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NEGOTIATING ROUSSEAU'S ECO PHILOSOPHY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN THE WORKS OF DORJEE THONGCHI AND VANNEIHTLUANGA

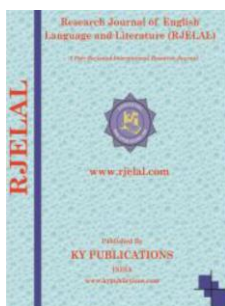
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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism as critical discourse is usually associated with the study of art and literature in relation to the environment and ecosystem, with special emphasis on landscape, season, climate, weather, non-human entities and a healthy continuation of biotic and abiotic elements. Together with the other paradigms such as race, gender, class and identity as represented in literary texts ecology or environmental study has gained much prominence in the last five decades in the backdrop of the postcolonial condition. Romantic Ecology occupies an importance niche in the gamut of Ecocriticism which is grounded upon the romantic notion of Rousseau and his poetic disciples in England such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. Rousseau's ecophilosophy can be satisfactorily problematized in terms of a discussion of his two Discourses, 'Discourse on the Sciences and Arts' and "Discourse on the origin of Inequality" where the concepts of 'natural man', 'wild primitivism', 'environmental ethics' and the principles of *amour di soi* and *amour-propre* find expression. It may be noted that Rousseau's environmental ethics encompasses the behavioural wisdom and psyche of both the human and animal realms which is an important part of any ecocritical discourse.

In the light of the above discussion the present paper purports to negotiate Rousseau's eco philosophy and environmental ethics in some selected stories of two important writers of the North East of India namely Dorjee Thongchi and Vanneihltluanga.

Key words- Ecocriticism, environmental ethics, natural man, *amour di soi*, *amour-propre*

Ecocriticism as a critical discourse is primarily grounded upon a study of the inviolable relationship of man and nature on one hand and literature and environment on the other. Since the second half of the 20th Century ecologists, environmentalists and Eco critics have all been unanimously concerned with the massive degradation of environment in the backdrop of the two World Wars which decidedly disturbed the

balance existence of the biotic and abiotic elements of the ecosystem. Ecosystem as such is based on an agreeable affinity and an amicable interrelationship between the biotic and abiotic elements which facilitates the proper continuation of the ecosystem. Ecocriticism and for that matter, Eco philosophy is influenced by various insights derived from philosophy, ecology, sociology, anthropology, feminism, Marxism and other related approaches.

For instance, Ecofeminism is a philosophy that hinges upon respect for women on the basis of their beauty, creative potential and fertility that facilitates the continuation of both the human and natural world. In Post Colonial Discourse, ruthless exploitation of nature and environment has been satisfactorily manifested through the anthropomorphic attitude, capitalist outlook and patriarchal hegemony by applying which the modern man tends to oppress and otherize women, nature and landscape.

Romantic Ecology is an important landmark in the gamut of Ecocriticism which is grounded upon the Romantic notion of Rousseau and his poetic disciples in England such as William Wordsworth and S T Coleridge. Romantic Ecology came as a reaction to Marxism with a view to protecting the pristine purity of natural landscape and the sylvan beauty of nature with special emphasis on the primeval innocence of the 'natural man', 'noble savage', birds and animals and their beautiful sights and sounds and behavioural psyche of both human and non human worlds. Jonathan Bate in his two seminal works, *Romantic Ecology Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) and *The Song of the Earth* (2000) celebrates the Romantic nature of Ecology which is further attested by Greg Garrard in his work *Ecocriticism* reiterated that animals and birds constitute an indispensable part of Ecocriticism. (Garrard146)

In his *Romantic Ecology Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* Jonathan Bate tends to situate Wordsworth's poetry in the context of the abiding pastoral tradition and also the English poets' powerful and enduring vision of human integration with nature. Besides Bate there were two other powerful critics who gave an interdisciplinary twist to Eco Critical Discourse. For instance, Glen Love in his *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment* (2003) has insightfully argued that any study or teaching of literature remains lopsided in the absence of a befitting discussion on the natural condition and the ecological principle (both biotic and abiotic) that underly life and literary creations. At the same time, Love argues that scholars today must respond to the environmental crisis by replacing anthropocentric vision by eco centric

outlook. While vindicating the same, Simon Estok in his article, 'A Report Card on Ecocriticism' (2001) emphasizes environmental study in relation to ethics. Significantly environmental ethics is the core issue that enriches the French philosopher Rousseau's doctrine of Eco Philosophy.

