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## Amrita Sher-Gil's Heteroglossic Art in the Context of Indian Diaspora and World Culture: A Philosophical Perspective

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### Abstract:

If a nation is an entity on the lines of being a macrocosm of the world, 'diaspora' could be considered as a space of dispersal manifesting microscopic consciousness of culture and its people. The interconnectedness between the world and nation is one of the significant ways to underline what diaspora is, as it provides the essential link between distances and destinations. The philosophical ramifications of Indian diaspora result in connecting the entire world together. A diaspora existence is unique in its ability to live or co-exist within several communities simultaneously. In this paper, I would like to invest critical attention in Indian diaspora as a "mode of cultural production" (Vertovec), further elaborating upon the Sikh diaspora contributing to its home country and the world by the production and reproduction of a transnational cultural phenomenon. The paper takes as case study the diasporic identity of Amrita Sher-Gil to lay claim to be among the precursors of the transnational, global and cultural exchange of art, as well as the pioneers of Modern Art in India. It would be argued that Sher-Gil's art as artistic contribution to India and the world underscores that diaspora is that aspect of culture which instead of being essentialised, should be understood as a heteroglossic concept or inculcated as something dynamic or adaptive.

### Keywords:

diaspora, heteroglossic, transnational, aesthetic, polyphony, humanism

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"Art, it is my conviction, must be connected with the soil if it is to be vital"

– Amrita Sher-Gil<sup>1</sup>

If a nation is an entity on the lines of being a macrocosm of the world, 'diaspora' could be considered as a space of dispersal manifesting microscopic consciousness of a culture and its people. Mobility and displacement become the machinery of the engine called diaspora, where "movement is one of the central resources for social description" (Peters 18). The interconnectedness between the world and nation is one of the significant ways to underline what diaspora is, as it provides the essential link between distances and destinations.

But first it is important to enquire about 'diaspora' as an independent entity, as an idea and its validity in a world of displaced populations. Some of the obvious questions that emerge at this juncture pertain to consider whether a diasporic population, that is, the

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<sup>1</sup> The artist is quoted to have said in 1936: "Art, it is my conviction, must be connected to the soil if it is to be vital" (Singh 45). The 'connection to the soil' could directly mean to define what the word diaspora conveys; however, Sher-Gil's aesthetic confirms a more subtle 'connection' as in being site(s) of tensions, distances, displacements and a continuous nomadic consciousness which comes to define her affiliation with the 'soil'.

mass of separated groups of common cultural or national origin, can be termed to constitute a community. Else, does a group of people demand to have a greater contact or a more profound interaction among each other, in order to be called a community? Moreover, could the displacement and distancing constituted and faced by a diaspora lead to a potential disintegration of a community?

Focussing first on the possibility of a diasporic community, with respect to one of the female pioneers of modern art in India, Amrita Sher-Gil envisages an individual artist as representing a diasporic consciousness. Thus, although she isn't directly situated in the hub of the circles of Sikhs or Indians living abroad and is not self-consciously aware of her diaspora identity, Amrita presents an interesting case-study to critically reflect upon the scope and domain of diaspora studies. But what after all are those intertwining mechanisms that made her represent diasporic consciousness? As we read about the biographical details of Amrita Sher-Gil, we find that it is primarily down to her art, her language—being an artist who is multilingual—the exposure to travelling to and fro to more countries than the host and home, as well as her modern outlook and beliefs. Secondly, there is a cross-cultural habitation in Sher-Gil as she represents a diaspora which gets problematized as “a processual configuration of historically given elements—including race, culture, class, gender, and sexuality—different combinations of which may be featured in different conjectures” (Clifford 46).

