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## Book Review

Roy, Shubhrangshu. (2019). **Zara's Witness: A Soul Journey into the Nature of Being**. New Delhi: Hay House India. pp.204. ₹ 299/- ISBN: 9789386832900

The inspiring novel, *Zara's Witness*, is a living translation of classical Indian philosophy to the modern youth or Gen Z. It uses fantasy, myth, science, music, poetry and other symbolisms to evoke the depth and beauty of our inner consciousness, as represented by the Indian psyche. It tells the story of a teenager seeking wisdom for herself in her life-journey from the Ganges, to the forest to the city!

With elegant prose, coupled with the sporadic poems, the book tries to share the classical wisdom of Upanishads and sacred texts with the modern youth absorbed by contemporary virtual reality and discotheques.

This book aptly dedicated to “the one within” is an ongoing search to find oneself in all its depth and breadth. It has as its Purva Paksha the following sections: “Song of Creation”; “Illusion of Identity”; “The Essence of Being.”

The last two sections, “Song of Creation Revisited” and “The End of Story: The Game Begins” are conversations with the higher self of the teenage Zara, the protagonist of the story, before she ascends to the sky to confront the one and only reality of her being – I am who thou art, or thou art who I am. They reverberate in us the classical Aham Brahmasmi (“I am Brahman”) and Tat Tvam Asi (“That thou art”).

In a sense, this book evokes in us “Noting Stirs” and in this very process “Everything Happens.” That is how human beings experience life and the novel does the same.

The last section of the book, or after-conversation, is “a copyright blueprint of the equation for everything in the Universe” articulated as “the essence of this and that” (p. 13 and 191). The attentive reader will be able to find “this equation” interspersed throughout the narrative. The concept of time and space, as measured by ancient seers, is elaborated at the end of the book (p. 13 and 197f.). Thus time is smoothly blended to life and narrative).

The teachers in this captivating novel are elements of nature. Froggy (the frog), Elly (the elephant), the Wind, Monk!ee, Thunderstorm, River, Koel (the sweet singing bird), Hyena, Rhino, Peacock ridge, etc., impart lessons for Zara and accompany her in her life journey.

The book deploys several tools used in other crafts and science such as literature, poetry, theatre, classical Indian and Western music, cinema, and quantum computing to narrate Zara’s inner exploration (p. 12) to arrive at her inner self. So, it is from her close intimacy with nature that Zara acquires the wisdom to lead her meaningful and fulfilling life.

This picturesque book is an attempt to answer eternal human question: Who am I? That search of a teen “meanders along the course of a river to its final destination in the sky where both the river and the human spirit merge at the end of the journey to discover the one eternal truth revealed to mankind since time immemorial—universal love” (p. 11). This search is a perennial one found in the whole Indian philosophy right up to our own times. Shubhrangshu Roy makes a very successful effort to make this search accessible for Gen Z.

For the author, Shubhrangshu Roy, the nature of Indian philosophy and the diverse aspirations of it “not only spirals upwards, i.e., it ascends from one story to another, but it is also essentially recursive. Which is to say, it is never-ending and almost amounts to the same thing being told over and over again through

shifts in the storytelling from generation to generation, from one millennium to another. In a sense, there is actually no ending, no conclusion. The storyteller and the story can go on and on (203).

This fascinating book contains very important lessons for life and articulates the classical Indian philosophy for the contemporary youth.

Most of the themes in this book are philosophically profound and can be traced to the Indian classics. The basic question Zara asks is: “Who am I?” and “Where did I come from?” “You come from, yourself, Zara,” (p. 161), answers the river “in celebration.” “But how did I come here?” Zara wondered aloud. The reply was enigmatic: “You came here riding time, Zara. Time, indeed, is your father,” said the river. And how did I come here riding time?” Zara asked again.

“Your desire of you rode time here,” said the river. “Those words were your desire to become something that expanded in time,” the river said as Zara waited for the answer. “Your desire illumined your senses with the colours of the rainbow, Zara, so that you could reach out to your higher self within, just as the tendrils of the plant reach out for sunlight. And that light generated heat. And that heat created the germ of life in you that we call the seed. And that seed is what you ceded of yourself within you, splitting you into two.” (p. 162).

The river elaborates on time. “Time is the distance you covered for the idea of you to become you and, therefore, turn full circle (p. 163)”.

In this discovery of the true self, and the illusion of identity, Zara listens to a sweet song, “Jo tu hai, so main hoon; jo main hoon, so tu hai! (What you are, so am I; what I am, so are you!) repeatedly in the course of this story (pp. 31, 90, 166, 182). ‘Have faith in yourself, Zara’, said the voice from within the pool. No one here is bigger than you, nor is anyone smaller than you are. Not the ant, not the housefly, not the butterfly, not the dragonfly, not the grasshopper, not the frog, not the monitor lizard, and, least of all, not the elephant. Come look again, little Zara, neither

is there any joy for you around this place nor is there any sorrow . . . what you are, little Zara, so I am; what I am, so you are.” (p. 25). Precisely herein discerns the author the richness of the Indian advaitic insight.