Rousseau's Eco Philosophy can be satisfactorily problematized in terms of a discussion of his two Discourses, 'Discourse on the Sciences and Arts' and 'Discourse on the Origin of Inequality', whereas in the former Rousseau deprecated Science and Arts which affected in a big way the serene and pristine beauty of the environment and in the latter the Romantic philosopher hinges upon mankind sharing ancestral origin with other species including animals and birds which vindicates the point that animal studies constitute a seminal feature of Ecocritical Discourse. While drawing a comparison between man and other animal species Rousseau observes,

"When I observe that being, thus constituted, of all the supernatural gifts he could have received and of all the artificial faculties, he could have acquired only through long progress; when I consider him, in a word, as he must have left the hands of nature, I see an animal less strong than some, less agile than others, but all in all, the most advantageously organized of all (Rousseau 40)

The lines quoted above succinctly shows that Rousseau defines man as an animal who after a long process of successive development became complex and developed artificial faculties. In his 'Social Contract' Rousseau castigates artificialities and complexities of the civilized man which is contrasted with Rousseau's concept of the Noble Savage, 'Natural Man', 'Wild Primitivism' and environmental ethics. Rousseau's philosophy is based on the fact that the more an individual comes closer to society the more complex, complicative and artificial he becomes. Rousseau's environmental ethics is grounded upon the fact that man can become utmost natural by remaining in close communion with nature as was done by Wordsworth's Lucy, who learnt very many lessons of patience, perseverance,

honesty, tolerance, harmlessness and sacrifice . To Rousseau therefore Nature is the best teacher and Rousseau's social philosophy as encrusted in 'The Social Contract' entails that an ideal society can be envisaged in an ideal, natural landscape.

In the 2nd Discourse, Rousseau juxtaposes man and animal together by drawing similarities between man and apes- a bold step that Rousseau took thereby rejecting the claim of man's superiority to the natural world. Significantly Rousseau's forceful claim for animal sentience and animal rights has been brought to the fore through his theory of the *amour di soi* as expounded in the 2nd Discourse. It is primarily a theory of self -preservation in which pity functions as one of the key principles. Rousseau argues that all human beings feel a strong distaste seeing the suffering of another sentient creature and such a feeling of pity towards other creatures do not allow them to mistreat other creatures willingly unless it is a question of their own self preservation at stake. Pity is that feeling which bears true testimony to man's natural goodness thereby justifying Rousseau's concept of the Noble Savage and 'The Natural Man'. It is in the natural state of goodness that man's feeling of love is manifested through pity and compassion and that constitutes the cream of Rousseau's philosophy *amour di soi*. Together with the doctrine of *amour di soi* one can discuss Rousseau's insightful ideas about the state of nature, natural goodness and the concept of the noble savage ,the ideas which Wordsworth incorporated in his short but powerful lyrics like Lucy Poems, Daffodils, Solitary Reaper, Cumberland Beggar, Leech Gatherer, Michael and Simon Lee. Wordsworth's Cumberland Beggar epitomizes Rousseau's natural state which justifies that man is essentially good and that it is society that corrupts the natural goodness of man. It is therefore imperative in Rousseau's philosophy that a man can remain pristinely pure and primevally natural without doing any harm either to man or to nature. Once again Rousseau's ideas of sympathy and pity for nature and his fellow beings is established here. Rousseau observes:

Pity is what carries us without reflection to the aid of those we see suffering. Pity is what, in the state of nature, takes the place

of laws, mores and virtue, with the advantage that no one is tempted to disobey its sweet voice. Pity is what will prevent every robust savage from robbing a weak child or infirm old man of his hard earned subsistence, if he himself expects to be able to find his own someplace (Rousseau 55)

What is significant to note is that in his 2nd Discourse Rousseau has universalized the concept of pity which is divinely gifted to both humans and animal worlds. In this connection, Rousseau observes:

