

# **Repressed Sexuality and Flamboyant Art:**

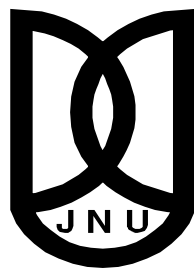
**A Psychobiographic Study of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin's  
Love Life as Represented in Fictional Works on the same**

Dissertation submitted to  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Philosophy**

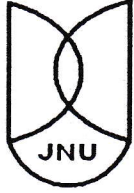
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**CERTIFICATE**

This dissertation titled “**Repressed Sexuality and Flamboyant Art: A Psychobiographic Study of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin’s Love Life as Represented in Fictional Works on the same**” submitted by Ms. Khushboo Soni, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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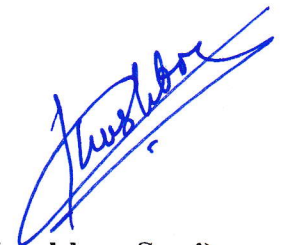
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**DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE**

This dissertation titled **“Repressed Sexuality and Flamboyant Art: A Psychobiographic Study of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin’s Love Life as Represented in Fictional works on the same”** submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.



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*For my mother for her unparalleled love and support*

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## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Becoming of a (Self Fashioned) ‘Savage’ Lover of Women and Art</b>	<b>9</b>
I. Ancestral effect	11
II. Paul Gauguin and a memory of his childhood	15
III. Mette Gad, bourgeois love, family life and all	22
IV. Becoming a savage	26
<b>Chapter 2: Vincent Van Gogh’s Search for Sublime in the Ordinary (Women and Art)</b>	<b>33</b>
I. The melancholy of dejection	35
II. No, nay, never	42
III. The confluence of the aesthetics of art and love	49
IV. Shallow compromise	59
<b>Chapter 3: A Comparative View: Van Gogh and Gauguin</b>	<b>63</b>
I. Perceptions	64
II. The commonalities and differences in the trajectory of their lives	69
III. Sexualized art and artistic sexuality	72
IV. The aesthetic appeal of the love interests	81
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>98</b>

## INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the fact that Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh are among the most celebrated and extensively researched post impressionist painters. Not only their artworks but also their unique personality and eventful and scandalous life stories remained a subject of interest for scholars belonging to both the fields of art history and psychoanalysis. There has been plenty of research done on the interesting relation which these two artists shared and how they impacted each other's life and art through their "electric arguments and utopian dreams".<sup>1</sup>

The question that now arises is that what is it that I can contribute to the existing literature already available on these two giants of art history? I am neither an art historian nor a psychoanalyst unlike most of the scholars who have written on Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh. I am a literature student and an art enthusiast. The intriguing nature of Van Gogh's and Paul Gauguin's lives has remained a source of great fascination for me. The curiosity to unravel and peep into the mind and personal lives of the artists and to have a glimpse of what their internal struggle and subconscious desires are like is what led me to the choice of my current research topic. The task to unravel a person's mind is without a doubt a difficult one and it is neither desirable nor possible to reach a final conclusion or final understanding of a human being. Although, the life stories of these painters are interesting enough to want scholars from different fields to dig into their lives from different perspective to arrive at newer understanding(s) and newer ways to interpret and understand both their art and life.

It is quite interesting to note that during 1920 to 1926, a number of psychobiographies came into being which were written from a psychoanalytic perspective without a background in psychoanalysis. As psychobiography gained recognition, authors from a variety of professions contributed their own work from alternate perspective and varying methods of analysis of the psychobiographical subject, significantly expanding psychobiography beyond the psychoanalytical perspective. Apart from the psychoanalysts and psychiatrists who wrote the first psychobiographies, there have been historians, political scientists, personality psychologists, literary critics, sociologist and anthropologists who have contributed to the growth of the field.

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<sup>1</sup> Van Gogh first uses the term "electric argument" in one of his letters to Theo explaining to him about how Paul Gauguin and himself used to discuss and argue about matters of art while they lived together in Arles for nine weeks.

Many discoveries have been done since the mid century with a number of works on these painters from psychoanalytic points of view studying both their work and life. But no research has happened focusing exclusively on the relation between the love life of these painters in connection with the paintings they painted of their lovers/ sexual partners. In my understanding, it is of extreme importance to study one's close relations and sexual behaviour to understand a person's behaviour, personality and life decisions, borrowing from Freud.

Though I would exclusively be focusing on the characters but I would also be relying on the biographies of the historical figures to understand and analyze the characters better since the characters are based on the historical figures, it is extremely important and vital to study the artists themselves in order to analyze the characters better.

Bradley Collins in the preface to his book *Van Gogh and Gauguin: Electric Arguments and Utopian Dreams*, explains why it is important and significant to study the lives of famous personalities from a psychobiographic angle in defence of the methodology of psychobiography:

By focusing on Van Gogh's and Gauguin's inner world I am counter to a strong current in contemporary art-historical thinking that regards psychobiography as the enemy of a properly historical view of artists in general and of these two in particular. But I do not see why a psychobiographical approach cannot happily coexist with the grounding of an artist's life and work in all of the dense particulars of his era. (Collins, *Van Gogh and Gauguin* xii)

In my research I take the application of the psychobiographical approach even a step further to apply it on the fictionalized personas of the actual artist figures. But following Bradley Collins's argument, I also do not see why the fictionalized characters cannot be studied using psychobiographic approach in relation with the artists, the legacy of the art that they left behind and their writings.

My thesis should be seen as an attempt to give a personal dimension to a historical interpretation of the famous figures of Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh. In my thesis I propose that Gauguin's life journey as an artist and his art is affected by his sex life and vice versa. Gauguin's changed sexual behaviour with the change in his profession from being a bourgeois Stock broker to becoming an artist and its relation to change in his sexual life from that of a bourgeois husband having sex with his wife, following all the conduct of a good husband and staying loyal to his



wife to the transformation into a seducer and lover of extremely young women is related to Gauguin's connection with his Peruvian mother Aline and his daughter also named Aline. His relation with his mother at the earlier age and his infatuated incestuous fixation on his daughter Aline in later years could be related to Paul's changed sexual behaviour in his later life.

In his novel *The Way to Paradise*, Mario Vargas Llosa has tried to weave the outrageous and unconventional life of Paul Gauguin from the point of view of Gauguin and has tried to weave his artistic journey with his internal struggle and importance of sex and art in his life which often impacted one another. He has tried to weave plausible narratives out of his autobiographical writings like *Noa Noa* and paintings to form stories about how these paintings came into being and how the women he lived with, and the way he experimented with his sexuality in a way affected the theme and the kind of works that he produced.

Llosa in the novel tries to find a connection between the increasing importance of sex in Gauguin's life with the importance of painting rose in his life. It seems that Paul's interest in sex and the desire to become bold in his sexual endeavours began at the same time as he decided to pursue paintings full time and took the bold step to leave his career as a stockbroker, his wife and children behind to live the free life of a bohemian artist.

I will use the framework of Freud's psychobiography of Leonardo Da Vinci and his Theory of Sexuality and psychoanalysis to do a psychobiographic study of the characters Van Gogh and Gauguin in my research.

*A critic's sense of limit...must come not from the fixed verities of a doctrine but from his awe at how little he can explain.* If a psychobiographer maintains such a stance, then he will not import the impression, even when making a psychological interpretation, which he feels his interpretation says all that there is to be said about the subject. He can make the connection, which may be helpful in increasing our understanding of his subject, without suggesting that the connection undermines or supersedes other level of explanation. (Anderson, J. 456)

I have begun my dissertation with a defence of the genre of Psychobiography because I do understand that there are limitations in the method of psychobiography to analyse the lines of historical figures yet I have choose to employ this framework for my research.

Even the harshest critics of psychological biography concede that the application of psychology to biography makes sense. Since comprehensive biographical studies inevitably include an analysis of the subject's personality, it is reasonable to carry out such analysis systematically and with psychological sophistication. (Anderson, J. 455)

What I have attempted to do here in my work is to base the study of these two characters on the psychobiographic study of the actual artists. In my research I have tried to reconstruct the personal lives of these two artists from the standpoint of their love interest and sexuality.

I have also included certain paintings by these painters of the women who served both as their models and lovers to draw connection between their sexual lives to their artistic journey.

Let us take the example of Freud's psychobiography of Leonardo Da Vinci where Freud tries to analyze Leonardo's life on the basis of his childhood memory. It has its own flaws as Freud tends to become reductionist in his interpretation where he tries to explain Vinci's famous art works and his sexual behaviour on the basis of a childhood memory of his past. I do understand that a single dimensional analysis cannot explain all the complex psychological dimensions of a subject's life history and also that psychological factors by themselves are not fully determinative of the subject's personality and there are other sociological, cultural and historical methods that do have their influence in the shaping up of an individual's life but there is no denying of the fact that psychological factor *does* have its impact on the shaping of an individual's life no matter however subtle and a psychoanalytical analysis in that sense can help enhance the existing knowledge about a person concerned and can give a new perspective to look at already existing literature and well known facts about the person or the text concerned.

What I want to do in my research is not new nor is the subject of my research. What do I intend to do in my research? This is the primary question. I want to do a comparative psycho biographical analysis of some crucial events of Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin's life taking into account the life journeys of the fictional Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin as portrayed in the novels *Lust for Life* and *The Way to Paradise* written by Irving Stone and Mario Vargas Llosa respectively. Vincent Van Gogh's life and art is not something which is not well researched. In fact he comes under the category of a select few who left ample resources in the forms of his letters largely written to his brother Theo and a few to Paul Gauguin expressing his fervent emotions, anxieties and fears, and it has become quite easy for his biographers to reconstruct the various events of his life and his

artistic exploration. The literature written about Van Gogh's life, trauma and art is abundant as I got to know while doing a literature review on him. Similar is the case with Paul Gauguin as he also wrote extensive letters to his friends Schuffenecker and Mette. Literature on Paul Gauguin's life and art is also extensive and well researched. In such a scenario, one might wonder what I can contribute to this mass of knowledge about these artists or what new things I can tell about them? This was the question with which I grappled for a long time while researching about these two artists. True, there has been more than sufficient research done on both these artists and their lives and there surely is some amount of literature focusing on both these artists as a unit and focusing on the interaction of these two artists when they lived for nine weeks at the yellow house in Arles, discussing, arguing, influencing each other in their ideas of art and the effect of which is pretty much evident in the kinds of paintings these two painters produced in the year 1888 to 1889. But there is no particular work which I came across which focused on the psychoanalytical journey of both these artists together starting from the beginning to the end. I am not interested in excavating facts about the historical Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin in particular but I want to focus on the fictional biographical novels written about them and to do the psychoanalytical biography of the character of Van Gogh as portrayed in *Lust for Life* by Irving Stone and of Paul Gauguin as portrayed *The Way to Paradise* by Mario Vargas Llosa. The standpoint of my research is going to be the kinds of love life both these artists had and how it affected their works.

My methodology for this research would be to closely look at my primary texts concentrating upon the love and sexual life of Van Gogh and Gauguin as portrayed by Stone and Llosa in their biographic narrative novels of these two artists and draw a correlation with their artistic behaviour and trace the subtle influence in the paintings which love and sexual behaviour/ libido has to play with one's artistic explorations. The methodological and theoretical framework would largely rely on psychobiographical study and Freud's psychoanalysis to draw connections.

Psychobiography is a field within the realm of psychology and biography that analyzes the lives of historically significant individuals through the case of psychological theory and research. Before understanding Psychobiography understanding biography becomes very important. A typical biography is often very descriptive and tries to record every notable event that happened in a person's lifetime, whereas a psychobiography primarily focuses on some particular events and tries to better understand why they happened. (Elms, 13)

Though a lot of research has already been done on the lives and paintings of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh in the past hundred year and almost each aspect of their lives studied and researched profusely and minutely, still there always remain a scope to relook and reinvent the past events and lives of these great artists from a fresh perspective and to say something new about them because to some extent this inexhaustible capacity of interpretation and reinterpretation of a work of art and the life of the concerned artist makes them and their works 'great'. Though there is ample amount of work done on the relationship of Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh, most of it concentrates on the turbulent nine weeks that these artists shared in the famous yellow house in Arles, south of France in 1888. None of the research has focused on these two artists' journey from the start taking love and companionship and sexual fulfilment as a standpoint to make a comparison between the two. I feel it would be very interesting to look at the life journeys of these two artists, how it got moulded and shifted and how it affected their art in relation with the kind of sexual relations they have had in their life time.

What I want to say is that, firstly it is well established fact as Freud talks about it in his Psychoanalytic theory that primarily it is the sexual energy in any person which if not realised/ fulfilled gets translated into and gets directed towards others activities. For instance, for an artist, this libido which if unfulfilled or repressed will most likely find its expression in the art created by the artist or it would translate into the work of art. So it can be established that one's sexual behaviour and sexuality do have an impact on the kind of art one produces no matter however subtle it seems but it does have a bearing on the artist's work that he produces. Here I would like to take the example of Freud's psychobiography on Leonardo Da Vinci named *Leonardo Da Vinci: Memory of his Childhood* where he talks about the exceptionally low sexual needs and behaviour of Vinci throughout his life time and establishes that Vinci too did have his share of libido which was repressed and manifested in the kinds of paintings that he made. According to Freud, Vinci's choice of subject for painting and the kind of attitude that he developed towards paintings and his scientific explorations can be explained through the interpretation of his childhood memory of a Vulture brushing its tail against his mouth. In this book Freud explicitly talks about significance and active role of the subject's earliest childhood and the impact of these early impressions in the child's life. We make the further assumption that it found reinforcement from what were originally sexual instinctual forces, so that later it could take the place of a part of the subject's sexual life. He says, "Thus a person of this sort would, for example, pursue

research with the same passionate devotion that another would give to his love, and he would be able to investigate instead of loving. We would venture to infer that it is not only in the example of the instinct to investigate that there has been a sexual reinforcement, but also in most other cases where an instinct is of special intensity. Observation of men's daily lives shows us that most people succeed in directing very considerable portions of their sexual instinctual forces to their professional activity. The sexual instinct is particularly well fitted to make contributions of this kind since it is endowed with a capacity for sublimation: that is, it has the power to replace its immediate aim by other aims which may be valued more highly and which are not sexual. We accept this process as proved whenever the history of a person's childhood— that is, the history of his mental development—shows that in childhood this over powerful instinct was in the service of sexual interests. We find further confirmation if a striking atrophy occurs in the sexual life of maturity, as though a portion of sexual activity had now been replaced by the activity of the over-powerful instinct.” (Freud, Leonardo, 13)

Some of those who denounce psychobiography would still reject it no matter what it's called or how carefully it's done. They yearn for a bygone world of genteel biographers and unblemished heroes. But psychobiography has not been an innocent spectator at the sharp decline of its own repudiation. Its biggest problem is obvious: Bad psychobiography is easier to write than good psychobiography. Psychobiography may be written for the wrong reasons or for no good reason. It may rely on shoddy data or misguided methods or inappropriate theories, or all of those together. Writers have claimed to augment their biographies with serious psychological analysis, when all they have done is to shove famous people into pathological pigeonholes. So the question that arises is what should be the best response to a bad psychobiography? Should the genre of psychobiography cease to exist? The best response to a bad psychobiography is good psychobiography. The best response to traditionalists' demand for less psychology in biography is more and better psychology. The best response to the gradual takeover of psychobiography by people who don't know what they are doing is a takeover by people who do know what they are doing. (Elms, 14)

The main point of most psychobiographical research is to provide a clearer understanding of the psychological understanding of a public figure. (Elms, 14) Why I intend to write a

psychobiography of Van Gogh and Gauguin yet again? As Elms rightly says in his book that “the understanding of a single life can be an important goal in itself, with no necessity to justify it by reference to other ends. That’s especially true when the life being studied is of one of the greats among humanity.” (Elms, 16) Both Van Gogh and Gauguin led exceptionally unique lives and produced art which were equally unique and innovative. Yet in their uniqueness and craziness and their passion for their art they were united. Their eccentricity united them and the sheer thrill of the kind of unconventional, controversial lives that these painters lived made me want to dig into the biographies of these painters in detail, to read their letters a little more closely, to look at their paintings to find traces of the eccentricity and suffering of the hands who painted the pictures and attempt to add something to the understanding of the lives of these two painters. This dissertation is just an attempt to understand the lives of these two painters a bit more closely with no claim to have the final word on the explanation for the life choices they made or the kind of art that they produced. This dissertation is an attempt to look at the lives and art of these painters in relation to their personal relations and melancholy and loneliness to the kind of art that they produced.

# Chapter 1

## Paul Gauguin: Becoming of a (Self-Fashioned) 'Savage' Lover of Women and Art



Paul Gauguin, *Self Portrait with Halo and Snake*, 1889

*For a long time people have harped at me about virtue; I know virtue, but I don't like it. –*

(Gauguin, *Avant et Apres*, 230)

Paul Gauguin's unique life has remained a source of artistic inquiry, fascination and a subject of study for a number of art historians, psychologists and art enthusiasts alike. Paul Gauguin is not only known as a post impressionist painter for his unique, original and flamboyant art (which includes paintings, sculpture and ceramics and literary writings) but is equally famous for his scandalous personality, life journey and his special bond with Vincent van Gogh and his involvement in van Gogh's notorious ear chopping incident at Arles.

A cursory glance at the biography of Paul Gauguin will make even a layman detect the drastic transformation Gauguin's life and personality went through after deciding to become a painter. This drastic, life altering change that occurred in Gauguin's life is linked with his decision to pursue art full time. Pursuing an artistic career is not similar to taking up any other job, but pursuing art, discovering art and creating something new demands a huge transformation on the part of the artist himself. The passion of creativity touches the very being of the artist and before he could create art, art first creates an artist. In the history of such transformative effect of art on the artists, Paul Gauguin's life remains an extreme case.

'Scandal' is the word that defines Gauguin's personal life. Paul Gauguin was a French post impressionist painter who is now famous for his paintings and his unique style and use of colour. Paul Gauguin decided to become a painter rather late in his life at an age when ordinarily people tend to settle down, Gauguin decided to leave his family of a wife and five children and a bourgeois lifestyle and career as a stockbroker to become an artist. This transformation from a bourgeois stockbroker to a bohemian artist is something quite fascinating. Paul Gauguin's choice of becoming a painter was not just a choice for a career change but as it turned out it was a total transformation of Gauguin's personality and life. Earlier Gauguin was a loyal, well settled and happily married man to a Danish woman named Mette Gad for 10 years and had five children with her. He was a rich and successful stockbroker living a bourgeois lifestyle in Paris with his family who would only paint and draw in his free time as a hobby. Slowly the harmless hobby of indulging in collecting art and painting in leisure hours developed into an all consuming passion resulting in Gauguin's gradual but total abandonment of both his family and earlier way of life. Gauguin slowly transformed into a bohemian painter living in cheap quarters and spending all his time painting. With the decision to Paint full time Gauguin's sexual behaviour also drastically changed and from a loyal husband of a bourgeois Danish women Paul turned into a



womanizer indulging in all kinds of sexual activity with extremely young black native women of Tahiti (and prostitutes). This transformation and change in Gauguin's sexual behaviour is of interest to me and in this chapter I would be exploring the relation between his drastically modified sexual behaviour with his new found artistic freedom while attempting to do a psychobiographic study of Paul Gauguin's life as represented in Mario Vargas Llosa's novel called *The Way to Paradise* which is based on actual facts of Gauguin's life.

There is a very significant, deep and direct connection of Gauguin's sexual life (if not love life) with his life as a painter. His artistic freedom and sexual freedom came about at the same time in a way. What I would be doing in this chapter is to look at the character of Paul Gauguin from a Psychoanalytical lens and will try to do a psychobiographic study of the character Paul Gauguin from the standpoint of his sexual relationship and its connection to his artistic journey

## I

### Ancestral effect

*If a biographical study is really intended to arrive at an understanding of its hero's mental life it must not- as happen in the majority of biographies – silently pass over its subject's sexual activity or sexual individuality.* – (Freud, Leonardo, 2248)

Paul Gauguin was living in the French colonial capital Papeete, on the island of Tahiti, when Sigmund Freud published his first major psychoanalytic treatise, *The Interpretations of Dreams*, in 1899. Though three thousand miles apart, it is hard to imagine two cultural figures more evocative of the symbolist milieu at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly the contemporary fascination with the role of sexuality in human creative acts. To account for Gauguin's erotic life, therefore, it would be a folly to ignore the stunning parallels between Gauguin's behaviour and beliefs and the psychoanalytical theories expounded by Freud that have shaped notions of personality to this day. (Mathews, vii) In order to analyze Paul Gauguin's life from a psychoanalytic lens it becomes necessary to trace his relation with his parents and early childhood behaviour in order to analyze the later events and behaviour in his adult life.

Nancy Mowll Mathews in the preface of her book *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic life* talks about the significance and usefulness of the application of Freudian theories to Paul Gauguin's life in order to understand it better. She says,

Gauguin's life offers exceptional opportunities for Freudian interpretation – from the loss of his frequent depiction of such phallic symbols as snakes and birds, to his insistence on the health benefits of sexual freedom, to his untimely death from Syphilis in 1903, at the age of forty four. Most importantly, I have found that Freudian theories of the roles sexuality and aggression play in creativity are extraordinarily useful in understanding Gauguin. (Mathews , vii)

Interestingly in Paul Gauguin's case the influence on his personality is not limited to his parents but it goes back to his maternal grandparents. Nancy Mowll Mathews points towards the fact that Gauguin's personality might be influenced by his ancestors. In her book *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, she says, "Gauguin inherited some of his ancestor's personality traits, but we may also deduce that this extraordinary family had a practical impact on his life." (Mathews, 5)

Gauguin's eventful life displayed a surprising continuity with his own distinguished, though more exotic, ancestors. Instead of a bourgeois stock broker suddenly transforming himself into a bohemian, Gauguin by becoming a revolutionary artist, revered to family type. (Collins, Van Gogh and Gauguin 39) His personality seems to be affected by his relation with his mother Aline and Father Clovis Gauguin but also it was greatly influenced by his grandmother Flora Tristan and grandfather Andre Chazal whose personalities would shape certain aspect of Gauguin's personality later in his life. Mario Vargas Llosa in his novel *The Way to Paradise* brilliantly connects the artistic journey of Paul Gauguin and his later sexual behaviour with the life journey of his grandmother named Flora Tristan.

It is possible to detect in Gauguin some of the personality traits of his flamboyant forebears, Flora Tristan is often held up as the source of Gauguin's Wanderlust and creativity and there are indeed parallels between the passionate, crusading temperaments of grandmother and grandson both. (Mathews, 6) It is this deep impact of the ancestors on Gauguin's unique personality and on his life which Llosa tries to weave into an interesting narrative in his novel by writing parallel journey of Paul Gauguin's grandmother Flora Tristan and Paul Gauguin in very subtle way showing the parallel between their lives.

