



Reflection of Afghan Ethnic Identity in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini¹

I v a n a P O N D E L Í K O V Á , J a n a P E C N Í K O V Á
Matej Bel University

Keywords: *identity, national identity, transnational identity, ethnic identity, religious identity, Afghan identity, A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Hosseini.*

Introduction

Identity is a modern phenomenon that did not exist in the Middle Ages as we know it today. In an agrarian society, people were bounded by social class, religion, and local ties to the lord of the manor. All of this began to change with the rise of industrial society; these older ties dissolved and society needed a different kind of glue to hold it together (F u k u y a m a 2012). That glue typically were language and culture, as they create new bonds so that people could communicate with each other and live together in a pluralistic, multicultural and modern society. Identity is a key to understanding human beings, their thoughts and views, but also to perceive the life of the communities in which they live. In Afghan society, which is a focus in this article, two kinds of identities, particularly ethnic and religious identities, are essential for forming national Afghan identity. Moreover, the history of Afghanistan has greatly influenced the development of Afghan identity. Several nations have tried to conquer the country and its people but, in the words of Colin Quinn, an American actor and writer, “*Afghanistan is a cemetery of great empires*” (Z a h e r 2014, 12). Even Alexander the Great, the Mongols, the British, the Soviets, or NATO forces did not have it easy in Afghanistan. We have decided to examine what influenced the formation of Afghan identity, especially during the era from the Soviet invasion to Taliban up to the present day. The submitted research is based on a novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, who is currently the most famous and popular author writing about Afghanistan.

Contemporary Afghanistan belongs to group of the democratic countries, but it is still one of the least developed and poorest countries in the world. The war, which has persisted in the country almost continuously since the 19th century, when

¹ The text is part of the project: KEGA “Innovative methods in teaching cultural studies” No. 033UMB-4/2018, which is conducted at the Department of European Cultural Studies, UMB in Banská Bystrica.

the British entered Afghanistan to complete the colonization of India, has also contributed to this situation. Afghanistan gained its independence in 1919. One hundred years later, in 2019, Afghanistan commemorated an important anniversary, 30 years since the end of the Soviet invasion (1979–1989). This historical event played an important role in shaping Afghan identity and influenced the political direction of the country. In his novels, Hosseini tries to depict and interpret this reality in an objective way. His role as an “insider” confirms this statement. For Slovak readers, due to a similar experience with the Soviet invasion (1968–1989), the topics of unfreedom, hiding personal identity, persecution, adapting and accepting a regime and living under the domination of another nation are well-known.

Khaled Hosseini – writer, doctor and UNHCR Ambassador

Currently, the best-known authors writing about Afghanistan include the Afghan-American physician and writer Khaled Hosseini. In 2008, he became the most successful author in the world, winning over bestselling authors such as Joanne K. Rowling, Stephenie Meyer, and Paulo Coelho. Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. His father was a diplomat at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1976, the ministry moved him to Paris. In 1980, the family was ready to return to Kabul, but then Afghanistan suffered a bloody communist coup and the invasion of the Soviet army. Thus, they did not return to their homeland. They gained political asylum in the United States, where in 1993 Hosseini received his medical degree. From 1996 to 2004, he worked as an internist in Los Angeles (KHB).

His literary career began in 2003 with the novel *The Kite Runner*, for which in 2014 he won the John Steinbeck Award, “In the Souls of the People” (KRAA 2014). His second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, was published in 2007 and tells the story of two women, Mariam and Laila, from different generation and social classes, whose lives are united by marriage to one man and the war that forced millions to flee abroad. Violence, fear, the injustice treatment of women, and identity issues, as well as faith, hope, the protection of the family and lasting values, are concretized in the struggle for survival. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a chronicle of Afghanistan since the 1960s and ends just after the millennium. At the same time, it is a touching story about family, friendship and the power of love and sacrifice. This novel can be read in various ways. Firstly, it can be read as a romantic story at the end of which a man and woman find each other. Then, it can be considered an orientalist text, in which the stereotypical depiction of Rashid as a superior Muslim man humiliating his wives symbolizes the dominance of the West. Although Laila represents modern and Mariam traditional society, both symbolize the Orient. Finally, it is a prototype of a neo-orientalist text because it portrays women as victims of Islamic violence.

