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VISUAL SYMBOLISM TO SELF-EXPRESSION: A COMPARATIVE SEMIOTIC STUDY OF AMRITA SHERGIL AND FRIDA KAHLO

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Abstract

Women artists have contributed immensely in reinventing visual discourses in modern art through challenging conventional representations of feminine identity and culture. This study seeks to examine identity, gender, and emotionality in Amrita SherGil's paintings Three Girls (1935) and Bride's Toilet (1937) as well as Frida Kahlo's paintings The Two Fridas (1939) and The Broken Column (1944) using comparative semiotic method. The objective of this study was to examine the symbolic visual elements in selected paintings that represent the meanings of women experiences and cultures. The research problem is based on the fact that there has been very little comparative semiotic analysis done on the works of Amrita SherGil and Frida Kahlo despite their contribution to the field of feminist visual discourse. The study employed a qualitative research methodology using Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotic model to analyze four selected paintings. In conclusion, the results show that SherGil symbolically captured the experience of women and restraint of emotions while Kahlo explicitly portrayed pain and identity conflicts through her autobiographical works. The research makes a contribution to comparative art studies in terms of how women artists convert their identities, gender roles, cultural experience, and emotions into visual symbolism to self-expression. The results show that the artists have converted the experiences of women into symbolic narratives, making a significant contribution to feminist analysis of modern art.

Keywords: *Feminist Discourse, Gender Representation, Identity, Semiotics, Visual Symbolism*

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1. Introduction

Art has always been used as a tool to express identity, culture, and emotions. With regards to modern art, it can be stated that women artists were significant figures in criticizing traditional forms of art by providing new insights based on personal and social experiences. According to feminist art historians, women artists would create a different form of visual language, which would challenge the patriarchal views and provide new insights into the subjective position of females (Pollock, 2003). From this perspective, the paintings of Amrita SherGil and Frida Kahlo are significant in global art history because of their themes.

Amrita SherGil (1913 – 1941) is one of the most prominent artists of modern Indian art. Amrita grew up in Budapest where her father was an Indian and her mother was from Hungary. This multi-ethnic upbringing was a significant influence on her artistic style (Britannica, 2026). In France, she received her art education at the École des Beaux-Arts school where she was exposed to modernist European painters including Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin. When Amrita came back to India in the 1930s, she became more concerned with the Indian subjects, specifically with the rural women and their lives. Her paintings were the mixture of the techniques of European modernists and Indian aesthetics inspired by the Ajanta murals and native Indian practices (Priyanka, 2022). Paintings like Three Girls and Bride's Toilet show women in an emotional, introspective, and realistic manner. According to researchers, the art of Amrita defies not only the colonial aesthetic standards but also the patriarchal representation of women by portraying them as introspective beings (Teje, 2026).

Likewise, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) is known throughout the world for her symbolic and auto biographical paintings. Born in Mexico City, Kahlo's life experiences played an important role in her artistic creation since she suffered greatly from the physical pain brought by a bus accident that affected her life for many years. She often used the concepts of identity, trauma, gender and culture in her art via self-portraiture and symbolism in her paintings like The Two Fridas and The Broken Column that illustrate emotional struggles and bodily pain.

Although SherGil and Kahlo come from different cultures, their artistic visions of women's issues are similar because they create their images based on experiences and use symbolism and emotions to make statements about social problems. Thus, both artists significantly contributed to the development of feminist modern art through their symbolic representations.

The current study is important because it adds value to comparative art analysis using the theory of Peirce's semiotics for the examination of the works of Amrita SherGil and Frida Kahlo. It shows how women artists symbolize their identity, gender, cultural experience and emotions in their art and thus enrich feminist visual discourse.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

In this study, the visual narratives created by Amrita SherGil and Frida Kahlo regarding the theme of identity, gender, and cultural experience in the selected artworks will be considered. The study uses the semiotic method proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce and is focused on the analysis of visual signs and symbols which create meaning in the artwork of both artists. Additionally, this study aims at comparing the approaches of the two artists regarding the visual representation of women's experiences and emotional reality. At last, this study fills the gap in semiotic comparative scholarship regarding Amrita SherGil and Frida Kahlo and their works.