These ‘combinations’ provide space for a possible development of a simultaneous consciousness that allows the ‘artist’ in Sher-Gil to harbour sensitively within herself a dialogic capacity to engage with her surroundings. Borrowing here from the idea of Edward Said's reference to music within its contrapuntality—though applied to ‘exiles’—helps to understand the ‘diaspora’ of Amrita Sher-Gil's conscious choice to live mostly within diversity: Seeing “the entire world as a foreign land” makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, and awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal ... For an exile, habits of life, expression of activity in the new environment inevitably occurs against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. (Said 1984: 171-172)

It is through her art that she challenges the audience, reader and viewer/critic to re-evaluate the narrowly defined cultural paradigms through which the diasporic texts are apprehended. How then the art of Amrita Sher-Gil should be approached given the culturally and historically diverse background in which she is rooted. The response to this question lies in the consideration that there is no absolute position which defines or evaluates Sher-Gil's process of expression. This could be understood as a deliberate *modus operandi* she employs in her art. The sociocultural implications of the diasporic experience of the artist could be seen in the light of Stuart Hall's idea of cultural identity as “a ‘production’ which is never complete” (222). In his seminal article, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Hall writes against essentialist and decontextualized notions of identity:

Cultural identity ... is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past .... Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past . . . identities are the names we give to the different ways we are

positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (225). As Hall notes, cultural identity signals a positioning between “the narratives of the past” (which are themselves multiple and hybrid) and the realities or exigencies of the present.

By bringing to view Amrita Sher-Gil’s oeuvre in its ‘contextual, processual, and transformative networks’ of identity formation, we find a diasporic vision consciously or implicitly challenging static and totalizing definitions of cultural identity. In other words, diasporic art, like diasporic cultures, signals inherently cross-cultural networks of production, which in turn give rise to a comparative cultural, artistic, and theoretical framework. To put her life in the context of the times, one could underline the transnational diasporic consciousness functioning in Sher-Gil’s artistic expression. Her literary recordings too present the same dilemma and inherent contradictions rife in her art: “Modern art has led me to the comprehension and appreciation of Indian painting and sculpture. It seems paradoxical, but I know for certain that had we not come away to Europe, I should perhaps never have realized that a fresco from Ajanta ... is worth more than a whole Renaissance!” (Sher-Gil in Dalmia 43).

Whereas on the one hand, South Asian diaspora is generally seen to “form tight-knit cultural, ethnic and, most intrinsically, religious enclaves with strong social structures, traditional practices, and endogamous relations which help preserve a deeply rooted sense of community” (Pirbhai 389), Amrita Sher-Gil’s case must also be considered to represent diasporic consciousness albeit a more dynamic one.

### **A Case for Amrita**

Her case is peculiar and provides a distinct dimension to the diasporic consciousness as her art does not get essentialized in any sense. Born to mixed-race parents, her life spent in different places in varying degrees doesn’t allow her to be one among the generations of an exclusive nation. Her art too symbolizes this. However, for the sake of identity, I would argue that Amrita Sher-Gil belongs to an India of her own understanding. She finds an India of her own making; letting her perceive it with a vision and express it in her homecoming, to place(s) she feels she belongs.

But it is this peculiarity of her character that defines the term ‘diaspora’ for me. Like other diasporic artists and writers, Sher-Gil shifts between multiple points of reference; in

her case, these include her Punjabi-European heritage, her locational place of birth, and her immigrant status in France or Italy. All of which effected in the making of her outlook an attitude that comes to define her modernist consciousness while returning to and getting situated in India. To this end, there was always a ‘third destination’ with Sher-Gil to take refuge in, to learn from, to develop her artistic expression, and despite the fact, to travel to take her to a homecoming.

This paper thus is an attempt to understand the problematics of the ways in which the diaspora artist engages with cultural reality. I would like to argue that it is impossible to understand the artist’s worldview without contextualising it within the wider diasporic consciousness which entails an experience not only in terms of socio-historical movements but as dynamic cultural process. If this is so, there is always an existential concern on the part of the diaspora artist to represent her hybrid identity.

In an effort to overview the periods of her artistic life, and to contextualize the art in terms of diasporic consciousness, it would be argued that the modernity of Amrita Sher-

Gil's works shall be critically defined in terms of its key features. In order to do so, I would like to visit some of her art works, covering the early, middle and later periods. Doing so, it is hoped to situate Indian diaspora, represented here by Amrita Sher-Gil, as a 'heteroglossic' entity<sup>2</sup>, an anti-essentialist phenomenon. In Amrita Sher-Gil's art, the heteroglossic, pluralistic and democratic voices express 'other' languages in terms of her subject matter, independent use of colour and especially her quest to materialize the emergence of diverse elements of social space that she traversed.