Hosseini’s latest work is a short story in the form of a letter from a father to a son called *Sea Prayer* (2018). This short story was published in 2018 and

describes the current situation in Syria. In addition to his literary work, the writer is outstandingly active in helping refugees. Hosseini is a US envoy to the UNHCR and has also established a foundation that provides humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. By writing about life in Afghanistan, he tries to bring Eastern culture(s) closer to Western readers. The author hopes that his readers will emotionally identify with the fate of the people of this country. His novels are full of the pain and suffering that Afghans have long experienced.

Hosseini has attracted millions of readers around the world not only with his brilliant storytelling talent, but above all with his powerful story embedded in a land plagued for decades by fighting; it becomes a country where time seems to be going backwards and where one bad political system is replaced by an even worse one. Hosseini was intimately aware of the threatening conditions in Afghanistan, which in themselves create a sufficiently dramatic atmosphere. The literary critic Natasha Walter of *The Guardian* points out that when reading the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the reader feels that he/she is listening to a lecture from history and at the same time experiencing a touching story of Afghan women, who are valued in society only for their ability to reproduce (W a l t e r 2007). Hosseini's world is Afghanistan, a "troubled country" that gives the impression of enduring constant chaos, freedom, conflicts and war. At the same time, it is an exotic and oriental country that is still unknown for Westerners.

The question of identity and its kinds

The term identity is currently one of the most frequently used words in cultural discussions. Identity refers to the identification of an individual with a certain whole on the basis of characters that he/she consciously or subconsciously accepts as his/her own (S l a t i n s k á, P e c n í k o v á 2017, 16). Culture and language are an integral part of an identity. Through language, we perceive the cultural world of others and vice-a-versa, thus broadening the horizons not only of our identity, but also of the identities of other people. The modern world is a world of different cultural identities. Some identities are open to mutual penetration and others, on the contrary, seek immunity from otherness. It is not possible to learn identity; it can only be revealed by discarding the irrelevant and revealing the essence.

The concept of identity took a central place in cultural studies in the 1990s. At present, there is a rich inventory of definitions and opinions related to this term, so often used today. The question of identity is a research subject in various social science disciplines such as psychology, sociology and philosophy. It is also a subject of interest in some interdisciplinary studies, such as social psychology and social anthropology. Each scientific approach understands the concept of identity differently, but the heart of research is the human being as a social creature. In cultural studies, identity is not perceived as a fixed "thing", but rather as a process of "becoming". This process is based on similarities and differences. According to Stuart Hall, a sociologist and pioneer of cultural studies, identity can be influenced

by history and culture, and thus is not a complete product, but rather an ongoing production process (Hall 1994).

In today's individualized society, therefore, there is a shift in emphasis from primordiality, that aspect of identity which is given, permanent, inherited or fixed to instrumentality, a basis of identity which one chooses and forms. This does not mean that concepts of essentialism are no longer alive and important, but it leads to the view that these two approaches to the study of identity are not completely mutually exclusive. Identity can take various forms, like national, ethnic or religious, along with modern forms of identity such as virtual, respectively digital, intercultural and hybrid identity.