Llosa bases his novel *The Way to Paradise* on the actual facts of Gauguin's life relying on Gauguin's own abundant writings and various biographies<sup>1</sup> written on Paul Gauguin's life. This novel turns out to a beautiful symphony of turn of events which led to the making of an artist, with the personal and factual details artistically blended to paint the picture of an artist portraying his internal turmoil, unconscious and subconscious thoughts, dilemmas and internal struggle in relation to his art and sexuality. This novel can be looked at as a creative psychoanalytical study of an artist with very subtlety blending the role of childhood memories, oedipal complex, family history and external life events with the journey of becoming an artist through a tightly knit narrative of Paul and Flora's parallel life Journey.

Bradley Collins in his book named *Van Gogh and Gauguin: Electric Arguments and Utopian Dreams* draws a connection between Flora Tristan and Paul Gauguin. He says –

In her own way, she [Flora] cut a figure nearly as singular and flamboyant as her grandson [Paul Gauguin]. And as one reviews her peripatetic strivings many surprising parallels emerge with Gauguin's own life. Both Flora and Gauguin abandoned their spouses and their children to make their way in the world. Flora left her engraver husband, Andre Chazal, and three children in an unsuccessful attempt to secure an inheritance from her relatives in Lima. Both struggled with poverty and adversity...both made bold trips to the tropics to attain success. Although Flora failed to extract a legacy from Don Pio Tristan Moscoso, her uncle and the last viceroy of Peru, she turned the memoir of her voyage into her first publishing triumph, *Peregrinations of a Pariah*. Both Flora and Gauguin challenged authority and agitated for social change until the end of their lives. Flora died after a lecture tour made more exhausting by Police harassment and agents provocateurs, while Gauguin continued to attack the colonial powers in the South Pacific until his last fevered days. And finally, both pursued esoteric religious studies. Flora adhered to prosper Enfantin's mysticism, and Gauguin immersed himself in Maori mythology. Above all, they shared a monumental wilfulness as well as a complete disdain for convention. (40)

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<sup>1</sup> The various incidents that are described in the novel about Paul Gauguin's life are not fictitious but are based on Paul Gauguin's writings like *Noa Noa*, other notes and scattered writings which were published collectively called as *Writings of a Savage*, his letters written to his wife Mette Gad, his artist friends including Schuffenecker, Emile Bernard and Vincent Van Gogh among others.

What I found interesting in the novel is that despite the efforts on Llosa's part to show the similarity and connection between Flora Tristan and Paul Gauguin (which is of course there at some level) I found it difficult to connect Paul's personality with Flora though there are plenty of surface level similarities between their lives. Instead of that, what I found more similar to Paul Gauguin's personality is the personality of his grandfather Andre Chazal. The connection between Paul Gauguin and his grandfather's personality comes out more strikingly despite the fact that Llosa mainly focused on the character of Flora Tristan along with the story of Paul Gauguin. Andre Chazal's personality emerges as an evil character in the novel and whatever we know about him is either from the point of view of Flora or through the commentary from the omnipresent narratorial voice in the novel. But there are ample of facts available about the real life Andre Chazal on which the character of Andre Chazal is based on in the novel. It would be significant to look at the personality of Andre Chazal to find parallels between these two.

Nancy Mowll Mathews writes about Paul's personality's connection with his grandfather in her book *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, she says - "Flora Tristan's husband was the artist and printmaker Andre Chazal ... Although Gauguin may not have known this grandfather personally, he certainly was aware of the artistic legacy of the Chazal family. The print shop had been founded by Andre Chazal's mother. Andre's brother, Antoine and Antoine's son Charles Camille Chazal both had modestly successful careers as painters, forming a minor artistic dynasty that lasted in Paris until 1875. Even after the marriage between Andre Chazal and Flora Tristan ended, Tristan's interest in art continued, and in addition to publishing some articles on art topics, she was active in a Parisian art circle that included avant- garde painters like Eugiene Delacroix. When Paul Gauguin was born in 1848, his family lived only two doors away from Delacroix on rue Notre-Dame –de-Lorette." (Mathews, 6)

It can be argued that on some level Paul Gauguin only became an advanced version of his grandfather's notorious self in as far as his sexual behaviour and treatment of various women in his life is concerned. Just like the violent behaviour of Andre Chazal sexually and otherwise towards his wife Flora Tristan and later on towards his daughter and Paul Gauguin's mother Aline, in a way is very much similar to Paul's own behaviour towards his wife Mette Gad and other extremely young Tahitian girls that he took in as lovers and "vahine"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Vahine is a Tahitian word which means wife. Though during his stay in Tahiti Gauguin takes in extremely young native Tahitian women as his vahine during his stay on the Island of Tahiti but the relation between these various vahinis and Gauguin remains mainly sexual with Gauguin ending up impregnating several of these girls with his child and not taking responsibility for any of them later on.

Andre Chazal who abducted Aline in her childhood in order to take revenge on Flora for leaving him, not only mistreated Aline but also molested her and raped her on the accounts of which was found in a letter written by Aline to her mother requesting her to rescue her.

This incestuous current seems to have been inherited by Paul from his grandfather. Various evidence of Paul's own incestuous tendency towards his own daughter also named Aline could be found through his own writings about his daughter Aline<sup>3</sup> and this incestuous impulse could be related to his sexual attraction and relation of native girls of thirteen or fourteen year, almost the age of his own daughter Aline Gauguin at that time and his incestuous attraction towards his own daughter could also be linked to his primary attraction to his own mother Aline Gauguin.

## II

### **Paul Gauguin and a memory of his childhood**

Paul Gauguin's and his relation with his mother remains one of the influential factors in the journey of Paul Gauguin becoming an artist. The deep impact that his mother Aline had on the psyche of young Gauguin could be guessed by his artistic expressions in the form of a paintings and his writings. Paul Gauguin had painted a portrait of her mother in 1990 from his memory and from the only photo that he had of his mother. The description of his earliest memory of his mother is also found in his writings<sup>4</sup> too. "How graceful and pretty my mother was when she wore the local costume, the silk mantilla covering her face and leaving only one eye visible, such a soft and imperious eye, so pure and caressing." (Gauguin, *Writings of a Savage*, 235)

Interestingly if one examines Gauguin's early childhood memory of his mother and the portrait that he made of her reveals something about his own unconscious sexual fantasy and his later sexual behaviour. It is quite fascinating to note that the portrait that Gauguin made of his mother from his memory is of a very young Aline Gauguin. It does not demand expertise in art criticism on the viewer's part to notice that the figure in the painting looks more like an adolescent girl

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<sup>3</sup> Paul wrote at length about his daughter Aline which he titled as "Cahier pour Aline" (Notebook for Aline) which was never printed. But the manuscript is kept in Paris in the *Bibliothèque d'Art et d'Archeologie*. A limited edition was first published by Suzanne Dameron in 1963. Excerpts for this *Notebook for Aline* were published as a part of the collected writings of Gauguin titled *The Writings of a Savage* in 1978. In this particular notebook, he writes about his amusement at the childhood desire of Aline to marry him.

<sup>4</sup> The description of his mother is found in his writing called *Avant et Apres (scattered notes)* that Gauguin wrote a few months before his death in Marquesas on May 8, 1903, and published in 1923 by Georges Cres.

instead of a woman, let alone a mother. Also, the memory of his mother too seems like a rather sensuous memory, the picture of a sensuous woman with just one eye uncovered, triggering the imagination to unclothe and see what lies guarded behind those coverings. This image of his mother as an extremely young and sensuous Peruvian girl in his subconscious mind could be contextualized to understand his own sexual attraction towards extremely young native Tahitian women and his various nude paintings of his “vahine” and mistress as an attempt to fulfil unconsciously his desire to imagine and see what lies guarded under the covering of clothes.

Sigmund Freud in his Psychobiography of Leonardo Da Vinci called *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* very interestingly attempts to explain the sexual behaviour of Leonardo on the basis of his childhood memory<sup>5</sup> using psychoanalysis and finding cues in his paintings. Freud in his psychobiography of Leonardo emphasizes the importance of childhood memory, he writes, “ if it is true that the intelligible memories of a person’s childhood and fantasies that are built on them invariably emphasize the most important elements in his mental development, then it follows that the fact which the vulture fantasy confirms, namely that Leonardo spent the first years of his life alone with his mother, will have been of decisive influence in the formation of his inner life.” (Freud, Leonardo, 2267)

If one applies Freud’s theory to attempt to do a psychobiography of Paul Gauguin, the explanation of his later sexual behaviour and his journey as an artist could be found in his childhood relation with his parents. According to N. M Mathews –

Gauguin was born to a family with a history of sexual violence and piquant cruelty. Because his father died when he was an infant, the young Eugene Henry Paul Gauguin naturally gravitated to his mother’s side of the family which was dominated by the Spanish- Peruvian Moscosos. (Mathews, 5)

To understand how Aline affected the behaviour of Gauguin it is of vital importance to understand the history of Aline’s life. Aline Gauguin just like her mother Flora lived a troubled life and had a very traumatic childhood.

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<sup>5</sup> Freud based his psychobiographic study of Leonardo’s sexual life on the basis of a childhood memory of Leonardo of a vulture brushing his tale against his mouth as an infant. Most part of his analysis depends on the identification of the bird in question as a vulture which turns out to be wrong as apparently Freud was relying on a faulty translation which confused the actual bird eagle with a vulture. Though this particular work of Freud calls for criticism for his error in interpreting the bird wrong but it is still appreciated for Freud’s methodology for doing psychobiographic study of an artist based on memories and artworks of the artist concerned.

Flora left Aline, her daughter and Gauguin's future mother, with Aline's grandmother. A grotesque caricature of a modern custody battle ensued as the eight years old Aline shuttled back and forth like a tennis ball from one Parisian domicile to another. First, the increasingly debt ridden and mentally unhinged Chazal abducted Aline. She was taken back to the police only to be kidnapped once again by Chazal. Although Aline then escaped and was placed in a boarding school, Chazal obtained a court order and reclaimed her once more. As if the young girl had not suffered enough from these ceaseless disruptions, Chazal further traumatized her by making sexual advances. Flora bought incest charges against Chazal and succeeded in recovering Aline, though not in keeping Chazal in Jail. The crazed Chazal, free to wander the streets, lurked about Flora's lodgings and one day shot her as she returned home. Flora survived, and this time Chazal received a twenty year prison sentence. (Collins, Van Gogh and Gauguin, 40-41)

To understand Gauguin's relation with his mother, it is crucial to understand the role played by his Father Clovis and his untimely death in Paul's bonding with his mother.

Clovis's death had the equally important result of leaving Gauguin with no male rival for his mother's affections. Aline neither remarried nor had any other children ... it is tempting to trace several adult traits back to Gauguin's fatherless childhood. His wilfulness, pride and non conformity may have flourished in the absence of a patriarchal figure who would have developed a strong feminine identification against which he struggled for the rest of his life. This would account for his need to present himself as a hyper masculine figure who womanized, dominated others, and always stood poised for a fight. In general, Aline's and Gauguin's special relationship may have heightened the ambivalence and oedipal dynamics that invariably exist between a mother and her son. Gauguin's later fondness for femmes fatales in his art certainly testifies to this. (Collins, Van Gogh and Gauguin, 43)



***Portrait of Aline Gauguin by Paul Gauguin, 1888, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.***

Description of Aline Gauguin first time appears in the novel *The Way to Paradise* in Chapter 8 called 'Portrait of Aline Gauguin: Punaauia, May 1897'. In this chapter Llosa very subtly blends in the element of Paul Gauguin's unresolved oedipal complex and his unconscious sexual attraction towards his mother.



Did you ever love her, Paul? Not when she died, true. But when you were a child, living with your great-great-uncle Pio Tristan in Lima, you loved her very much. One of your clearest childhood memories was how sweet and pretty the young widow looked in the big old house where you lived like royalty, in the central Lima neighbourhood of San Marcelo, when she dressed like a Peruvian lady and draped her slender body in a big silver-bordered mantilla, covering her head and half her face with it and leaving only one of her eyes visible. (Llosa, 129)

In order to understand the significance of this childhood memory of his mother which Paul recollects as an adult and the description of which is also found in his writings of Tahiti period. Paul Gauguin's childhood memory of his mother as a beautiful Peruvian woman dressed in traditional garment could be interpreted as Paul's initial sexual attraction towards his mother.

This unconscious sexual desire for the mother as a primary love object by Paul Gauguin which is very much evident from his childhood memory of his mother and his description of her Peruvian looks and beauty could be seen as later manifesting in his sexual desire for the native Tahitian girls that he took in for "wives" and mistresses. The link between the memory and the primary sexual desire for the mother is very subtly blended and hinted at by Llosa through the narrative of Paul Gauguin's troubled thoughts in the novel *The Way to Paradise*.

This torrent of memories was unleashed the day that Paul began to pin the Port Said photographs up in rows on the walls of his new studio in Punaauia. One of the models looking straight at the photographer from the arms of another naked girl had the kind of black hair that the Parisian called *andalousienne*, and enormous, languid eyes; she reminded him of someone, and without knowing why, he felt uncomfortable. Hours later, he realized. It was your mother, Paul. The features, the hair, the sad eyes made the whore in the photograph look a little like Aline Gauguin [the mother]. (Llosa, 128)

Wayne Anderson in his introduction to the book *Paul Gauguin: The Writings of a Savage* tries to connect the dots between his desire to become a savage in a tropical paradise to his unconscious desire to reunite with his mother in the form of finding his origin and becoming one with it. In the introduction Anderson writes,

His mother was part Peruvian – she had a share of savage blood – and this was sufficient to establish Gauguin, even in his European existence, as a savage. The return to a tropical paradise was his inevitable destination – there he could re-enact the whole syndrome in his terms. His migration to Tahiti, where he could “love, sing and die” at peace with the life cycle at last, was a journey backward to the era of his Peruvian childhood. Shortly after arriving he made a portrait of his mother as a Tahitian native, more beautiful than any other of the native women he painted. (Anderson, W. xv)

His various writings about his mother and his portrait of his mother as a young girl could be seen as a testimony of his unconscious desiring of his mother. It is very interesting to note that Paul named two of his children after his mother and father. Both his daughter Aline and son Clovis died young and Paul was known to have special affection for his daughter Aline among all the five children. So much so that he dedicated one notebook of his writings to Aline and named it as “Notebook for Aline”. His grief over the sudden death of Aline is also found in the letters he wrote to his friend Schuffenecker. Though his affection for Aline (his daughter) does not come as paternal affection of a father for his daughter, instead it had a hint of incestuous sexual attraction towards her.

Gauguin wrote in his Notebook for Aline post her death in a state of despair –

These meditations are a reflection of myself. She, too, is a savage, she will understand me.... Will my thoughts be useful to her? I know she loves her father, whom she respects. I give her a remembrance. The death I have to accept today is an insult to my fate. Who is right? My words or myself? Who knows. In any event, Aline has, thank God, a heart and mind lofty enough not to be frightened or corrupted by contact with the demonic brain that nature gave me. Faith and Love are Oxygen. They alone sustain life. (Gauguin, Writings of a Savage, 66)

Aline died suddenly at the age of twenty in Copenhagen in 1897. Gauguin had last seen her in 1891; she was then fourteen. At this last meeting with his family, it would seem that she alone responded to him with warmth. He recalled her response in a letter three years later :

“Mademoiselle is off to the ball. Do you dance well? I hope the answer is a graceful Yes, and that young men talk to you a great deal about me, your father. That’s an indirect way of courting you. Do you remember three years ago when you said you would be my wife? I sometimes smile when I recall your simplicity...” (Gauguin quoted in Anderson, W. xxii)

Aline’s death was taken by her father as less a tragedy for her than for him. He logged it as another example of divine malice against him and a stroke of bad luck. After hearing the news he wrote in anguish to a friend, the composer William Molard: “Bad luck had dogged me since childhood. Never any luck, never any joy. Always adversity. So I cry: *God if you exist, I charge you with injustice and malice* (Gauguin quoted in Anderson, W. xxii) The fact that Aline had lost her life may never have entered his head.

By carefully monitoring the children’s relationship with their father, Mette had brought them up to have remarkably tolerant feelings towards him, which is noticeable in their later writings. Seeing that he did not have to overcome the hostility that he had expected from his years of neglect, Paul flirted freely with them, particularly the two teenagers. Emil hung back, no doubt remembering his father’s violence towards his mother, but Aline was captivated by the attention, and Paul teased her about being her wife some day. (Mathews, 164)

His own sexual desire for his daughter could be linked to the ancestor history that affected his own personality. His own desire for his daughter on an unconscious level and the dismissal of it on a conscious level could be traced by his cold rebuffing of the fact of his grandfather’s incestuous advances towards his mother in her childhood. The description of the episode where Paul gets to know about the ugly facts about his mother’s life through her lover Gustave Arosa who does so in order to gain Paul’s sympathy both for himself and his poor unfortunate mother.

Now came the foulest and ugliest part of the story. So foul and ugly that on the afternoon that Gustave Arosa, thinking to ingratiate himself with you, showed you the letters that the girl managed to get to grandmother Flora in April 1837, you had hardly begun to read it when you close your eyes, sickened by disgust, and returned it to your guardian... In her letter, with spelling mistakes in every line, the girl desperately begged her mother to rescue her. At night she felt fear, pain and panic, because her father – “monsieur Chazal,” she said – usually drunk, made her lie down

naked with him on the only bed in the room, while he, naked too, held her, kissed her, rubbed himself against her, and wanted her to hold him and kiss him as well. So foul, so ugly was this episode that Paul preferred to gloss over it, as well as over the charges that his grandmother Flora levied against Andre Chazal, accusing him of rape and incest. (Llosa, 138-139)

All these characteristics that Andre Chazal had Paul Gauguin manifested in his later life perhaps in more sublimated and complex ways after the freedom he gained as an artist to follow his “savage” and extreme repressed desires which he could not express during the time he lived as a successful stockbroker leading a conventional bourgeois lifestyle with his Danish wife Mette Gad and his five children. To understand his later years’ sexual behaviour as an artist, it is important to look at his life as a bourgeois stockbroker first.

### III

#### **Mette Gad, Love, Family life and all**

It is utterly significant to look at his sexual life prior to becoming a fulltime painter. In *The Way to Paradise*, the unnamed narrator narrates the story of Paul’s life and the significance of sex in his life as a young man.

Sex hadn’t been important to him at the time it most commonly is for ordinary mortals – in youth, the age of lust and ardor. In his six years as a sailor, he visited the brothels in every port – Rio de Janeiro, Valparaiso, Naples, Trieste, Venice, Copenhagen, Bergen and others he scarcely remembered – more to accompany his friends, to avoid seeming enjoyment in those squalid, stinking haunts crowded with drunk, fornicating with ruined, sometimes toothless women with dangling breasts, who yawned or dropped off to sleep from exhaustion as you mounted them. Only after several strong drinks could you manage one of those sad, hasty matings that left a taste of ashes in your mouth, a funereal melancholy. It was better to masturbate at night, on your pallet, rocked by the waves. (Llosa , 61)

Later in his life he started a bourgeois lifestyle by making a career in Paris Stock Exchange as a Stockbroker and marrying Mette Gad, a Danish woman. The unnamed narrator describes Paul’s

married life as a stockbroker as having “embarked on a very bourgeois life, in a very bourgeois apartment, in a neighbourhood that was the zenith of bourgeois existence: the place Saint-Georges. Sex still mattered so little to Paul then that in the early days of his marriage he didn’t mind complying with his wife’s prudishness and making love to her as Lutheran morality counselled, Mette wrapped in her long buttoned –up nightdresses and in a state of total passivity, never permitting herself the slightest display of daring , merriment, or seductiveness, as if being loved by her husband were an obligation to be endured in the same way that a patient suffering from constipation endures cod-liver oil” (Llosa , 63)



***Portrait of Madame Gauguin* by Paul Gauguin, 1880-81. Foundation E.G. Buhrle, Zurich.**

In Gauguin's case, sex did not assume importance in the age when it is usually considered important to people – in youth. It is very interesting to notice that for Gauguin newly discovered sex yet again happened at the time he discovered painting.

In most artists, adult responsibility and art making are not mutually exclusive; but in Gauguin, art came to compete with his marriage and with his career. In fact, Gauguin himself portrayed his art as equivalent to his lover when, years later, he self-righteously claimed that he has been a better husband than most because he spent his spare time with art rather than with a mistress. What we know about Gauguin's private life and erotic attractions during these years offers no hint of womanizing or scandal. He was remarkably untempted by affairs with women – whereas making art and interacting with artists was irresistible. (Mathews, 36)

His artistic freedom and sexual freedom came about at the same time. It is also interesting to speculate whether one kind of freedom led to another? Whether the freedom of pursuing art full time after abandoning the very life he was living for a long time and leaving everything behind to embark on a novel journey of a painter's life and discovering life anew at a stage when ordinarily people tend to settle down for good in their life, led to his freedom of sexuality and adventurous sex life or was it his new found interest which opened the flood gates and let his creative juices flowing? In my understanding, it happened both ways. His bold decision of following art freely without any limits and boundaries set his whole being free.

N.M. Mathews in her book indicates towards the connection of artistic freedom in art which all the painters associated with the new movement in art called impressionism sought with the freedom of sexuality which happened in case of Gauguin. She writes –

Most [painters] who joined the impressionists were already full time, professional artists. For them the encounter meant a change of style and aesthetic philosophy. But for Gauguin, the change was far more complete: the freedom that the new movement brought to art, Gauguin gradually broadened to encompass every aspect of his life" (Mathews, 34).

Not only his art was unconventional and fresh but also his life turned unconventional and his interest in seeking freedom in sexual expression was renewed. With this new found sexual

freedom and its expression came various adventurous experiences with both men and women of all kinds which reignited his creativity and imagination to paint subjects from imagination and memory. These sexual encounters and adventurous experiences sometimes gave him inspiration to paint certain paintings specially his paintings from the Tahiti period. Tahiti became the site for both artistic and sexual freedom and both these artistic freedom and sexual freedom at times intermingled and manifested itself in form of paintings of women that Gauguin using as models for his paintings and sleeping with them side by side in his unique experimental style of paintings.