Studying Sher-Gil's paintings within the timeline of her art makes me reflect on the Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia as it allows well to describe the structure and polyphonic matter of her works.

Taken primarily from the field of literary criticism, Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as "another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (Bakhtin 324). Although applied by Bakhtin primarily within the realm of literature, the term helps to define the way in which diverse languages—and extending here to the realm of painting, various images of the visual arts—draws distinct frames and bearing numerous possible meanings, leading in innumerable directions or visual spaces. This ensures the eventual meaning to remain uncertain and contested.

Equating Bakhtin's idea of utterance, where the opposition between unitary language and heteroglossia plays out, with the artist's image we can say that Amrita Sher-Gil's heteroglossic utterance in her paintings as a whole could be defined as the "process of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification" (Bakhtin 272). How do you define Amrita Sher-Gil's modernity in terms of her being European, Indian, Intertextual or a Feminist among other entities? Her art evokes a diasporic identity that defies any singularly identifiable characteristic. Her voice eventually comes out as a unique blend of an increasingly heteroglossic artistic identity, the architectonics of which reveal an evolution of conceptual signification of a modernist sensibility. Seen as a whole, the various movements of her art represent the constituent parts which must be studied in unison, and not separately.

If studied architectonically, as opposed to an aggregative and architectural form of structural organization, Amrita Sher-Gil's work reveals the heteroglossic vein, wherein looking at her art is to avoid looking at it as a monoglossic or a single ideological and authoritative work. In this sense, Sher-Gil's art is seen as a pre-cursor of the democratization and pluralisation of meaning, interrelatedness, and intertextuality within culture (as for instance bearing strong influence of the Bengal school of painting). The contribution of her diasporic consciousness in this way to India and the world remains unparalleled. In this light, I begin to focus primarily on the body of Amrita's works, from the perspective of showing a continuity of a movement within the context of resisting essentiality within her art.

## A Journey through Art

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<sup>2</sup> Russian philosopher and thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia which originated in his work, "Discourse in the Novel". Looking at a work of art, a novel for instance is to avoid looking at it as a monoglossic authoritative work. It emphasizes the democratization and pluralisation of meaning, hybridity and intertextuality of culture in languages. Bakhtin referred to the authoritative meaning as centripetal, and to heterology as centrifugal.

If there is one thing noticeable in the oeuvre of Amrita's art it would be prolificity. If we take a cursory look at the range of her work painted during her short and curtailed life, it indicates the above mentioned heteroglossic phenomenon in terms of expressing a multivocality rather than a unitary voice.

It is pertinent to view Amrita's work in terms of movements in her career. Although it is not possible to provide context to each work of hers, it would make sense to begin viewing selected paintings of the artist. At first, it is the early period of Amrita Sher-Gil which constitutes the education received in the form of European art borrowing from the rich colours of the Post-Impressionists. The first voice in the oeuvre of her heteroglossic art is of her own self. As we observe many of her self-portraits during the time, Amrita consciously assumes both the position of the artist and the subject.

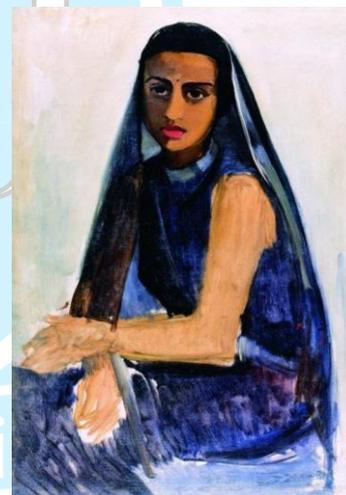
If anything we see a reflection of a split consciousness in her early work, with the Cubist inspired backgrounds, attempting to capture some abstract expression at the same time. From her mixed parentage to the opportunity Amrita gets to receive training as painter, we observe in her work the expression of more voices than one. Even in the context of her education in terms of Literature, the modernist writers Amrita Sher-Gil's admired reveal a lot about her own dialogic and polyphonic art. A great admirer of the Hungarian poet, Endre Ady, Sher-Gil's reading of Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Marcel Proust and others attests to her own heteroglossic expression and outlook (Sikh-heritage.co.uk).