Ethnic identity

In Western social sciences ethnic identity research accelerated after the re-establishment of ethnic movements in the 1960s. Social inequality, which was also based on ethnicity, led to a strengthening of ethnic pride. People felt a strong need to associate on the basis of ethnicity and identify with their ethnic group. Thus, ethnic identity can be understood as a set of characteristics that members of an ethnic community consider to make them different from others and that can also be objectively determined, as well as self-reflection, a sense of ethnic difference, and an awareness of belonging to a particular ethnic group. Self-identification as a member of an ethnic group, experience of ethnicity, attitudes towards an ethnic group and participation in ethnic activities can be considered components of ethnic identity (Bačová 1996, 47). Ethnic identity becomes important for an individual when meeting people of different ethnicity and culture. Ethnicity is ascribed to a person; he/she does not choose which ethnic group he/she is born into. However, a person can choose what role this will play for his/her overall identity. The Slovak ethnologist Viera Bačová points out that sometimes it seems that ethnic membership is given "once and for all" and is impossible to "run away" from, especially in the cases of ethnic groups that are the target of prejudice (Ibid., 48). The question of ethnic identity is important in an ethnically diverse society, but in an extremely heterogeneous society it is not so important, since being "different" in a multicultural society is not unusual. In the past, identity was primarily formed on a religious and ethnic basis, while today it is undergoing a modern rebirth as an identity is built on cultural principles.

Afghan identity

Geographically, Afghanistan is a mountainous country with a harsh climate in which it can be difficult for foreigners to live or survive. In addition to the relentless geographical conditions, the Afghans are also remarkable militant and brave people, who, despite their multi-ethnic composition, can unite and resist foreign domination. The most numerous ethnic group are Pashtuns (approximately

40 %), who speak *Pashto* (S h a l i z i 2018). They live mainly in the east and southeast of the country. The second ethnic group consists of Tajiks (about 30 %) who live in the north of the country, along the border with Tajikistan and speak *Dari* (Ibid.). Both languages are considered to be official languages. Uzbeks live in the northwestern lowlands (9 %), and an equally large group is the Persian-speaking group of Shi'ite Hazaras (Ibid.).

Pashtuns have always played a decisive role in the country's political life, and the local political elite has largely come from their ranks. "Pashtun kings ruled this country for almost two hundred and fifty years <...> and Tajiks for all of nine months, back in 1929" (H o s s e i n i 2008, 128). In 2018, a dispute arose over Afghan identity with the introduction of new electronic ID cards, *e-Tazkira* (S h a l i z i 2018). The subject of the conflict was the name "Afghan", because the term was originally derived from the word Pashtun (R a o f i 2018). Some ethnic groups reject the name, saying that "our ethnicity is our identity" (S h a l i z i 2018) and consider Afghanistan to be a country of all ethnic groups, not just Pashtuns. Therefore, they prefer using the official name of the country, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which includes all ethnic groups. As Hosseini has the character of Babi state: "To me, it's nonsense— and very dangerous nonsense at that—all this talk of I'm Tajik and you're Pashtun and he's Hazara and she's Uzbek. We're all Afghans, and that's all that should matter. But, when one group rules over the others for so long... There's contempt. Rivalry. There is. There always has been" (H o s s e i n i 2008, 128). The fact remains that Afghans primarily identify with their specific ethnic group. The identities of these groups are determined by different ethnic backgrounds, languages and cultures. The only similarity between them is that almost all of them are Muslims. There are about 35 million people living in the country, of whom 80–85% are Sunnis, 15–19% Shi'ites, while 1% of the population professes other religions (Z a h e r 2014, 40). Afghanistan is a Muslim country which, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, aims to exist as a bridge between the Muslim world and Western countries (Ibid.).

The influence of the Soviet invasion on the formation of Afghan identity

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was preceded by developments in the country's political field. Hosseini draws attention to all major historical events and incorporates them into the story of the novel. In 1973, when Mariam was fourteen, King Zahir Shah, who had ruled from Kabul for forty years, was overthrown in a bloodless coup. His cousin Daoud Khan did this while the king was in Italy getting medical treatment (H o s s e i n i 2008, 23). He proclaimed the Republic of Afghanistan and became its first president. The neighboring Soviet Union initially accepted this change positively, as Daoud Khan sought to strengthen the economy and orient the country more to the West. In 1976, he began military cooperation with India and sought to focus economically on Iran and the rich states of the

Arabian Peninsula such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Kuwait (D r á b i k 2016). At that time, President Leonid I. Brezhnev feared a potential threat from Afghanistan. After the introduction of a new constitution, which included the rights of women in Afghanistan, a bloody military coup took place in 1978, initiated by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Daoud Khan and his family were murdered.

