

## **Poverty and Social Solidarity in Vincent Van Gogh's painting "The potato Eaters" and Mohammed El- Bissatie's Novel "Hunger": A Comparative Literature Study Through the Sustainable Development Perspective**

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Vincent Van Gogh (1853- 1890) created his painting the Potato Eaters in 1885. In his painting Van Gogh shows a poor family of peasants while they are having their meal of potatoes in their simple cottage. The figures in the painting reflect feelings of deprivation and hunger, however, their circle around the table expresses social solidarity and warmth. Mohammed El- Bissatie published his novel *Al Goo*, (Hunger) in 2007. It was translated into English by Denys Johnson Davis and was published in 2008. The main characters in this novel who are the poor family of Zaghoul and Sakeena, suffer poverty and hunger. Beside their son, Zahir the two characters take turns to find food for the family. Most of the time they do not have enough food and depend on borrowing bread from their neighbors.

Poverty and hunger have always been among the main subjects of the United Nations project of sustainable development,

Contemporary understanding of the concept of sustainable development is considered through the United Nations Millennium Development Goals focused on a complex global situation, such as population growth, hunger and poverty... . (Klarin 87)

In their works, Van Gogh and El- Bissatie show the negative influences of poverty and hunger on man in different places and times of the world. They represent the artistic and literary contribution to the world efforts to face poverty and hunger.

Introducing these figures and characters, who are exposed to poverty and hunger beside the failure of their local societies to help them may motivate the world to exert more efforts to support the poor around the world, individual, families and groups... can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain types of diet... and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely... approved, in the societies to which they belong. (U S Department... 31)

So lack of food is the first trait of the poor when they are defined. "It is a bitter irony that half of the hungry people are farmers" (Devereux 6). The figures in the Potato Eaters are farmers and the characters of Hunger live in a village. Poverty or more specifically hunger is faced in the two works only by family and social solidarity, Family solidarity originated in social psychology. Humans, for instance focused on those elements of human interaction... the greater the interaction, mutual affection, and shared norms and commitment to the group, the more cohesion the group would show. (Komter 150).

Motivated by the family relations in the portrait and the family relations beside the neighbors in the novel the poor can partially face their hunger. Some "accounts held that the value of social relationships or other social phenomena... is the value they contribute to the lives of individuals" (Mason 42). So through solidarity the relations of the family and the neighbors prove their value in the two works.

This paper has two main aims: the first is to show the influences of poverty and hunger on the figures of the painting and the characters of the novel. The second aim is to show how the familial and social solidarity face poverty and hunger. So the paper comes in two parts. In the first part the paper discusses the negative effects of poverty and hunger on the figures of the Potato Eaters and on the main characters of Hunger. The paper in the second part highlights the ways in which the family in the portrait and the family accompanied by the neighbors in the novel help in relieving the influences of poverty.

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The potato Eater and Hunger are two different forms of art, however, they show the similar features of poverty. Some of these features are visible and easily noticed like the scant furniture and the weak bodies of the figures of the painting and the characters of the novel. Other features of poverty such as being distant from each other and not communicating are related to their social and psychological conditions.

The small, narrow and dark cottage of the painting contains beside the small table, little and unnecessary objects, "A clock and small painting of the crucifixion on the left and shelves with kitchen utensils on the right wall represent the scant furnishings " ( Beaujean 22). Their things are important for their life, however, they are cheap and very little.

In Hunger, El- Bissatie also refers to very little and simple furniture, "Sakeena wakes up early and seats herself on the stone bench... her husband on the other end of the bench' ( El- Bissatie 3). The stone bench represents their only piece of furniture. It is the place where they comfort themselves and spend most of the day and night. It is the living room where they sit, talk and eat. But where they keep their food?

Very little times in their life this family have extra food, and it is one type of food the loaves of bread," the loaves that were left she kept in the palm crate that she hung by a rope from the ceiling, fixing one end of the rope to a nail by the courtyard, keeping the bread away from the rats and from the eyes of her husband and the two boys " (El- Bissatie 15). Very simple device to protect the few loaves in the house from rats and the hungry members of the family. Zaghlool's house also contains as little and unnecessary objects as the cottage of the potato eaters, only the stone bench and the palm crate.

