gil family.

Amrita Sher-Gil’s Indian lineage, from her father Umrao Singh, went back to influential figures of the nineteenth century who played key roles in the transformation of India, from tribal chieftains to local rajas who countered colonial rule. Her mother, Marie Antoinette, came from a middle-class Hungarian family but was inclined to seek cultural experience and adventure elsewhere, in lands and cultures distant from her origins – this worked to bring her and Umrao Singh, whom she met in Lahore in 1911, close to each other both emotionally and intellectually, an attraction that soon resulted in marriage. After a courtship of over a year they married according to Sikh rites on 4 February 1912.

Marie Antoinette (Mária Antónia) Gottesmann Erdöbaktay was born in Budapest on 4 February 1881 – On her father's side, Marie Antoinette came from a French–Hungarian family. Raoul (Rezső) Gottesmann, the only son of Adolf Gottesmann and Marie Antoinette d'Albon, worked in an insurance company and was a chief counsellor of Parliament. He married Antónia Levys-Martonfalvy, who came from a Jewish family and they had five children, of whom Marie Antoinette, Amrita's mother, was the eldest. She had four younger siblings: two sisters, Blanka and Ella, and two brothers, Raoul and Ervin. The youngest, Ervin Baktay, whose reputation as an Indologist became almost a brand in Hungary, used his grandfather's title of nobility as his family name, as was the accepted practice at that time.

The Gottesmann family was part of the ruling middle class of Hungary, or the 'kereszténymagyar középosztály' ('Christian Hungarian middle class'), as it was also called. In Hungary, like elsewhere in Europe by the turn of the century, 'culture' was a concept that permeated and defined the lives of this middle class. Signifying devotion to the self, preoccupation with the psyche, and the spirit and dedication to developing artistic talents at the personal/individual level, it became more and more a social category that was embraced alike by families, institutions and objects of social interaction.

Antónia Martonfalvy, Amrita's maternal grandmother, typified these concerns and interests; she loved the good life and indulged in expensive holidays in the Riviera and Biarritz, Marie Antoinette, her eldest daughter, spoke several languages, was accomplished in social skills, and learned painting and music, first in Italy and then in London; in later years, she transferred her love of Bach, Tchaikovsky and Puccini to her daughters. The pan-European artistic and intellectual background of the family was further extended by Ervin, who went to Munich to study painting under Simon Hollósy, the founder of the Nagybánya Colony and a very influential figure who had an interest in metaphysical questions and the orient. Ervin had read Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* while still a schoolboy, and was drawn to the ideas of theosophy and Madame Blavatsky.

Marie Antoinette's decision, after her marriage, to return to Budapest to give birth to her first child, is an important milestone in the narrative of Amrita Sher-Gil's life. Their second daughter Indira was born in 1914, and the outbreak of the First World War the same year meant that the family stayed on in Hungary for several more years, until 1921. The only language the girls spoke when they were children was Hungarian, and Amrita was to maintain this marker of her Hungarian identity and family bonds till the end of her life, even after she returned to India.

Dalma-Amrita, as she was christened, was born at 11.30 am on 30 January 1913, at 4 Szilágyi Dezső Square on the Buda side of the Danube, facing the ornate building of the House of Parliament. Bela Bartók, the great modern composer, lived in this house in later years, from May 1922 to June 1928. The Sher-Gils stayed there till July 1913 and then moved to a villa on Rath Gregory Street on Buda hill. The substantial family income of Umrao Singh had made it possible for him to transport a considerable amount of furniture to Budapest from his Lahore home, which indicates that they had probably planned to stay in Hungary for a number of years at the outset. In September 1916 the Sher-Gils moved to Dunaharaszti, a village on the outskirts of Budapest and a popular holiday resort, to stay in Marie Antoinette's family home (at Fő út 174). Because of the war, their life in Hungary was frugal, but the lack of material comforts was more than compensated by affectionate familial bonds. For Amrita, those early years spent in the company of her maternal aunts, uncles and cousins resulted in deep and lasting emotional relationships with them. She

established an especially close friendship with her older cousin Victor Egan, who she later married.

In 1919 Amrita joined the local school at Dunaharaszti, where she did many drawings in coloured pencil to illustrate Hungarian folk stories and the fairy tales of Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. She also penned her own stories and poems, and recorded historical events, with the aid of coloured crayons. There is a record of Amrita having received a certificate on 23 January 1920 from her school, in the name of 'Sher-Gil Maria Magdolna' (her name after the re-christening).

In June 1920 the Sher-Gils moved from Dunaharaszti – first to MariAntoinette's sister's house in Budapest and then to the famous Margart Islands Hotel on the Danube. On 2 January 1921, when Amrita was almost eight years old, the family returned to India. (Taken from Preface : Amrita Sher-Gil A self-portrait in letters and writings, Volume 1)

Her precocious talent was noticed and appreciated by the legendary actress Jaszai Mari



[Photo Left to right: Blanka Egan, Jaszai Mari, Antonia Gottesmann, Ervin Baktay and friend, c. 1913, Budapest]

Our seminar will span quite an arc – dealing with family members, Uncle Ervin Baktay and brother-in-law Ernest Gottesmann’s involvement with Amrita’s life and work, Amrita’s passion for literature – and an analysis of the wonderfully enigmatic canvas “Two Girls” painted in Hungary in 1939 when Fascism and National Socialism and the Second World War loomed large and ugly.