The Afghan-Slovak writer Zahir J. Zaher summarised the fate of Afghan rulers: "the one who in the past stood at the head of Afghanistan risked not only his life, but also the lives of his loved ones" (Z a h e r 2014, 40). Other rulers of Afghanistan had a similar fate. In December 1979, Afghanistan was occupied by the Red Army. The Soviet Union enthroned its President, Babrak Karmal, and fought the Afghan Mujahedeen with the new government. The Mujahedeen were intensively supported financially and materially, especially by the United States. The war caused acute problems for the Soviet Union. In 1986, President Babrak Karmal resigned and was replaced by Dr. Najibullah.

The Communists were interested in women's education, freedom and rights. In Hosseini's novel, through Babi, for whom education was very important, we learn that "<...> the one thing the communists had done right-or at least intended to-ironically, was in the field of education <...>. More specifically, the education of women" (H o s s e i n i 2008, 133). Further he states that "almost two-thirds of the students at Kabul University were women now <...>, women who were studying law, medicine, engineering" (Ibid.). Women have always had a difficult time in Afghanistan, "but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before" (Ibid.). It was a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan.

Women's freedom and status were also reasons why some men fought. In Kabul, women taught at universities, ran schools, and held government positions. However, in remote regions, especially in Pashtun, where women were rarely seen on the streets and then, only when shrouded in a burqa and accompanied by a man; men still lived according to the old tribal laws. They rebelled against the Communists and their orders to give women rights, to abolish forced marriages, and to raise the minimum marriage age to sixteen (Ibid., 107). These men perceived such changes as an insult to their centuries-old traditions.

Through Laila's teacher, we learn what they taught students at schools during the communist government: "the Soviet Union was the best nation in the world, along with Afghanistan. It was kind to its workers, and its people were all equal. Everyone in the Soviet Union was happy and friendly, unlike America, where crime made people afraid to leave their homes. And everyone in Afghanistan would be happy too, <...>, once the antiprogressives, the backward bandits, were defeated" (Ibid., 111). The teacher explained that the Soviets had come to Afghanistan to "lend their neighbor a hand. To help us defeat these brutes who want our country to be backward, primitive nation" (Ibid.). The children were expected to report anyone who would be against the Soviet regime: "And you must lend your own

hand, children. You must report anyone who might know about these rebels. It's your duty. You must listen, then report. Even if it's your parents, your uncles or aunts. Because none of them loves you as much as your country does. Your country comes first, remember! I will be proud of you, and so will your country" (Ibid., 111–112). The children were brought up in these values, which influenced the formation of their identity. This varied according to who was in power. In Afghanistan, the regime changed frequently, followed by the country's name and flag, and with it, the system of education.