Painted in 1931, a self-portrait with red flower depicts an integration of elements to be seen in her later works too; for instance in 'Self Portrait in Blue Saree' (1937). These works present her self-consciousness of growing up as an artist as well as situating herself as a modern woman. Amrita could slip from a western outfit into a traditional saree; from a 'bohemian' into a distinctly domestic presence.



Untitled. Self-Portrait (1931)

Courtesy Sotheby's.com



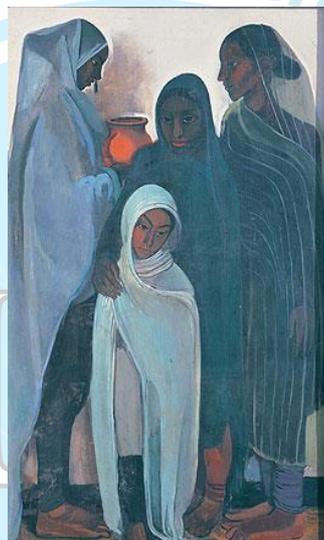
Self Portrait in Blue Sari (1937)

Courtesy Curator.com

In the words of art historian, Rakhee Balaram, "... these portraits demonstrate Sher-Gil evolving from girl to woman to artist as she explored a sensuality that ranged from the heavy-handed to the subtle" (Balaram 00:13:15 – 00:13:25).

The Middle period of her career—during her intermittent stays in India—underlines the transition from the Occidental to Oriental sensibility; or shall we remark this period more as a phase to capture an artistic conflict. Expressing about her Eastern roots she proclaimed, “Europe belongs to Picasso, Matisse and many others, India belongs only to me” (Sikh-heritage.co.uk). However, instead of splitting from Europe, Amrita’s art during this period could be understood more as a fusion between the two cultural landscapes. Her humanistic vision derives from the Western thinking which allows her aesthetic expression to relate to her Indian roots. The want of vivid colour in Europe, Amrita fulfils in India.

She paints at first a large number of portraits, but is soon engrossed by what is even seen as a sentimental and romantic depiction of the poor in India. Among her works are found people’s stances captured in a melancholy highlighted through the presentation of large, sad eyes and oblong faces, as for instance in ‘Mother India’ (1935), and ‘The Three Sisters’ (1937). During this period, in ‘Man in White’ (1935), one of her most popular works, Amrita uses the ‘diagonal structure’ and a flat style in terms of geometry and shape, much reminiscent of Gaughin; also seen in ‘Hill Men’ (1935) and ‘Hill Women’ (1935).



Hill Women (1935), Oil on Canvas (Courtesy WikiArt)

In the later period of her oeuvre, Amrita Sher-Gil is particularly seen undertaking extensive journeys to diverse parts of India. Immensely impressed by the aesthetic ethos of miniatures, sculptures and cultural dance performances, her mind evolved to harbour more distinct voices that represent Indian aesthetics. When she visited Ajanta and Elora, the experience was nothing short of a revelation to her. She came in contact with art forms which, in their collective heteroglossic spirit, added to her entire artistic conceptualization of perceiving objects and subjects.

Amrita could now sense beauty in the most pedestrian forms of humanity. She once put it to Karl Khandalwala, “How dismal to be completely misunderstood, when at long last I am learning restraint and discrimination and achieving the subtlety my work has till recently so glaringly lacked” (Sher-Gil in Dalmia 169). During the tours, she painted ‘Fruit Vendors’ (1937), a clear product of the visual impact of the people and landscape of Kerala on her. In this painting, Amrita Sher-Gil captures the polyphonic voices of the subjects – dark-complexioned characters, white garments and the emerald-green background; each element challenging the supremacy of the other.

Similarly, Ajanta cave art had a significant influence on her images at work. Geeta Kapur has stated that it is possible that she was drawn to Buddhist art and especially Ajanta for the way in which it transfigures Buddhist humanism into a sublime aesthetic (Grewal, 00:24:00 – 00:24:27). The dignity that Sher-Gil's figures now acquire comes from an understanding of a fine balance between the parts and the whole. As Kapur elaborates further, the mode of stylization also becomes a mode of interpreting a given subject which constitutes the content of the work (Grewal, 00:24:40 – 00:24:50). This poise of aesthetic interaction is visible in some of her finest paintings from 1937 such as 'The Bride's Toilet', 'The Brahmacharis', as well as in 'South Indian Villagers going to the Market'.