1.2. Theoretical Background

This study is based on the semiotic approach of Charles Sanders Peirce and feminist art criticism. The theory developed by Peirce includes a triad (representamen, object, interpretant), which describes the process of the creation of meanings and therefore it is useful in the analysis of symbolism of visual art. Semiotics helps to understand the artworks as the system of signs which communicate cultural and emotional meanings (Lekomtsev, 2019). On top of that, feminist art theory highlights how women artists resist patriarchal representation and create visual narratives connected to gender and identity issues.

1.3. Objectives of Research

1. To explore the portrayal of identity, gender and cultural experience through the selected paintings by Amrita SherGil and Frida Kahlo.

2. To discuss the use of visual signs and symbols in order to convey emotions and socio cultural meanings through semiotics.

1.4. Research Questions

1. What are the portrayal of identity, gender and cultural experience in the selected paintings by Amrita SherGil and Frida Kahlo?

2. How do visual signs and symbols create meaning in the selected works through semiotics?

2. Literature Review

Semiotics is the science dealing with signs and their interpretation as means of conveying meaning in languages and cultural symbols. In visual art, semiotic approach allows exploring how artists deliver their messages using signs and symbols, colors, composition, gestures and images. According to the theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, meaning is created through the interaction of representamen, object and interpretant that constitute a triadic model of semiotics. Representamen is a visible sign, object stands for the idea that the sign symbolizes, and interpretant stands for the meaning created by the viewer of the painting (Lekomtsev, 2019).

Furthermore, according to Curtin (2008), semiotics is a technique to study how visual images and material objects acquire meaning by means of complex interaction between the observer, artwork, and the social cultural environment. According to him, the meaning cannot be assumed to exist in an image, rather it is dependent on cultural conventions and the observer's interpretation. In his discussion of semiotics, in particular of Peirce's semiotic system, Curtin (2008) talks about the significance of such components as sign, object, and interpretant, and he also discusses types of signs, namely icons, indexes, and symbols. His discussion reveals how various layers of meaning can be conveyed through an artwork depending on cultural interpretation of signs. The presented approach is important for the analysis of paintings because visual elements such as figures, gestures, colors, objects can function as signs conveying meanings other than the literal ones.

According to Somov (2005), the analysis of visual art should take into account a number of semiotic aspects, such as the presence of various semiotic units, signs, representamens, and perceptual signs within the artwork itself. In this regard, Somov identifies different types of signs used by artists. For example, there are signs, which represent objects directly, as well as connotational sign formations, which create additional meanings apart from their direct representations. Therefore, according to the author, when analyzing a visual artwork, one should not only pay attention to what is visible, but also to what is associated with the visual elements present within the picture and what cultural meaning is generated due to the relationships between these elements. As one can see, the emphasis made by the both painters SherGil and Frida on the importance of connotation is quite relevant for the interpretation

of paintings, where colors, figures, gestures, objects, and their composition can convey messages beyond the literal meanings.

Many researchers have applied semiotic theory to the visual arts and cultural representation. For instance, Habib & Hameed (2025), in their research paper titled "Interpreting Trauma and Technology: A Saussurean Analysis of Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud Paintings Strange Fruit and Youth, Beauty and Dreams", have analyzed the ways in which visual signs create meanings connected with trauma, modernity, and identity. As seen from the above, semiotic theories can be successfully used for revealing hidden symbolic and psychological messages conveyed through paintings.

The majority of literature on Amrita SherGil is devoted to feminism, cultural identity, and hybridization. According to Priyanka (2022), SherGil was mixing European modernist style and Indian artistic tradition in order to depict rural women in a realistic manner. Similarly, according to Teje (2026), SherGil creates portraits of contemplative woman instead of decorative one. There are some recent studies that also talk about gaze, agency, and emotions in SherGil's art (Rayhan, 2024). At the same time, Frida Kahlo is mostly associated with autobiographical symbolism, corporeal pain, and identity issues. Piechura (2021) conducted research on surreal symbolism and cultural identity in Frida Kahlo's paintings.

