

A Thousand and One Identities

A Meeting with Shauna Singh Baldwin, Shashi Tharoor, and Krishna Baldev Vaid

Report >
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By Thomas de Bruijn

On 26 and 27 November last year, 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 IIAS 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 of identities. Notwithstanding the authors' 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 problems 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 the '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 Sikh woman against the backdrop of the horrors of the Partition of Pakistan and India. The Sikh community was more or less crushed between the interest of the Hindu and the Muslim communities. Many fled the Punjab or were killed in the violent aftermath of the Partition. Rup is a Punjabi girl from a village who is married to a wealthy Punjabi landowner so as to produce the offspring his first wife could not deliver. Her husband has been educated in England but is still wrapped up in the traditional responsibilities of Punjabi landownership. He attempts at all costs to establish a just

division of land for the Sikh villagers. His struggles are futile and when the riots start, he sends Rup and her children away to Delhi. He follows later on the infamous trains from Pakistan on which many refugees are killed.

The story of the novel follows Rup's childhood in the village, where she develops into a self-conscious and independent child, and her later life, as she learns to survive in the traditional world of her husband's household. Identity plays an important part in the story but is never depicted as a singular notion. The characters are developed from the point of view of their struggle to cope with different roles and identities which are cast upon them by tradition and modernity. Baldwin shows, in Rup, to what extent gender and economic dependency define identity in both the traditional village and in her husband's family. Although social constraints and the political situation determine the events in this novel, the author also suggests that there is a deeper sense of individual identity. It is expressed in the way Rup and her husband's first wife 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 but 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.

Shashi Tharoor 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 presently lives and works as an UN official in New York. Although English became his first language through education and upbringing, he never lost contact with India and that is apparent in his work. In his essays he is very open about his own multiple cultural identities and analyses the complex new identities that arose with the formation of the nation state India, the political system, the positive discrimination of lower castes, and the diaspora of Indians to all regions of the world. His literary and essayistic works converge on this point, as they depict the conflicts between various cultural or social allegiances in the lives of contemporary Indians. His first success came with *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), 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 Millennium* (1997). Tharoor believes in India's cultural diversity and its democratic rule, although both attributes put a heavy burden on Indian politics and society.

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 novel, in which the author 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 'Indianness'. It is characteristic of the novels that the characters are determined mainly by roles put upon them by the nation, caste, or family, but that this *dharma* is not enough to stay put in a confusing and tempting world. Identities, and the duties they impose, cannot fulfil the lives of the characters if they are not complemented by personal conviction and a place for the relishing of cultures other than that of the traditional world. Tharoor's most endearing characters

His work has developed over the course of the years as he explored the possibilities of various styles. Whereas Vaid's early work is highly realist, his later novels and stories explore the realm of magic realism. For the festival Les Belles Étrangères, the French Hindi specialist and translator Annie Montaut published a volume of Vaid's stories, translated into French with the Hindi text alongside the translations. The stories and Montaut's introduction offer a wonderful insight into Vaid's way of looking at India and the notions of identity one can find in his work.*

Identity is a complex concept in Vaid's work and can only be summarized in this short space. The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and its violent aftermath are prominent in his work; Vaid was born in the Punjab, an area that was divided between the two nations and which saw the worst of the killings and a mass exodus of refugees from both sides. In two lengthy novels – *Uska Bacpan* (1958, translated by the author as *Steps in Darkness*) and *Guzara Hua Zamana* (*Times Gone By*, 1981) – he describes this period from the perspective of a young man who witnesses the rising tensions between the two