...one daily observes the repugnance that horses have for trampling a living body with their hooves. An animal does not go undisturbed past a living body of its own species. An animal does not go undisturbed past a living body of its own species. There are animals that give them a kind of sepulchre; and the mournful lowing of cattle entering a slaughterhouse voices the impression they receive of the horrible spectacle that strikes them (Rousseau 54)

Apart from pity and the natural state of man Rousseau's environmental ethics encompasses the fact that behavioural wisdom and psychology of both human and animal world can be taken as a subject for discussion in any Ecocritical discourse. Rousseau's stance here is anti- Christian in the sense that he deprecates Christian superiority of man over animals and strongly asserts that the non- human entities cannot be neglected by the anthropocentric and colonial psychology of man.

Rousseau maintains that the initial detachment of mankind from the state of nature occurred when *amour de soi* ceased to be the driving principle in man and other unnatural impulses began to dominate his behaviour. In particular, Rousseau regards *amour-propre* as the antithetical drive to *amour de soi* which became the predominant cause of man's estrangement from nature. *Amour-propre* is a form of self-love that is stimulated by narcissistic drives that depends on comparing oneself with others within a social context. *Amour -propre* consists in someone basing his or her self worth on a perceived superiority to

another and that breeds contempt, hostility and frivolous competition. In practical terms Rousseau blames the division of labour that was introduced as a way of felicitating large scale production for disrupting man's original bond with nature. (Zambianchi) In the light of the above discussion on natural state, natural man, noble savage, *amour di soi* and ecocentric vision against anthropocentric outlook and *amour- propre* the present paper purports to negotiate some selected stories of Dorjee Thongchi and Vanneihluanga in the light of Rousseau's eco philosophy and environmental ethics.

Novelist and short story writer, recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, one of the first generation of writers hailing from Arunachal Pradesh, occupies an important niche in the gamut of North East Indian Literature, exhibiting through his creative outpourings a deep awareness of the environmental problems of deforestation and wild life extinction in the states of North East India. Thongchi's short story 'The Forest Guard', translated from Assamese to English by Tilottama Misra, elucidates the picture of a society that depicts mankind's weakening relationship with the natural world, the root cause being man's desire to accumulate property and wealth at the cost of inflicting dependency and servitude on others inferior to him, echoing Rousseau's contention in the 2nd Discourse that the growth of capitalist societies accentuated man's greed for private ownership and wealth leading to his estrangement from nature. Such a culture based on capitalist ideals has brought in its wake consumerism and materialism that has resulted in a spiritual weakening with the natural elements. To cite an instance from the aforementioned story, 'Forest Guard' the author says that nobody was interested in applying for a job in the dept of Wildlife protection because there was 'neither money nor power nor prestige' whereas everyone aspired for a job in the territorial Department that handled the timber business because money fell like "seeds from a tree during a storm" in this department.

At the other spectrum of the capitalist, anthropomorphic outlook of the modern man lies

Rousseau's embodiment of the 'natural man' / 'noble savage' guided by the principle of *amour di soi* which is exemplified in the figure of Gomseng the forest guard, in charge of protecting the birds and animals of the Pakhui Wildlife Park. Considered a small job for it had neither money nor power in it, nevertheless Gomseng was proud of it as he considered it a privilege to look after the needs of the wild animals in a world where man seem to be constantly involved in destruction of the wild creatures that inhabit the earth. As a forest guard, constantly amidst wild life, Gomseng became an ardent observer of the life pattern of the birds and animals and their unique societies in the Pakhui Wildlife Park and realized that they were in many ways even superior to humankind. It was an enriching experience for him everyday to observe the life patterns of the birds, animals and insects of the forest and it filled his mind with a sense of happiness and wonder.