Eating one type of food is a common feature of poverty in the painting and the novel. The food in front of Van Gogh's figures is potatoes and the usual food of El- Bissatie's characters is bread. In Europe, "during the 18<sup>th</sup> century potato became the bread for the poor people" (Hautvast 37). The poor are usually unable to offer more than one type of food for the family. Because the long hours of hunger, the one type of food does not affect their appetite. However, the rarity of the rich sources of vitamins affects the physical and healthy conditions of the Potato Eaters and Zaghlool's family.

The faces and bodies of the four figures that face the viewers in the potato Eaters clearly and terribly show the bad influence of poverty, hunger and one type food. "Aspects of poverty that are directly or indirectly related to health were also painted frequently in the 19<sup>th</sup> century... (and) were important in raising concerns about poverty" (Chapman 1502). In Van Gogh's painting, the two figures on the left seem to be younger. The face of the man is boney and has no flesh. His nose and jaws seem to be getting out of the rest of his face. The right hand, of the woman beside him, has much bones and bigger than his hand. The two old women on the right have many deformities in their faces and bodies. They have curved backs and their necks are not tall enough. Van Gogh gives the viewers the back of the fifth figure, who seems to be a young girl not to decrease the bad influence of poverty and hunger, of the old figures, by her young face.

Many times in his novel, Hunger, El- Bissatie refers to the bad influences of the hunger on the characters of the novel. It causes them sleep disrupts and stomach troubles. "The four of them went to sleep with empty stomach; their sleep was disrupted. She felt the two boys sitting up during their sleep, looking around here and there, then lying down" (El Bissatie 4). The two sons could no sleep quietly because of hunger. "Who, but them in the lane, was still up at this hour? Colic brought on by hunger keeps sleep away" (El Bissatie 17). The troubles in their stomach because of hunger prevent them from sleep. Zahir and Ragab cannot sleep peacefully for some time. Hunger causes them stomachache and keeps sleep away from them. When they are awake hunger keeps the characters away from each other.

Even in their narrow places, the figures of the painting and the characters of the novel are kept away from each other. In their small and crowded cottage "the wall between the two figures at the right creates a strange partitioning of the intimate space" (Vincent 1). Poverty, which interferes in the way of building the house, obligates that partition to hold the wall of the cottage and at the same time separates the two members of the family from each other.

In the novel the hungry characters willingly choose to stay away from each other. The wife "Sakeena was at her place on the stone bench awaiting the coming of the day... Zaghlool; at the other end of the stone bench, was sucking the length of straw ..." (El- Bissatie 117). Hunger separates the wife from her husband. They do not sit besides each other, but each has his own fixed place at one end of the stone bench. The length of the straw in the mouth of Zaghlool makes it busy. The husband does not communicate with his wife.

Similarly the figures in the Potato Eaters do not communicate. Gogh

Simply records the villagers look full mistrust; they remain in some unfathomable depths of their own, not communicating with their vis- a- vis gazing straight past at some imaginary world. (Vincent 2)

The eyes of the four figures do not meet. They do not communicate. Instead, each escapes to his own depth where he chooses to look at his imaginative world. They do not love or trust their real world of poverty

and hunger. Each may feel the shame of his disability to help himself and his family. Poverty and hunger prevent their communicating and let each of them in a sad isolation.

Hunger also gets vitality and happiness away from the figures in Van Gogh's painting. The figures seem to be fixed, "the few actions shown focus solely on the meager meal, the faces look serious and sad, the attitudes indicate dejection (Beaujean 22). All the figures concentrate on the little poor meal of potatoes. Their faces are serious and sad. The figures or clearly suffering depression and they are living in despair. In such atmosphere hope is important to keep man alive.

In spite of that dull atmosphere, which is created by the bony, depressed figures, the view can not miss the feeling of hope, "the eyes of the two figures at the left shine with an inner light... 'I like so much better to paint the eyes of people than to paint cathedrals' Van Gogh wrote shortly later" (Vincent 1, 2). The feeling of hope comes from the beams of light that are sent from the eyes of the two younger figures on the left of the viewer. The man and woman may relate to the future than the two old women on the right.

