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Pains of Subaltern In Paints, A Spark of Life To The Dark Souls:

Representation of the Marginalized Peasants And The Artist Vincent Willem Van Gogh

In Van Gogh's Paintings

Vincent Willem van Gogh, a Dutch Post-Impressionist artist, created around 900 paintings, 1,100 drawings and sketches over a decade. Van Gogh gives emphasis to expression of emotions and sensations through light and colour. He tried to express the deepest emotions of his own tormented soul through his paintings. His paintings were a cry for help, to help his own soul and to help the other marginalized section of the society, the poor peasants. Thus, he was also called as 'Peasant Painter'. He was the artist who lives with the peasants in Nuenen and becomes one among them to absorb their lives in brushes and to reflect them through his dark tones of paint. The use of dark tones in these peasant paintings represent their hard work and dark life they were leading. His first masterpiece *The Potato Eaters*

serves as a perfect example for peasant life depicted in shades and one of his famous paintings *The Starry Night* reflects van Gogh's lonely and marginalized condition as an artist.

The peasants of that time were one of the most marginalized sections of people who were not even recognized as a human being. On the other hand, van Gogh himself was a marginalized artist in the artistic world because he lived and painted in the same time when Paris was unfolding the layers of impressionism. But van Gogh was a step ahead and he was trying to break all the conventional rules of impressionism by looking forward to a new trend of painting beyond impressionism. So, being a Post-impressionist artist van Gogh was rejected, he never fit anywhere and was never understood or appreciated by anyone. Adding to the surprise, one and only one painting was sold out during his lifetime. He was accepted as a great artist only after his death. So, being a marginalized, he was able to identify himself with the poor peasants, who were also not recognized for their work. Both being a subaltern, they were kept aside, separated and pulled into the shades of loneliness and emptiness, and were constantly struggling with poverty.

**Key Words:** Marginalized, Peasants, Subaltern, Paintings.

From his adulthood, he was interested in serving the poor people especially the manual workers. As an artist as well as a human being van Gogh was always attracted to the traits and humanity of the peasants. He found them as noble. When he was in Nuenen, he had painted fifty peasants' heads. He had held the labourers to a high position in the same way he approaches his paintings. To capture their deep feelings realistically and with objectivity, van Gogh lived as they lived, he worked in the fields with them, and even endures the weather for long hours as they were. He even changed his appearance and manner of speech. And thus,

lead a peasant lifestyle. So, the peasant- paintings of him are not an imaginary one but realistic which carries the sweat and blood of the subaltern, the marginalized peasants.

All the peasant figures were painted with faces which show the wearisome labour and hardships they were facing in their work and life. His famous *The Potato Eaters* depicts the daily life routine of a peasant family, a slice out from their life. The women and the men in the picture are wearing dull and tired faces. They painted with earthly colours instead of bright colours and this shows their wear and tear of life which is inevitable. A gloom of dark tonality spreads all over in this painting. After their work they are dining together, but none of their faces carry happiness. Even the potatoes they are eating speak of their poverty and troublesome life because after all these hectic work they were not even able to take a good meal but only potatoes. For them, table is their altar and the food is their sacrament for each one who has laboured. Van Gogh had painted them with homely faces and in colour and modelling it resembles them of the same potatoes which nourish them. He even repainted the heads of the peasants to make them the colour of a 'really dusty potato'. The characters which assembled this painting are of real life characters. Van Gogh has used the de Groots family, a Netherlands farming family of his acquaintance as his subject of this painting. He has also painted them in his 1885 work, *The Cottage*.

His painting *Old Peasant (Patience Escalier)* (1888) is considered as the last realistic portrait of a peasant in the tradition of Western painting. Van Gogh painted the peasant in such a way that he is formed both from sun as well as from earth. Even though his substance glows, he never lost his earthy brownness. This earthy nature shows his humbleness and simplicity. His blue cape and the burnt orange background are an inversion of the Provencal sky and earth. Firstly, he is speaking to us through his eyes and next through his face. His masterfully drawn hands show his strength and picturises him as a hardworking stubborn man of ages, who becomes a 'used to' follower of peasant life. Every one of his community tries

to overcome their hardships by being close to nature. This peasant seems to be a representative of their peasant folk who closely hold themselves to the heaven and earth.

In a letter to his brother Theo in July 1885 he wrote that he had seen a woman who is digging carrots on the ground. Van Gogh had watched from her front and her head was almost on the ground. Being inspired by their life style, he tried to convert their life into hues and his painting *Peasant Woman Digging* (1885) speaks of this peasant woman which he had experienced. This painting brims with the peasant life in drab earth colours. He had painted her with all her roughness which reflects both in her posture and work.

Van Gogh himself was considered as a marginalized from his childhood onwards. His birthday reminds him about the death of his elder baby brother and for his parents his date of birth (30<sup>th</sup> March, 1853) was the first anniversary of his dead son with the same name, Vincent. So, he considered himself as a 'replacement child' which haunts him for his entire life. So, from his childhood onwards he was living in a self imposed prison of loneliness. For him, being a replacement child was like being a marginalized. In his adulthood he longs to be a missionary but his ideologies were that of the old Christian saints which contradicts with the missionaries of van Gogh's age. So, among those missionaries he was being a subaltern and later, he was even rejected from church for his concern for the poor peasants. Later on, when he turned to be an artist, he was rejected because he rejected the old concepts of Impressionism and embraced Post-Impressionism. Thus, he was leading the life of a subaltern who was kept aside in his entire life. And in most of his paintings he leaves the traces of his loneliness and his deep feelings of being a marginalized.

In his famous *The Starry Night* (1889), he had absorbed the beauty of the dark blue night lit with stars in his canvas. In the painting we can see a lonely church kept in the dark and this can be connected to van Gogh's own life which symbolizes his marginalization by the missionaries of the church where he was kept aside, alone in darkness. The eleven stars

painted here has an allusion to the bible quoting the Genesis 37:9, refers to the story of Joseph who was thrown into a pit and sold off as a slave and sentenced into imprisonment for years and this simply refers to the life of Van Gogh who was leading the life of a prisoner in the asylum for years. The eleven stars in the painting may be referred to the eleven brothers of Joseph who have not given any respect and love to Joseph and this situation of disrespect was also faced by Van Gogh himself as an artist when the critics of that time failed to recognize and accept the artistic works of Van Gogh.

The other painting *Van Gogh's Chair* (1888) shows an empty rustic wooden chair and on the woven straw seat there is a decorated pipe and a pouch of pipe tobacco. The empty chair shows the owner of the chair as missing. This symbolizes his absence from the artistic world because he was dragged away from the universe of art by the critics of that time. This painting was done at the time of his strained relationship with his friend Paul Gauguin and so, van Gogh even thought that he was not recognized as an artist even by his friend.

*Church at Auvers* (1890) is a painting from the last few months of van Gogh's life. In this painting, van Gogh had distorted and flattened out the architecture of the church and this shadows his own complex relationship to spirituality and religion. The use of the acidic tones and the darkness of the church alludes to the impending mental disquiet that would eventually erupt within van Gogh and lead to his suicide.

Thus, Vincent van Gogh is not an artist who had painted the peasant life to show the picturesqueness, but was moved by their entire aspects of life. He had a deep affinity and solidarity with poor people because their lives, like his own, were burdened with care. So, van Gogh sees his own reflection in those peasants. His paintings were an attempt to bring both the life of van Gogh and the peasants light, voice to the voiceless dark souls, because both were living in the same world of loneliness, poverty and marginalization.

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