Sex became important to him [Gauguin] at the same time as painting....it was only some time later, when his mind began to churn out images suitable for painting and (without completely neglecting his work at the offices of Paul Bertin) he began to spend his nights drawing everything, in every sort of medium – pencil, charcoal, watercolours, oils – that he was suddenly racked at night by desire. Then he begged or ordered Mette to take liberties in bed that scandalized her, making her undress, pose for him, and let her jealously guarded private places be stroked and kissed. It had been the source of bitter conjugal disputes, the first shadow falling over a happy family that keeps growing larger every year. Despite Viking's<sup>6</sup> resistance and growing urgency of his sexual desire, he didn't cheat on his wife. He had no lovers, he didn't visit houses of ill repute, he didn't rent flats for little seamstresses as his friends and colleagues did. None of the pleasures the Viking withheld from him were sought outside the marital bed. At the end of 1884, at the age of thirty six, when his life had taken a Copernican turn and he had decided to be a painter, only a painter, never to return to business, and had begun his slow decline into poverty and bankruptcy, he was still faithful to Mette Gad. By then, sex had become a central preoccupation, a constant anxiety, a source of scandalous fantasies, of baroque exaggeration. As he gave up being bourgeois and began to lead the life of an artist – privation, informality, risk, creation, disorder – sex gradually came to dominate his existence, not only as a source of pleasure but also as a means of severing old ties and gaining new freedoms. (Llosa ,62-64)

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<sup>6</sup> Another name of his wife Mette Gad

Apparently Gauguin lived a pretty conventional life with his wife Mette Gad and five children. His sexuality was limited only to making love to his wife. Paul's life and his sexual behaviour was on a 'normal' track with everything happening in the most conventional and normal way. While he was married he still had interest in art both in terms of making it and collecting it. Art was as harmless a hobby as a distraction on weekends and a few hours in the free time. As art started to assume a more serious role in his life and slowly ceased to be just a hobby but an obsessive all consuming passion so much so that it slowly took precedence over his financial stable career as a stockbroker and his family. It is at this point both his life and sexual behaviour changed too. It can also be argued that it was perhaps his prolonged repression of his true self under the garb of a civilized and conventional man living a conventional life with a conventional woman that got free with the advent of art in his life. It is in this sense that his decision of becoming an artist is so strongly linked with his sexuality. The freedom that Gauguin achieved was double fold, as a painter who associated himself with the new school of impressionist art he freed his art from the conventional way of painting and by becoming a painter he freed himself of a conventional way of living, giving free rein to his instincts to dominate his mind in all its wildness.

#### IV

#### **Becoming a Savage**

*To truly paint we must shake off our civilized selves and call forth the savage inside.*

(Gauguin quoted in Llosa, 23)

It is a well known how frequently great artists take pleasure in giving vent to their fantasies in erotic and even crudely obscene pictures. (Freud, Leonardo, 2248)

I am here proposing that Gauguin's drastic change in sexual behaviour with the discovery and perusal of his artistic passion has direct relation to his changed sexual behaviour in later years of his life. To prove this hypothesis I would be relying on Sigmund Freud's works explaining the role that sexuality plays in one's creativity and how by studying the work of an artist can give us cues to understand a person's sexuality and sexual fantasy. So far in this chapter I have tried to establish how Gauguin's familial ties and the role his ancestors and his parents played in forming his early childhood memories might have played a role in his becoming the kind of rash and a



person capable to taking impulsive bold decisions with a potential of being violent in his adult life. The previous part tried to explain the 'why' part of his decision to become a fulltime artist, while in this part I would be attempting to link his change in his sexual behaviour with the event of becoming a bohemian artist by using Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. This psychoanalytic explanation about the "diversion" in a person's sexual life later on as triggered by an external factor and having roots in past childhood experiences and memories could be very significant in understanding the change in Paul's sexual behaviour later in his life and its relation with his decision to peruse art and become a bohemian artist from a bourgeois stock broker.

Some experience of their early childhood would probably come to light which had a determining effect upon the direction taken by their libido. This experience would simply have passed out of the subject's conscious recollection, but could be recalled to his memory under appropriate influence. In the opinion of these writers inversion can only be described as a frequent variation of the sexual instinct, which can be determined by a number of external circumstances in the subject's life. (Freud, *Three Essays*, 1469)

Sigmund Freud in his essay of sexuality says that a later state inversion is "found in people whose efficiency is unimpaired, and who are indeed distinguished by especially high intellectual development and ethical culture." (Freud, *Three Essays*, 1467) later on he goes on to explain the cause of this kind of change in sexual behaviour to change in some "external factor" which in Gauguin's case I believe the external factor or the even remained the decision to become a full time artist. He says "it is possible to point to external influence in their lives, whether of a favourable or inhibiting character, which have led sooner or later to a fixation of their inversion." (Freud, *Three Essays*, 1469) Sigmund Freud's *The Three essays on Sexuality* remain of great help in understanding Paul Gauguin's later life sexual behaviour. In regard to Paul's later developed sexual attraction towards the same sex is explained as –

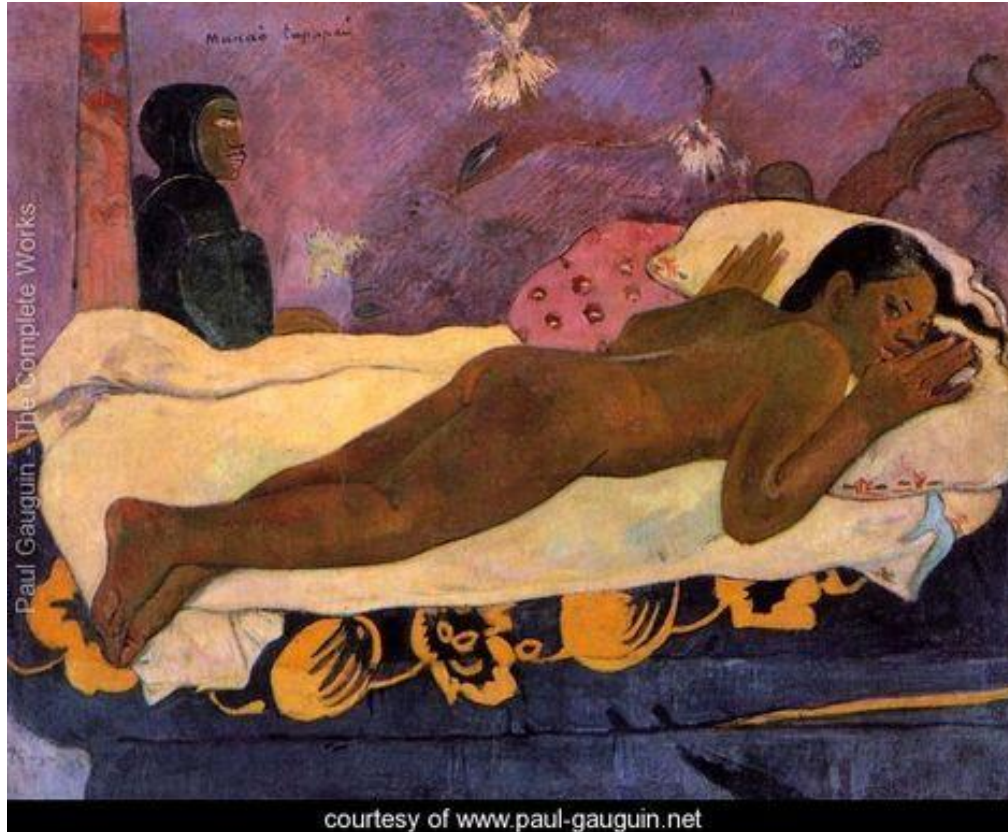
The trait of inversion may either date back to the very beginning, as far as to subject's memory reaches, or it may not have become noticeable till some particular time before or after puberty. It may either persist throughout life, or it may go into temporary abeyance, or again it may constitute an episode on the way to a normal development. It may even make it's first appearance late in life after a long period of

normal sexual activity. A periodic oscillation between a normal and an inverted sexual object has also sometime been observed. Those cases are of particular interest in which the libido changes over to an inverted sexual object after a distressing experience with a normal one. (Freud, Three Essays, 1466)

Freud in his three essays on sexuality clearly gives indication and suggests that a change in sexual behaviour at a later stage in life can occur in response to changes in outer circumstances. Freud suggests and establishes that a later stage inversion is very probable in highly intelligent beings and it could be lead by certain “outer changes” of *Sexuality* as my theoretical framework.

Paul Gauguin in the later part of his adult life, post becoming a fulltime artist, showed some very prominent changes in his sexual life and his sexual behaviour changed drastically and became highly complicated especially during his stay at the island of Tahiti. In this period Gauguin became sexually attracted towards native Tahitian girls of thirteen or fourteen years. He took in a number of these native Tahitian girls mainly for the purpose of sexual gratification and also to help keep his house and to do other household chores at different points of time during his almost seven year stay in Tahiti. The description of these native wives is there in his writings like *Noa Noa* and *Avant et Apres* by Paul Gauguin himself and the names and characteristics of a few of these girls are known to us. Among his various native “wives” Taha’amana and Paua’ara get special mention in his writings and a number of Gauguin’s important Tahitian paintings have used Taha’aman and Paua’ara as models.

The narrator in the novel left subtle hints of the connection between Gauguin’s sexuality and his artistic life and his ancestral history through the brilliant narrative which is to a large extent is based on the actual facts of Gauguin’s life which makes it quite reasonable to research the painter’s life and to attempt to do a psychobiographic study of the same through the factual narratorial novel written on him. Llosa has described the formation of some of Paul Gauguin’s most important paintings combining it with a contextual story. The story that Llosa weaves in his narrative in connection with the concerned painting is not based on a fanciful imagination on his part but is based on Paul Gauguin’s own account of these events leading to the formation of these paintings which are of the native Tahitian women that Paul Gauguin took in as his “vahine” and mistresses at different point of times while living at the Tahitian Island. Both his paintings and the narrative surrounding it unveil something important about Paul and his sexual behaviour and his fantasies.



**Paul Gauguin, Manao Tupapau (Spirit of the Dead Watching), 1892. Albright – Knot Art Gallery. Buffalo, New York, A. Conger Goodyear Collection, 1965.**

The story behind the formation of the painting *Manao Tupapau* is as fascinating as the painting itself and it reveals more about the gazer than than the gazed at. In the novel, this is described as “He entered the hut and, crossing the threshold, felt in his pockets for a box of matches. He lit one, and in the small bluish-yellow flame that flared between his fingers, he saw a sight he would never forget...on the mattress on the ground, naked, face down, with her round buttocks lifted and her back slightly arched, half turned towards him, Teha’amana stared at him with an expression of infinite horror, her eyes, mouth and nose frozen in a mask of animal terror.” (Llosa, 20)

Paul Gauguin in his Tahitian Journal called *Noa Noa* describes the incident depicted in the painting below as follows – “Quickly, I struck a match, and I saw... Tehura, immobile, naked, lying face downward flat on the bed with the eyes inordinately large with fear. She looked at me. As for myself I stood for some moments strangely uncertain... never had I seen her so beautiful, so tremendously beautiful... might she not with my frightened face take me for one of the demons and specters, one of the Tupapaus, with the legends of her race people sleepless nights?” (Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 33)

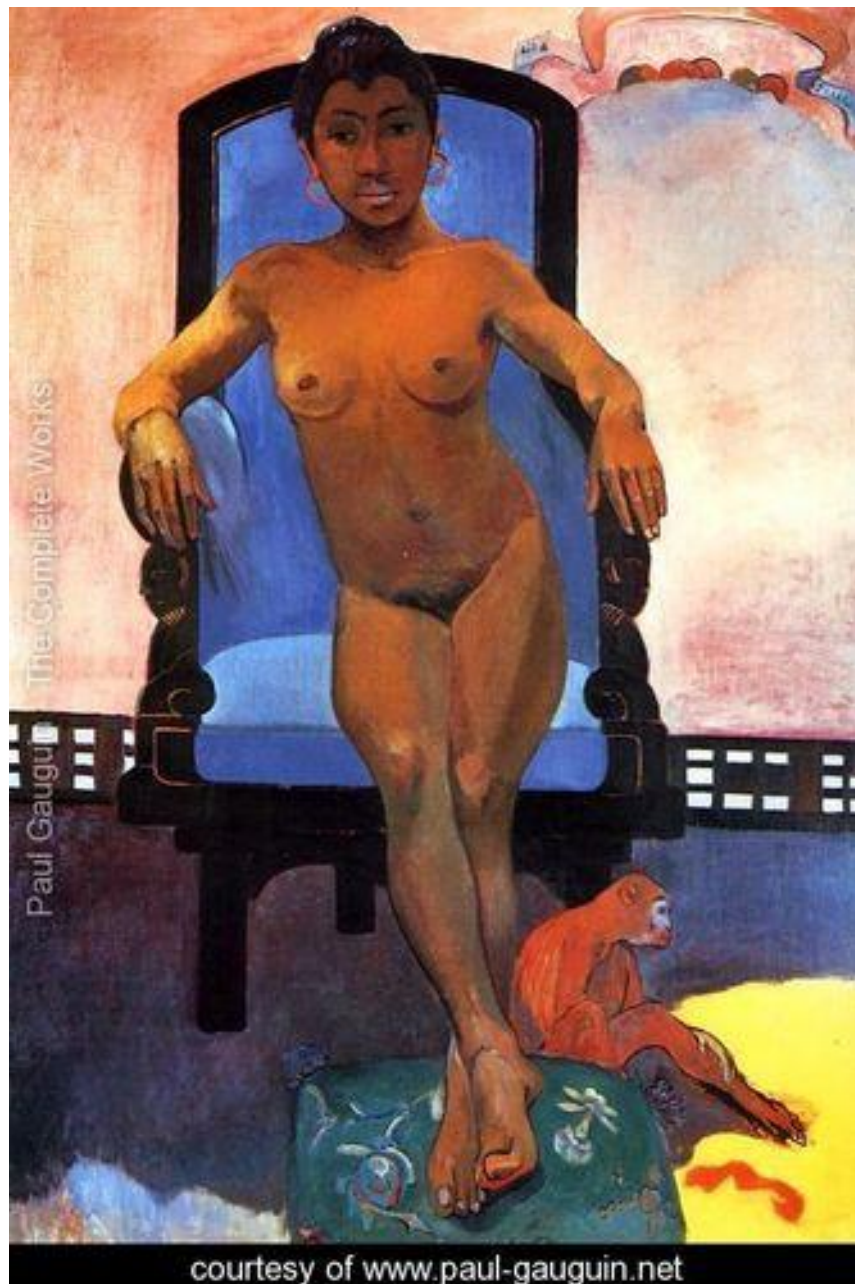
The painting *Manao Tupapau* showing Teha'amana naked and frightened in conjunction with Paul Gauguin's own narrative about the making of this painting reveals Paul's own sexual attraction and arousal by a submissive, frightened, extremely young (almost childlike), native girl the evidence of which are can be found in the novel *The Way to Paradise* in the description of Paul's preference in sexual partners.

She was younger, perhaps only thirteen or fourteen, like Teha'amana; at the age – which so aroused you – when the early – blooming girls of primitive countries enter adulthood. Her breasts were developed and her thighs were firm, and she was no longer a virgin. But it wasn't the clean limbed little body of the companion he was vouchsafed by ungrateful Paris – a slip of a thing, a perfect miniature, beside the bulk of forty-five-year-old Paul –that immediately seduced him. (Llosa, 91)

The above mentioned description suits not just the physique of Tehama'ana but also of a number of teenager child-woman that he self with and impregnated in his later life. His sexual desire, raping and sodomizing of girls in the age group 13-14 indicates towards a transference of his incestuous sexual desire for his own daughter Aline Gauguin who was also 13 when Paul last met her and she remained 13 in his memory forever as it was the last time Gauguin met her and at the age of 18 Aline died after catching cold. Paul's sexual attraction towards his own daughter can be very subtly sensed from his notebook which he dedicated to his daughter Aline and in that notebook described the incident of how he found Aline's idea of marrying him in future amusing. One painting that to a large extent indicates towards Gauguin's incestuous impulse and its sublimation is the painting called *Aita Tamari Vahini Judith, te Parari (The Child-Woman Judith is Not Yet Breached)*.

The story behind the composition of the painting is as interesting as the name of the painting. While Paul was staying in a rented studio owned by the Mollards in Paris after coming back from Tahiti, his friend Ambroise Vollard sent a black girl of 13 years old to Gauguin as a gift to serve me as his sexual slave. Her name was Annah and Paul instantly took her in as his sexual partner and as a model for his painting. The making of the painting story of *Aita Tamari Vahini Judith, te Parari* quite twisted. The owners of his rented studio had a daughter named Judith who was infatuated with the charm of Gauguin. Gauguin used to flirt with Judith whenever her parents were not around and one fine day when her parents were away Gauguin convinced her to

pose for him for a full length frontal nude but while the painting was in its making Judith's mother Ida found out about it and extremely angered by Paul's behaviour asked Paul to destroy the painting immediately which Gauguin promised to destroyed it but instead he Painted a nude of Anna and named it *The Child-Woman Judith is Not Yet Breached* which "made it clear that both the girls were to be imagined in similar state of undress." (Mathews, 205)



**Paul Gauguin, *Annah the Javanese, or Aïta Tamari Vahini Judith, te Parari (The Child-Woman Judith is Not Yet Breached)*, 1893. Private Collection.**

N.M. Mathews in her *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life* recounts the memory of Judith who as an adult still remembers being molested by Gauguin as a teenager. She recounts, “I walk quietly to Gauguin, his arms steals around my waist, and he puts his hand like a shell on my budding breasts...Standing on my tiptoes, I search for his cheek. It is his mouth that I meet.” (Judith quoted in Mathews, 205) Judith’s mother earlier assumed his affection for Judith was fatherly as his affectionate remembrance of his own daughter Aline. She assumed that “his affection stemmed from his separation from his own daughter, whom he often talked about while gazing at her.” (Mathews, 206) Although, it seems the affection did stem from his remembrance of his daughter Aline but perhaps not in an affectionate fatherly way but instead as a manifestation of his repressed incestuous desiring of his own daughter. The trick title suggesting the intended painting of Judith taking the shape of the native girl Anna can be as sublimation of Gauguin’s desire for his own daughter Aline and simultaneous desire for his mother also named Aline, working in a fascinating symbolism of desire for the savage woman (symbolising the desire for his Peruvian mother) through the white one (the hidden desire for his own daughter).

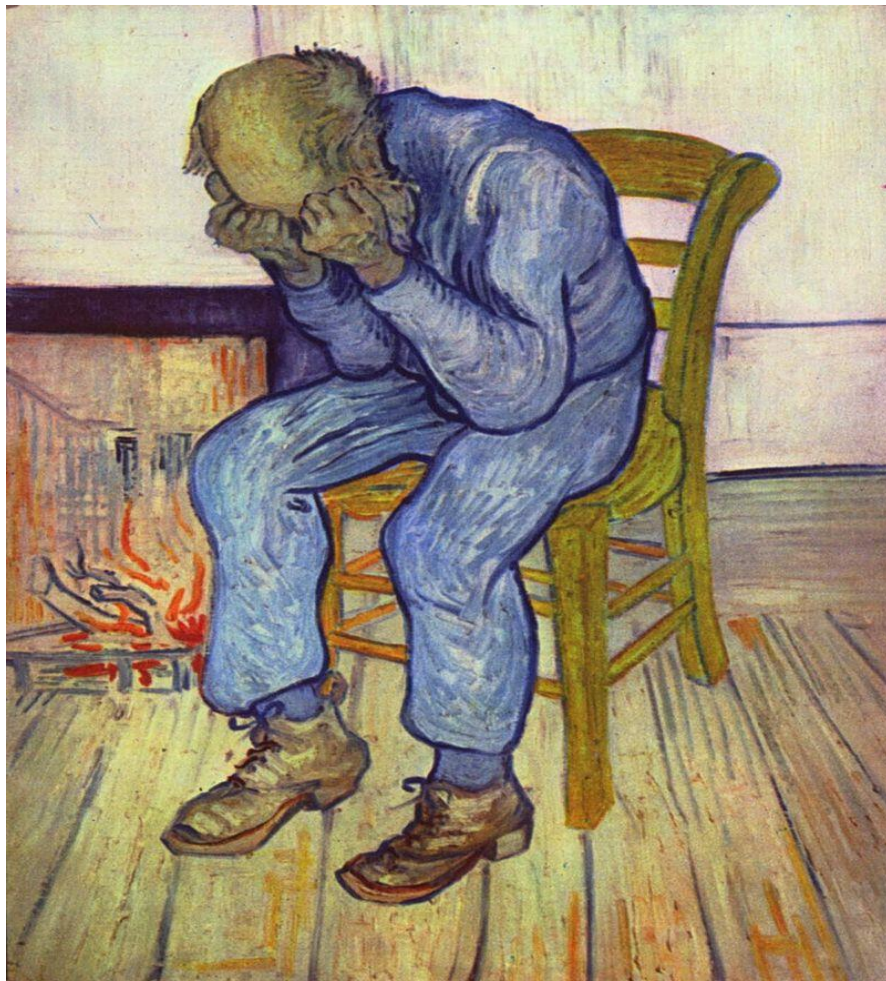
In the Novel, *The Way to Paradise*, Llosa very efficiently weaved the story of Paul Gauguin and his experimentation with his sexuality and the creation of some of his most famous paintings with the story of his grandmother, her temperament, life struggle, giving subtle glimpse of the early life and attitude of Paul’s mother Aline and Paul’s indirect and unconscious influence of both Flora, Andre Chazal, and his mother Aline on his personality.

In conclusion I can safely say that narrative gives subtle hints about the oedipal ties of Paul Gauguin with his mother. His childhood memory of his beautiful young mother in traditional Peruvian dress, the later links of his incestuous attraction towards his own daughter named after his mother also called Aline and the complexity of these internal subconscious attraction and sexual conflicts in the final manifestation of his erotic and exotic paintings of the extremely young native women, his sexual relation with the native Tahitian women of the age of his own daughter Aline as part and parcel of attaining his idealistic primary identity of some fanciful “savage” in an attempt to unite with his mother, in an attempt to live the incestuous fantasy of his sexual attraction towards his daughter, of experiencing and experimenting with his sexuality, all of which was very accurately assimilated and women in a fantastic narrative of Paul Gauguin’s life in the novel *The Way to Paradise*.



## Chapter 2

### Vincent Van Gogh's Search for Sublime in the Ordinary (Women and Art)



Vincent van Gogh, *Worn Out*, 1890

*I need a woman, I cannot, I may not, I will not live without love. I am only a man, and a man with passion. I must go to a woman, otherwise I shall freeze or turn to stone – or, in short shall have let events browbeat me.* – Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 21 December 1881 (Leeuw ed., Letters of Van Gogh, 121)

You say ‘Vincent van Gogh’<sup>1</sup> and the image of sunflowers, starry nights and bright yellow cornfields comes to mind almost instantly. Vincent van Gogh today is perhaps one of the most popular post impressionist painters, and one need not have to necessarily be an art historian in order to be familiar with Vincent van Gogh’s life and art. Although, Van Gogh’s bright colourful canvases are perhaps in sharp contrast to his immensely grim and lonely life. Vincent van Gogh today is not just known for his abundant and brilliant art that he produced over a span of ten years of his artistic career but he is also equally famous for his peculiar, interesting and struggling life of an artist who went mad at the end and cut off his ear. This particular incident of Van Gogh’s cutting off his ear has been the focus of attention to a number of psychologists, art critics and psychobiographers and art lovers in general.