On the contrary, research on Frida Kahlo usually concentrates on autobiographical symbols, body pain, and cultural identity. In the same vein, Piechura (2021) discussed surreal symbols and indigenous identity in Kahlo's self-portraits, elaborating on how she translated her personal traumas into symbolic visual narratives. The artist often used exposed human anatomy, broken forms, and symbols of pain and femininity. Her work, therefore, is known to be an important contribution to the field of feminist visual discourse and symbolic art.

Themes like identity, trauma, gender, emotional experiences, and resistance to patriarchal representation are common to the reviewed literature. Women are depicted by both SherGil and Kahlo as active characters with psychological and emotional depth. While SherGil highlighted the shared experience and emotional repression of women in Indian society, Kahlo depicted personal traumas, body pain, and duality of culture. Even though previous literature effectively discusses symbolism and feminist representation in their paintings, there is a gap in comparative analysis of these two artists.

In addition, previous literature shows that semiotics has been a useful methodology to comprehend the meaning behind symbols in visual art. Literature on the topic of trauma, identity, and cultural representation indicates that the works of art function as sign systems which communicate ideologies and emotions (Habib & Hameed, 2025). Yet, very few pieces of literature analyze Peirce’s triadic theory in connection to the selected paintings of SherGil and Kahlo.

Thus, there is a gap in comparative semiotic literature of these two artists. Previous literature does not explore how representamen, object, and interpretant work together in these artists' paintings in the process of construction of meanings based on gender, identity, and culture. This study aims at filling this gap by doing comparative semiotics of SherGil and Kahlo's paintings.

3. Research Design and Methodology

For this study, I propose to use a qualitative research design that will be used to determine the symbolic meanings and visual narrative in selected paintings by Amrita SherGil and Frida Kahlo. Qualitative research design is an ideal choice in this situation because this research focuses on interpretation and meaning rather than numbers (Creswell, 2014). The research will be done using a comparative visual analysis in order to determine similarities and differences in terms of the

representation of identity, gender, and emotions in the paintings that have been selected. The study will be grounded on a triadic semiotic framework proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce where the representamen, object, and interpretant play central roles. Four paintings have been purposively selected for this analysis. They are Three Girls (1935), Bride's Toilet (1937) by Sher-Gil and The Two Fridas (1939) and The Broken Column (1944) by Kahlo. These four paintings have been selected because of their themes that focus on women identity, emotion and symbolism. Data for the research includes images of paintings and other scholarly sources such as journal articles and museum archives, among others. They have been chosen for the strong depiction of issues relating to female identity, emotional conflict, and symbolism. Data sources are digital images of paintings and peer-reviewed journals and other academic resources such as museum databases. The visual signs, symbolism, gestures, color harmonies, and composition in the paintings will be analyzed. The semiotic analysis aims to analyze how visual imagery represents meanings culturally and psychologically pertaining to women's experiences and identity (Rose, 2016).

Semiotic Analysis of *Three Girls* (1935)



Representamen

According to Pierce's theory, in the painting Three Girls, the representamen are female figures, usual clothes of the Indians, dull earthy colors, low glances, static body pose with same silent internal state and simplified composition with mainly four colors that include brown, orange, red and green. These signs work together to convey the feelings of silence, repressed emotions and introspection. Lack of decorations directs focus on emotions and symbolism rather than beauty (Priyanka, 2022).

Object

In this case, the object is the realities of life and emotional situation of women in colonial Indian society. The female figures serve as symbols of suppressed female identity, emotional isolation and silent suffering as a result of the patriarchal system. The paintings present women as psychologically heavy subjects rather than beautiful idealized ones. As Rayhan (2024) explains, the paintings of SherGil subvert the traditional masculine representations by highlighting the female agency and introspection.

