Body Remembers

On 26 and 27 November 2002, three Indian authors presented their work in sessions in Amsterdam and Leiden. These sessions were part of the annual French literary festival Les Belles Étrangères which invited twenty Indian authors to present their work in France. The festival organizer, the Centre National du Livre in Paris, gladly supported the IAS initiative to invite three of their guests to the Netherlands.

All three authors – Shauna Singh Baldwin, Shashi Tharoor and Krishna Baldev Vaid – acknowledge their shared Indian identity as part of, and not in exclusive opposition to, a complex ethnic and cultural identity. Their work incorporates different backgrounds and the fact that their writing falls into separate categories, it proved worthwhile to bring them together to discuss their work and their opinions on the themes that arise with the political and cultural construction of identity in modern South Asian society. Identity is a prominent element in their work, but in many different forms and guises. The authors share the notion that social, cultural, or religious identities interfere and clash with the perception of individuality. In the case of Baldwin and Vaid, political events interrupt the trajectories of their protagonists and change the contours of their role in the social context. Vaid adds an existential aspect to this change by emphasizing the inherent fluidity of identity. In Tharoor’s work, this conflict is partially ‘classical’ post-colonial rift between westernized acculturation and traditional cultural identities, but also shows a deep involvement with Indian society.

The encounter with these authors provides an excellent opportunity to explore the presentation of identity in their work a little further and also to introduce their work to that part of the readership of the newsletter that is not acquainted with modern Indian writing.

Shauna Singh Baldwin lives and works in Canada and made a spectacular debut as a novelist with What the Body Remembers (1999). This novel describes the changes and personal growth of a Sik woman who is sent to India as a child to a wealthy Punjabi landowner so as to produce the offspring his first wife could not deliver. Her husband has been killed in the Partition riots and she is wrapped up in the traditional responsibilities of Punjabi landownership. He attempts at costs to establish a just division of land for the Sikh villagers. His struggles are futile and when the situation does not improve, he begins to think of her father’s traditional role. His wife wonders whether his tale is great and authentically Indian. The characters in his novels take this conundrum one step further as they depict the conflicts between various shades of cultural identity, tradition and modernity, westernization and ‘Indianness’.

In The Great Indian Novel, the reader is immediately confronted with the issue of identity in an author’s note at the beginning of the book. Tharoor wonders openly whether his tale is great and authentically Indian. The characters in his novels take this conundrum one step further as they depict the conflicts between various shades of cultural identity, tradition and modernity, westernization and Indian politics and society.

Tharoor’s most endearing characters are Rup’s characters are steeped from the point of view of their struggle to cope with different roles and identities which are cast upon them by tradition and modernity. This is evident in many of the characters of the book, the reader of Satya deal with the role they are given. They develop a form of inner determination and will for freedom and survival that gives them the strength to endure all kinds of hardship. Again, identity appears as complex and with many dimensions. The same goes for the perspective from which the book was written; Baldwin was born in India and has lived in Canada almost her whole life. She paints a very detailed and historically accurate picture of the cultural traditions and modern history of the Sikh community. The historical detail enriches the novel, but it also adds to a dialogic quality to the representation, reflecting different aspects of the author’s own identity.

Krishna Baldev Vaid has published a substantial number of stories, novels, and essays in which he presents India’s literary heritage and modern history from a critical, comical, but above all, personal perspective. He grew up in various places in India and Europe and has received various awards as an UN official in New York. Although English became his first language through education and upbringing, he never lost contact with his mother tongue. From the identification of the nation state India, the political system, the positive discrimination of lower castes, and the diaspora of Indian workers, to his literary and essayistic work. His literary and essayistic work converges on this point, as they depict the conflicts between various cultural or social identities in a modern world.

Krishna Baldev Vaid

His work continues with his novel The World of Illusion (1978), a caricatured retelling of the Mahabharat, followed by the novels Show Business (1992) and Riot (2001) and a volume of essays, India, from Midnight to the Millions (1997). Tharoor believes in India’s cultural diversity and its democratic reality, although both attributes put a heavy burden on Indian society and politics.

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