Paul Gauguin’s *The Ancestors of Tehamana*  
(also known as *Tehamana Has Many Parents*)

Where she saw complexity, he saw only broad patches of green and white and blue and muddy brown. He had painted her all wrong—he had painted her as if she were wrong.

Her name was Tehamena. He’d told her to call him Paul, and so she called him Paul and she saw him as Paul. He, in turn, called her Tehamena and saw her as Tehamena. Sometimes she wondered who he thought this Tehamena was, this girl who had slept beside him on so many muggy, mango-scented nights.

Did he find her beautiful? He stood next to her now and looked at her as if she were beautiful, and she looked at him, and he smiled. Her eyes moved away involuntarily to the canvas propped up in front of them. The smell of oil pigments was still ripe and bitter to her nostrils, and she wondered how the paint would feel smeared on her rough fingertips.

“I look sad in the painting,” she told him. “Am I supposed to look sad?”

“You are sad,” he said.

“Why am I sad?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

She had not known she was sad. Sad, to her, was the sound of the newly-borns’ thin, high cries carried by the breeze that slapped at their soft skin. It was the difference between how the ocean reflected the shifting colors of the dawn and of the dusk. Sad was the way that long dark heavy hair like hers bore down on her back in the heat, the feeling that it was part of her and she did not want to cut it off. But now he’d told her that she was supposed to be sad.

“I am sitting far away in the painting,” she told him. “Am I supposed to be far away?”
“You are far away,” he said.

“Where am I supposed to be?” she said.

“Where you belong.”

“And where is that?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t recognize it.”

Far away was where Paul had come from. They had all come from far away, they who had told girls who looked like Tehamena to cover themselves up, and when the girls and women had done so, they were the ones who laughed at how stupid the fashions looked on the girls’ bodies. And now the new ones, the enlightened ones like Paul, longed for a paradise that men who looked like them had already corrupted. But for Tehamena, there was no corruption. There was only what she was old enough to know and what she was too young to know.

“I am wearing flowers in my hair, but I am also wearing a stiff dress,” she said. “Why did you paint me two ways?”

“Because you are torn between two cultures,” he said.

“I am?”

“Yes.”

“But I am as I am.”

“No, my dear. You are one culture, and it is the natural one. But you cannot be the other.”

“Not even if I try?”

“You should not try. It would be a sad thing to do so.”

There was that word again. Sad. Tehamena had not felt sad putting on this prim dress. She had liked the stripes and wondered whether Paul would like them on her. But in the painting, she did not look as though she belonged in the dress, and this, Tehamena realized to her surprise,
made her sad. She had not known there to be such a thing as not belonging. Now Paul, in his quiet way, had exposed her to it. And she felt exposed, like Hina in the background. She felt exposed, but she no longer felt powerful like the goddess of the moon.

Tehamena kept looking at the painting. She was confused. She felt Paul’s hand on her back. Behind her in the painting were two big, red, juicy, voluptuous mangoes. There were strokes of that same red in her face. Why had Paul painted her like he’d painted the mangoes? She did not want to be a piece of fruit. She wanted to be Tehamena.

“Paul,” Tehamena said. “I am looking away in the painting. Where am I looking?”

“I did not want you to look at the viewer, Tehamena. You should remain a mystery.”

“But you know who I am, Paul. My name is Tehamena. You have seen me laugh, and you have seen me cry. What else is there to know?”

“We may both laugh, and we may both cry, but we are not the same, my dear. You are such a mystery to me, and it would be impossible for me to comprehend it. We are too different to know one another.”

She looked straight at Paul in defiance, but he looked away.

Tehamena longed for Paul to see her and listen to her as she had seen him and listened to him, and it was a long longing like the grasping of waves on the sand. He was not a mystery to her—he was just a man. So why couldn’t she be just a girl? She was not in that painting, she realized. She did not know where she was.

Her name was Tehamena. She had many parents.

“Am I beautiful?” she asked Paul.

“You are so dark,” he replied. “You are so beautiful.”
Very nice: The scenario is thoughtfully imagined and thoroughly intriguing in a somewhat uncomfortable way. Both of them are so different from each other. One wonders what the young Tahitian girls saw in Gauguin, maybe something exotic just as he saw in them. I really like the way the story, without spelling things out directly, references many complicated issues such as colonialism, racism, and chauvinism, just to name a few. You’ve managed to describe entire worlds colliding with each other through this simple dialogue between just two people in history. The painting also does that, but in a manner so serene that many people don't see so much significance.

I think there could be more details about how he worked. For example, where did he get paint while all the way out there? Was it because he was trying to preserve his supplies that he applied paint so thinly to the canvas in comparison to his friend Van Gogh?

I really like the way that you imagined and developed the complex somewhat uncomfortable relationship between the two of them. 98%