Interpretant

The interpretant created in this painting inspires people to think about the emotional and social situation of women in traditional Indian society. Silent communication between the girls signifies the

emotional distance between them, which implies isolation in the collective existence. The painting reflects the traditional Indian society, where women is bound and not liked on being open or bold.

Semiotic Analysis of *Bride's Toilet* (1937)



Representamen

The representamen of the painting Bride's Toilet are the bride figure, surrounded by four women, traditional dress, lowered gaze without any facial expression, the traditional terra cotta utensils used in India, the whole painting is created using only a few colors tones which include olive green, muted red and brown tones, modest body language of the characters in the painting. These visual elements make up a meditative mood rather than an upbeat depiction of marriage (Priyanka, 2022).

Object

The object depicted in the painting pertains to marriage as a societal phenomenon and how marriage affects the female identity in India. The image of the bride depicts transition, uncertainty and emotional restraint that comes with being a woman in the traditional society. The images of other women around the bride depict the involvement of all members of society in patriarchal ritualistic practices. According to Teje (2026), Sher-Gil makes a critique on the idea of traditional femininity by emphasizing women's internal psychology.

Interpretant

The interpretant created in the painting encourages spectators to reflect on the role of culture in molding emotions and social interactions of women. The emotionless character of the bride reflects the struggle between personal identity and societal expectations. By making use of symbols, SherGil has managed to turn a domestic setting into a commentary on the issue of gender.

Semiotic Analysis of *The Two Fridas* (1939)



Representamen

In the case of The Two Fridas, the representamen is made up of the two twin female figures, the strong emotions displayed on their faces, open hearts, connected vein of both figures, European-styled white dress and lace while the other figure is dressed in the Mexican-styled clothing symbolizing Frida's Mexican identity, a pair of scissors held by one figure cutting the vein, blood stain on the dress of one figure and storm clouds in the background of greys. As observed by a writer, the two Fridas in the painting are "holding hands and connected by a single vein" with one of the "European-style white lace dress and other Tehuana traditional Mexican attire" representing her heritage and societal expectations (ArtSloth, 2025, para. 4). These signs act as symbols to convey emotional split, duality, and psychological struggle. Kahlo's use of anatomical imagery creates a direct symbolic language related to pain and identity (Piechura, 2021).

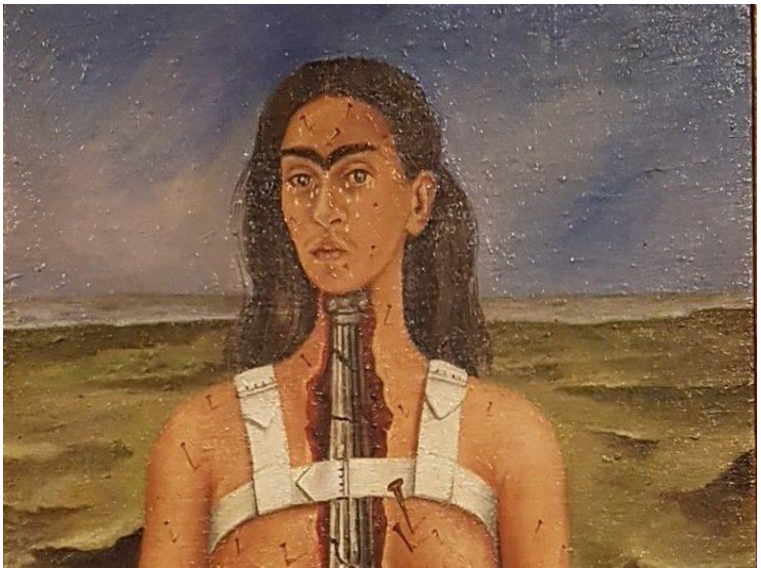
Object

The signified that is conveyed by these signs pertains to Kahlo's duality of self with regard to her being caught between her European cultural background and Mexican cultural background, and, moreover, her psychological wounds as a result of her separations from her husband. As per this painting, the signs such as repetition of motifs of blood, veins, and surgical tools in the works of Kahlo serve not only as biographical markers related to her physical sufferings but also as visual signs of psychological pain and how her physical pain was intertwined with her psychological pain (ArtSloth, 2025, para. 8). The European styled dressed individual serves as a symbol of vulnerability and emotional losses, whereas the Mexican styled dressed individual serves as a symbol of cultural ties and resilience.

