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**The Influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on Romantic Movement**

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**Abstract:** This research paper is an account of a study about the influence of philosopher and writer Jean Jacques Rousseau on the Romantic Movement. This will enrich the understanding about various ideas and thoughts that would earn him the title ‘the Father of Romanticism’. Rousseau’s enthusiasm for nature and his appeal to emotions opened the gate for the Romantic Movement. Simultaneously, we will look to the philosophy that inspired many other writers.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Emotion, Equality, Freedom, Imagination, Innocence, Justice, Nature, Righteousness

The romantic thinkers gave ideas and thoughts about the nature and essence of democracy and freedom. The pioneer among the romantic thinkers was Jean Jacques Rousseau. He grew up in a humble and countryside area of Geneva, Switzerland which taught him to praise and worship nature. He wrote various critical works and articles about music and poetry. He published four major books which made

a great impression on the Romantic Movement. The book *New Heloise* was published in 1760. After two years *Emile* and *Social Contract* were published. In 1781 *Confessions* was published which is like an autobiographical account.

His first book *New Heloise* covers the theme of the beauties of nature and humble life. He opposed degraded and polluted life of city areas. He believed that human beings are born good and are corrupted by outside institutions like political and educational institutes and governments. Such institutes caused social disparity, corruption and misery. His solution to sufferings was to change the political and legal institutions. He gave his slogan “back to nature”<sup>1</sup>. It means reform can only occur by people returning to nature and the innate state of human righteousness.

In his book *Emile* he has focused on a new form of education in which the focus will be on nurturing individual and natural

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<sup>1</sup> This slogan was made by Rousseau. It suggests that people should come out of artificial life and enjoy the canopy of nature.

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abilities of children rather than imposing same approach on everyone.

In his book social contract he argues that people sacrifice some of their individual freedom in exchange for general good. The social contract helps people to transform their natural individual freedom to public freedom. He believes in natural freedom which will not be curtailed by any external power or administration. Basically, it shows how people can actually form one republic by making a social contract. It means everyone will respect the rights of others and treat all people equally. Public freedom is better than natural freedom because it is based on mutual cooperation, which is the source of goodness and democracy.

In Confessions he transforms his personal experiences into personal philosophy. He believed that emotion which came from nature and sexual love are the essence of his existence and the source of his passion. Rousseau makes his subjective emotions as the source and content matter of his writing.

Instead of focusing on reason, romantics chose to embrace emotion and imagination as a real way of knowing the existence. Now poets were creating poetic thought by combining imagination with subjective experience. Rousseau and the romantics denied reason and thinking and

emphasized on feeling. According to them, world can be known through our emotions. Rousseau thought that human beings were naturally pure and their natural feelings were also pure, only this polluted civilization could corrupt and pervert people into emotionless savages.

Rousseau's political ideas were spiritual, idealistic and collectivist. It was Rousseau's romantic view of "public will" and democracy that so deeply influenced the French Revolution. The very famous slogan of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity<sup>2</sup> is inspired from the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Romantics rejected universalism and instead focussed on individualism. Individual experiences combined with strong emotion were a hallmark of romantic philosophy. Romantics abandon self-restraint in support of spontaneous individual expression. They emphasised on the search for individual nature rather than human nature. Rousseau imagined himself as a lamp creating a very individual truth shining with his own genius. Love, imagination and emotion were now considered preferable to intellect, reason and formalism. Basically, Rousseau asserted that in the state of nature human beings are honest and just, and in society we need only the proper system for achieving consent on all things.

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<sup>2</sup> This slogan first appeared during French Revolution and was written into the Constitution.

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The romantic notion given by Rousseau glorifies natural innocence, common people and democracy as the common individual-expression of goodness. Hence, modern democracy rests on the romantic spirit.

The description which Rousseau gave about his life and philosophy in his works have influenced the romantic period so much. His works did not follow the social manners and norms of the enlightenment period. His works eased the way for future romantic writers like William Blake, Mary Shelley and John Keats. They were inspired from his works.