On one such occasion as he followed the courtship of a pair of Hornbill birds, he noticed that the female was soon confined to the hollow of a *holong* tree as it was time for her to lay eggs, while in the meantime the male bird went out alone, returning with food for his companion. Watching the activities of the male bird Gomseng began to develop an "unconscious camaraderie" with the male bird and he decided to help him in his food gathering activity. With such a noble intention he brought a branch from a *jamun* (a kind of a berry) tree and stuck it on to the wall of the Observatory No 3 which was his place of guard. The hornbill was initially apprehensive of coming near, but gradually by the third day it seemed to have lost all fear and plucked a berry from the branch that Gomseng had stuck, thereby reciprocating the forest guard's gesture of friendship. Soon Gomseng noticed that there were several tiny beaks at the mouth of the hollow of the tree and his joy knew no bounds at the thought that he was contributing to the task of nurturing and feeding a whole new family of hornbills.

In such a gesture, expressive of sympathy and compassion it is possible to locate the principle of *amour di soi* in Gomseng whose vision of the world is primarily an eco centric one that

encompasses the world as one single unit wherein every single entity has its own unique place and equal rights in the ecosystem irrespective of its species. Such an ideal embraces the 'Utilitarian Principle of Equality' wherein its principal proponent Jeremy Bentham asserted that everyone is entitled to equal moral considerations which is irrespective of family, race, nation or species. His famous statement that cruelty to animals was analogous to slavery may be seen as a complete opposition to the anthropocentric vision wherein man is seen as superior to the other life forms (Garrard146). In Gomseng's ability to identify himself with the sentiments of the creatures of the wild, firstly with the deer and then the hornbill it is possible to appropriate Rousseau's man in 'the first embryo of the species', the natural man, whereby man and nature worked in harmony and maintained the delicate balance of the environment based on the awareness that each life form is equally important in maintaining the continuation and proper working of the ecosystem.

As the story progresses, interesting facts about Gomseng's life are brought to light. The decision to become a forest guard and be a protector of the forests' inhabitants is traced to a childhood incident that took place in the distant past. Ironically Gomseng grew up in a family where not a single meal was consumed without the meat of any kind of animal for his father was a famed hunter for whom "killing animals was the sole goal of his [father's] life" (Thongchi 22). Being a renowned hunter himself, it was quite obvious that he expected his son to follow in his footsteps and for that purpose often made the young boy accompany him in the various hunting expeditions. Reminiscing on the past, Gomseng recollects an incident, still vivid in his memory where persuaded by his father he not only killed an innocent mother doe suckling her calf but inflicted a slow, painful death by using the injured animal as a target to hone his marksmanship skills. This incident of the brutal torture and ultimate killing of the doe in the presence of her calf was to change Gomseng's life forever. The sight of the dying animal, with her painful eyes and cry of agony filled Gomseng with a sense of terrible remorse and awakened his

conscience that he has no right to kill and take the life of other beings. Clutching the calf tightly to his bosom he made a solemn vow there and then that he would never "destroy life but would become a protector of wildlife" and despite his father's insistent arguments to take up the bow and arrow again he never harmed any animal or bird ever and dedicated his life for protection of wildlife.

In the story, the various characters may be viewed as markers of man's relationship with nature. As a complete anti-thesis to Gomseng, his father may be seen as a ravager and plunderer who seeks to impose his will on the natural world and his love of hunting may be seen not merely as a source of survival but as a sport, of a desire to control nature in terms of colonial hegemony. The third significant character of the story is that of the Forest Secretary Tajum Lombi who is presented as a typical product of a capitalist society, with a hypocritical moral conduct who uses his power and position for corrupt practices. Gomseng was initially quite impressed with the Forest secretary who was present in his passing out parade in his induction as forest guard for in his speech he had extolled all the young men joining the forest department to save the unique wild life of their state, Arunachal Pradesh promising all kinds of funds to sanction large projects for that purpose. These inspiring words would often echo in Gomseng's mind filling him with a sense of fulfilment and giving him an opportunity to atone for the sin of killing the deer so cruelly in his childhood. As Gomseng begins his life as a forest guard he comes to be acquainted with the corrupt practices of high ranking Government Officers and politicians who use their power and position to hunt and kill wild life in the protected areas and despite repeated requests to Range Officer Choudhuri to register cases against those government officers the reply Gomseng got was always the same-

They are hunting in an area which is outside our jurisdiction and so we have no authority to take action against them. Besides, it would go against our own interest if we fell into the bad books of these important people' (Thongchi 25)

As the story proceeds, Gomseng is in for a another rude shock as his earlier image of Forest Secretary Tajum Lombi Lombi as a lover and protector of nature is shattered exposing him as just another self centered individual ,even more degraded than his father for he plunders what he has pledged to protect.