Similarly, in his novel, El- Bissatie uses poverty and hunger to draw four depressed characters. However, Zaghoul and Sakeena do not completely lose hope,

Though hunger is so continuously present in the four member family of Zaghoul that it causes stomach troubles for his two sons, they rarely complain. The conditions are difficult perhaps, however, the husband and the wife are not drowned in despair. (Kamniski 1)

The patient husband and wife still feel some hope in life. The intermittent appearances of the food in their life keep them alive.

The merit of persistence in the art of painting emphasizes the traits and expressions of the figures in van Gogh's the Potato Eaters. Skillfully, El-Bissatie enjoys this merit of painting in his novel through the repetition of the first scene of the novel at the very end of the novel. He described the hungry family of Zaghoul,

As usual when there is no bread left in the house, Sakeena wakes up early and seats herself on the stone bench...

She is joined by her husband and the two boys, who are still sleepy ..., her husband on the other end of the bench, cleaning his teeth with a piece of straw.

(El- Bissatie 3)

El- Bissatie typically repeats the scene, "Sakeena was at her place on the stone bench awaiting the coming of the day..., Zaghoul at the other end of the stone bench, was sucking the length of straw..." (El-Bissatie 117). The occasional chances of heaving food throughout the novel does not change the life of the family. Their state of suffering is as fixed as that of the figures in van Gogh's the Potato Easter.

## II

Poverty and hunger are faced in the Potato Eaters and in Hunger only by social solidarity. In the painting social solidarity is represented by cooperation, which means giving and taking. In the novel, social solidarity has the same tool of giving and taking beside that of one way giving. Concerning the general idea of giving,

large category of motives is related to psychological expectations of reciprocity and equality. The underlying idea is that favors have to be reciprocated with equivalent value ... (for. instance in case of help). (Komter 48)

The family member's feelings of belonging and adherence, of being responsible for the other members of the family is clear in the positions of the figures in the painting. The viewer can easily notice something that connects them together, "it is the purity of familial souls whom care for one another and the hard struggle with the earth and weather leave little place for self- striving" (Vincent 1). Being together in one place under one light and around one table united them.

The feeling of commitment and equality join the figures in on union. The table in the painting is a square one, however, the figures seem in a complete circle, which means power in the face of their challenges. The circle also puts each member in the focus of the other figures, which achieves some certainty and confidence for each one. The similar distance between the five figures in the circle, where there is no any weak point, emphasizes equality and the power of the family.

The idea of equality as a condition for cooperation and for the principle of give and take in facing the difficulties, either out or inside the cottage, is clear in the fifth figure. The young girl, that gives her back to the viewer, is as important as the other figure. She completes the circle that connects the figures and gives their union the trait of strength. She also gives the other old figures a chance to have little lighted and expressive faces and bodies. Van Gogh, in spite of the absence of her face, makes her as important as any other figure.

In spite of being poor, hunger and sad, the figures enjoy being together. They eat potatoes and have hot drink. They have the power to continue their struggles with hunger and cold weather. Because they are five persons, the narrow cottage, the light over their heads and food are sources of family warmth, with which they can survive hunger and cold.

Thus, it is clear that reciprocity and equality are the clear motives of cooperation or give and take in Van Gogh's painting, the Potato Eaters. Everyone equally gives the rest members of the group and equally takes from every member. Each one has the commitment and the responsibility to give and help the others and also expected to take and to be helped. In spite of all this co-operation and certainty, poverty and hunger seem to win the fight with familial solidarity. The figures are sad and absent minded. They are unable, even in the time of their rest to look in the eyes of each other.

In El- Bissatie's novel, *Hunger*, social solidarity is represented in two forms, give and take beside one way giving tool. Zaghoul, Sakeena and Zahir, each one takes his turn in working for sometime and gets some food for all members of the family. Sakeena and her neighbors cooperate through borrowing bread and other types of food from each other. Abdullah, Zahir's friend, represents the one giving tool when he gives Zahir some food from time to time. So the great space of the form of novel enables El- Bissatie to show two types of social solidarity.

For a short time, Hag Abdel Reheem gives Zaghoul a chance to work with him,

... Here's something." He gave a handful of loose coins from his pocket without counting them.

"Buy them something, and come back at sunset ... the pointed outside the room. " Take the left- overs from lunch...". (El- Bissatie 44)

Only some money in coins, which means that it is a small amount of money and the little food left from the meal of Hag Abdel Reheem are given to Zaghoul to carry them to his poor family members, Sakeena, Zahir and Ragab. After short time Hag Abdel Reheem dies and Zaghoul loses the job.