Interpretant

Interpretant created using the artwork allows the audience to contemplate her personal struggles with her own identity, emotional distress, and cultural duality through the self-portraits of Kahlo. The personal pain is conveyed using universal symbolism and surreal visuals by Kahlo. This artwork breaks away from the romantic and unrealistic perception of femininity by bringing into light emotional weakness and disintegration of her mind. Using symbolic imagery, Kahlo expresses themes of strength, identity, and individuality.

Semiotic Analysis of *The Broken Column* (1944)



Representamen

In The Broken Column (1944), Kahlo uses the broken Ionic column that substitutes for her spine with flowing blood, open torso, nails, corset, tears, white drapery over the lower part of her body with some nails, and barren landscape as visual symbols that are interrelated with each other. All of these become the means to make physical pain visible through visual language. As Muller (2017) states, the corset seems to support the disintegrated body of the artist, while the broken column stresses the damage to the spine and physical imbalance.

Object

In this case, the visual symbols are linked to the experiences of physical harm, pain, medical care, and anguish that Kahlo had experienced. The broken column is symbolic of bodily weakness and insecurity, while the nails symbolize continuous pain. The corset is symbolic of medical care, physical confinement, and bodily support. Similarly, Courtney et al. (2017) link the broken column painting with the chronic back pain and disturbance of body image experienced by Kahlo.

Interpretant

The interpretant arises as a result of the viewer's interpretation of these interconnected signs. The look and pose of Kahlo contrast with her wounded body, creating an interpretant of agency and resilience rather than helplessness. According to Abhirami et al. (2024), Kahlo's experiences of emotional and physical traumas played a role in transforming her from a feminine woman to a feminist woman. Therefore, the wounded body becomes a place of identity, resistance, and expression. With the use of this semiotic system, The Broken Column turns private pain into a public discourse of pain, vulnerability, resilience, and identity.

4. Findings and Results

4.1. Findings from *Three Girls* (1935)

The semiotic analysis of Three Girls indicates that in painting this work, Amrita SherGil used subdued colors, inactive body postures, and introspective facial expressions to denote the emotions of restraint and isolation. Using the triad by Pierce, the painting is a representation of the psychological state of women in patriarchal environments in colonial India. From the analysis, it is evident that SherGil deliberately changed her approach from that of representing the beauty of women to the emotional and psychological aspects. The combination of representamen, object, and interpretant creates meaning related to silence, identity, and emotions.

4.2. Findings from *Bride's Toilet* (1937)

The interpretation of Bride's Toilet has shown that SherGil utilized ritual images and repressed emotions to portray the changeover of women to prescribed marital status within the society. The representational symbols like the stance of the bride, female individuals surrounding her and other traditional objects carried cultural meanings of expectations and repressed individuality. Results have shown that the painting highlights the criticism of patriarchy through the use of emotional complexities rather than celebrating the event of marriage. The semiotics of the connection between visual symbols and cultural meanings revealed how the marriage is a ceremony as well as a psychological experience of the individual.

4.3. Findings from *The Two Fridas* (1939)

From the analysis conducted on the painting The Two Fridas, it was evident that Frida Kahlo used duality in symbols to express emotional fragmentation and culture based identity conflict. The use of conflicting costumes, exposed hearts, and the artery connecting the two figures conveyed

psychological trauma and fragmentation of the self. The semiotics of the painting revealed that there is dual identity based on Europe and Mexico, thus showing the struggle that Frida Kahlo had with her personal and cultural identity. In addition, it became clear that the body symbolism served as a language of emotional fragility and strength.