In one of his visits to Bhalaukung, secretary Lombi seemingly showed great interest regarding the animals inhabiting the area near the salt mine located near Observatory 3 which was Gomseng's post of duty . Totally unsuspecting of the real intentions of the secretary , Gomseng enthusiastically informs him about the different animals spotted near the salt mine. He is horrified when the secretary informs him that he intends to spend the night in Observatory 3 with Gomseng with the intention of shooting at least one big animal. Dismayed that this was the officer who had been so eloquent about the need to protect wild life he realizes that he is "a big man who wears a mask of ..." (Thongchi 27). That night in the event of the salt mine being visited by a herd of wild elephants no other other animals ventured near it thus foiling the forest secretary's plan . By morning in frustration and anger, finding no other game to quench his thirst Lombi shoots and kills the male hornbill with whom Gomseng had formed such a beautiful friendship. Dismayed and anguished at this act of betrayal and crime, despite his subordinate position , Gomseng verbally abuses the secretary, accusing him of double standards for which he has to pay the price of being suspended from duty. For Gomseng that is of little consequence , he is more distressed that he could not protect his feathered friend ,the hornbill from death.

Modern societies accompanied with the galloping progress of science and technology, have shown a tendency to place mankind in the centre and idolize reason as the sole mode of apprehending the truth, which has resulted in severing man's organic bond with nature. Such a society is envisaged in the story and both Gomseng's father and Lombi are seen as products of such a capitalist culture. Colonialist attitudes coupled with imperialist pride is responsible for mass scale destruction of the natural world and its inhabitants .

The second story, 'Innocence wears another look' by Vanneihluang ,Mizo writer and social critic, and translated into English by Margaret Ch. Zama is another similar tale with ecological overtones that dwells into the psychology of power struggle, manifesting the principle of *amour -propre* as an evil that is seen as the guiding spirit of the capitalist culture . *Amour- propre* as elucidated by Rousseau in the 2nd Discourse is an unnatural form of self love that arises from competition and is essentially egocentricism, when individuals within a society compare themselves to one another and base their self worth on this evaluation . This type of self love is subject to unwanted qualities such as jealousy and corruption, which in turn cause misery and vices. It thus works as a complete contrast to *amour di soi*, which means seeing and valuing one's self worth independent of other's opinion.

In the story, 'Innocence Wears Another Look', the character Pu Sena betrays such an egocentric orientation as the opening line of the story suggests - " Pu Sena was an outstanding pillar of his community and enjoyed a social standing that few could match" (Vanneihluanga 214) This is clearly suggestive of his elevated position in society and the entire opening paragraph is devoted to extolling the extent of his influence over the Mizo community. It is further stated that both in social as well as religious matters he enjoyed respect and command and the entire society looked up to him for advice and counsel. Besides he was also a good sportsman excelling in games like hunting and fishing and took immense pride in blatantly displaying his catch before admiring onlookers of his community. " It was a matter of great pride that he could bring home a slain deer with its impressive antlers blatantly displayed from the back of the Government gypsy allotted to him for official use"(Vanneihluanga 214) This kind of self love , stimulated by narcissistic drives, breeding contempt, hostility and frivolous competition is the guiding spirit of Pu Sena's actions . His adored son Mazama, seem to have inherited the same drive and disposition as his father for he too is fiercely competitive who "loathed to lag behind his peers" and in his social circles in school and home he was often held up as a role model among his peers.

The conflict gets underway with the arrival of a new boy from a nearby village to Aizwal whose constant bragging about his catapult skills became a source of great worry for Mazama since till then he had never cast even a stone at a butterfly, much less a bird, however he was now determined to have a similar achievement so that he could be at par with his new friend. In this instance led by the desire to stand tall among his peers, rather than by any interest of his own he approached his father for a catapult that very evening and without delay his delighted father brought him one, while at the same time extolling his own skills with the catapult. From that day onwards, urged by a fierce competitive spirit, Mazama learnt the use of the catapult with the sole desire of keeping up with his new friend.