Sakeena is luckier than her husband, through her relationship with the two girls, the servants in the house of Hag Hashim's house, she can afford much food and comfort for her family

She understood that they wanted her to share in the food. She was moving closer when she noticed the arm stretched out to her with a loaf of bread with a piece of cheese on top of it, so she took it. (El-Bissatie 78)

This is the first time and it is before she actually works with them in the house. Sakeena is not happy with this little food because it will not reach her hungry family and she is mentally busy with having her chance and working in that house.

In the second time, Sakeena works with the two girls, the servants of the house, so she is happy, not only because they give her much more food but also because she is more confident with working there.

Sakeena was standing in the kitchen washing the dishes after the meal.

"Take the rest of the food with you for the children."

Zubeida told her.

The joy overwhelmed her! She had been thinking about what they would eat, having left them in the morning with empty bellies.... (El- Bissatie 83)

The rest of the food of Hag Hashim lets the joy to overwhelm Sakeena when she thinks of the quantity and the types of food that her hungry family will eat. This time her great happiness is supported by her confidence because she works now in the house and her family may repeatedly have such rich meals.

In the following time Sakeena is especially happy. Her work in Hag Hashim's house gives her the chance to produce not only food but also a good place for them to stay and to sleep. She went out- she could not contain herself for joy: the cooking pot full of food was tied up in a piece of cloth. And Zaghoul and the two boys would sleep early in clean bedding and would have dinner and breakfast- and she would do something about lunch too. (El- Bissatie 85)

Sakeena is about to lose her balance because of the much joy she feels since she through her work could offer three good meals and a clean place to sleep for her family. In this scene Sakeena is about to win her struggle with poverty and hunger. However, this life continues for very short time and they return back to suffer hunger and poverty.

Then, the turn of the older son, Zahir, comes to find, through work, some food and offer it to his family. For some time he is able to help the members of his family to face hunger. Zahir, "stretched his hand and took a piece. A voice came from inside the darkness. 'Take some if you want'... 'Come and sweep up the oven, and then you can fill your lap' " (El- Bissatie 101). When he arrives home with the bread his mother is so happy. She "brought down the reed crate and emptied what he was carrying into it ... 'All that ... all that ... where did you get it?' " (El- Bissatie 102). But again, Zahir's simple work can not offer food every day for the family and they return to struggle with hunger most of their time.

Work fails to get hunger away from the family. Every member of the family, who is able to work, exerts great effort to help himself and the rest of the family. Zaghoul, Sakeena and Zahir can get food to the house for some time, however work do not continue and fail to stop their suffering of poverty and hunger. Work as a way of having food is not the only way as long as the family live among a society. There should be another way for people to help each other, since hunger is a common problem for most of the families.

In El-Bissatie's novel, borrowing is a famous way of social solidarity in the village of Zaghoul's family. The families, through mothers, borrow every type of food from each other. When Sakeena bakes bread for her family the bread,

was enough that she was going to settle her debts, which had been long outstanding. She could always borrow when things became difficult. She put aside the number of loaves owed to each of the women, beginning to pay them back immediately on her return from the bakery. (El- Bissatie 15)

There is a complete system of borrowing that keeps the rights of the two sides. Sakeena knows the number of the loaves and she does not slow returning the debts. She returns the borrowed loaves to the women immediately after returning from the bakery.

Borrowing as a strict system of social solidarity allows some exceptions. Some types of food and drinks, when borrowed in little quantities could not be returned . Sakeena explains:

The last time was when Zaghoul had worked for two whole months, and there was everything in the house: a woman came and asked for sugar and tea, enough for the pot that was on the fire, and with the guest sitting there... the sugar and the tea for the pot was never given back... Many things were given and not returned. ( El- Bissatie 39)

When the quantity of the food borrowed is so little and is taken in the presence of a guest, the borrower is not obliged to return it. In this case it is seen as one way giving,

By means of giving a gift one may hope to reduce uncertainty..., the majority of gifts are given in order to a certain and fortify relationships that are deemed important but have not yet been stabilized.

