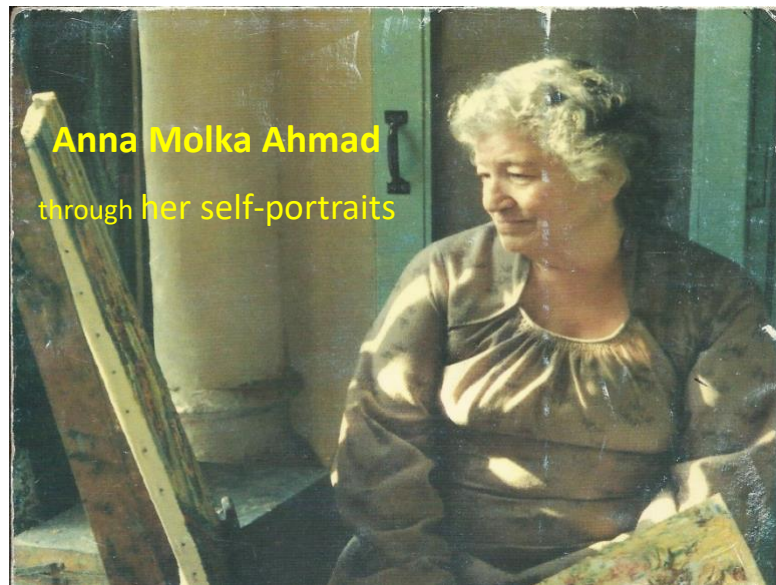


Anna Molka Ahmad through Her Self-Portraits

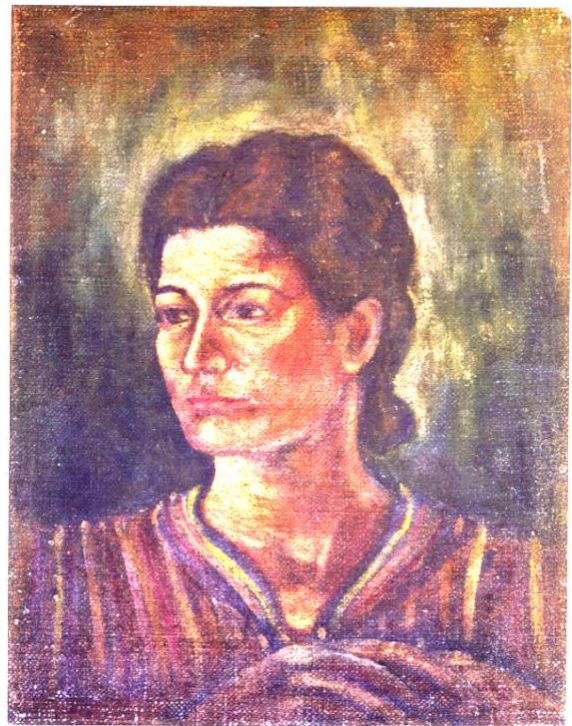
For Anna Molka Ahmad, the towering icon of the Fine Arts in Pakistan, a thorough appreciation cannot be attempted within the given short time. So, I have chosen her self-portraits, that she painted throughout her career, to talk about her development as an artist and as an educator.



Self-Portrait 1 (1939)

At this stage in London, Anna Molka had embraced Islam, was in love with Sheikh Ahmad, and firm about her idea to settle in India after marriage to propagate art. All decisions were made by a twenty-one year old.

This face with stiffened lips looking at a far-distance introduces us to a determined and iron-willed young woman. The seriousness on her face is emphasized by the white highlights as



she is looking towards that light source outside the picture frame that she believes is the brightened path of her aspirations. The somber colours and dim environment reflect a gloomy world on the brink of World War II.

Self Portrait 2. (1948)

We have Anna Molka's second in the series and first self portrait in Pakistan. It was the time when she experienced the devastating effects of the Partition: the depletion of students and staff members, the theft of academic records and paintings of the Department that she had founded in 1940 with such hard efforts.