I will now ask Dr. Agnes Pap, referent librarian at National Széchényi Library, Budapest, where some of Umrao Singh’s letters are kept to give her lecture based on Amrita’s talented and scholarly father’s correspondence with the famous Hungarian actress Mari Jászai during and after World War I –luckily for us Umrao Singh Sher-Gil was a prolific letter writer who kept typed copies of all his correspondence.

Dr. Ágnes Pap: "The Correspondence between Umrao Singh Sher-Gil and Mari Jászai".

[Drawing on the correspondence between the famous Hungarian actress, Mari Jászai, and Amrita’s father, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, the lecture illuminates the scholarly Sardar’s opinions on politics, literature, family life, mixed marriages and the education of his daughters. Mari Jászai was an acquaintance of his wife, Marie-Antoinette Gottesmann. The letters written by the Sher-Gils to Mari Jászai are kept in the Manuscript Collection of the National Széchényi Library in Hungary. The majority of the letters were written by Umrao Singh, who regularly sent them to the actress partly from Hungary (Budapest, Dunaharaszti and Rozsnyó), and partly from India, after returning home. Umrao Singh was deeply attached to the cultures of both the East and the West, especially to the Hungarian culture, since he had spent eight years in Hungary. The scholar was in contact with some of the Hungarian orientalists and indologists (Sándor Kégl, Gyula Germanus, Charles Fábri), and writers (Árpád Pásztor, Antal Szirbik.)

Navina Sundaram:

Archiving seems to run in our family. My brother Vivan Sundaram, whose ongoing engagement with the Sher-Gil archive is legion – the seminal volumes on Amrita’ “A Selfportrait in Letters and Writings” published 2 years ago are just the most recent example. Apparently another family member also kept track in his own way of Amrita’s life and work: Ernest Gottesmann - her Hungarian brother-in-law, married to Victor Egan’s sister, Viola. I remember meeting Ernő when I visited Budapest with my parents in 1966 and again together with my brother in 1995 when Vivan mounted “The Sher-Gil Archive” in the Mucsarnok Dorottya Gallery, and again when Katalin Keseru mounted a major exhibition on Amrita in the Ernst Múzeum in 2001. The art historian and independent curator, Yashodhara Dalmia, whilst researching for her book on Amrita met Ernest Gottesmann in Hungary in 2004, a couple of months before he died. She will now present her paper on what she found during this trip:

Yashodhara Dalmia:“ Ernest Gottesmann: Chronicler and Archivist”by Yashodhara Dalmia

[Ernest Gottesmann (1905-2004), Amrita Sher-Gil's brother-in law, kept a record of the artist's life and work. In the talk his role as the artist's archivist will be discussed accompanied by visual material and a part of a film by Pooja Kaul will be shown]

Navina Sundaram: Amrita was an amazing all round talent. She was passionate about music, in fact she was taking piano lessons with Alfred Cortot in Paris before she gave it up saying she could only concentrate on one talent – and that would be

her painting. And she was passionate about literature. Margit Köves who teaches Hungarian in Delhi university and has written on Hungarian and Indian literature, will now talk about Amrita's predilection for Hungarian literature – where in fact she wrote to her father –who was a linguist in his own right –“It is a pity you do not master Hungarian perfectly. You lose an immense amount, more than you ever would think, not to speak of Ady's poetry.”

Dr. Margit Köves “Amrita Sher-Gil and Hungarian Literature”

[Amrita Shergil was fluent in English, Hungarian and French. She was a voracious reader and her childhood drawings and water colours draw on Hungarian folktales and literature. The talk deals with the issue that her early works, letters and other writing are not marginal notes expressing her opinions, values, likes and dislikes, but that they inform the creative production of her oeuvre as an artist's diary, similar to the diaries of George Sand, Francois Mauriac or Christopher Isherwood.]

Navina Sundaram

We will now take a short tea break and meet at 4.15 for the second session of our seminar which will be chaired by **Parul Dave Mukherjee**.

Second Session chaired by Parul Dave Mukherjee 5.00 – 6.00PM

" Amrita Sher-Gil and Ervin Baktay"

by Dr. Katalin Keserű

[The paper recalls the memory both of Amrita Sher-Gil who was born in Budapest 100 years ago and her uncle, the Hungarian painter and indologist Ervin Baktay, who died 50 years ago. Documents recently acquired by the Hopp Ferenc Museum of East-Asian Art and the latest publications on Amrita allow for a more accurate reassessment of the Hungarian connections in Amrita's art. The talk goes into the role József Nemes, Ervin Baktay's classmate, played in Amrita's studies and the importance of her plein-air works in the development of her key subjects (women, sadness, loneliness) as well as in methods of composition (view from above, centralization).The talk includes Ervin Baktay's reflections on her work and the influence Amrita had on his view of Indian art.]

"Amrita Sher-Gil - Two Girls (1939)"

by Rakhee Balaram

[The lecture critically examines the duality embedded in Amrita Sher-Gil's portrait *Two Girls* painted in Hungary in 1939. The portrait will be contextualized in terms of the representation at a time of heightened political tension in Hungary and against a backdrop of nationalism in India. Sher-Gil's own words and photographs, the complexity of her memory, dreams and reflections and the artist's own intimate anxieties and struggles to develop a 'modern' style of painting reflect a woman who used her artistic and critical sensibilities to forge her future in terms of the disquiet and failures of her past. The personal becomes the political, ambition becomes desire and the sullenness and 'unreadability' of *Two Girls* becomes as poised and self-contained as an unexploded bomb.]