One notices Amrita Sher-Gil's art as a continuous and simultaneous evolution towards a multivocality of simultaneously positioned selves. Beginning from a highly personal self, Amrita's subjects from this period belong directly to a specific social context, and yet theirs is an appeal of universal humanity, found as well in the subtle harmony of colours. Now when she returns to Hungary briefly in 1938 and attempts to capture the European landscape, her expression carries a balance between emotionality and restraint, form and content, and tradition and modernity, as observed in 'Hungarian Market Scene' (1938). Moreover, during the final years of her life, Amrita Sher-Gil exhibits the sum of diverse parts in a harmonious heteroglossic vein:



Ancient Story Teller (1940)

Courtesy Google Arts & Culture



The Haldi Grinders (1940)

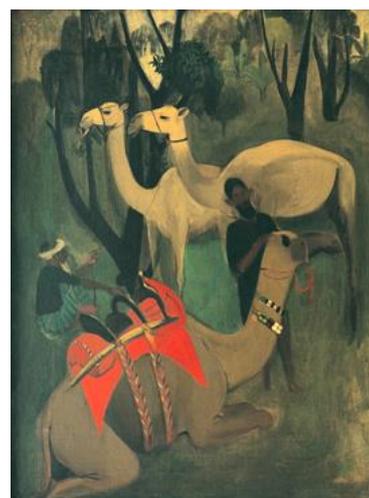
Courtesy Google Arts & Culture

In the end, Sher-Gil's oeuvre is completed with the development of one significant element, that is, the consciousness regarding her ecological surroundings in terms of the environment and life-forms such as animals. The outlook of the artist keeps getting broader, allowing her canvas a pluralistic voice which is at the heart of her diasporic identity.



Elephant Promenade (1940)

Courtesy Google Arts & Culture



Camels (1941)

Courtesy Google Arts & Culture

Thus, in a short time, having undergone an intense emotional experience during the paintings of what is known as her 'South Indian Trilogy', Amrita Sher-Gil attempts to blend myriad presences and positions available in the social fabric of India with a unique sensibility of a voice she had brought in through her diasporic consciousness.

### **Vision of the artist**

In order to attempt and understand Amrita Sher-Gil's art one requires to delve into the philosophical significance of diaspora and, within its perspective, contextualize the heteroglossic, intertextual, transnational consciousness present in the diaspora of Amrita Sher-Gil, representing her art at the threshold of a distinct modernist voice. When Amrita says that art must be connected to the soil, it shall be perceived as an artist's philosophical exploration of culture, identity and nation.

The philosophical ramifications of Indian diaspora result in connecting the entire world together. A diaspora existence is unique in its ability to live or co-exist within several communities simultaneously (as globally dispersed yet collectively identified ethnic groups). This interaction with the wider social norms leads to a self-conscious questioning of previously held beliefs.