This lady is lacking that confidence and sense of hope that we have earlier noticed in her self-portrait of student days. Her stare transmits the apprehension, nervousness and anxiety that she must have been experiencing in those days. She has worked with a finer brush but has directly applied thick colours with minimum use of oil. Here the choice of colours clearly defines a transition

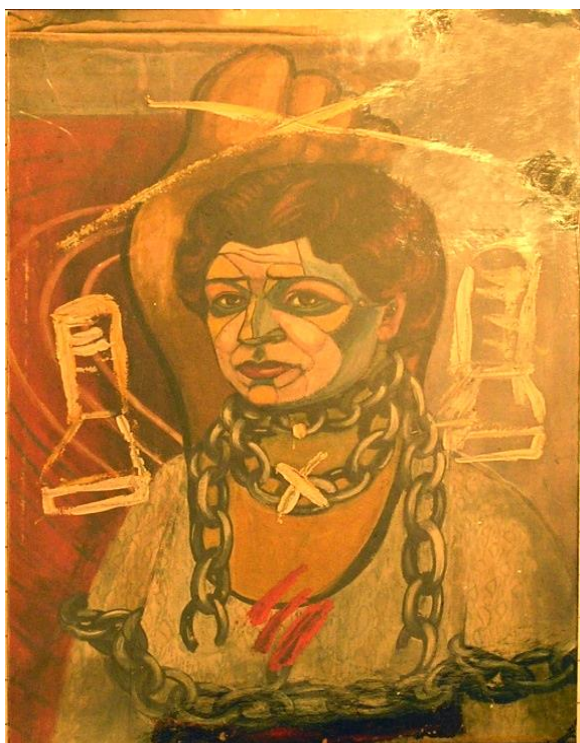
of Anna Molka's style, that is, her newly found expressionism.



Self-Portrait 3. (Divorce period, 1952.)

Her formative period of academic training continued to play a very important role in her artistic development throughout in her career. When she was going through her divorce period, she incorporated Surrealism, Symbolism and Cubism

in addition to her personal connotations in her artworks.



In this third self-portrait, the face of Anna Molka is divided into cubistic segments and her cold expression creates an air of stillness for the whole work. The **two intact chains** represent her two daughters that have become her sole responsibility and **the broken one** stands for her relationship that has been terminated. **Three stabs** on her chest embody the scars she is bearing for her loved ones: husband and the daughters. **Two graves**, one on the

right, refer to the death of her mother whom Anna Molka had left alone and betrayed. The other, on the left, indicates Anna Molka's own death and failure of her dreams. Beneath the portrait, one can see **the sole of a man's foot**. It refers to gender discrimination in a conservative society, in which a woman is suppressed by male chauvinism to be walked upon. The **two crosses** in white colour, one on the foot and another on the middle chain around the neck represent the artist's strong determination that she will not tolerate this unfairness to herself in particular and for other women in general.

Due to her economic constraints, this artwork is painted with thin application of colours on a small scaled paper. While the crimson colour used against her grave, in three stabs, on her chest, and on her silent lips, is indicative of her tortured emotions.

Self-Portrait 4 (1957, Social Adjustment Period)

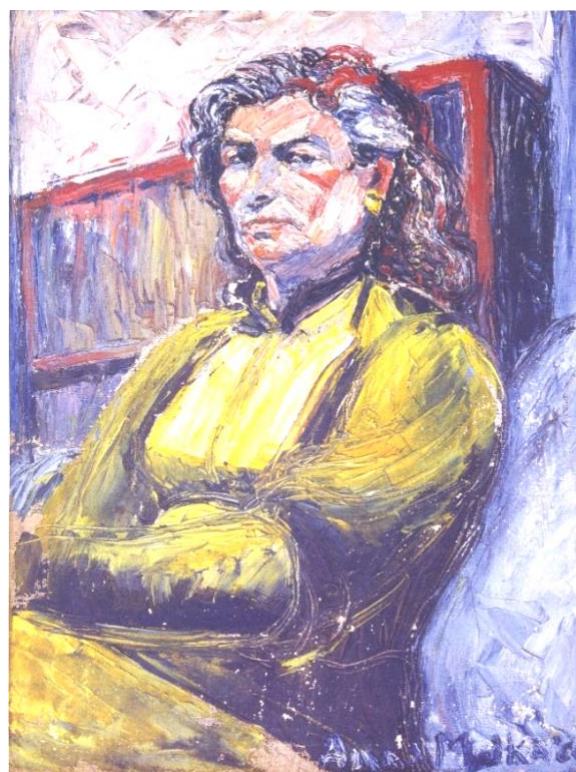
This year, at the age of forty, she painted her fourth self-portrait standing next to an easel in the verandah of her home to get relief from the hot summer months. A confident, stern-faced lady, whose face is devoid of emotions, is looking at herself and at her achievements as a single parent and as a successful administrator of the Department of Fine Arts in the University.



Her features are modulated with a fine brush while the other details are carried out with broad strokes of knife. The light on the right side of her face and shoulder is the only source that animates this work.