A number of psychoanalytic studies of Vincent van Gogh’s life have already been done by psychologists, some of them aimed at explaining Van Gogh’s actions in life as rooted in unresolved oedipal ties with his unloving mother while others merely reduced his actions to pathology of a man dealing with various psychological illnesses. Full volumes of detailed study of complete life of Vincent van Gogh have also been attempted, e.g. by Nagera and by Lubin, several times in the past century. In the case of Vincent van Gogh, abundant research work is already available on his paintings and also his unique and rather unfortunate life. So, the *why* question about the need for another study of his life becomes the most important one to explain.

The best response to a *why* in my understanding is a *why not?* Though a lot of work has already been done on Van Gogh’s life yet there are areas which need to be studied again and again from newer angles, from newer perspectives to reach newer understanding about someone as complex a person as Van Gogh. When the person in question is none other than a sheer genius like Van Gogh, the opportunity for exploring something new, reading something different in his paintings and life are never slim and there always remain scope for digging deeper and finding more.

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<sup>1</sup> I have referred to Vincent van Gogh at times as ‘Vincent’ to refer to the Protagonist Vincent van Gogh of the novel *Lust for Life* by Irving Stone and as ‘Van Gogh’ and ‘Vincent Van Gogh’ to refer to the actual historical painter. Although at times, the line of distinction between the character and the actual historical artist gets blurred, difficult to separate and often the character and the actual artist overlap and at times blend into each other as the character is based on the meticulous details of the actual artist which makes the rigid distinction between the two both difficult and unnecessary. My study of the character Vincent is largely an attempt to reflect on the actual artist by looking at him through his representation in the novel as a character.



In this chapter I would *not* be talking about any of the things which he became famous for; rather I would be focusing on Van Gogh's love life in a dialogue with the series of paintings he made of a prostitute who eventually became his lover, companion and also a subject for a number of his sketches and paintings while he lived in the Hague during 1881 to 1883.

Van Gogh's dramatic life and posthumous recognition of his genius, popularity and demand for his paintings worldwide led to study of his own life as a subject of artistic and psychoanalytic contemplation. Vincent Van Gogh's exceptional life inspired Irving Stone, a twentieth century American writer to write a book length novel on Van Gogh's life called *Lust for Life* in 1935. Stone who relied heavily on Van Gogh's letters written mostly to his brother Theo and other friends and relatives and his paintings, preferred to call his novel as a "bio-history"<sup>2</sup>.

Since the novel itself is based on Vincent Van Gogh's life and relies heavily on the letters written by Van Gogh as a first hand source. I would also be relying on the letters of Vincent Van Gogh to facilitate my study of the character Vincent. I would specifically be focusing on the character of Vincent Van Gogh's love life and his ideas of love and need for companionship in life based on his own letters where he often talks about the subject of love and shares his own love life and problems with his brother Theo.

## I

### **The melancholy of dejection**

*The story of Vincent Van Gogh is a never ending struggle to control, modify, glorify or deny a deep-rooted melancholy and loneliness. (Lubin 2)*

Melancholy and loneliness are the two words which define Vincent's life and remained as a constant companion to him from the beginning till the end of his life. Vincent often talked about his feelings of loneliness and melancholy in his various letters that he wrote to Theo. Melancholy and loneliness have been a living reality of Vincent's major chunk of life. Though the reason for this melancholy and loneliness have been various ranging from self imposed alienation, a sense of being inadequate in the society he was surrounded by, early childhood neglect that he faced at

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<sup>2</sup> Refers to the genre of novel writing about a historical character in the form of narratorial biography

the hands of his parents, a sense of being a failure in life and an unfulfilled and unfortunate love life. Though all these various reasons culminated to influence Vincent's personality and art, I would exclusively be looking at Vincent's love life in relation to selected paintings and sketches of his lovers.

The want of love and companionship and a sense of melancholy are deeply connected in Vincent's life. It is difficult to point out which led to another. Was it the constant sense of isolation which led to his failure in forming loving relationships with women or were the melancholy and loneliness the result of a lack of fulfilling love life and want of a companion stemming from a sense of being unwanted and being rejected from his early childhood days? Van Gogh lived a peculiar love life and failed to develop a stable emotional bond except for with his brother Theo, to whom he wrote frequent letters. It is quite fascinating to note Vincent wrote around 850 letters (surviving) in his lifetime. Considering the huge numbers of the letters that Vincent wrote mostly to his brother Theo (around 650 surviving) also indicates towards the acute loneliness and lack of companionship and people in his life to talk and share his thoughts with. Besides the fact that in his various letters to Theo, loneliness and an overpowering feeling of melancholy has been a subject that Vincent talks about at length but also the fact that Vincent wrote such huge amounts of letters in his lifetime could be taken as an indicator of his lack of people and companionship around him to talk to on a daily basis and share his thoughts and life with. Writing letters to Theo became his life line, his sense of companionship and a constant mental support as well as a cathartic exercise to vent out his passionate thoughts and emotions in words just like the act of making painting became a cathartic exercise for him on some level.

Albert J. Lubin in his psychological biographic study of Vincent van Gogh's life called *Stranger on the Earth* suggests a probable link between van Gogh's sense of feeling not good enough, alienated and unwanted as a child playing an important role in his inability to develop a fulfilling and satisfying relationship with a love interest. His explanation for the paradoxical life of van Gogh's desire to have a loving relationship yet living in isolation is rooted in hidden depression which unconsciously almost always acted as a barrier to establish intimate relationships with attainable partners. As a result he kept wanting intimate relationships (mostly with women who were already engaged, or married and extremely difficult to get) yet remained tormented. It was as if he "longed for intimacy with others, yet sought out solitude." (Lubin, 2)

It seems highly probable that his lack of love in life, his feelings of being rejected and loneliness and being out of place and the discovery of his passion for painting at the age of twenty eight, could be interrelated. The women (love interests) who affected Vincent's life were few. Among them was Ursula who came into the picture when Vincent had not yet discovered his passion for painting.

The novel *Lust for Life* opens in London with a young Vincent secretly in love for the first time in life. The name of the girl he was in love with is Ursula Bongers who is a daughter of Vincent's landlord in London. This love affair belongs to the pre painting discovery phase when Vincent was unsatisfactorily working in Goupils & Co. as an art dealer. In the novel, on the very first page, Ursula is described as "Ursula was nineteen, a smiling, wide-eyed creature with a delicate, oval face, pastel colouring and a small slender figure." While Vincent was described as "he was twenty one and in love for the first time." (Stone 12) Vincent's love for Ursula is described as "In his love for Ursula there was nothing of passion or desire. He was young; he was idealistic; he was in love for the first time." (Stone 15)

In the first few pages for the book, Vincent uncontainable urge to express his feelings for Ursula is described with Vincent's efforts to keep inside his overpowering emotions and passion to keep impatiently for a while but ending in sudden outburst of outflow of emotions expressing his feelings for her in his impulsive manner. Vincent proposed to Ursula not for a relationship but directly for marriage. To Ursula he proposed by saying, "I am trying to tell you, Ursula, something you know already. That I love you with all my heart and I can only be happy if you would be my wife." (Stone 18) which Ursula turned down immediately on the grounds of her being engaged to someone else already. After getting to know that Ursula is already engaged to someone else instead of understanding and backing off he said, "Ursula, you don't love him. I won't let you. You're going to be my wife. I couldn't bear to lose you. I'll never stop until you forget him and marry me!" (Stone, 18)

I believe that it is crucial to study Vincent's behaviour during his apparent first love with Ursula as it provides insights about Vincent's peculiar character and as an early manifestation of passionate impulsive decisions Vincent would be taking repeatedly in both his artistic sphere and love life later. It is believed that van Gogh turned melancholic after facing rejection in love which contributed him to move from London and leave his current job as an art dealer indirectly giving

him a chance to pursue his career as an evangelist in Borinage<sup>3</sup>. In his melancholic mood he kept on picturing Ursula as his wife yet the picture kept shifting with his shifting status and thoughts. Since now he had become an evangelist so now “when he pictured his marriage to Ursula he no longer thought of her as his wife of a successful art dealer. He saw her as the faithful, uncomplaining wife of an evangelist, working by his side in the slums, to serve the poor.” (Stone 29) He kept on hoping that Ursula will eventually fall in love with him and agree to marry him. In these hopes he kept on visiting his former landlords time to time but his spell broke when he saw Ursula getting married to her fiancé. “Something thin snapped within Vincent, snapped neat and clean. The spell was broken. He had not known it could be so easy. He trudged back to Isle worth in the slashing rain, collected his belongings and left England forever.” (Stone, 32)

Love, companionship, relationship held very much importance in Vincent’s life as love just like paintings remained one of the most discussed topic in his letters to his brother. For Vincent, loving was equal to a “divine act” which gives a person some purpose to live. Description of Vincent’s idea and importance of love in his life is mentioned in the letter he wrote to Theo on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 1878. It was the time when Vincent had been rejected by Ursula and had started working in Borinage as an evangelist. At this point of time in his life the emotions of love got deeply connected with divinity which perhaps was influenced by his evangelical work that he was doing.

Love is the best and the noblest thing in the human heart, especially when it is tested by life as gold is tested by fire. Happy is he who has loved much, and is sure of himself, and although he may have wavered and doubted, he has kept that divine spark alive and returned to what was in the beginning and ever shall be. If only one keep loving faithfully what is truly worth loving and does not squander one’s love on trivial and insignificant and meaningless things then one will gradually obtain more light and grow stronger....when one lives with others and is bound by feelings of affection, then one realizes that one has a reason for living, that one may not be utterly worthless and expendable, but is perhaps good for something, since we need one another and are journeying together as *compagnons de voyage*. But our proper sense of self-esteem is also highly dependent upon our relationship with others. (Van Gogh 53-61)

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<sup>3</sup> Van Gogh went to the Borinage to work as an evangelist there for the coal miners. There Van Gogh got deeply moved by the inhuman condition coalminers were working and living in. He was believed to have developed deep sympathy for these workers and tried his best to help them out by going in extreme ways and beyond the limits of his job of just preaching the “words of God” and giving sermons as an evangelist. Rather, he got deeply involved with these workers spending all his money and belongings to help wretched coalminers.

Lubin in his book *Stranger on the Earth*, points out this transformation of loneliness to solitude through his passion for art. He says, “Art was the one activity that enabled him [Vincent] to turn loneliness into solitude, the solitude that provided necessary time for fantasy, reflection, study and reading. (23)

Vincent’s state of depression and melancholy after facing rejection at the hands of Ursula went through a kind of moulting period<sup>4</sup> contemplating about where he was going in his life, yet not knowing his true calling. It was the time when he had already tried his hands at a number of jobs from being an art dealer to a scholar of theology to an evangelist yet failing to at each one of these jobs and also being feeling like a failure in his love life. It is at his wit’s end that Vincent discovered being an artist as his true calling of becoming an artist. This decisive phase in Van Gogh’s life which Van Gogh went through in 1880 is presented as a dramatic turn in the novel. In the novel, the situation of utter hopelessness and despair in the novel is described as “There was no job, no money, no health, no strength, no ideas, no enthusiasm, no desires, no ambitions, no ideals and worst of all, no pivot upon which to hang his life. He was twenty-six, five times a failure, without the courage to begin anew.” (Stone 83) Although this void and utter hopelessness led to a deeper inquiry and to question his purpose in life, his true calling to follow in life as everything he planned in life already failed.

“I am a failure, I’m a failure. I’m a failure”, gave way to “what shall I try now? What am I best fitted for? Where is my proper place in the world? He realized ‘he was not fitted for the routine of business and he had tried everything else for which he might have had an aptitude. Was he always doomed to fail and suffer? Was life really over for him? (Stone 85)

At this point of utter hopelessness and total nothingness, Vincent discovered drawing while he was wandering over to Marcasses without a clue about what to do with his life when he observed coal miners coming out from the mines in the evening with their drooped shoulders, tired faces and covered in coal dust which arouse a strange urge in him to sketch what he just saw. Stone has made Van Gogh’s decision to become a painter perhaps a bit more dramatic and sharp than in the real life. This turning point in Vincent’s life is described as:

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<sup>4</sup> Van Gogh uses the term “molting period” himself in one of his letters to Theo explaining how he is not an idler but is just going through that barren phase just like birds go through before they find new wings to fly.

Something about the man, he could not tell what, attracted Vincent. Idly, without particular interest, he reached into his pocket, pulled out the stub of a pencil and a letter from home, and on the back of the envelope quickly sketched the little figure trampling across the black field. (Stone, 86)



**Coal Shoveler by Vincent van Gogh, July- August, 1879**

This sketch by van Gogh is one of the earliest surviving sketches of him prior to deciding to become a fulltime painter. This sketch actually corresponds neatly to Stone's account of the first sketch that the protagonist Vincent made just like that in an idle hour. In this sketch one can see a man with a hood and Coal shovel going hurried somewhere (perhaps going to the mine or coming back after a hard day of work) with his face down. The crude and rough style of this sketch both indicate towards perhaps Van Gogh immature drawing skills which is deliberately done this crude way perhaps to depict the crudeness of the life of coalmine worker.

The sequence and complex amalgamation of a failed love and the despair and melancholy caused by it accompanied by failure to stick to any particular job that he tried his hand in a strange fashion contributed in shaping Vincent's decision to become a painter in the first place. It might not be wrong to say had Vincent not got rejected at Ursula's hand and had not went through a barren, contemplative "moulting period" which gave him the opportunity of try his hand at different jobs and failing terribly at each one of them, perhaps art history would not have been the same today. Who knows, for how long Vincent would have been stuck in his first job as an art dealer in London if Ursula would have in fact accepted his proposal. It would not be wrong to say that perhaps his melancholy and experience of dejection played a crucial role in shaping his personality and played a role indirectly in his decision to pursue art.

It is also significant to note that Vincent lived a highly mobile life throughout. During his ten years long artistic career he lived in eleven different places. In order to understand his lack of any close companions and the sense of feeling isolated and alienated often is deeply related to his nomadic lifestyle. Recognizing the importance of the change in location frequently with development of Vincent's art and love life, Stone has divided the chapters in his novel *Lust for Life* geographical location wise, titling each chapter to the name of the place where important incidents in Vincent's life took place. For instance, the chapter dealing with Vincent's first love with Ursula Bongers is named 'London' as this affair happened in London. Similarly, the chapter dealing with Vincent and Gauguin's relationship and Vincent's notorious ear cutting incident is titled 'Arles' as this incident took place in Arles. Therefore, I feel that it is extremely important to look into the importance of frequent change in geographical location on Vincent's part especially during his active artistic years from 1880 to 1890 on his art and personal life.

By living at different locations throughout his artistically active years naturally exposed him to a wide range of new experiences and gave him an opportunity to explore and paint novel landscapes, fresh perspective on life and a chance to meet and paint new people which in a way impacted his art in terms of variety and in the development of his artistic style.

The impact of his moving places to places in a short span of time not just influenced his painting style which remained unique and original but the nomadic life impacted his love life as well. Every time Vincent moved to a different place once an affair ended. This holds true in the case of all the women he loved/had an affair with, including Ursula, Kay Vos, Sien and Margot. His shifting from one place to another both affected his paintings with the new landscapes and light and it also affected his perception of love and like his stay at a particular place his passion for a particular love interest also remained short term and his perception about love kept changing.

## II

### **No, nay, never!**

Book 2 of the novel *Lust for Life* is titled 'Etten' after the place where Vincent's life would take yet another turn. After losing his job in Borinage as an evangelist, Vincent came back to his parents' house in Etten to practice his new found passion for sketching. It was the initial learning phase in Vincent's artistic journey where he was struggling to learn to sketch. In this period he was trying to learn to draw nature and capture the essence of it. It is very interesting to note that Vincent's love for paintings and his love for Kay Vos sprouted at close proximity. The time Vincent fell in love with Kay Vos and was struggling to get her affection was also the time when Vincent had discovered paintings rather recently and at that time Vincent was struggling to express himself through it. In a way, his struggle with sketching and painting nature and his struggle with winning Kay Vos's love were alike. Vincent dealt with his emotions the way he dealt with nature in an attempt to paint it the way he was feeling it yet struggling to achieve the effect. In the initial phase of his artistic career, both his paintings and his conception of love was full of passion but lacked the maturity and depth which he was to attain only later in his artistic career.



Vincent first met Kay Vos while he was staying in Amsterdam with his uncle Reverend Stricker after he left his job in London, to prepare for becoming an evangelist. Reverend Stricker took Vincent to meet his Cousin Kay Vos's family. This was the time when Vincent saw his cousin Kay Vos in her marital bliss with her husband and child. Van Gogh has written about Kay's happy family life and his own craving for such a life in his letters to Theo. Irving Stone describes Vincent's subconscious desire to have a loving family and a partner when he saw Kay Vos sitting happily with her husband and child in the novel *Lust for Life* as –

The vibrant waves of their love reached out and engulfed Vincent. For the first time since that fateful Sunday the old pain for Ursula arose from some mysterious source within him and flooded the outmost raw parts of his body and brain. The little family before him, with its clinging unity and joyous affection, brought him to a realization that he had been hungry, desperately hungry for love all these weary months, and that it was a hunger not easily destroyed. (36)

Apparently, Kay Vos had everything that Vincent always wanted for himself. In his subconscious mind Kay Vos became symbolic of Vincent's idea of perfection and happiness which he craved for all his life and could never get. There was perhaps some amount of jealousy too which Vincent felt when he saw Kay happily engrossed in her little world. This initial impression of Kay's perfection stayed with Vincent in his memory and when later he saw Kay in Etten after she had been widowed and suffered the loss of her beloved husband, she became someone Vincent no more felt jealous of but someone he could relate to yet the association of the idea of perfection with Kay Vos somehow remained in his subconscious mind and an urge to experience with her now what he was denied with Ursula – marital bliss and companionship.

Interestingly Vincent fell in love with his cousin Kay Vos after she became a widow. He did not fall in love with Kay earlier even when he stayed with her during his stay at his uncle Reverend Stricker's house while studying theology and preparing to start a career as an evangelist. Although during this period Kay and Vincent used to meet frequently and chat for hours. One plausible explanation for Vincent to not have developed feelings for Kay at that time could be the fact that Kay was not only older to him in age and was his first cousin but she already married and had a child too. The question that arises here is what made him fall for her at a later

stage and not at the earlier time that he spent with her. One could think that Vincent not developing any feelings for Kay during the earlier stay together might be her married status but considering Vincent's earlier obsessive behaviour to chase Ursula even after knowing that she was already engaged to someone else, it seems highly doubtful that Kay's married status would have stopped Vincent from falling in love with her. Also, if Vincent had morality issues than him falling in love with his first cousin even after her being widowed should have also not happened considering it was treated as incest in 19<sup>th</sup> century European society. Than what was it that made him fall in love with her later?

One plausible explanation that one finds is that he got attracted to the woman in grief. He got attracted to his cousin because she attained some "spiritual depth"<sup>5</sup> just like the subjects he preferred to paint who have also attained some "spiritual depth" after suffering and living a hard life. It can be argued that his attraction for Kay Vos was not just sensual but he became attracted to Kay Vos the way he got attracted to paintings. Stone describes Vincent's subconscious emotions towards Kay in the novel as:

Kay's great grief had spiritualized her. She had loved her husband devotedly and his death had killed something within her...if she had less vitality than when Vincent knew her in Amsterdam, she now had in its place a more mellow beauty, a seasoned sadness which gave her depth and substance. (125)

After falling in love with Kay Vos years after since he was rejected by Ursula in London, he realized what he has been missing in his life. It was the point when he realized that lack of love was not only affecting him but his paintings too. "He knew now that for many years he had been living only partially, that great funds of affection and tenderness in him have been dried up, the clear cooling waters of love been refused to his parched palate." (Stone, 130) His love for Kay Vos made Vincent realize that "no woman had ever loved him. That was not life, that was death...He knew that life would be impossible unless his new hunger could be fed by Kay's warm response." (Stone, 130)

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<sup>5</sup> Van Gogh uses the concept of "spiritual depth" to describe people who have suffered and had seen pain and despair in life. This concept of spiritual depth occurs frequently in his description of poor peasants, mine workers and prostitutes, the subjects that he like to paint and also to describe his love interest Kay vos and Sien in a his letters to Theo at different point of time.

With a new love interest Vincent thought his earlier love interest was shallow and now the love has attained some depth yet his pattern remained the same. His love for Ursula followed by rejection ended in melancholy and a moulting period of not knowing what to do with life yet exploring different things began. His new born love for his cousin Kay Vos followed the same pattern. Kay aroused desire in Vincent. He started dreaming about Kay Vos leaving his past behind. His nature of love remained impulsive requiring immediacy on Kay's part. He expected Kay to forget about her deceased husband. He reacted in a similar fashion when he was in love with Ursula. At that time, he expected Ursula to forget about her fiancé since they have not met for a year and to accept who is available in the present that is, Vincent. Contrary to the distinction he made between his earlier feelings for Ursula as immature and for Kay Vos as being more deep and passionate, it is quite noteworthy to see the striking similarities between the manner in which he proposed to Ursula and Kay Vos.

He proposed to Ursula by saying, "I am trying to tell you, Ursula, something you know already. That I love you with all my heart and can only be happy if you would be my wife" (Stone 18) Which is very similar to the way he proposed to Kay Vos, to Kay Vos he said, "I want you to be my wife and stay with me forever! We belong to each other, and in our aloneness we need each other desperately." (Stone 18) In reply to his passionate expression of his love he got a "no, never, never" for an answer.

To both of these women he proposed with urgency, with force, with persistence. The impulsive nature and the electric energy could be sensed in Vincent's character from the very beginning. From the first time he fell in love with an 18 years old girl Ursula, he wanted to have her for a wife and intended to have a stable relationship in his own obstinate manner. When he faced rejection in his love life for the first time, he became obstinate and insistent on his own feeling, without taking Ursula's feeling towards him into consideration. Just like his love for Ursula in which he dreamed of her as his wife similarly he dreamt about Kay Vos as his wife. It is very significant to note that from his earliest love interest, the idea of getting married had been one of Vincent's preoccupations. From his earliest love interest to the last one, he had always wanted to marry, settle down and have a family, quite opposite to what he ended up doing in his life. Vincent was insistent on having marital bliss in his life from the very beginning.

He wanted Kay for his wife, to have her near him always. He wanted a home, and children who would bear the stamp of his features upon their faces. He was a man now, and it was time he stopped wandering. He needed love in his life; it would take the roughness out of his work, round off the crude edges, quicken it with the consciousness of the reality that had been lacking. He had never known before how much of him had been dead without love; if he had known, he would have loved passionately the first woman he had come upon. Love was the salt of life; one needed it to bring out the flavour of the world. (Stone 132)

In both these love affairs and their failure to turn into anything and materialize into anything the only difference was that this time Vincent had paintings in his life to keep melancholy at bay. He turned melancholic when Ursula turned him down as a lover, after facing rejection from Kay Vos, Vincent chose not to turn melancholic. This time he had paintings to divert his energies from the pains of unrequited love and use this energy to create art instead of turning melancholic.