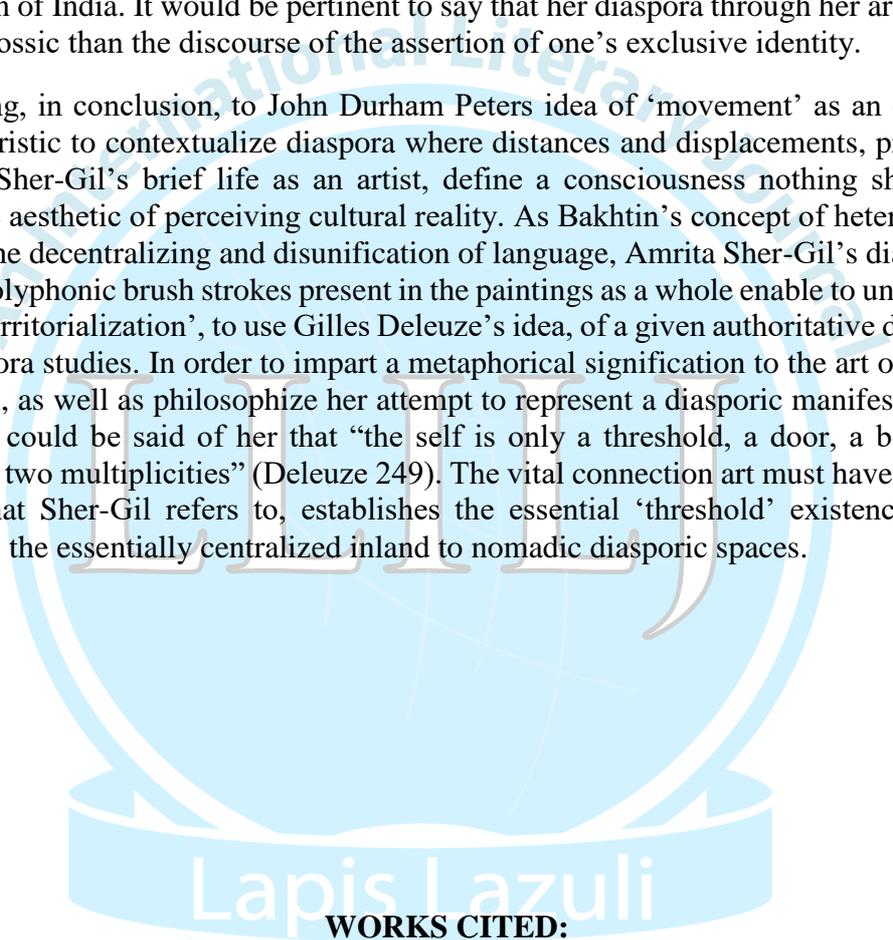
In this paper, I have attempted to invest critical attention in Indian diaspora as a "mode of cultural production" (Vertovec 278), further elaborating upon the Sikh diaspora contributing to its home country and the world by the production and reproduction of a transnational cultural phenomenon. The diasporic identity of Amrita Sher-Gil lays claim to be among the precursors of the transnational, global and cultural exchange of art, as well as the pioneers of Modern Art in India along with the Bengal Renaissance. It has been argued, in the light of Sher-Gil's oeuvre, that Indian diaspora could be seen as an anti-essentialist phenomenon. It cannot be seen as 'diaspora' used as a term for what has been called as deterritorialised, decentred, postmodern or postcolonial (Clifford 1994). Sher-Gil's art as artistic contribution to India and the world underscores that diaspora is that aspect of culture which instead of being essentialised

or an unchanging norm, should be understood or inculcated as something dynamic or adaptive.

Having applied Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia, we could infer that art too is inherently dialogic. The medium may be different but the artist and the viewer are able to connect. Sher-Gil's art manifests the quality to interpolate various subjects and to interconnect different social paradigms. Amrita challenges the stylistic unity in art by first, physically being in different places; hence, not getting confined to a single space; second, by artistically painting various subjects of varied languages or voices, to represent polyphony in society. To her credit, Amrita thus represents the desire to experience the others' means of looking at the world, thus, allowing various key cultural voices to speak within her works – without any one voice given full authority over the other.

In the end, Sher-Gil's oeuvre becomes a polyphonic, multi-voiced work by giving each voice a position and perspective, and through it all, she pursues a more truthful, dialogic depiction of India. It would be pertinent to say that her diaspora through her art is more heteroglossic than the discourse of the assertion of one's exclusive identity.

Returning, in conclusion, to John Durham Peters idea of 'movement' as an essential characteristic to contextualize diaspora where distances and displacements, present in Amrita Sher-Gil's brief life as an artist, define a consciousness nothing short of a nomadic aesthetic of perceiving cultural reality. As Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia allows the decentralizing and disunification of language, Amrita Sher-Gil's dialogic or rather polyphonic brush strokes present in the paintings as a whole enable to understand the 'deterritorialization', to use Gilles Deleuze's idea, of a given authoritative discourse of diaspora studies. In order to impart a metaphorical signification to the art of Amrita Sher-Gil, as well as philosophize her attempt to represent a diasporic manifestation of India, it could be said of her that "the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities" (Deleuze 249). The vital connection art must have with the artist, that Sher-Gil refers to, establishes the essential 'threshold' existence which uncloses the essentially centralized inland to nomadic diasporic spaces.



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**BIO-NOTE**

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