Self-Portrait 5 (1966, Impact of Personal Crises)

Anna Molka is painting her fifth self-portrait at the age of forty-nine in 1966. This was the time when she was still under the shock of Zarah's marriage to Colin David. Her black mood is emphasized with stern expressions as her heart was at pieces but trying to pull herself together.



The treatment of painting adheres to the influence of Cezanne in the form of using triangles and other mixed forms that constitute the face. To match the stark and severe mood, the treatment of the colour is thick and broad on the face and hair, and on the wall in the background where the shadows are made very dark.

Self-Portrait 6 (1980, The Culmination of Anna Molka's Career as an Artist)

Among all her self-portraits, this sixth one is the most romanticized and idealized. This is a personality who is still at the height of her authoritative powers at the Department and taking pleasure in devoting all her spare time to painting.

The colour strokes are short, smooth, and gently applied while the entire face is immersed in a neutralized light instead of the artist's usual play of strong light from one

direction in other portraits. The soft rounded contours of the face, highlighted grey bobbed hair, and the freshness of her green scarf worn over a blue dress correspond to her status



Self-portrait 7 (1985, The culmination of her career)

A rather heavy-handedly painted "self-portrait 7" in 1985, shows her in a sad and pensive mood. The bulk of paint is applied in a middle tone of every colour, avoiding

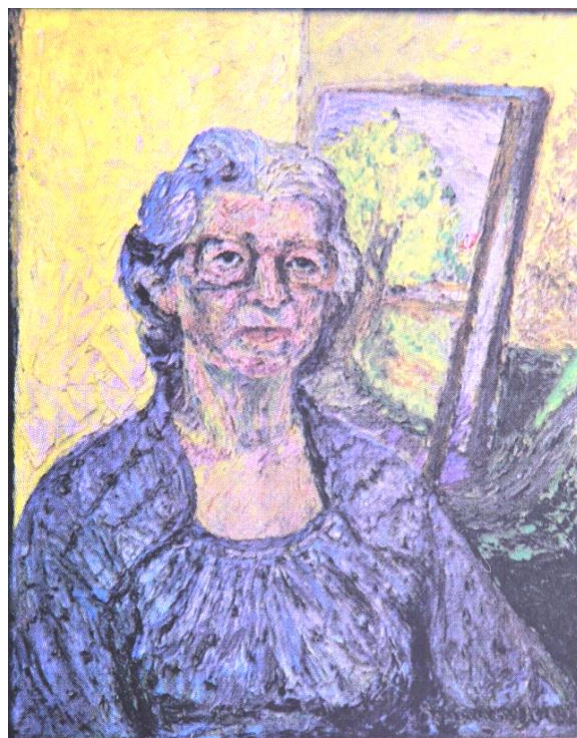
stark contrast and bright highlight.

The technique evades details of forms and gives more emphasis to the process of thinking. Her weary staring eyes, the heavy shadow on the forehead, the coarse treatment on the white overall, and formless vague hand and palette – all suggest that artist's mind and heart are not working together.



Self-portrait 8, (1988, The culmination of her career)

This work shows Anna Molka very tired and pulled down. The previous usual stern looks and the sparkle in her eyes are gone. The eye contact is avoided in this portrait that reflects her disappointment at having no strength to march on in life. She is not wearing that neck-collar and dentures advised to her for the severe pain in her neck and backbone. This can be noticed by a loose grip of her lips.



In this gloomy environment, the organization of the elements and the command on skillful drawing and painting, make this work emotionally

very powerful. It is not an easy job to paint oneself, especially, while seeking deeper reality instead of a resemblance.

Self-portrait 9 (1992, The culmination of her career)

This last “Self-Portrait” is considered a hallmark in the history of Pakistani portrait painting. While drawing and painting at the same time, Anna Molka has expressed a world of hidden connotations. She has utilized minimal colour, in a few pre-meditative sure strokes of a broad palette-knife. The wrinkled face, the hazy eyes and quiet lips do not intend to say anything and the posture too declares obliviousness to the surroundings. Here, it is the “inner reality” she is after rather than resemblance.



The death is given a symbolic form of a black shawl, now covering her whole body. The black of the death is placed against a blue sky. It conveys

mystical function of man's ultimate destiny – heaven or hell. The depiction of existence and extinction has taken away any trace of a happening in the form of grieving or dramatic gestures. It stands for the contact with the natural law of the last truth where protest is of no avail.

All her self-portraits, made at different passages of her life, provide a vista of information about the person that Anna Molka was – as an artist and as an educator.