Van Gogh

I would much rather have had a yea and amen, but I am almost pleased with my 'never, no, never'...If you ever do fall in love and get a never no, never, don't resign yourself to it whatever you do! I hope to...cast out despondency and gloom, meanwhile working hard – and ever since I met her, I have been getting on much better with my work. (Van Gogh, 102-103)

Vincent in his letters from this time to Theo talks about how he does not want to relapse to melancholy over Kay Vos this time like earlier times, perhaps referring to what he went through after Ursula rejected him. This time painting became a diversion which helped him not become melancholy over the failed love affair with Kay.

Instead of giving into despair I chose active melancholy, in so far as I was capable of activity, in other words I chose the kind of melancholy that hopes, that strives and that seeks, in preference to the melancholy that despairs numbly and in distress. (Van Gogh, 60)

After Vincent expressed his love for Kay Vos and she rejected him with a “No never never!”, Vincent is left heartbroken yet he kept on trying to get her back and to somehow change that “no

never never” to a positive reply. In a letter to Theo written on November 3, 1881, he expresses his emotions for Kay and how he is dealing with the melancholy from the rejection. This is also the time when he gave his own philosophy on love to Theo and points out the value of even unreturned love over not being in love.

... I hope to leave no stone unturned that might bring me closer to her, and that it is my intention.

To go on loving her

Untill in the end she loves me too.

*Plus elle disparaît plus elle apparaît.*<sup>6</sup>

Theo, are you by any chance in love as well? I hope you are, for believe me, even its *petites miseres*<sup>7</sup> have their value. One is sometimes in despair, there are moments when one is in hell, so to speak, yet there is something different and better about it.

There are three stages –

1. Not loving and not being loved
2. Loving and not being loved (the present case)
3. Loving and being loved

Now, I tell you that the second stage is better than the first, but the third ! that’s it!  
(Van Gogh, 102)

These words which Vincent said to Theo in context of facing rejection in love can very well be seen as his attitude towards love and art. His persistence remained one feature which was common to both Vincent the artist and Vincent the lover in the face of failure.

The artist always comes up against resistance from nature in the beginning, but if he really takes her seriously he will not be put off by that opposition, on the contrary, it is all the more incentive to win her over – at heart, nature and the honest draughtsman are as one. (Nature is most certainly ‘intangible’, yet one must come to grips with her and do so with a firm hand.) And having wrestled and struggled with nature for some time now, I find her more yielding and submissive, not that I have got there yet, no one is further from thinking that than I am, but things are beginning to come more easily. (Van Gogh, 94)

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<sup>6</sup> The more she disappears the more she appears

<sup>7</sup> Minor irritations of human life

Vincent in these words described his struggle to tackle nature as a subject for painting in a letter that he sent to him in October 1881. This is the same year Vincent fell desperately and hopelessly in love with his first cousin Kay Vos. His love for Kay Vos was obsessive, problematic and one sided. His idea of painting nature and winning a woman in love are very similar and there seem to be a very strong connection between the two. Vincent tried to tackle the woman he fell in love with the way he tackled nature in his paintings. ‘Struggling with nature...[till] it becomes yielding and submissive’ as a painter is similar to how he handled the emotions of love and his love interest. In this particular case, his widowed first cousin Kay Vos who was as resistant as nature to Vincent’s attempt to tame and make submissive to his passions.

Nature always begins by resisting the artist...but if I really take my work seriously, I won’t allow myself to be led astray by that resistance. On the contrary, it will be a stimulus the more to fight for victory....At the bottom, nature and a true artist agree. It may take years of struggling and wrestling before she becomes docile and yielding, but in the end, the bad, very bad work will turn into good work and justify itself. (Stone 111)

In contradiction to Vincent’s belief that Kay will change her decision and accept his proposal by recognizing his genuine feelings and tireless effort to win her over, Kay snapped all contact with him immediately and refused to meet him or talk to him ever again. Vincent could not make his peace with the fact that no matter what he does, how hard he tries, unlike painting where by consistent efforts and sincere hard work an artist is bound to see some progress, one cannot make someone to fall in love with you. His philosophy of love failed him and unable to deal with the situation, Vincent turned to self mutilation by trying to burn his hand over the flame of an oil lamp. “Kay was gone from his life. The “no, never, never” had been wrung from the depths of her soul...Never shall you know love, for it cannot live, no, not even for as long as you can hold your flesh in the burning crucible of pain!” (Van Gogh 144) Derek Fell believes that this act of self mutilation on Vincent’s part was motivated by his intense pain of rejection which could only be dealt by inflicting intense physical injury to himself. Fell suggests that this was a defence mechanism to cope with rejection which he would be repeating in future<sup>8</sup>. “A great inarticulate

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<sup>8</sup> This act of burning his hand over rejection in love could be seen as a prelude to his future even more severe act of self mutilations including his ear chopping incident happened on 23 December, 1888 perhaps to cope with Gauguin wanting to leave Arles where they lived together for a few weeks and his finally his attempt to commit suicide by shooting himself in the chest with a gun on 27<sup>th</sup> July, 1990.

surge of grief welled up in his throat. He raised his left hand to his mouth to stifle the cry, that Amsterdam and all the world might never know that he had been judged, and deemed unworthy. On his lips he tasted the bitter, bitter ash of unrequited desire.” (Van Gogh 144)

### III

#### **The confluence of the aesthetics of art and love**

Vincent’s resolve to love Kay forever even if his love is not returned did not last long as he began to crave a woman and companionship. His emotions soon turn from Kay Vos as “the only one and always” to a desperate craving for almost any woman to be with him. He expressed his desperate desire to have a woman in his life in a letter written on 21 December, 1881 by openly admitting to his urge to be with a woman. He wrote, “I need a woman, I cannot, I may not, I will not live without love. I am only a man, and a man with passion. I must go to a woman, otherwise I shall freeze or turn to stone – or, in short, I shall have let events browbeat me.” (121)

Thus began the battle that raged within Vincent, his emotions at war with his romantic ideals. Whatever hold he imagined Kee had over him, he realized that he, like many men, could not live too long without a woman- and concluded that he must find a new one. (Fell)

Irving Stone in the novel *Lust for Life* describes the effect of initiation of sexual relation and new found companionship that he experienced with Sien as –

When Vincent awoke in the morning and found himself not alone, but saw there in the twilight a fellow creature beside him, it made the world look so much friendlier. The pain and aloneness were gone from him and in their place had come a deep feeling of peace...he was grateful to Christine for what she had done for him. Lack of love in his life could bring him infinite pain, but it could do him no harm, lack of sex could dry up the well springs of his art and kill him. “Sex lubricates, he murmured to himself as he worked with fluidity and ease.” (155)

It did not take long for Vincent to find a woman. Vincent met a prostitute named Sien Hoornik during one of his visits to the wine cafes to ward off his feelings of loneliness on one of those nights when being alone becomes unbearable. When Vincent met Sien, she was already past her

prime and was pregnant with a child from one of her customers. Vincent's connection with Sien was instant as both of them have the baggage of painful past suffering and loneliness in their life. Vincent could connect to Sien on a level he could never connect to either Ursula or Kay. Sien offered to Vincent what was denied to him by both Kay and Ursula. Although, Vincent's relation with Sien started primarily as sexual but it did not remain limited to sexual gratification only and soon transcended the physicality of it and developed into an emotional co-dependent bond – something which Vincent craved all his adult life.

The significance of Vincent's relation with Sien is twofold. Firstly, his relation with Sien remained the singular fulfilling relation that Vincent would ever be experiencing in his life that too for a very short span of time<sup>9</sup>. With Sien and her child Vincent was able to finally live his much desired wish to have a simple and fulfilling domestic life with his wife and child in his home while he painted peacefully in his studio. Vincent could never marry Sien although he wished and had elaborate plans of marrying and settling down with Sien, the description of which are found in his letters he wrote to Theo in 1883. Though he did not marry Sien but almost a year they lived together during which he not only got to experience familial bliss and companionship for a while but also got to experience fatherhood as he took care of pregnant Sien during her pregnancy and afterwards caring and spending time with the baby. Secondly, the experience of familial bliss and domestic life that he got with Sien and the baby, Vincent translated it in his art. These new feelings and experience impacted Vincent's life as an artist and also his art the outcome of which was a whole series of paintings and Sketches which he made in 1882 while staying with her, depicting various aspects of Sien's life, mostly Vincent painted her engaged in various domestic activities portraying and capturing the beauty of simple domestic life. Sometimes he painted nude figures of her and at other times painted her as a personification of torment and misery. In this section I will study some of the paintings from the Sien Series to talk about how his artistic sensibility is influenced by and connected to his love life.

There is a strong link between Vincent's choice of painting subjects and the kind of woman he managed to establish a somewhat fulfilling relation with for some time. For him Kay Vos became the epitome of perfection and unrealistic idealization, a love that happened in the realm of ideas which did not materialize into anything substantial. In the circumstance of unfulfilled

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<sup>9</sup> For almost one and a half years starting roughly from January 1882 and ending in September 1883 with his moving to Drenthe



love this time, Van Gogh decided not to give into melancholy this time fretting over Kay Vos and instead chose to fulfil the practical and realistic needs of sex and companionship with someone who is available, someone very ordinary and realistic. It would not be wrong to say that it was only after failure of his unfulfilled desires for the beautiful Kay Vos with her perfect feminine features and demeanour. That he could find beauty in the fallen, in the past her prime sex worker, in the ill fated women who are despised by the clergy man. He says that he could feel a deeper connection with these women then he could ever feel with Kay Vos.

His perception of beauty in women is very much connected to his aesthetic and understanding of what is 'beautiful' and worthy of artistic attention and effort of painting. Vincent in his letter written to Theo on (7 or 8 January 1882) says that "I struggle and strive to make something myself that is realistic and yet done with feeling." (Van Gogh 137)

His ideas about love are very similar to his idea of art. A connection between these two can be easily drawn. For him, as in his time of when he was in a relationship with Sien was something which is realistic and practical but with feelings.

For his entire life, Vincent kept yearning for the most ordinary delights of bonding, love and companionship. He had the eye to look for and find the sublime in the ordinary that is very well reflected in his choice of subjects for paintings and for his choice to a companion (Sien) in his personal life. He could find something extraordinary in the most ordinary woman like Sien and companionship with her just like he could find something extra ordinary and beautiful in the most ordinary and common people like the peasants or washerwoman or a farmer.

In his relationship with Sien he tried to live and experience the delights which domesticity brings. His relation with Sien became symbolic of the feeling to be 'at home' which he missed throughout his life in company of the people of manners and etiquettes that he hated. He could establish a fulfilling relation with Sien because she was very much like the people he admired and found authentic and real. For him, she came into the same category of the browbeaten peasants that he admired or the coal worker – basically someone who has worked hard, who has seen misery in life, someone who has suffered and that suffering itself has rendered her beautiful, the kind of 'beautiful' that Vincent felt worth painting.

Among all his love interests it is only Sien that he had painted repeatedly and at length. He never painted Ursula or Kay. Although he never painted Kay but his preoccupation with Kay remained and traces of her at times reflected in the paintings he did of Sien. His earlier passions and desire to attain Kay's love and its failure in real life and his attempt to experience what he desired with Kay via Sien manifested unconsciously through his paintings of this time. One particular painting of Sien called *Woman Seated* painted in 1882 is of extreme importance here as his subconscious desire to have Kay for his lover comes out very subtly in this painting. The model for the woman in this painting, who is shown sitting in the chair and lost in thoughts is actually Sien who posed for this painting but the features of the woman shown in this painting has striking resemblance with the appearance of Kay Vos. The frilled dress of the woman in the painting is quite similar to the dress Kay used to wear while brooding posture of the woman is very much similar to Sien's demeanour. Van Gogh has painted Sien as contemplating or brooding not only in this painting but a number of other sketches too, of which *Sorrow* being the most important one.



*Woman Seated*, pencil, pen and brush in black ink, brown/sepia wash, white opaque watercolour, traces of squaring, on laid paper (two sheets), April 1882, [Kröller-Müller Museum](#), Otterlo, The Netherlands.



A photograph of Kay Vos Stricker with her son Jan c. 1879/1880.

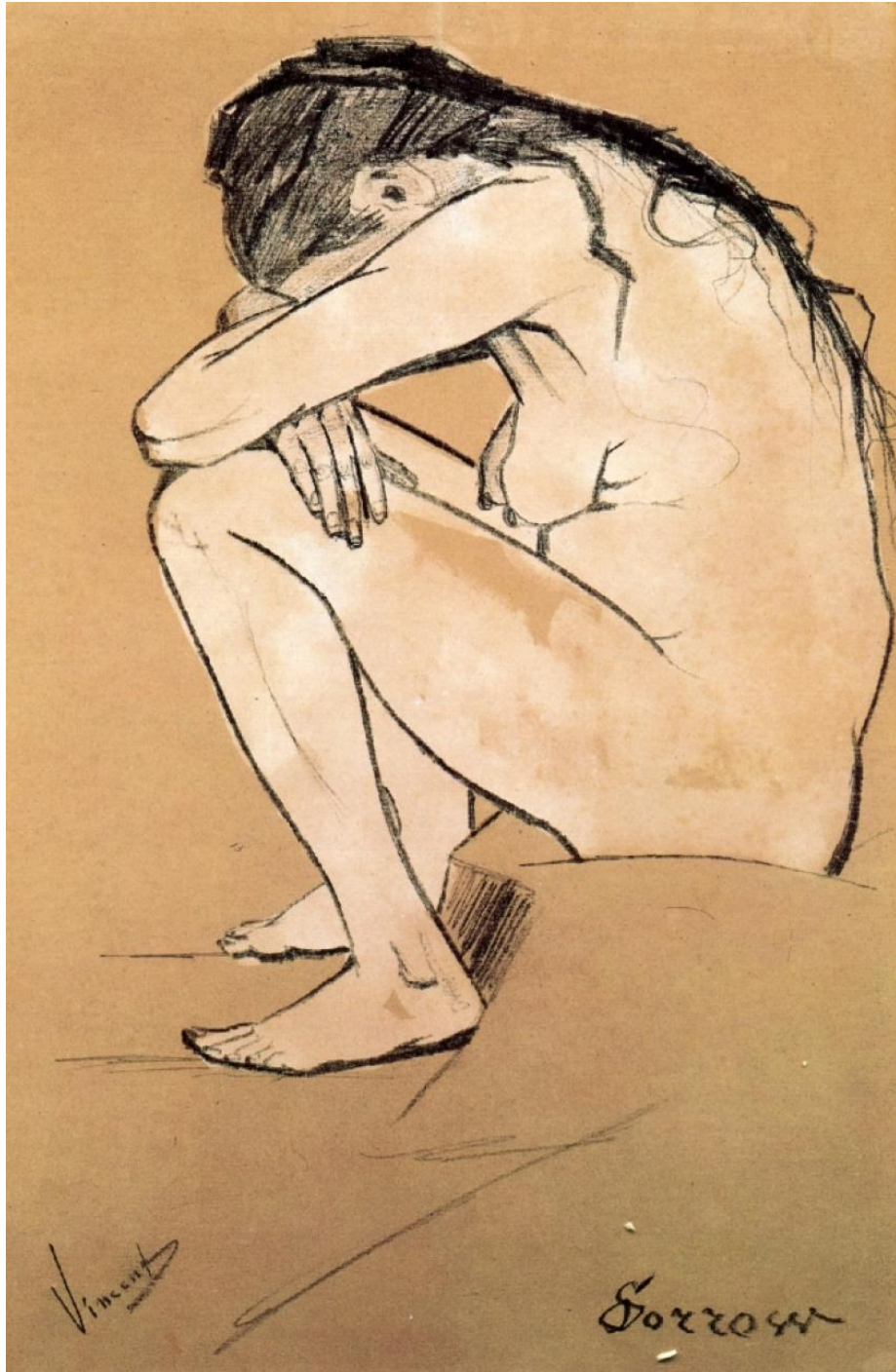
Van Gogh painted *Sorrow* in 1882 while he was living with Sien. Sorrow and pain in life was the element that was common to both of them and in a way was the foundation of their relation where their mutual understanding of pain and suffering became a source of solace for them both. The time Vincent got into a relation with Sien, she was going through a crisis in her life. She was grappling with acute poverty and had no other option to go to street to work as a sex worker at night and as a washerwoman in day time to barely make both ends meet for herself and her children and mother who were totally dependent on her. Thing got worse with her getting pregnant with a stranger's baby making it difficult for her to go to work. It was at this stage Vincent offered to take her in and take care of her. This painting *Sorrow* capture not only the suffering life of Sien but his own too.

“Vincent's inspiration for this remarkable sketch was a clump of grounded, twisted tree roots that had been exposed during a storm among the dunes. The beauty in the tangled mass of sinuous forms – and in the roots still struggling for life – helped Vincent realize the dramatic potential of Sien's emaciated figure.”(Fell) The description of the making of this painting in the novel *Lust for Life* by Stone is also based on the actual inspiration of Van Gogh for this painting. Stone describes the woman in the painting as representing the state of being which has endured the harsh torments of life which has rendered the person rough and brittle. Stone describes the making of the painting as:

He posed Christine naked on a low block of wood near the stove. He turned the block of wood into a tree stump, put in a little vegetation, and transposed the scene to the out-of-doors. Then he drew Christine, gnarled hands on her knees, the face buried in the scraggy arms, the thin hair covering the spine a short way down, the bulbous breasts drooping to meet the lean shanks, the flat feet insecurely on the ground. He called it *Sorrow*. It was the picture of a woman from whom had been squeezed all the juice of life. (174)

Vincent found women in their suffering as aesthetically appealing both for a having a romantic relation and as a subject to paint. Connection between Sien's ugly faded self which Vincent found beautiful to the subject of painting which he found beautiful enough to paint. Of course, Vincent's idea and aesthetic of 'beauty' is both unconventional and revolutionary. He not only revolutionized the art but through his letters he also revolutionized the idea of beauty in women.

Oh, there is gossip enough, because I am always in her company, but why should that bother me? I never had such good assistant as this 'ugly' faded woman. In my eyes she is beautiful, and I find in her exactly what I want, her life has been rough, and sorrow and adversity have put their marks on her. (Van Gogh quoted in Fell, 75)



**Sorrow by Vincent Van Gogh, April, 1882.**



Vincent's idea of beauty in his artistic subjects and love interests seems to be quite similar. His idea of a beautiful woman and what befits the beautiful subject to paint can be seen in his letter to Theo. In a letter to Theo written on 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1885, Van Gogh said –“A peasant girl, in her patched and dusty blue skirt and bodice which have acquired the most delicate shades from the weather, wind and sun, is better looking - in my opinion- than a lady. But if she dons a lady's clothes, then her charm is gone”. (291)

Most of the women depicted in Vincent's work are marked by sadness and tragedy, so deeply were these features of a woman ingrained into his mind. Early portraits, from The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen, show women with bowed heads and downcast eyes, women made ugly by the cares and sorrows of a fruitless existence. (Lubin 87)



Vincent naturally got attracted to tormented and conventionally ugly women and it is in these tragic washed up women both for his paintings and sexually. Vincent's *Sorrow* epitomizes both these aesthetics perfectly as in the painting *Sorrow* he evoked the emotions of grief, with the woman's face down as if in mourning at the same time sexually appealing to Vincent's sensibility. Since he used Sien as a model for this painting, whom he found sexually appealing to him in her ugliness reveals the complex working of artistic aesthetic which very subtly blended with his aesthetics of sexual appeal.

***Woman (Sien) with Baby on her Lap, Half-Figure, September 1882***



*Sien with Child on her Lap*, drawing, 1882, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands



*Sien Nursing Baby*, watercolor, 1882, Private collection



Above: *Sien with Umbrella and Prayer Book*, pencil, black chalk, 1882, Private collection  
Below: *Sien in a White Bonnet*, pencil, black lithographic chalk, washed, December 1882, [Van Gogh Museum](#), Amsterdam, Netherlands.



Above: *Sien, Sewing, Half-Figure*, pencil, lightly washed, 1883, [Kröller-Müller Museum](#), Otterlo, The Netherlands

Below: *Two Women Strolling* (pregnant Sien & her mother), pencil, first half of 1882, Private Collection Netherlands.







***Sien Peeling Potatoes* by Vincent van Gogh, April, 1883.**

Apart from painting Sien's nude figures, Van Gogh also painted Sien multiple times while she was pregnant, in various stages of pregnancy and when the baby was born then he painted her multiple times caressing, cuddling and breastfeeding the child. It was as if Vincent was trying to live through painting what he could not have in his real life and by painting Sien with her child again and again made him fulfil his paternal instincts imagining Sien as his wife and her child as his own. Just like his relationship with Sien was a desperate attempt to live that domestic bliss even with a prostitute, the act of painting her again and again became an attempt to feel the warmth of domesticity and relive the familial bliss translated in form of art. In his painting, in his



attempt live his idea of perfection, Vincent metamorphosed the prostitute into a domestic woman, a wife and a mother and a fellow suffering being, which is evident in the kind of paintings and sketches he made of her.

#### IV

##### **Shallow compromise**

After Van Gogh's affair with Sien ended because of the financial crux and Sien increasingly taxing behaviour, Van Gogh moved to Antwerp to his parent's house to paint the landscape there. Vincent did not fall in love with any other woman again although he yet again came into a relationship of compromise with a woman named Margot Begemann who turned out to be her neighbour. She was twelve years older to him and lived with her four elder sisters who were all unmarried and single and her mother. Vincent's sister in law Jo described Margot as "neither beautiful nor gifted, but she had an active mind and a kind heart. She often visited the poor with Vincent; they walked much together, and on her part at least the friendship soon changed to love." (Fell, 881)

Margot belong to a well off family and had not seen much of the world or any financial difficulty in life living a bourgeois lifestyle in Antwerp. She used to observe Vincent while he painted outside totally engrossed in fields. She took a fancy of Vincent and fell head over heels in love with him. It was the first time in his life that any woman had fallen in love with him without any effort on his part. When Margot proposed to him, he accepted it though he could not feel any passion for her like he felt in case of grieving Kay or in the case of Sien with whom he connected on an even deeper level. Van Gogh used to write to Theo in great detail about both Kay Vos while he was in love her and also about Sien while he started living with her but Van Gogh ever wrote about Margot in neither his letters to Theo nor he ever painted her.

One of the reasons why Vincent could not feel any passion for Margot though she showered her with love and care could be Vincent's attraction to the women in distress. Albert J. Lubin in his book *Stranger on the Earth* explains Van Gogh fixation to the women in distress having its roots in his childhood relation with his mother. Vincent had a problematic relation with his mother Anna the roots of this problematic relation goes even beyond his birth. Before giving birth to

Vincent van Gogh on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1853, Anna gave birth to a child on the same date in 1852 who died soon after his birth. Interesting this first dead child was also named Vincent. Apparently, Anna could never recover from the loss of her first child and always remained distressed and gloomy which affected Anna's relation with his second child Vincent. According to Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Dr. Albert J. Lubin, Vincent faced rejection at her mother's hand as Anna could never overcome the death of her first child and could not focus on the living Vincent. These early impressions of childhood neglect and rejection from his mother and her distressed image got fixated in young Vincent's subconscious mind. Lubin argues that Vincent's fixation on his mother's image in mourning led him to go after women in distressing state and difficult to attain just like the unattainable affection of his mother in his childhood.