His opportunity to show off his skills surfaced on a Saturday morning, when he was invited along with his friends to an outing in a garden not far from Sairang road. Armed with the new catapult and about twenty homemade pellets, he reached the garden and started stalking the birds. Initially unable to target any of the birds who were too shy and timid, he caught sight of a small bird perched atop a tree with a grasshopper in its beak. Taking aim he swung the catapult and hit the bird as it fell down among the banana trees below. A closer observation of the fallen bird revealed that it was not dead, but had fallen down due to dizziness and Mazama for a moment thought of releasing it but daunted by the fact that such an act would make him appear as a coward in the eyes of his friends he decided against it and instead tightly gripped the bird by the neck and threw it on the ground with all his might. Satisfied with his exploits, Mazama set off towards home, with the carcass of the bird, looking forward to narrating the day's adventure to his family, knowing well that his self worth and esteem would go up manifold in the eyes of his family.

In an ironic twist to the story, just some minutes later, the hunter Mazama becomes the hunted – the victim in a classic case of 'reversal of fortune'. On the Aizwal Silchar Highway, which is the road taken by Mazama where hundreds of trucks ply everyday, a loaded truck driven by an expert driver named Valtea made its slow progress uphill. Apart from his reputation as a skilled mechanic there was

one more added feather to his cap- that of being a skilled *pasalathe* (one who can catch any game). Ever since his childhood he could not resist going after any living creature and urged by such instinct he would not spare any creature even while driving be it a humble lizard or a grazing deer – they would inevitably come under the wheels of his truck, crushed to death. He was aware of the fact that this trait was not due to just his love of meat but rather because of egoistical concerns - being an uneducated man and having nothing to boast about on that score, it was his exploits as a game catcher that he prided on. Similar to both Pu Sena and Mazama, Valtea is driven by the principle of *amour-propre*, by the desire to earn a name not because of the deeds per se but rather for the esteem and value accorded by society.

In the tragic accident that follows, the young boy Mazama is run over by Valtea's truck who in a bid to kill two jungle birds engaged in a fight in the middle of the road, sped his truck at full speed not noticing Mazama who was trying to cross the road. Significantly it may be noted that the author draws a parallel between the two killings. In the first instance the author states: "Thus Mazama watched life, certainly not the handiwork of man, leave the beautiful bird" (Vanneihtluanga 216) and in the second instance the author states, "thus Valtea watched in great distress as life certainly not the handiwork of man, left the young boy" (Vanneihtluanga 218). By universalizing the loss of life in both the cases the author is upholding the Utilitarian 'principle of equality' that entails everyone to equal moral considerations irrespective of family, race, nation or species. In the statement that "life certainly is not the handiwork of man" the meaning implied is that mankind has no right to destroy life in any form since it is not in his power to grant it. In such a message the story may be situated in the literary genre of the fable that carries with it, important moral lessons, embedded in the plot, examples of which are found in plenty in the Indian Panchatantra and Jataka tales. It may be noted here that India has a rich tradition of such works, underlying the fact that ancient Indian culture is grounded on the peaceful co existence of the human and natural world. In the context of the

story under discussion the message that is put across is the importance of an ecocentric vision in the post colonial societies as opposed to an anthropomorphic one, of respecting and valuing natural elements and establishing a balanced relation between culture and nature.

To sum up, the two stories discussed in the paper highlight the relevance of Rousseau's eco-philosophy and environmental ethics within the ambit of the Ecocritical Discourse. The two authors from North East India echo Rousseau's belief that the present day culture which is based on capitalist ideals simply breed egoistical, vain, hypocritical and corrupt notions that that has in turn severed the connection between man and nature. In the post colonial scenario, patriarchal hegemony, capitalist outlook and anthropomorphic attitude of the modern man has resulted in oppressing, otherizing and exploiting nature and landscape. In a world of intense competition where everyone seeks attention and approval, human motives are increasingly guided by *amour propre* and human values are slowly being eroded from the present day societies. The two stories are replete with the message that it is important to embed the idea of *amour di soi* and reclaim all that has been lost in mankind's dealing with the natural world.

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