(Komter 47)

The friendship between Abdullah and Zahir is not strong enough and Abdullah's family do not know anything about this relation. Abdullah's father seems to refuse such friendship. The first and only time he meets Zahir, he dismisses Zahir. So the friendship of Zahir and Abdullah was not strong enough and Abdullah gives Zahir a food gift from time to time to fortify their relation.

The threat of this friendship is Abdullah's father. Abdullah secretly smuggles the bread from his family's house and gives it to his friend. Zahir heard a "Ssh!" and saw Abdullah sprawled out on the roof with his head thrust out, looking in both directions. The string was let down, its end twisted around a loaf of bread, a large, dry loaf that swung as it was lowered . Zahir stared at it, his hands at the ready to catch it if it fell. He undid the string and looked at Abdullah, who was signing to him to hurry away. (El- Bissatie 109)

That scene shows the great effort that Abdullah exerts in the process of smuggling the loaves to Zahir, Abdullah really tries to strengthen their friendship, but what he does in this scene reflects a great sympathy with a hungry friend. Zahir also is terribly hungry. His severe hunger is clear in his story at the loaf and in his readiness to catch it. Abdullah is the good friend who helps his hungry friend. His help is one way giving which is an important way of the social solidarity.

The means of social solidarity in either Van Gogh's the Potato Eaters or in El- Bissatie's novel Hunger are many. They also are able to help the figures and the characters to some extent. However, they can not stop hunger. Social solidarity can help the hungry figures and character to live but sadly and with very weak feeling of hope. The painter and the novelist described the poor and hungry characters to help the poor's feeling of hope. Van Gogh was born and brought up in a family of religious inclinations. He studied and worked as a clergyman and breached for some time. He felt the suffering of the poor and hungry people. That is why the simple people were always objects of his works. He focused in many of his works on the peasants and their difficult life, "he was moved by their whole aspect- but from a deep affinity and solidarity with poor people" (Vincent 1). He felt that it is his duty to shed light, through his works, on the problems of the poor. The famous painter also sees that his paintings of the poor will relieve their suffering. He "often mentioned in his letters that he wanted his paintings and drawings to bring comfort to people who had a hard and difficult life" (Ulijn 7). His paintings, he thought, will be a kind of sympathy and consolation. So, his painting shows actually the purity and the pains of the poor.

Mohammed El- Bissatie spent the most of his life in Cairo, however, he was born in a village, among the poor farmers of Egypt. "His fiction is set almost exclusively in the region where he was born and raised" (Spence 73). Many of his novels have their settings in the villages and many of his main characters are farmers. Writing on the life of the poor farmers is not an easy job for the novelists. "Some of them do so with romantic enthusiasm and some from didactic feeding of duty towards their ignorant countrymen" ( Selim 233). Showing the suffering and the aspect of the poor farmers' difficult life is the duty of those novelists.

Van Gogh and El- Bissatie succeed in their works to show the terrible influences of poverty and hunger on the figures of the painting and the characters of the novel, nevertheless they also succeed to prove that the social solidarity with its tools can not help to stop the negative effects of poverty on its victims. Van Gogh and El Bissatie with their efforts contribute to the universal U. N. Object of sustainable development. They represent the literary role in the human fight against poverty and hunger.

## I. CONCLUSION

In the first part the paper discusses the features of poverty in Van Gogh's the Potato Eaters and El-Bissatie's Hunger. These features are: the scant furniture in the painting and in the house of Zaghoul's family in the novel, the weak bodies in the painting and in the novel. The figures and the characters are distant from each other and they do not communicate. The novel can produce a fixed and a stable picture of the hungry family since the last scene is a repetition of the first scene.

In the second part the paper shows how the tools of social solidarity tried to relieve the influence of poverty and hunger. Social solidarity is represented in the painting by co-operation, the feelings of belonging and adherence beside the feelings of commitment and responsibility. The idea of equality helps the figures to survive. In the novel, Zaghool, Sakeena and Zahir take their turn to work and get food to the hungry family. Burrowing is shown as an important tool of social Solidarity in the novel. The one way giving is seen clearly in Zahir Abdullah relationship.

Van Gogh and El- Bissatie succeed in shedding light on the terrible problems of poverty and hunger in their works. They also show that social solidarity may relieve the bad influences of hunger and poverty. They have done their duty and represent the literary men contribution to the universal movement to eliminate hunger and poverty which is an objective of the UN sustainable development project.

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