Looking at the women he fell in love with, except for Ursula all the women have been in distressed state. When Vincent fall in love with Kay, she was mourning the loss of her husband and was most likely to turn down any man at that time let alone accepting his eccentric first cousin's proposal. His attraction for Kay Vos could be seen as his childhood desire to get attention of his mourning and distant mother and the rejection at Kay's hand might have reminded him of the earlier rejection at his mother's hand. Lubin believes that in Vincent's relation with the prostitute Sien whom he tried to rescue from a destructive lifestyle and poured all his emotions and care on could be studied as a subconscious role reversal on his part. In his mind Sien became himself who needed love, care and attention desperately just like he needed in his childhood and He himself took on the role of a caring mother trying to save Sien from self destruction. Lubin argues that Vincent's attempt of saving Sien was an unconscious attempt to save himself by caring for her.

Coming back to his last relation with Margot, she again became the woman who needed saving from her dominating and suffocating elder sisters and mother. Margot has never had a lover and she lived a loveless life for forty years craving desperately for someone she could love and be loved by. This distressed state of Margot perhaps made Vincent to rescue her from her dominating mother and sisters by accepting to marry her but he could not feel passion towards her. The reason for a lack of passion on Vincent's part could be the fact Margot was too ready to give herself away to him which did not challenge Vincent like in the case of Kay or Sien. Derek Fell in his book *Van Gogh's Women* voices makes a similar argument, he writes –

Robert Harrison, a translator of Vincent's letters, believes she was too compliant in her affections for him to warrant any comment in letters, while Kee's rejection had to be reversed and Sien's relationship had to be justified. Also it's probable that Margot had not been 'ploughed enough'<sup>10</sup> for Vincent's artistic sensibility. Not enough struggle or grief or abuse showed in her features. She was in fact the epitome of women he had said he held no respect for – 'a respectable pious lady', a daughter of a clergyman with a good education. Vincent blamed the narrow-minded churchgoers with whom Margot associated for suffocating her development. 'It is a pity I did not meet her ten years before', wrote Vincent to Theo in a letter, 'Now she gives me the impression of a Cremona violin which has been spoiled by bad, bungling repair. And the condition she was in when I met her proved to be rather too damaged. But originally it was a rare specimen of great value. (Fell, 917)

Clearly in his opinion Vincent did not consider Margot worthy enough to either win his love or be painted by him. His relation with Margot also ended in tragedy as Margot got pregnant with someone else's child and tried to commit suicide, the blame of her attempt to commit suicide was put on him as her family suspected Vincent to be the father of her child. Vincent and Margot's marriage plan did not work as Margot's family did not approve of Vincent. After things ended with Margot on a tragic Vincent never got into any other relation in his life. Lubin regarding Vincent's change in behaviour after his break up with Margot writes –

By the time he met Margot, he had accepted his fate as a man who could not even succeed in having a permanent relationship with a wretched stand-in. Margot, not he, was the one who longed to be married. And after Margot, Vincent no longer seriously ruminated about marriage. Women became incidents in his life, and art his real wife. ...having come to terms with his inability to be intimate with a woman, he declared that he preferred painting a woman's figure to possessing it. (Lubin, 86-87)

Lubin's argument suggesting Vincent replacing paintings itself as his lover and wife does not sound absurd to me but it actually makes a lot of sense considering it is only after Vincent stopped investing in taxing emotional relation with women, he started to produce some of his

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<sup>10</sup> Van Gogh uses the term "Ploughed" to indicate the amount of suffering and hardships of life a person has faced. In his opinion, just like for something of value to grow, the ground has to be ploughed properly first, human beings also need to taste the hardships and suffering in life in order to be of some real value.

mature work. All the important paintings and masterpieces of Van Gogh are post 1884.<sup>11</sup> His first masterpiece *The Potato Eater* was made in April 1885. Ending the desire to marry a woman and having a family of his own, Vincent seem to have devoted all his energies into his art and later on coming up with his own theory of abstaining from having sex in order to paint well and the shifting the focus from searching for a love and companionship with a woman, it shifted to the dreams of companionship with fellow artists and establishing a artists' colony with them. His new focus of seeking companionship in a fellow artist came to reality in his turbulent relation with Paul Gauguin which is explored in the next chapter in detail.

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<sup>11</sup> Vincent's last relation with Margot Begemann started in July 1884 and ended in the same year.

## Chapter 3

### A Comparative View: Van Gogh and Gauguin



The painting on the left hand side is a self portrait by Vincent van Gogh titled *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat* painted in 1887.

The painting on the right hand side is a self portrait painted by Paul Gauguin titled *Portrait de l'artiste au chapeau* in 1893.

## I

### Perceptions

Both Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin expressed their views on sexuality and how they related the sexual act with making art directly or indirectly in their writings and to some extent metaphorically and symbolically through their works of art. Their own views and philosophy of the role sex and sexuality played in their creativity<sup>1</sup> throw light on their own sexual behaviour in their life which is a very crucial standpoint to understand their art in my view.

Martin Gayford in his book called *The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin and Nine Turbulent Weeks in Arles* touches upon Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin's contrasting view on sex, love and marriage among other things.

Fundamentally, he [Vincent] thought of sexual intercourse and painting pictures as two competing ways in which sexual energy could be directed: an occasional brothel visit kept the expenditure of energy on women to a frugal minimum. 'Don't fuck too much,' he exhorted Bernard<sup>2</sup> in his direct Dutch way. 'Your painting will be all the more spermatic.' (184)

While in Paul Gauguin's view sex is the force which made him paint with more enthusiasm and more energy. Gauguin in his letter to a close friend Schuffenecker wrote 'Hygiene and coitus - with that well regulated and independent work a man can manage'. Gauguin's formula for a productive life according to him only was 'Calm down, eat well, fuck well, work ditto and you will die happy' (Gauguin quoted in Gayford, 184). This differential view on the effect of sexual intercourse on the activity of painting which Van Gogh and Gauguin expressed and often argued about while they lived in the yellow house in Arles, the description of these differing views on the role of active sexuality on the process of making art is also dealt in detail in the novel *The Way to Paradise* by Mario Vargas Llosa:

Paul reproached Vincent for making love only with prostitutes; he preferred to seduce women rather than paying for their attentions. And he was having a fairly

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<sup>1</sup> The evidence of which is found in literal works of Paul Gauguin like *Noa Noa* (1893) and *Avant et Apres* (1903) and in various letters of Van Gogh written to his brother Theo.

<sup>2</sup> Emile Bernard was another impressionist painter and a common friend of both Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin

easy time of it with the women of Arles, who loved his good looks, clever talk and easy confidence. Vincent assured him that before Paul's arrival he had visited Madame Virginie's only a few times a month; now, however, he was going twice a week. This new sexual ardour distressed Vincent; he was convinced that the energy he expended in "fornicating" (which, as an ex-Lutherian preacher, was what he called it) was subtracted from his work as an artist. Paul mocked the puritanical prejudices of the ex-pastor. In his case, nothing made him more eager to take up his brush than having first satisfied his cock. "No, no" the mad Dutchman exclaimed in exasperation. "My best work has always been done in the periods of total sexual abstinence. My spermatic painting! I did it by spilling all my sexual energy onto the canvas instead of wasting it on women." (287)

Considering Vincent's life history and his opinion expressed in his letters to Theo, it can be said that for Vincent; love, marriage and companionship remained quite significant and his tormenting feelings for the lack of it is very much evident in his writings. All his romantic liaisons<sup>3</sup> reflect this trait of Vincent. Plans of marriage and togetherness and tender, caring feelings towards the love object has always been an integral part of his love affairs sometime which just happened only in the mind of Vincent in the case of Ursula and Kay Vos as both of these women rejected his proposal at different point in his life. Vincent for his entire life sought after love and stable relationship in his life to share the woes and loneliness of his artistic life with someone. Not having a stable romantic relationship in his life or a wife and children remained a matter of despair and lack on Vincent's part while his views on sex remained puritanical which manifested in his theory and belief of how it was better for him to abstain from "fucking too much" in order to paint well devoting all his energies into his art.

Gauguin on the other hand believed that in order for him to paint well he needed to have an active sexual life and also in his view it is best for an artist to not indulge into sentimental or binding relationships instead he should just "fuck well in order to paint well". These were Paul's later life views when he had already abandoned his wife and children for the sake of his art and was

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<sup>3</sup> In all the major romantic interests of Vincent, be it the landlady's daughter Ursula Bongers, his first cousin Kay Vos, the prostitute Sien or Margot, the element of seeking marriage, love and companionship has always remained an integral part though it never turned into reality. The mention of his love affairs with all these women is found in the novel *Lust for Life* and also in Vincent Van Gogh's biographies by different authors.

exploring both his art and sexuality anew in the tropical island of Tahiti experimenting and freeing both his art and sexuality from conventions. Traces of Paul's changing notion about the role of sexuality and his opinion on the role of sex, love and marriage is found in the novel too. In the novel the omniscient narrator gives a glimpse into Paul's thoughts and opinion on this matter.

By 1888 you had come to the conclusion that Western-style love was a hindrance; that love, for artists, should be exclusively physical and sensual, as it was for primitive peoples, that it should not involve the emotions or the soul. Therefore, when you gave in to the temptations of the flesh and made love – with prostitutes, mostly – it felt like a hygienic act, a diversion without consequences. (Llosa, 249)

It is quite interesting to look at Van Gogh and Gauguin's contrasting take on love and sex from their treatment of women in their life. Paul Gauguin, after abandoning his wife and children and living at different places as a bohemian artist before finally moving to the Island of Tahiti to become a "savage" and also to paint like one, started experimenting with his sexuality. He was believed to take in a number of native Tahitian girls as his wives at different point of time. Paul never took any kind of responsibility or is known to have been in love with any of these "wives". His relation with these native women remained largely physical with no emotions or attachment involved from his side. He almost treated his native wives as whores to serve the purpose satisfying his sexual appetite. He also impregnated several of these native women with his child without taking any responsibility for the girl or for the child just like he left Mette Gad and his five children to fend on their own. He not only impregnated these native women whom he slept with but also knowingly infected them with Syphilis while sleeping with them.

Vincent Van Gogh on the contrary developed emotional bond even with a prostitute<sup>4</sup> so much so that he took her in his house, compromised on his limited financial resources to share it not only with her but her children too. Van Gogh in contrast to Gauguin who abandoned his own children, cheerfully agreed to not only accepts Sien as his wife but also her unborn child she was pregnant with at the time Vincent found her.

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<sup>4</sup> I am here referring to Van Gogh's relation with the pregnant prostitute named Sien towards whom Vincent developed sentimental emotions. He not only just took her in his house but also took care of her during her pregnancy and planned on marrying her and adopting her child as his own, this plan did not work out as Sien later on found it difficult to live with him because of his financial issues and obsession with paintings and they both called it off later.



It is interesting to note that Van Gogh and Gauguin not only had a certain kind of philosophy and view on how their sexual behaviour impacted the flow of their creative juices but they also had very strong and critical opinion about each other's art which came out in heated debates and often almost violent and "electric arguments"<sup>5</sup> that they had while they happened to live together in Arles in 1888 in a yellow house for almost two months. Though this was a short span of period these two artist spend together but this period is considered extremely significant in the terms of the way these two artistic giants who belonged to the artistic movement post-impressionism (without their being fully conscious of the fact) but in their own quite different way and approach to paintings. Although their turbulent relationship developed in Arles but it started way early in Paris itself when Van Gogh was living with his brother Theo in his apartment, it was at that time perhaps they got to know each other although the exact way in which their friendship began could not be known since Vincent was living with Theo at that time so he had no need to communicate to him. Although the question of how their relation started is not that important but the outcome of that relation is important as it impacted both their painting style and life in a significant way.

In order to understand their art and personal life it goes without question to also study the relation that they shared with each other and their opinion about each other's life and art. A few snippets of their mutual relation are shown upon in both the novels in question. Irving Stone devotes an entire chapter titled 'Arles' to the relation between Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh leading to the unfortunate event of Van Gogh's act of self mutilation and cutting off his ear while Llosa also brought in Van Gogh and his unique bond with Paul Gauguin in the form of Gauguin's memories and in the form of commentary by the third person omniscient narrator. The beginning of their friendship is described by the omniscient narrator in *The Way to Paradise* as:

The night that Paul met the mad Dutchman, in the winter of 1887 at the Grand Bouillon, Restaurant du Chalet, in Clichy, Vincent didn't even let Paul congratulate him on the painting he was showing. "it is I who should congratulate you," Vincent said, shaking Paul's hand vigorously. "I've seen your Martinique paintings at Daniel de Montfried's. Astounding! Painted with the Phallus, not the brush – paintings that

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<sup>5</sup> Bradley Collins used this term in the title of his book on the relation of these two painters. Although it was Van Gogh himself who used this term originally in one of his letters to Theo explaining his relation with Paul Gauguin during the time they lived together in Arles in 1888 for almost two months in a yellow house.

are art and sin all at once.”... “This is great painting , it comes from the guts, like blood, like sperm.” He embraced Paul, entreating him, “I want to paint with my phallus, too. Show me how.” And so began their ill-fated friendship. (Llosa, 66)

Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh had heated debates over the techniques of art and they had the irresistible urge to show the other one that how their technique of painting is more meaningful and better than the other. Since Gauguin was a couple of years elder than Van Gogh, naturally had the urge to dominate him<sup>6</sup> and take up the role of his master in the matter of artistic knowledge which Vincent resisted with full force which led to their passionate and turbulent arguments about the superior form of painting, in an attempt to refute one another to assert their supremacy over the other. Irving Stone presents their endless fights over the better technique of art in his novel *Lust for Life* as:

“You’ll never be an artist, Vincent.” Announced Gauguin, “until you can look at nature, come back to your studio and paint it in cold blood.”

“I don’t want to paint in cold blood, you idiot. I want to paint in hot blood! That’s why I am in Arles.”

“All this work you have done is only a slavish copying from nature. You must learn to work extempore.”

“*Extempore!* Good God!”

“And another thing; you would have done well to listen to Seurat. Painting is abstract, my boy. It has no room for the stories you tell and the morals you point out.” (Stone, 363)

This extract from the novel clearly shows how Van Gogh and constantly argued about painting, defending their own technique and critiquing other’s basing it not just on the artistic aspect of the painting but by linking it to each other’s temperament and values in life and the painting being only the reflection of that.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Gauguin was known to have taken young artists under his wing like Charles Laval (another impressionist painter) who considered him as Master and had taken the role of his student. Paul Gauguin’s broad physique and dominant personality and his fascination being surrounding by young submissive boys are a few characteristics of Gauguin which increase the conflicts between him and Van Gogh as Van Gogh wanted him to acknowledge and accept him as his equal.

The mad Dutchman<sup>7</sup> understood perfectly, from the very beginning. The Canvases Paul had painted in Martinique looked as they did, not because of the outrageous colors of the tropics, but because of the freedom of mind and body achieved by an apprentice savage, a painter who was learning all at once to paint, to make love, to obey his instincts, to accept what there was in him of nature and the devil, and to satisfy his appetites like man in his natural state. (Llosa, 67)

Though the criticism and the urge to assert artistic superiority over the other was there but in between all the criticism and drama, there was also the recognition and occasional appreciation of each other's art. Though Gauguin very rarely appreciated Van Gogh's art and even when he did, he did it in the most brisk and dry manner while Van Gogh when in flow of his passionate energy would appreciate his art whole heartily perhaps expecting some recognition for his talents in return which Gauguin hardly reciprocated.

## II

### **The Commonalities and differences in the trajectory of life**

It is very significant to trace the development of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh's life and the kind of relations they maintained prior to the decision of renouncing everything and becoming full time painters in order to understand them as painters and their relation with women after becoming painters. It is quite interesting to note that Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin's lives drastically changed after becoming painters not just in terms of the lifestyle due to lack of money and other resources but also in terms of the way they related to women prior and after the decision of becoming painters also changed. If this assumption is to be believed than it can be inferred that turning artistic had had an impact on their love lives and if we look at it differently it can also be the case that their love life in some way affected their art.

Van Gogh prior to the decision of becoming a full time painter worked at as an art dealer at Goupils and Co. in London, not knowing what he wanted to do exactly but quite unsatisfied with his job of selling artworks to people which in his opinion he found mediocre. At this point Van Gogh fell hopelessly in love with the daughter of his house owner called Ursula Bongers. Ursula

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Gauguin used to call Van Gogh 'mad Dutchman'

was a young girl of eighteen years old, the only girl younger than Van Gogh that he fell for in his life. Ursula did not return his love as she was already engaged to someone else which led to Van Gogh turn melancholic and obsessive for a long time. Van Gogh did not fall for any other women till the time he decided to become a painter. After the first rejection in love, Van Gogh quit his job at the Goupils and company and tried his hands at a number of other vocations. He tried to learn theology and become a scholar and then to become an evangelist but failed at all the career options he tried.

Gauguin as a young adult spent his time working as a sailor for several years before starting a successful career as a stockbroker. At this time he fell in love with a Danish woman named Mette Gad whom he eventually married and over ten years of his marriage had five children with. Paul Gauguin before becoming a full time painter was living a successful bourgeois lifestyle with his bourgeois mindset of being a rich and successful in his promising career as a stock broker settled in his life. From biographical facts it is known that during this time Paul Gauguin remained a faithful husband to his wife Mette and sex did not obsess him as it would obsess him later in his life. He could be called a perfect family man and a successful person in worldly terms so far away from the notorious Paul Gauguin he was yet to become and be known for in Art history for his scandalous life and outrageously flamboyant art.

It is of grave significance to note that both Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh discovered paintings rather late in their lives. Van Gogh discovered paintings in 1880 at the age 28 on the verge of decline and failure. Gauguin also discovered paintings (28?) in his late twenties. It is also very significant to note that both these artists did not receive any formal training and are more or less self taught which in a way contributed to the original and unique style of painting that they would be inventing later which would change the game of art history forever. Though both these artists took to full time painting rather late in their lives but the circumstances in which they led to these decisions were quite different.

When Vincent took to paintings, he was going through the moulting period in his life where he had failed at everything he attempted to do so far. He was going through a phase of melancholy and emotional crisis. He was a failed lover, a failed art dealer, a failed scholar and a failed evangelist. He did not know what to do with his life and at that stage of utter despair and hopelessness he turned to painting.

Gauguin on the other hand was already successful both in the terms of worldly success of material comforts and in his love life too. He was married to the woman he loved, he had an established family and marriage of ten years with his wife Mette Gad and five children. He was totally settled in terms of his family life and financial security. But the stock market crashed which rather became an excuse for Paul Gauguin to leave his career as a stock broker for good and turn to a bohemian life of a painter abandoning his wife and children for good.

Looking at the circumstances in which Van Gogh and Gauguin decided to become full time painters one can easily see that one turned to painting as the last resort when everything be it a promising career, love affair or familial bliss abandoned Van Gogh in a state of melancholy and emptiness while the other turned to painting abandoning everything, severing the ties of ten years old marriage, children, responsibility and a promising career to the journey of becoming a painter. One turned to painting in the event of utter hopelessness and the state of nothingness while the other did it at his saturation point nauseous of the bondages of love, family and a bourgeois lifestyle. It is of grave significance to note that leading a life of a lone artist was not a conscious decision on Van Gogh's part but it was rather circumstantial. Van Gogh very much wanted and craved for the familial life and marital bliss and companionship but was failed to get any of it facing rejection by his love interest Ursula while in the case of Gauguin it was a conscious decision on Gauguin's part to leave his bourgeois lifestyle, his wife and children in order to become a full time painter. For Paul Gauguin painting worked as a catalyst to cut off all social bondages and a step towards personal freedom while for Van Gogh paintings worked as the last resort, last ray of hope to hold on to when everyone and everything rejected him and failed in his life. This difference in the circumstances in which they decided to become artists would have implications on their tendencies and life choices as artists which is also crucial for the kind of art they would be producing.

After studying Van Gogh's life closely one would find a pattern and consistency in his inconsistent life. Van Gogh can be seen as a dedicated and loyal person not just in his loyalty towards his art but also towards the relations he formed in his life time. Vincent Van Gogh's life is marked with his dedication and loyalty towards every job, every relationship he entered. When he decided on studying theology he did it with dedication by studying up to twenty hours a day. When at borinage, he tried to help the miners as genuinely as he could without thinking for

himself. When he fell in love with Kay Vos, he poured his whole heart into it leaving no stone unturned but to no result. He helped and held on the prostitute Sien by connecting with her on a human level and did not leave her till the time she herself felt like going away. He left painting and stayed back home in the event of his mother slipping of the stairs and was advised proper bed rest at the expense of losing on painting time. He decided to marry Margot even though he did not love her but Margot did. His life long lasting bond with his brother Theo and the numerous letters that he wrote to him were not just in response to the monetary help and support that Theo provided him but can also be seen as a mark of the strong bond and feelings of loyalty towards him that Vincent felt. Vincent felt this same passion and sought friendship and companionship from his fellow artists, he remained attached to Paul Gauguin too and did all he could to make him stay at the Yellow house and did not harbor harsh feelings towards him even after Gauguin left him.

Gauguin in this respect of his life seems as a complete opposite of Van Gogh. His life is marked by coldness, betrayal towards others without an exception for anyone and self centeredness of an extreme kind.

### III

#### **Sexualized art and artistic sexuality**

It is very thought provoking to note that Van Gogh, except for the exception of Ursula<sup>8</sup>, always fell for or had a relation with an older woman in his life. Be it with his widowed first cousin Kay Vos who was almost ten years elder to him and already had a baby or the prostitute Sien with whom he was able to connect better and had a working live in relation for almost two years, Sien was also elder to him and already had children and was also pregnant with someone else's child. His next major love affair happened with Margot who was also almost 10 years older than him. It is interesting to note that Van Gogh in all his love affairs only painted Sien in his paintings. He also felt that he had the most fulfilling relation with Sien even deeper than his passionate obsession for his cousin Kay Vos for whom he tried to burn his hand once. One thing that

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<sup>8</sup> Van Gogh fell in love with Ursula as a young adult at the age of twenty one while still working in the London branch of Goupils and co. while Ursula was a young girl of nineteen then. Van Gogh's passionate feelings for Ursula happened before his turning into a painter while all his other affairs happened after becoming an artist.

remained consistent on his part in the treatment of all his love interest is that he desired not just temporary affairs but hoped for getting married and having a family with each one of them. The desire to experience marital bliss and loving companionship did not leave Van Gogh till the end of his artistic career which he unfortunately never got.