Zara’s Witness is a philosophical fantasy where Zara’s life is explored in terms of human needs for fulfilment, happiness, and spiritual liberation. This book can be compared to two classic novels of the same genre. In *Siddhartha: An Indian tale*, the German novelist Herman Hesse (2007) explores the spiritual journey and search for the meaning of a young man by the same name during the time of the Gautama Buddha. In *Sophie’s World: A novel about the history of philosophy*, a novel by Norwegian writer Jostein Gaarder (2012), the young teenager Sophie Amundsen is introduced to the history of philosophy through riddles, puzzles, symbols and the genre of story-telling, like Zara..

Like the two books mentioned above, I wish that Zara’s Witness also becomes a classic giving purpose, meaning and wisdom to today’s Gen Z. I wish that Indian philosophy with its liberative and humanistic vision discovers its valuable roots and make it relevant to the contemporary women and men. May we rediscover the depth and significance of “the Indian Ending” that the British historian Arnold Toynbee refereed to! A fascinating novel that speaks of virtual reality, Gen Z, space warping, quantum mechanics and discotheque in the same breath as Indian philosophy can achieve it! A book highly recommended both to the young and old seekers of wisdom! A book which will hopefully become a classic!

Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ

M. D. Joseph. **Adolescence and Personality Growth: A Philosophical and Psychological Probe.** Guwahati: Eastern Pub (India), 2021. 978-93-90434-41-1 pp. 66 Hdbd. Index. ₹ 495.

Adolescence is a developmental period that is remarked by substantial change in affective and incentive-seeking behavior,

which is relative to both childhood and adulthood, including a heightened emotional propensity to engage in risky behaviours and experience persistent negative and labile mood states. This volume on human life discusses the emotional and incentive-driven behavioural changes in the phase of adolescence, associated specially with rapid development and progress in physical and neural changes during this significant stage in the life of the teens. It throws light on what it means to be human, responsible and authentic. This book enables and encourages human life in this phase of life, helping the youngsters to move from childhood to adolescence from adolescence to adulthood and find one's unique and responsible place in the society.

With Forewords by Dr M. Angamuthu, IAS, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup Metropolitan District, Guwahati and Most Rev John Moolachira, Archbishop of Guwahati, this book deals with the meaning of adolescence, the storms associated with it. It also takes into consideration the role emotion plays in the life of adolescence. It explores the role of friendship and leadership in this crucial phase of life. Then it takes up the philosophical notion of "I am that I am," which talks of personality, maturity behavior, moral growth, etc. the final chapter deals with the important role that the school and teachers play in the life of adolescents.

The author, with his doctoral in philosophy, is a guide and mentor for adolescents, who can guide them in the path of morality, responsibility and wisdom. This book is gentle in its approach and open-minded in its vision and progressive in Weltanschauung. It is highly recommended to adolescents, parents and teachers and will be a good asset in all school and college libraries.

Kuruvilla Pandikattu

Cyril Desbruslais, SJ. **Ancient, Medieval and Modern Philosophy: A Historical Introduction (500 BC-1800 BC)**. Valerian Mendoncs SJ (ed). Pune: Jnana Deepa and New Delhi: Christian World Imprints. 2021. ISBN: 978-93-5148-519-3; pp.xiv+256, ₹ 600.

This insightful books gives an accurate overview of Western philosophy starting from Pre-Socratic peiord and leading to the great enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant. The vision and understanding of the prominent philosophers of this vast perios are critically studies in terms of their understanding of the human person, world and God. This book explores the Ancient, Medieval and Modern philosophica schools and personalities. This creative venture is the fruit of about 60 years of enriching philosophical discussion the author had with young scholars and seekers. It gives a bird's eye-view of more than 2000 years of Western thought in a progressive and dynamic manner.

The book follows a systematic and progressive style where the life, thought and critical remarks of each philosopher has been analysed. Desbruslais, who has been teaching philosophy at Jnana Deepa, Pune and accompanying the youth of Pune (Search in Service and Unity) for about 50 years has a passion for philosophy and the youth. This book is an edited and revised version of the very popular cyclostyled notes he had been preparing for the philosophy students from 1970's onwards.

This book 17th volume in the JD Philosophy Series.

It is also a fitting tribute to Prof Cyril Desbruslais, a progressive, liberation and humanist Christian, who has reached the mature and fruitful age of 80 by his admirers, well-wishers and students. The book was released on December 19, 2020 just two days before his birthday. It has recalled that he has influenced thousands of youths thorough this lectures, books and plays.

Definitely this book is a must for anyone interested in the history and development of Western philosophy. A must for all students and teachers of philosophy and for all librarities of humanities and social sciences. A sequence to this volume, dealing with Contemporary Philosophy will be out soon.

Gini George