4.4. Findings from *The Broken Column* (1944)

As was evident from the semiotic interpretation of The Broken Column, the artist Kahlo had been able to create symbolic visual narrative using signs of physical pain. The signs included the broken column, nails, corset, and the barren landscape, which all conveyed a sense of physical pain, bodily instability, and mental endurance. The semiotic analysis indicated that The Broken Column did not conform to the traditional portrayal of the female body, where vulnerability was not treated as an acceptable theme in art. Through the process of representation of the object and its interpretation, the viewer was able to understand The Broken Column as the story of endurance amidst pain and suffering.

5. Discussion

The comparative semiotic analysis of the chosen artworks of Amrita SherGil and Frida Kahlo provides a vivid example of how both artists employed a symbolic visual language to express their identity, gender, and emotions. Despite being from different cultures, both of them defied the stereotypical portrayal of women as they depicted female subjects as complicated characters rather than passive objects (Teje, 2026; Romagna, 2023).

Thus, the study shows that SherGil's paintings mainly depict emotional experiences of Indian women as a community. The muted color palette, contemplative gestures, and restrained expressions of characters are the symbols of silence, loneliness, and restriction (Priyanka, 2022). These paintings illustrate the lives of Indian women who lived in a patriarchal environment during the colonial India era. It should be noted that Sher-Gil was known for her combination of Indian artistic traditions and European modernism in the depiction of women (Varma, 2023).

On the other hand, Kahlo's paintings place emphasis on autobiographical experience and bodily suffering by means of symbolism. Through visual symbols such as the exposure of hearts, broken anatomy, blood motifs, and medical devices, she expresses identity conflict, pain, and resilience in paintings such as The Two Fridas and The Broken Column (Piechura, 2021). Through personal trauma, Kahlo created visual symbolism that expressed both psychological and cultural struggles (Romagna, 2023).

There were also noticeable differences between the two artists in terms of their visual approaches. Whereas SherGil used subtlety in symbolism and emotional calm, Kahlo relied on explicit anatomical and surrealist symbolism. However, despite their differences in style, both artists used the female form as a basis for identity construction and emotional expression. This is why their works have made important contributions to feminist readings of modern art through rejecting the idealization of women (Abhirami et al., 2024).

Cultural context also contributed significantly to the artists' approaches to painting. The works of SherGil were inspired by the lifestyle in rural India, Ajanta murals, and real life situation of women in colonial India (Priyanka, 2022). Kahlo's art is defined by post-revolutionary Mexican identity, indigenous cultural symbols, as well as her own experience of suffering and ill health (Piechura, 2021).

The results clearly answer the research objectives by proving that the approach proposed by Peirce can help in identifying symbolic meanings of visual art pieces. The analysis showed the connection between representamen, object, and interpretant in the chosen paintings as well as

discussed how visual signs construct meanings associated with the issues of identity and gender as well as culture. Also, the comparative analysis answered the research questions by pointing out the similarities and differences in semiotic representation of women in the works of the two artists.

In general, the study shows that both artists succeeded in translating the experiences of women into symbolic stories through visual art.

6. Conclusion

The current study comparatively analyzed the selected paintings of Amrita SherGil and Frida Kahlo according to the semiotic model of Charles Sanders Peirce in order to investigate the topics of identity, gender, and emotions. It was found out that the two painters utilized their artistic abilities to symbolically convey messages about womanhood and life experience challenging the traditional stereotypes. While the paintings of Amrita SherGil were characterized by emotional restraint and the social condition of women of colonial India, the paintings of Frida Kahlo were based on the idea of personal pain, body fragmentations, and identity conflicts in the Mexican culture. In spite of the stylistic and cultural differences, both painters managed to express the experience of being a woman symbolically using the medium of painting. It was also shown that the semiotic method is a useful tool of analyzing paintings.

Future Suggestions

Further research in this topic area could include an analysis of other paintings of SherGil and Kahlo or even other female artists representing various cultures.

Ethical Consideration

All the information used in the research is derived from publicly accessible sources. This paper does not contain any visual images of works of art which were not freely accessible to everyone.

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