Paul Gauguin's life took a drastic shift post his decision of Becoming a full time painter. Earlier he was devoted and loyal to his Danish wife Mette Gad but after deciding to become a painter his personality totally changed. His artistic freedom and sexual freedom came about at the same time. It was the time he experimented with both his art and his sexuality. He started experimenting with his sexuality and engaged in primarily sexual relationships with women. His relationship with women totally changed after turning to paintings. Paintings opened the floodgate of his sexual energy as well. Paul Gauguin got attracted to extremely young girls of barely the age of 13 and 14. He took up a number of wives while living on the island of Tahiti apart from other casual sexual encounters with native women.

Now you had taken a new step toward freedom – from life as a bohemian and artist to life as a primitive, pagan, savage. This was great progress, Paul. Sex for you was no longer a refined form of spiritual decadence, as it was for so many European artists, but a source of health and energy, a way of renewing yourself and restoring your enthusiasm, drive, and will, to create better and live better. Because in the world to which you were finally gaining access, living was a perpetual process of creation. (Llosa, 64)

The contrast between Van Gogh's preference for women and Gauguin's preference is quite striking. On the one hand Van Gogh's libido turned towards elder, and often tortured and broken women while Gauguin's libido turned towards extremely young women. It should also be noted that Van Gogh's attraction towards elderly women could also be seen as primary attraction towards his mother and as a case of unresolved oedipal complex. He felt neglected from his mother as his mother was always in mourning for the child she lost before Vincent which was also named Vincent. Vincent's attraction towards all these women already in pain and living in past can be explained as a transference for his original need of acceptance and love from his mother. Paul Gauguin's attraction to the native women of extremely young age could also be linked with his desire for the love of his mother Aline and an unresolved oedipal complex. It was

a known fact to Paul Gauguin that his mother had a troubled childhood and a tragic life. She was neglected and in a way abandoned by her mother, Paul Gauguin's Grandmother Flora, and was doomed to spend her entire childhood moving from place to place without the love and stability of a family life. Paul Gauguin's mother Aline too had a troubled life and a traumatic childhood which included no sense of a stable home or a family, the trauma of being abducted thrice as a child by his father and being molested and raped by his own father Andre Chazal. Paul knew this fact and it might have impacted him on a subconscious level. It can also be linked to his daughter Aline, the only child Paul was attached to and who was the namesake of his mother. Paul's attraction and sexual relation towards extremely young girls, as young as his daughter Aline and the horrific sexual encounters of his mother at the same age could have affected him on a subconscious level and his sexual interest in extremely young girls could be seen as a displacement of his original sexual desire for his mother whom he saw as reincarnated as his own daughter named Aline and his freed sexual libido found expression in raping and forming sexual relations with extremely young girl child as a displacement of his original love object his mother Aline and his incestuous desire for his own daughter.

Sex had burst into his life too, like the light in his paintings, with uncontrollable belligerence, sweeping away all the scruples and prejudices that until then had kept it in check. Like his fellow shovel-wielders in the pestilent swamps where the locks of the future canal opened, he went in search of the mulattas and black women who flocked to the Panamaian camps. Not only could they be had for a modest sum, they could also be beaten while they were being fucked. If they cried and, frightened, tried to flee, what satisfaction, what cruel pleasure to fall upon them and subdue them, show them who was master. You never loved the Viking<sup>9</sup> like that, Paul, not as you did those black women with enormous breasts, animal maws, and voracious sexes, who burned like braziers. That was why your painting had been so drab and stiff, so conformist and timid – because your spirit, your sensibility, your sex were. (Llosa, 67)

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<sup>9</sup> Another name of his wife Mette Gad



Their art and love interest can be seen as merged in the paintings that these two painters painted of the woman they had also been having sexual relation with. It would be of extreme importance to study these paintings and sketches by these painters of the women they have been having sexual relationship with.

Comparative study as a method “can help us to gain an alternative perspective and get away from the repetitive, inchoate day to day grind that the straightforward chronicle of a life can become. They enable us to sift and creatively reorder the data into a new arrangement.” (Thomson, *Comparing Lives*, 66)

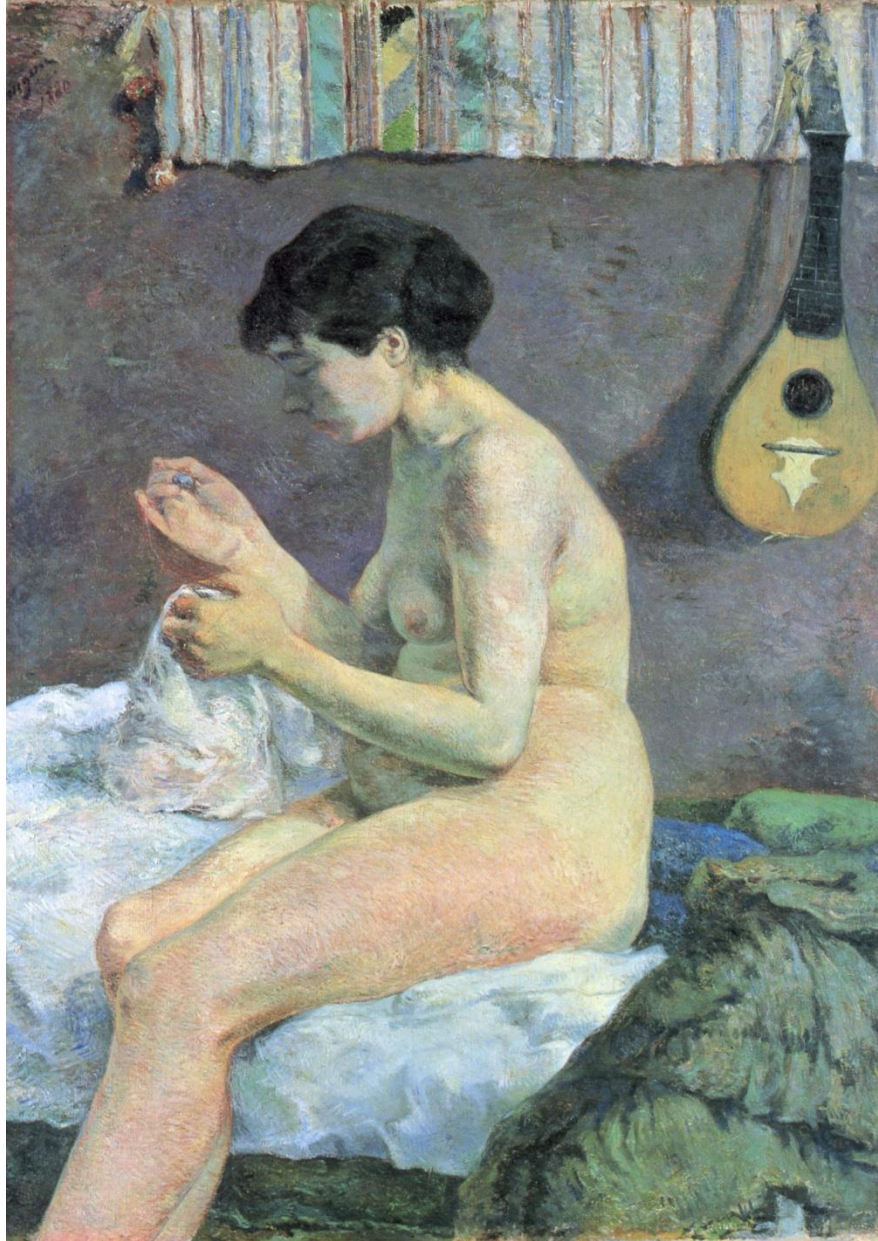
Debora Silverman in her book named *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* uses paintings by these artists in order to comment on the life choices of Van Gogh and Gauguin as a methodology to do a comparative study of their lives. In her book Silverman draws out the contrast between the painting techniques of Van Gogh and Gauguin to find the contrast between their lives. In her analysis she characterizes

Van Gogh as aiming for thickness and textual brushwork, and this is seen as suggestively analogous to his desire to identify with the manual labour of weaving and plowing. Gauguin on the other hand, is seen as cultivating opposite effect: extreme tactics of surface reduction in a drive to weaken materiality of its hold on consciousness. (Thomson ,66)

To understand how Van Gogh and Gauguin’s perception of women affected the way they represented the women figure in their paintings could be understood through a comparative analysis of some selected paintings by these two painters of the women they loved/had a sexual relation with and simultaneously used as models for their paintings. I would exclusively be focusing on the paintings and sketches by these painters of women that they simultaneously loved (or had a relation with) and at the same time painted. I start off with the assumption that there is a relation between the art one produces and the life one lives. Our idea of beauty and aesthetic appeal reflects in both the life choices one makes and the art that one produces.

For this purpose I would be analysing and doing a comparative study of a painting called *Sien Sewing* by Van Gogh with Gauguin’s painting named *Women Sewing*. The reason I have chosen particularly these two paintings is twofold. Firstly, in these paintings both Van Gogh and

Gauguin have dealt with the same theme, depicting a woman engrossed is the act of sewing a piece of cloth but in their own unique style which gives an excellent reference point for me to analyse and study their unique style of painting. Secondly, arguably both these paintings are based on the actual women in their life which opens up the possibility for me to study these paintings in connection with their subconscious sexual desire and sexual behaviour in their personal life with the act of painting itself.



**Paul Gauguin, *Woman Sewing*, 1880. Oil on Canvas, 43 1/2 X 31 in. (114.5 x79.5 cm). New York  
Carlsberg, Copenhagen**

The figure above depicts a painting by Paul Gauguin called *Woman Sewing* which shows a woman sewing or mending a piece of cloth sitting on an unmade bed. This painting painted in 1880 belongs to Gauguin's early period paintings and it basically supposed to be showing a "realistic" representation of woman doing household chore unlike his later symbolic canvases of Pont Aven and Tahiti period. Critics of his time for a long time believed and appreciated this canvas for its representation of a realistic sexual body.

As the Belgian critic Huysmans noted, "It is possible to see in an undraped woman her nationality and the historical era in which she lives, her status, her age, the virginal or deflowered state of her body." For Huysmans, the most intriguing of these characteristics was the "deflowered" state of Gauguin's nude, so visible in her "slightly flabby stomach". The vivid impression that Gauguin achieved of the woman who has known sex and had children allows us, as viewers, to "dream of the sort of life she leads, that we can almost search the marks of childbirth in her limbs and reconstruct her sorrows and joys, identify ourselves with her for a few minutes". It emphasizes the fascination with the "sexual woman" in Impressionist art, a type who was more frequently shown in paintings with open references to prostitution. (Mathews, 46)

Although, these previous interpretations of this painting as Gauguin's attempt to show realistic woman's nude body was challenged later by a contemporary art historian Charles Stuckey. Stuckey in his study of this painting suggested *Woman Sewing* is instead of being a realistic study of a woman's figure is rather a "reaction against the large, conventional genre painting for which his wife has posed, but as a parody of contemporary realist art. After all, as Stuckey pointed out, few women actually sew in the nude with their backs turned to the light. (Gedo,408)

Though the painting seems like a realistic study of a woman's body but a close examination of the painting actually unravels the fact that even in his initial years as an artist, how Gauguin's paintings had the element of thinly veiled symbolism working. On the surface level it looks like that in this particular painting Gauguin was aspiring to do a representation of a realistic body of a realistic woman engaging in household chores like sewing but this painting turns out to be more symbolic than realistic. Given that a *Woman Sewing* is an attempt to capture a realistic portrayal of a woman but in reality no woman sews naked on an unmade bed. On a close observation of

the features of the woman in the painting one can find resemblance of the face and hairdo of the woman in the painting as similar to his own wife Mette Gad. The reference of allusion of the nude figure in the painting with that of Paul Gauguin's wife Mette is also found in N.M. Mathews's book *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, in this book she analyses this painting as:

...it was a daring allusion to his wife's fourth pregnancy and the birth of their son Jean-Rene only a few days after the opening of the impressionist exhibition. To bring attention to his own and Mette's private sexuality in this way foretells the even more shocking sexual reference that Gauguin employed in his later art. (46)

The body of the woman in the painting also works symbolically as Gauguin paints a woman who has known sex, who has been through a pregnancy perhaps in a morbid attempt to bring out the sexuality of his own wife in public in these symbolic ways showing the body of a nude which in those time were dared only by hired models and prostitutes as no upper class woman would dare to pose naked for a painting. Gauguin in this painting seems to be challenging that norm and by painting a golden ring on the finger of the figure to perhaps indicate towards the possibility of married state of the nude figure adding up to the element of secret symbolism and heightened tension in the painting.

Apart from the nude central figure in the painting, the background of the painting also seems to have symbolic significance. The background shows a mandolin hung straight on the wall behind the naked woman on the bed which seems to me to be working as a personal symbolism in the painting. Gauguin was known to both own and play mandolin in his real life. "The emphatic vertical placement of the mandolin, with its thrusting phallic neck overlapping the rug and its rounded shadow abutting the model's shoulder, suggests that Gauguin intended these details to be read as sexual puns." (Gedo, 413) The presence of his mandolin in the background could also be read as symbolising Paul Gauguin's sexual desire for the naked woman and an intrusion into the intimate space of the sexual woman. "The intimate setting in which Gauguin portrayed his nude, seemingly captured unawares in her bedroom, sends the message – whether true or false – that he enjoyed free access to his model's chamber, and by extension, to her sexual favors." (Gedo, 415) The composition of this painting could be read as perhaps hinting towards Gauguin's subconscious mind's fantasy which he would live in his real life later on.

It is interesting to note that Van Gogh also painted a woman engaging in day to day activity like sewing in his paintings. The Paintings that are most significant to examine here in comparison to Gauguin's *Woman Sewing* with allusion to his wife Mette Gad, is Vincent's painting of the prostitute named Clasina Maria Hoornik (Sien), named *Sien Sewing*.

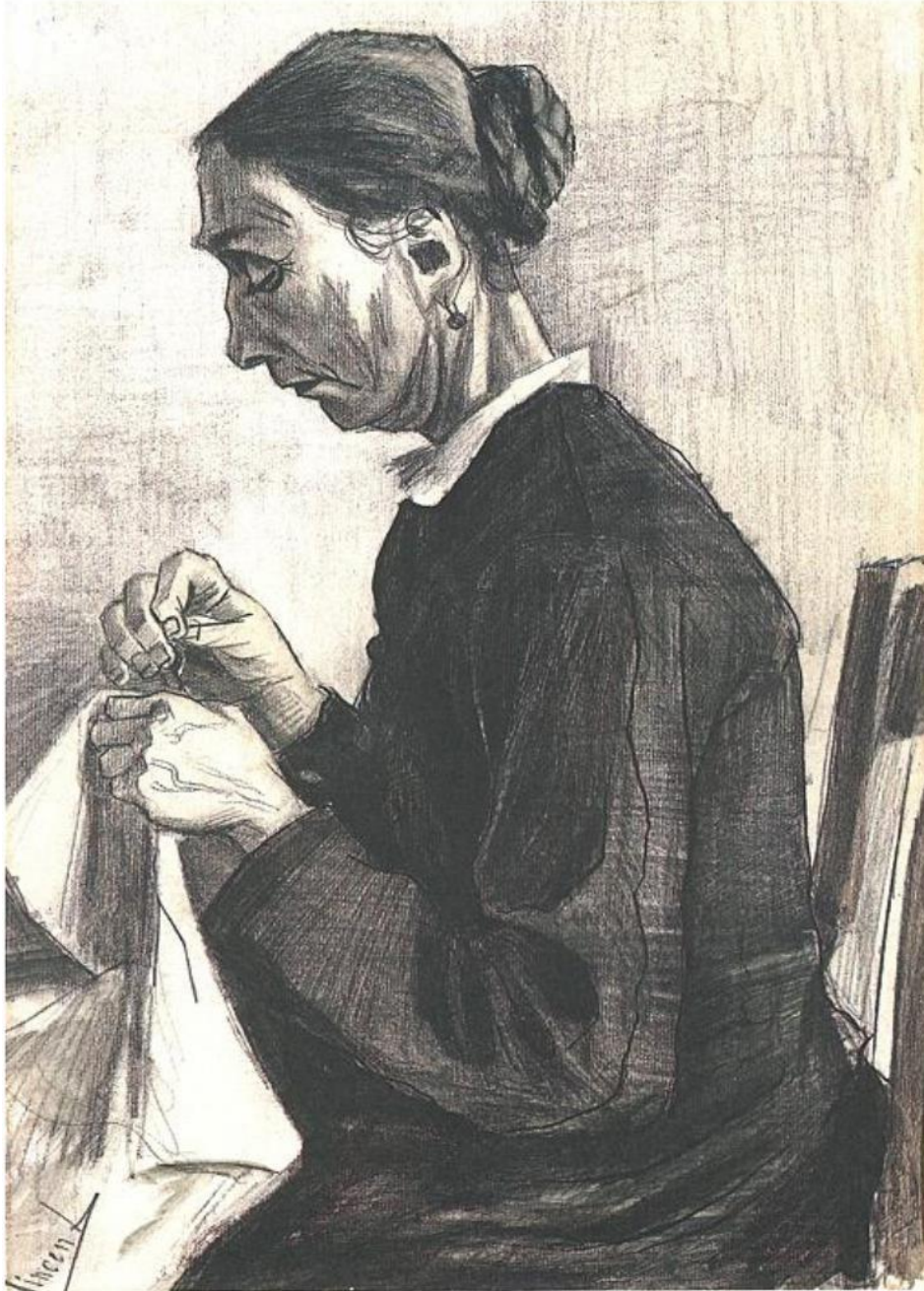
In order to understand Van Gogh's *Sien Sewing* it is very important to contextualize it, Van Gogh preferred to call the prostitute named Clasina Maria Hoornik as Sien and she is referred to as Sien in the novel *Lust for Life* by Irving Stone. Van Gogh's romantic affair with Sien started in January 1882 and it lasted for almost two years finally ending in autumn of 1883. Sien was a washerwoman and a prostitute who was pregnant at the time Van Gogh met her. She served Van Gogh as a model for his paintings and later she moved in with Van Gogh serving both as a model and as a lover. During the period of 1882-83 Van Gogh painted a series of paintings and sketches depicting Sien in various roles, sometimes engaging in household chores, sometimes nursing a baby and sometimes as an embodiment and personification of grief and despair.

Sien had lived a very hard and rough life working as a washerwoman by day and as a prostitute by night for years in order to make ends meet for her family including her two children that she had with random customers, her mother and her brother. When Sien met Vincent she was already a faded woman in her thirties past her prime and aged before time because of the harsh life she led. Van Gogh who considered himself as the painter of the downtrodden people, of peasants and of authentic people who earn their meals by hard labour, felt an instant empathetic connection with Sien as he considered prostitutes as sexual labourers and downtrodden people just like peasants worthy of his empathy and as interesting a subject to paint as poor peasant figure. It is quite interesting to observe that unlike Gauguin's seeing of women in general and prostitutes in particular as sexual objects, Vincent saw prostitutes as humans, as hard labourers and as women who have attained certain by their suffering and harsh life.

This painting by Van Gogh depicts his companion and model Sien engaged in domestic activity of Sewing. The woman shown in the painting looks aged and worn out with wrinkles and fine lines etched on the surface of the face narrating a tale of the harsh life this woman must have lived. The expression on the face of the woman in the painting is stern, serious and perhaps a little gloomy. The hands of this woman in the painting are not the hands of a lady but are hands of a worker which have engaged in harsh manual labor, with swollen knuckles and veins visible.



The woman is seated in the direction of the light source, eyes squinting with the strain of doing the minute needlework, dressed in a plain dress, sitting on a simple wooden chair making a realistic picture of a lower working class woman hard at work in total contrast to Paul Gauguin's supposed "realistic" picture of a woman sewing .



*Sien, Sewing, Half-Figure*, pencil, black mountain chalk 1883, [Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen](#), Rotterdam, The Netherlands

These two early paintings by Van Gogh and Gauguin depicting a similar theme in their own unique way could be taken as a reference point to understand and do a comparative analysis of the working of Van Gogh and Gauguin's mind and as a glimpse into how they perceived women and their aesthetic sense and act of 'seeing' the women in their life through these two paintings. These two paintings from their beginning of their artistic career are also crucial to study their later sexual behavior and as a confluence of the ideas of aesthetic beauty in the matter of both women and art.

#### IV

##### **The aesthetic appeal of the love interests**

It is quite significant to note that of all the women Van Gogh fell in love with or had a romantic/sexual relation with, he only painted Sien. Now the question arises as to why Vincent never painted any of his other lovers? The answer to this question is not very difficult to find as Vincent himself leaves ample hints in the novel *Lust for Life* which is largely based on his letters and meticulously researched facts of Vincent's life. The novel has subtle hints which provide us with a plausible explanation as to why he often painted Sien in his paintings by subtle hints of him considering his relation with Sien as the most significant love affair he had in his life. Vincent's feelings for and perception of Sien is described by the protagonist Vincent in the novel *Lust for Life* as:

Sien is that kind of a person. She is just an ordinary woman of the people, yet for me she has something sublime. Whoever loves an ordinary, commonplace person, and is loved by her, is already happy, notwithstanding the dark side of life. It was the feeling of being of some use that brought me to myself again and made me revive. I did not seek for it, but it found me. Sien puts up with all the worries and troubles of a painter's life, and is so willing to pose that I think I shall become a better artist with her than if I had married Kay. (Stone, 201)



***Sien with a Cigar Sitting on the Floor beside the Fireplace by Vincent Van Gogh, 1882***

Their preference for a certain kind of beauty in women is connected to their subjects of painting. Van Gogh found beauty in the one who has suffered, the ones who have seen pain and sorrow in life. Gauguin liked his women to be extremely young and inexperienced.

...she was younger, perhaps only thirteen or fourteen, like Teha'amana; at the age – which so aroused you – when the early – blooming girls of primitive countries enter adulthood. Her breasts were developed and her thighs were firm, and she was no longer a virgin. But it wasn't the clean-limbed little body of the companion he was vouchsafed by ungrateful Paris – a slip of a thing, a permanent miniature, beside the bulk of forty-five-years-old Paul – that immediately seduced him. (Llosa, 91)





*Nafea Faa Ipoipo (When Will You Marry Me?)* by Paul Gauguin, 1892

It was good to paint with conviction again, knowing that you were painting not only with your hands but also with your memories of the landscapes and people of Tahiti – you missed them terribly, Paul – with their ghosts, and, as the mad Dutchman liked to say, with your Phallus, which sometimes in the middle of a session, would swell at the sight of the naked girl and compel you to take her in your arms and carry her to bed. Painting after making love, with the smell of semen in the air, made you feel young again. (Llosa, 96)

On the other hand Vincent throughout his life got attracted to woman older than her except for his feelings for Ursula before discovering paintings. Take the example of Kay Vos who was older to her and had gone through the pain of a lost spouse. After that, Sien who was also elder to him and has been used and exploited to the last. Her youthful energy spent and attaining a different kind of beauty by suffering and going through hell. As Van Gogh himself accepted his love for Sien was more mature and greater than his love for Kay Vos. Kay represented the perfect 'ideal figure' of a woman. She dominated his realm of fantasies. His love for Kay Vos happened in the realm of ideas without the harsh reality check of the day to day existence. His love for Kay Vos can be compared to his idea of painting from imagination while his affair with Sien became symbolic of the kind of art he preferred. An expression of the life as you see in front of you but with a passionate energy. The spark of extraordinariness in the ordinary. The mundane day to day existence realistic love but with a extraordinary fervent and passion. Van Gogh just like in his art turned the ordinary day to day scenes and landscapes into something extra ordinary by the way he painted it.