Through his unfinished poem “The Triumph of Life”<sup>3</sup> Shelley accepted Rousseau from his other contemporaries. He seeks to demonstrate the inability of reason in achieving the real purpose of enlightenment.

The Romantics felt that reason was incapable of describing the reality of experience. That’s why William Blake reproached to “Bathe in the waters of life”<sup>4</sup>. And Keats says,

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,-- that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

The romantics found the system oppressive, and so they focussed on liberation. It is evident in *Prometheus Unbound*<sup>5</sup> by P.B. Shelley

The boundless, overflowing, bursting gladness,

The vaporous exultation not to be confined!

Rousseau’s emotional belief in the goodness of innocent man and simplicity and ignorance found its voice in Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Love of nature, simplicities of rural life and uncivilized people found expression in their literary works. Wordsworth’s love of nature was due to the influence of Rousseau. Rousseau’s intellectual influence touched William Godwin and through him to P.B. Shelley. William Godwin in his work *Political Justice*<sup>6</sup> embodied Rousseauistic thought. Inspired by Rousseau, Godwin raised his voice for equality and justice. Godwin expressed his faith in the innate innocence of human beings. Shelley was inspired from the book *Political Justice*. He wrote that he had learnt “all that was valuable in knowledge and virtue from that book.”

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<sup>3</sup> This poem is an unfinished and the last major work by P.B. Shelley. It explores the nature of being and reality.

<sup>4</sup> A poem by William Blake in which he has discarded the rationalist thinkers

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<sup>5</sup> This poem by Shelley expresses need to embrace love and forgiveness and abandon tyranny and oppression.

<sup>6</sup> A Book by William Godwin in which he outlines his political philosophy and it explores the idea of dismantling the power of state.

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William Wordsworth was inspired from the doctrines and principles of Jean Jacques Rousseau. In fact, we can say that his works are the continuation of the thought and movement initiated by Rousseau. In Wordsworth, we find the basic doctrines and beliefs of Rousseau. Wordsworth has same spiritual faith in the purity of nature. He believes in the innocence of childhood. Wordsworth's concepts on education are similar with that of Rousseau. Like, Rousseau Wordsworth developed his notions and beliefs similar with the situations and circumstances of his own life. His approach was very subjective in nature. He wrote about his loyal and affectionate love of nature. He used imagination as a medium to see the reality and never accepted a separation between it and reality. He believed in innate goodness of human beings.

The romantic writers gave importance to memory and nostalgia, deference to childhood, appreciation of natural beauty, isolation and meditation. Just like Rousseau wrote about free time spent by him in his book *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Wordsworth and Coleridge also allowed their mind to be cleared. For romantic writers, the canopy of nature had been the ideal setting for their memories to be inculcated and retrieved.

We can say that there can be no doubt that Romanticism in all its aspects

expressed a high admiration for the individual. Romantics wanted free development of individual genius and emotion. Romantic believed in the notion of Pantheism. Rousseau has emphasised on the importance of subjective features of human life. Rousseau was trying to express original individual nature without any artificial restraint.

Rousseau believed in the idea of nature as a mentor and a source of inspiration. For Rousseau, man gets his proper respect through his individual freedom that he possesses.

Critics have interpreted it as expressing a point of view which is opposed to reason and devoted to the combination of emotion and imagination. It is not that Rousseau totally rejected the reason, but he considered it secondary, and it is to be set in proper relation to the other essential aspects. For him, instinct, emotion and feeling are supreme and are closer to the essential nature of human beings.

To conclude, Rousseau's thought had a profound influence on the Romantic Movement. His world was one of boundless space, alluring and attractive. He believes that man should be continuous with nature. Man becomes isolated only through a bleak civilization. He gave his world famous slogan "Go back to nature". Its objective was to recover the man from a bleak world

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of rationalism. It sought for the natural man who is free from the influence of dreary and artificial civilization. It rejects false restraint. It believes in free and open expression.

It is accepted as the name for a broad cultural movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is an individual state of mind as well as a comprehensive point of view on the world. Despite its various criticisms, it has an important place in the history of cultural movement. It presupposes this world as a place for individual development. It glorifies freedom, democracy and justice.

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