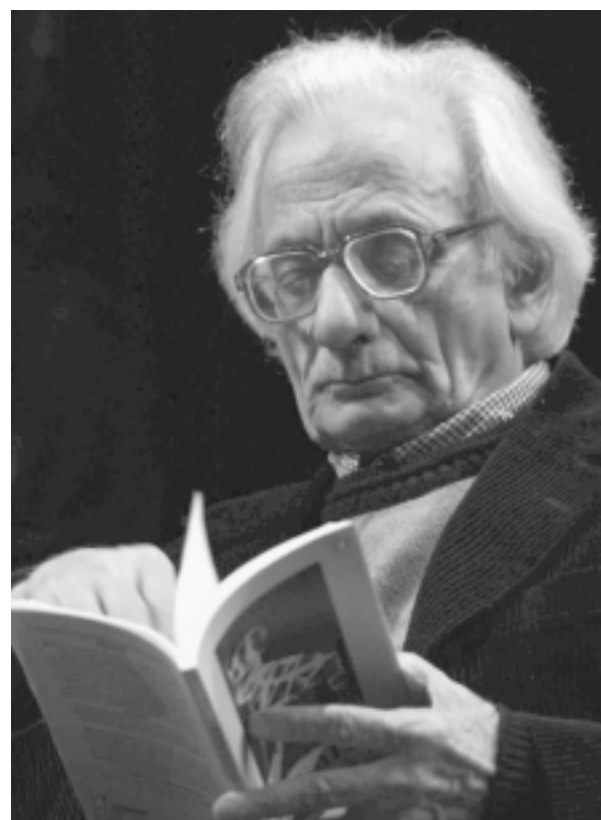
talist tone and turned into uncertainty with regards to cultural and personal identity. His later stories and novels, such as *Bimal Urf Jayē To Jayē Kahā* (1974, translated by the author as *Bimal in Bog*), *Mayalok* (*The World of Illusion*, 1999), or *Dusra na koi* (*There is no other*, 1978), express this breakdown of identity in a style in which the influence of Beckett and Joyce can be observed. This was a novel feature for Hindi writing and was discussed ardently by literary critics.

An intriguing feature of Vaid's work is the description of ubiquitous scenes of poverty, hunger, and misery in India's public life, which seem to remain outside the observer's identity as if they are not part of his reality. Vaid's literary work shows the many dimensions of modern Indian identity, combining an almost mystical urge for transcending definitions with a deep commitment to the reality of Indian society and culture.

It would not do justice to the richness of each authors' works to draw far-reaching conclusions from this very brief summary of their representation of identity. It seems, however, that the protagonists in the works have in common the fact that they progress on trajectories towards personal realization and growth that are influenced, if not defined, to a large extent by the social and cultural context. These trajectories originate in the preoccupation with inner conflict and subconscious trauma which is the stock element of psychological development in Western fiction. We have seen this in other postmodern and post-colonial authors who write in English, but the authors that are presented here seem to add something new to the familiar perspective. Baldwin places the growth towards identity of her protagonists against a historical background which enriches the description of the cultural and economic reality of their protagonists. Tharoor adds a carnivalesque tone to the development of identity, but also emphasizes involvement with Indian social and cultural plight. Vaid's approach is different; he adds much to Indian writing by exploring a post-modern perspective in Hindi writing and stretching the expressive possibilities of the language.

In this respect, the representation of identity in the work of the three authors opens up another layer of detail and diversity in the perception of identity in South Asian culture and society. ◀

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Krishna Baldev Vaid

have learned a different set of identities and new horizons in a westernized upbringing, but have to reconcile these with the confined situation of their traditional role. His novels view the dynamics of Indian society where roles and trajectories are constantly changing and new identities are created through a humorous optimism, playing with the semantics of the English language in the Indian context.

Krishna Baldev Vaid is a writer of Hindi and English fiction who has been publishing from the 1950s onwards and has produced an impressive oeuvre of short stories, novels, and theatre plays. He has spent a long time teaching English literature at universities in the United States and has also published English versions of his own work. The career of Vaid spans the entire period in which post-Independence Hindi writing came into its own.

communities in his own village. He gradually sees the old world, in which the division between religious identities was present in every day life in a fluid way, fall apart into one of rigid and opposing factions. The notion of the indefinite nature of identity is a central theme in Vaid's work. In his view, the realization of identity can never take the form of a rigid, separate religious conviction or cultural affiliation; true identity lies in remaining undefined, being all opposites, all identities at once. Descending into singularity is a loss; the loss which Vaid describes in the novels on the Partition period.

His later work continues this theme but, then, in an avant-garde, magic realist setting, exploring the boundaries of narrative style and language in a way that was unprecedented in Hindi fiction. The undefined nature of identity of his earlier work acquired an existen-

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* *Histoire de renaissances: Pichale janma ki bata hai* / Nouvelle présentation et traduction du hindi par Annie Montaut, Paris: Langues et Mondes (2002).