Vincent's Van Gogh's fascination with Sien does not seem to much stem from her sexual aspect but rather it stems from his most important and much deprived need of acceptance from someone, companionship, love and domestic bliss of having a family. Vincent's unsuccessful efforts to attain these simple joys of life with other women like Ursula and Kay Vos failed and ended in painful rejection which perhaps heightened the importance of the working relationship he formed with Sien. There was a certain kind of comfort level arising from the fact perhaps of being social outcast and suffering human beings who have struggled, who have seen pain, who have been complete failures in life, unloved and unappreciated by everyone. Vincent in a way could identify with Sien in her suffering which somehow made him consider his relation with Sien as quite significant. The description of their bond is described by Irving Stone in his novel *Lust for Life* as:

They spoke of simple things, without pretence or competition. When Vincent spoke, she listened; she was not eager for him to get through so that she could talk about herself. She had no ego that she wished to assert. Neither of them wished to impress the other. When Sien spoke of her own life, its hardships and miseries, Vincent had only to substitute a few words to make her stories describe perfectly his own. There was no challenge in their words, no affection in their silences. It was the meeting of two souls unmasked, stripped of all class barrier artifice and distinction. (164)

During Vincent's relation with Sien, Vincent often painted Sien in his paintings and sketches but the most prominent and multiple sketches of Sien remained of her engaging in domestic tasks like preparing a meal, mending clothes, sitting by the hearth and after she gave birth to her child, he painted pictures of her nursing and cradling her baby. The pictures Vincent painted depicted Sien were sketched in a crude manner with harsh rough lines in utmost simplicity perhaps in an attempt capture the rough and harsh life of Sien yet with the warmth of being an ordinary woman engaging in the tasks of simple domesticity and motherhood and perhaps by painting Sien in such a manner Vincent tried to bring out the ordinariness of all the prostitutes by transforming the image of seductive creatures into ordinary woman and hard laborers.



***Sien Nursing Baby* by Vincent Van Gogh, 1882**

The figure above depicts one of the many sketches Vincent drew of Sien feeding her baby and nursing it. These various paintings of giving a vibe of domesticity in his paintings and sketches of Sien perhaps unravel his desperate need and desire to feel at home and experiencing the simple joys of familial bliss and the desire to have a wife and children. The protagonist Vincent in the novel *Lust for Life* writes a letter to Theo in a fit of rage to explain how it was justified and important to him to have a relation with Sien even after his declaration of his passionate love for Kay Vos and forming a relationship with Sien after facing rejection at the hands of Kay:

Because Kay turned me down, should all my human feelings be extinguished? When you come here you do not find me discouraged and melancholy, but you come into a studio and a home in full swing; no mysterious studio, but one that is rooted in real life – a studio with a cradle and a baby’s high chair – where there is no stagnation but where everything pushes and urges and stirs to activity. To me it is as clear as day that one must feel what one draws, that one must live in the reality of family life if one wishes to express intimately that family life. (Stone, 201)

It is clear for the above quoted lines that for Vincent companionship and familial ties were an essential need and energy source for him. Vincent never pictured his life as a lone artist, living alone and painting alone which he eventually ended up becoming but he dreamt of being pursuing painting while having a wife and children to support him and keep him joyful and inspired.

Just like Vincent Van Gogh’s series of paintings of Sien nursing her child, Paul Gauguin also painted quite a few paintings with the theme of motherhood and depiction of native women nursing a child. It is quite significant to mention here that in the 1890s it was a rather common practice in the avant-garde circles to depict women in various forms “ranging from the purest virginal maidens to the most evil *femme fatales*.” (Slatkin, 1) Paul Gauguin whose art is considered highly symbolic could be categorized with the symbolist artists of late 19<sup>th</sup> century who “painted images which expressed the concept of woman as fertility goddess or as the archetypal “Good Mother” in Jungian terminology.” (Slatkin, 1) While both Van Gogh and Gauguin painted on the theme of motherhood but perhaps with quite different intention. In Vincent’s case the portrayal of the theme of motherhood reveals his hidden desire to experience fatherhood and to have a wife and children in his real life while Gauguin’s portrayal of Tahitian



women engaged in the act of breastfeeding has just like his any other Tahitian canvases, has layers of hidden symbolism. Wendy Slatkin in her essay called “Maternity and Sexuality in 1890s” tries to contextualise and analyse Paul Gauguin’s paintings dealing with the theme of motherhood. In her essay she writes:

While earlier epochs had assigned humankind’s and nature’s power of reproduction to external forces appeared by the performance of appropriate rituals, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century understood that the power of fertility was firmly associated with human sexuality. Sexuality was seen as an overwhelming force embodied in the woman as seductress to which men must never submit. (1)



*Maternity* by Paul Gauguin, 1899

In the painting called *Maternity* above, Gauguin depicts three young Tahitian women, all of them half naked, one is shown holding a bunch of flowers, the other woman holding a basket of fruit (probably mangoes) and the third one nursing the baby. If observed closely it seems from the composition of the painting that there is a certain circularity in the way these three women are positioned and the use of flowers, fruits and a baby suckling a woman's breasts have deep symbolic meaning. There seem to be a certain connection with the three women in the foreground of the composition looking directly at the viewer and the three men in the background with their fishing hooks, fishing in the river. The painting is infused with sexual symbolism of Gauguin's subconscious sexual desires. Both offering of flowers and fruits have been used by Paul Gauguin in many of his Tahitian canvases as a symbol of sexual desire<sup>10</sup> and the forbidden fruit which he is able to freely eat both in terms of his creative freedom and freedom to assert his sexuality with adolescent native girls in the paradise of Tahiti which was frowned upon in Europe. Nancy Mowll Mathews in her book *Paul Gauguin: An Exotic Life* writes:

But in Tahiti he[Gauguin], like Adam, was happy to succumb to the temptation of the forbidden fruit...Gauguin changed the gender of the figure from the male to female and changed the seduced to the seducer: he revelled in all the possibilities of the erotic encounters that he found in Tahiti. (172)

This painting seems to be narrating the complete cycle of sexual act by the symbolic use of flowers, fruit and a baby. The men fishing in the background trying to trap the fish could be read as men engaged in the various stages of the sexual act while the three women in the foreground symbolize the various stages of seduction where women holding a bunch of flowers symbolizing seducing, the women with the fruit symbolizing the second stage of seduction which is the sexual act and the women with the baby suckling at her breast symbolizing the maternity and the final outcome of that seduction. Gauguin in this painting not only depicts the theme of motherhood but he depicts motherhood as an after effect of seduction the sexual act leading to maternity. The woman figure shown in the painting not only symbolizes a mother figure but also

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<sup>10</sup> The sexual symbolic theme of women with fruit and flowers recurred in a number of Tahitian canvases painted by Gauguin like *Vahine no te Vi (Woman of the Mango)*, 1982, *Fatata te Miti (By the Sea)* and *Two Tahitian Women*, 1899.

as a sexual being. Gauguin also wrote at length about the theme of motherhood in his writings, he said, “In order to conceive a child a woman must commit a little sin, but the sin is absolved by the most beautiful act, creation, a divine act in that it is the continuation of the work of the creator.” (Gauguin quoted in Slatkin, 14). The “little sin” here perhaps refers to the sexual act and maternity being the “divine act”. This statement of Gauguin’s statement could as well referring to his own person life and as a “little sin[ful]” and its role in his process of creating art. Just like Van Gogh’s *Sien Nursing Baby*<sup>11</sup> which via depicting the theme of motherhood also depicts Van Gogh’s reveals some very significant aspects of his own life and his subconscious desires, Paul Gauguin’s *Maternity*<sup>12</sup> also reflects in his symbolic fashion about his own hidden sexual desires through the portrayal of a sexualized mother figure, seducing with the fragrance of flowers and the hint of having eaten the forbidden fruit of sexual experience to attain motherhood.

In this chapter, through the comparative analysis of the love affairs of Van Gogh and Gauguin before and after becoming a painter combined with an analysis of certain paintings of the lovers that Van Gogh and Gauguin painted. . Belinda Thomason also points out the importance and need for doing comparative biographic study. She believes that comparative approach to biography of artists is significant as such a study helps in enriching the already existent knowledge of their works and life though doing such an analysis has its own pitfalls and risks.

In conclusion of this chapter I can safely say that here I have tried to delve into the question of and looked at the possibility of the connecting point of the aesthetic of artistic appeal and sexual appeal for Van Gogh and Gauguin and how one has the potential to impact the other by using a

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<sup>11</sup> Not just this painting but the whole series of painting and sketches done by Van Gogh depicting Sien and her baby. This particular painting is used here just as a representative of all the paintings done by Van Gogh on the theme of motherhood depicting Sien with the baby as presenting and explaining all his paintings on Sien is beyond the limited scope of my dissertation.

<sup>12</sup> Same goes for Gauguin’s *Maternity*; Gauguin also did a series of paintings dealing with different aspects of motherhood. I have chosen this particular painting for analysis because this particular painting gave me the scope to analyze a number of symbolic motifs like fruit and flower (which appear separately and sometimes in combination in a vast number of Tahitian canvases) apart from the theme of motherhood, to talk about the painting’s connection with Gauguin’s subconscious sexual desires and his personal life in general by connecting the painting with his writing.

comparative analysis of some of their paintings depicting woman figure. I have perhaps attempted to sexualize the art and turning artist changed their sexual behaviour and pattern owing to a certain kind of freedom that an artist experiences in dealing with his sexuality too with the artistic freedom and how in turn that libido and sexual preference can also leave traces in the art which is produced and has the potential of contributing to the final product.



## Conclusion

In my thesis I have attempted to study the portrayal of Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin as the main protagonists in biographic narrative novels written on these artists. I am fully aware of the fact that I do not stand in a position to analyze the life and work of Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh from an art historian's point of view or from the point of view of a psychoanalyst. But I can look at and analyze the "characters" Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin portrayed in the novels named *Lust for Life* by Irving Stone and *The Way to Paradise* by Mario Vargas Llosa.

This research could not of course be seen as a full account of each artist's life or of the paintings discussed. In this research my emphasis has been on Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin's relations with women and their homoerotic tendency which extends to the relation with each other. I have traced the relation of Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh's relations with women through the narratives of their lives as presented in *Lust for Life* and *The Way to Paradise* in combination with a few selected paintings of their love interests/ sexual partners.

In a nutshell, in my dissertation basically I have dealt with the question of sexuality and its relation and impact on the art that one produces through the detailed study of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh's personal life as represented in the novels *The Way to Paradise* and *Lust for Life* respectively. Both these novels belong to the genre of biographic narrative novels. A biographic narrative novel is the one which primarily a study of a historical figure based on the actual biographical facts of the concerned person and is based on the meticulous research of biographic historical facts about the concerned person presented in the form of a narrative, using the historical figure as a main protagonist and infusing the narrative with dialogues and recreating various historical events from the author's point of view though keeping the actual facts intact. Both Mario Vargas Llosa and Irving Stone are known for their biographic historic narrative style of novel writing and *The Way to Paradise* and *Lust for Life* presents the artistic struggle and inner turmoil and reconstruction of certain personal events in the form of narratives which led to the creation of some famous artworks by the post impressionist painters Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh often overlapping and providing inter textual references to these two artists unique relationship and bond in both these novel. In my dissertation I have tried to do a psychobiographic study of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh from the reference point

of their sexual behaviour in relation to their certain paintings of their sexual partners /love interest basing it on the biographic narrative of the novels *Lust for Life* and *The Way to Paradise* primarily using Freud's psychoanalytical theory of sexuality as my theoretical framework.

I have divided my dissertation into three parts in the form of three chapters. Chapter one titled 'Paul Gauguin: Becoming of a (Self Fashioned) Lover of Women and Art' exclusively deals with detailed analysis of Paul Gauguin's life and works as narrated in the novel *The Way to Paradise* by Llosa. Chapter two titled 'Vincent Van Gogh's Search for Sublime in the Ordinary (Lover and Art)' focuses on the detailed psychobiographic study of Vincent Van Gogh based on the events and paintings narrated in the novel *Lust for Life*. Chapter 3 titled 'A Comparative View: Van Gogh and Gauguin' focuses on the similarities and differences between the life journeys and works of these two painters by doing a comparative analysis of a few selected paintings of their love interest by these two painters painted on similar themes and by doing an overall analysis of their life and the homoerotic nature of their relationship.

In chapter 1 titled 'Paul Gauguin: Becoming of a (Self Fashioned) Lover of Women and Art', I have tried to study the life of the artist Paul Gauguin as a character and main protagonist of the novel *The Way to Paradise*. Though it is strictly a study of the character Paul Gauguin in the novel, however, use of textual evidence from the original writings of Paul Gauguin and his original paintings (the making of which is described in the novel itself) has been inevitable. At some points the boundary the study of the character and the artist becomes blurred and difficult to establish as at times the character turns into the original artist and the artist becomes the protagonist with ease. I don't really think so a strict demarcation of the two is either possible or desirable considering the fact that Llosa himself bases both his novel and the portrayal of Paul Gauguin largely on the historical artist.

The analysis of the character Paul Gauguin in this research should only be considered as an attempt to study and theorize certain aspects of the artist's life using the theoretical framework of Freud's psychoanalysis and techniques to do psychobiographic study of an artist to enrich the understanding of the art and life of Paul Gauguin not from the viewpoint of the an art historian but from the view point of a literature student as a character study. I have perhaps just attempted to give a personal dimension to the understanding of a historical figure. The analysis of the art work of Paul Gauguin in this chapter has not been done from the perspective of a scholar of art

history but most of the interpretation of Gauguin's art is my done from my own understanding and impression of his art though historical interpretation and understanding of these art works have been taken into consideration. The selection of Paul Gauguin's paintings in this chapter is not based on its artistic significance and importance in the art world but is selected to illuminate and facilitate certain aspect of Gauguin's personal life. The selection of painting here is chosen on the basis of the painting's connection with Gauguin's personal symbolism and as a window to peep into his mind and subconscious desires.

This chapter is divided into four parts dealing with four aspects and stages in his artistic development. Part one titled 'Ancestors: Flora Tristan and Andre Chazal' deals with the analysis of the life history of his grandmother Flora Tristan who apparently influencing force in Gauguin's life and with his grandfather who also indirectly affected the personality of Gauguin. This part exclusively focuses on the detailed historical study of his grand parent's life and their influence and psychoanalytic explanation for such ancestral influence in order to explain certain traits and bold decision of Gauguin's life. Part two of this chapter titled 'Paul Gauguin and a Memory of his Childhood' is based on Freud's Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood'. It focuses with Paul Gauguin's relationship with his mother Aline and attempts to explain Gauguin's later sexual behaviour in terms of his initial sexual attraction towards his mother basing it on his childhood memory of his mother as a beautiful Peruvian woman to explain his later attraction towards young native woman and his desire to go back to his primitive roots and become a savage by his voluntary exile on the Island of Tahiti.

Part 3 titled 'Mette Gad, bourgeois love, family life and all' of chapter 1, focuses on Paul Gauguin's love hate and often violent relation with his wife Mette and studies the pre artistic phase of Gauguin's life where he lived a life of a bourgeois stockbroker with a stable income, promising future, large family of five children and a wife. This part also attempts to study the transition period in Gauguin's life and delves into the probable explanation of his transition from a loyal husband and family man leading a conventional life into a bohemian artist linking this transition with the earlier two parts dealing with the influence of his ancestors on his personality and his complicated relation with his mother Anne and how all these events and influences would have affected his life and their role in his decision to become an artist through the psychoanalysis study of all these events and relations in his life so far. The fourth and final part

of his chapter titled 'becoming of a savage' deals with the most controversial and artistically productive years of his life. This part of the chapter basically studies the drastic changes in his sexual behaviour including his sexual attraction for extremely young native girls, his homosexual adventures with a woodcutter named Jotefa and his incestuous sexual desire for his own daughter Aline all linked up with the study of his earlier life and relations covered in previous three parts. This part studies his changed sexual behaviour through the study of a few paintings of his lovers and the stories behind the making of these paintings in relation to Sigmund Freud's Theory of Sexuality binding all the four parts of this chapter together to form a detailed analysis of Paul Gauguin's personal life with his art.

Chapter 2 titled 'Vincent Van Gogh's Search for Sublime in the Ordinary (Women and Art)' exclusively focuses on the psychobiographic study character of Vincent Van Gogh from the standpoint of his love life and its relation to his art in the novel *Lust for Life*. This chapter is divided into four parts dealing with his significant love affairs with various women in his life and its impact and probable connection with the kind of art that he produced.

I have approached the life and character of Van Gogh differently from the way I have approached the character of Paul Gauguin probably because of the huge difference and contrast in Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh's approach to their life in general and love interests in particular and also because the way Llosa and Stone have chose narrate their lives in the novels *The Way to Paradise* and *Lust for Life* respectively. In the case of Paul Gauguin, his sexual interests and women (and men) he had been involved with are varied, dispersed and difficult to study individually as his affairs post abandonment of Mette remained mostly primarily sexual and adventurous in nature with a number of women and sometimes men. Therefore, it is impossible in his case to trace down and study his each sexual relation individually and separately. Rather in his case, the study has been focused on his sexual behaviour prior and after the decision of becoming an artist with a comparison with early adult sexual behaviour and relation with his wife Mette Gad and his other sexual adventures primarily with a number of Tahitian girls and other women as a cluster to analyses his sexual life in relation to his art. While in the case of Van Gogh, with his huge evidence and material available in the form of hundreds of his meticulous and descriptive letters written to his brother Theo, his sister Will, Paul Gauguin and a number of his other artist friends. The love life and love interests of Van Gogh have not been as dispersed

as that of Gauguin and the nature of his love affairs has been more sentimental in nature instead of just sexual again as opposite to Paul Gauguin. Considering all these factors, my approach and methodology to study their personal lives has been different to each other. In Van Gogh's case I have tried to study and analyses his love life and its relation to his art in four separate sections dealing separately with all his four love affairs/interests during the lifespan of his life.

The first part of the second chapter titled 'First love and the melancholy of dejection' deals with Van Gogh's pre artistic phase when he was trying his hands at a number of different jobs ranging from an art dealer to becoming an evangelist, feeling lost in life and not being able to stick with any of these jobs also not knowing what his true calling in his life is. The focuses his first passionate love interest towards his landowner's daughter Ursula Bongers and the after math of the rejection and Van Gogh's phase depression and melancholy over the rejection and the feeling of unrequited love. This part and study of this particular love affair in Van Gogh's life is significant because the melancholy he faces after the rejection somehow changes Vincent's course of life as after this rejection Vincent changes his job and after trying his hands at various jobs finally discovers his true calling of becoming an artist in a state of total despair and feeling of being a failure. This part establishes the ground and role that rejection in love and subsequent melancholy played in shaping of his life and art.

The second part of this chapter called 'No, never, never' analyses his initial phase of pursuing art and his struggle both with learning and maturing his art and his second passionate love for his widowed cousin Kay Vos and facing humiliation and rejection at her hand one more time. This part of the chapter deals with how Vincent translated the subsequent melancholy from the dejection in love this time into his artistic endeavours. The third part of this chapter titled 'The confluence of the aesthetics of art and love' deals with his another love affair with a prostitute named Sien. It would be the only fulfilling relation Van Gogh will experience in his entire life. The analysis of this part of Van Gogh life and this love affair is very significant as this is the only time Van Gogh love life and art would cross paths and would significantly impact each other. During his relation with Sien Van Gogh shortly lived his desire to have a family of his own, the bliss of domesticity, of a companion to share his joys and sorrows and of having children. He accepted Sien as his wife and Sien's children as his own children though this union did not end into marriage as Van Gogh had expected it to but ended shortly after. This phase of

Van Gogh's life is important because in this period Vincent painted a series of paintings depicting Sien engaged in various household activities providing an opportunity for us to study those paintings in relation with his life. The fourth part of this chapter titled 'Shallow compromise' analyses Van Gogh last prominent relation with his neighbour Margot for whom Van Gogh did not feel any passionate emotions but rather settled for this relation as a compromise on his part but unfortunately this relation too ended shortly with Margot's family's disapproval of the match and Margot's attempt to commit suicide afterwards. This chapter delves with the psychoanalytic analysis of all these events and love affairs that Vincent had in relation to his progression into becoming an artist.

Chapter 3 titled 'A Comparative View: Van Gogh and Gauguin' which attempts to do a comparative study of these two artists from different view point to arrive at a deeper understanding of the unique connection between Van Gogh and Gauguin's life though Poles apart these artists met at certain points to both influence each other's life and art. Just like the first two chapters, this chapter is also divided into four parts and the first one being 'Perceptions' which studies Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh's own philosophies about love and art that they believed in and expressed in form of both their art and writing. Also, this part touches upon Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin's perception about each other's life choices and art. Part 2 of this chapter 'The commonalities and differences in the trajectory of their lives' takes an overall comparative view of their lives covering all the major life events to look at various meeting points these artists where their lives took similar turns and the points where their personalities drastically differed to reach a certain comparative understanding and psychoanalytic explanation of the 'why' question of their sexual behaviour by knitting their lives by both contrast and similarities in a singular narrative.

Part three and four of chapter 3 named 'sexualized art and artistic sexuality' and 'the aesthetic appeal of the love interests' respectively studies a selected number of paintings painted by Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin of the women who interested them both sexually and artistically as they simultaneously both painted and maintained a sexual relation with these women. By a comparative study and detailed analysis of these paintings I have tried to explain their subconscious sexual desires through their art and how their love for art and women at some love got tuned and merged revealing their personal aesthetic common both for art and women.

Having said everything that I have said in this dissertation, I have yet not been able to say enough. I would like to end it on a note of reluctance and perhaps some dissatisfaction and desire to keep going on for a few more pages, understanding, analysing and digging deeper in the richness of the luxuriant and flamboyant life and art of these two artists. As Thomson would say about the indeterminacy and difficulty of the beginnings and endings, "If it is difficult to know how far back to start, it is equally tricky knowing where we should stop our investigations in order to maximize the advantages and avoid the pitfalls. (Thomson, 66), the task is of reaching a point of completion is no doubt difficult but I wonder whether it is even necessary or desirable to reach a certain conclusion? Concluding and giving final statements especially when one is dealing with analysis of something as complex as a human life in my understanding is neither possible nor desirable. It is safer to leave a study involving analysis of the workings of the repressed desires and flamboyance of art without a final statement, without concrete conclusion and incomplete than concluded in organized statements.

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