The influence of the Taliban on the formation of Afghan identity

After the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, the war in Afghanistan did not end. In March 1992 Dr. Najibullah resigned. Afghanistan was on the brink of civil war, as the hostile parties of the Mujahideen, who had fought together against the Soviet occupation forces, could not agree on a division of power: "The Mujahideen, armed to the teeth but now lacking a common enemy, had found the enemy in each other" (Ibid., 169). The bloody civil war left thousands of dead Afghans and a devastated country. Ninety percent of the well-educated fled from Afghanistan to Iran or Pakistan. This period resulted in the Taliban coming to power in 1996. Most of the Taliban members had grown up in refugee camps; some were even born there. They studied in Pakistani *madrasas*, where they were schooled in *Shari'a* by *mullahs* (Ibid., 266). Influenced by this education about an ideal society based on strict adherence to Islamic law *Shari'a*, they believed that this was the proper way for Afghanistan, thus influencing the formation of Afghan identity. In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, we learn about the commands called the *Voice of Shari'a* (Ibid., 270), which were heard from loudspeakers, radios and were written on flyers. Again, the country was renamed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. All citizens were ordered to pray five times a day. All men had to grow a beard and wear turbans. Singing, dancing, playing cards, chess, gambling, or kite flying were forbidden as well as writing books, watching movies and painting pictures. Disobedience of these and other orders was punished by flogging, imprisonment, or execution. Women were not allowed to go out on the street alone and always had to be shrouded in burqas. Using cosmetics, nail polishing, or wearing jewelry and fancy dress were forbidden. They could only speak when they were given permission. They were not allowed to laugh in public. Girls were forbidden to go to school and women to work (Ibid., 270–271). The Taliban closed universities, sent students home, destroyed everything around them, and burned books except the Qur'an. During the Taliban regime, Afghanistan was destroyed, the economy, education, and culture did not function and health care was in a desperate state. Hosseini says the Taliban set up separate hospitals for men and for women (Ibid., 278). Under the Taliban rule, the author compares Afghanistan to the *Titanic*, a ship destined to perish. The passengers, like the Afghans, hope to be rescued: "Everybody wants Jack to rescue them from disaster. But there is no Jack. Jack is

not coming back. Jack is dead” (Ibid., 296–297). Hosseini also incorporated the attack on the World Trade Center in New York in September 2001 into the plot of his novel.

At the end of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini hopes for a better future for Afghanistan. The protagonist Laila returns home with her family, and together they help restore the orphanage. Laila followed what her father had once told her: “when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated. No chance” (Ibid., 114). The writer expresses hope for Afghanistan through young and educated women.

The fate of Afghanistan is still unclear. Neither Russian-style socialism nor the victory of the Mujahedeen brought the people of Afghanistan what they wanted most, peace and a happy life (Zaher 2014, 28). In a multi-ethnic country where the government regime, name and symbols are constantly changing, it is difficult to create a unified national identity.

Conclusions

The culture of a nation is expressed in the identity of its inhabitants and literature contributes to its understanding. It is not possible to examine the identity of a nation without becoming aware of the historical events that have shaped the personal identity of its people. Hosseini also considered it necessary to acquaint readers with the recent history of Afghanistan so that they could identify with the fates of the main characters who lived in an unstable and ever-changing society. According to him, there was no other way to write a story about Mariam and Laila without telling the story of Afghanistan (Mudge 2007). It is necessary to examine their story in the context of extra-literary phenomena.

If Hosseini had written a non-fiction book about life in Afghanistan during the Taliban era, which was reminiscent of the darkest Middle Ages, it would have been read by far fewer people. However, he preferred to write a novel, in which there is so much evil and violence that we cannot even imagine it in the Western world. Hosseini deserves admiration for this eye-opening work for those who have prejudices against otherness. The author does not question the Western view of Afghanistan but enriches it. He brings new knowledge to readers and turns ordinary Afghans into loving people who long for a dignified life.

References

- B a č o v á 1996 – Viera Bačová, *Etnická identita a historické zmeny. Štúdiá obyvateľov vybraných obcí Slovenska*. Bratislava: VEDA.
- H o s s e i n i 2008 – Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- KHB – “Khaled Hosseini Bio”, [Internet site: <<https://khaledhosseini.com/bio/>>, accessed 2018-12-27]

- KRAA – “Kite Runner Author Accepts 2014 John Steinbeck Award at San Jose State University”, [Internet site: <<http://www.steinbecknow.com/2014/08/28/kite-runner-john-steinbeck-award-san-jose-state-university/>>, accessed 2019-02-04]
- Drábik 2016 – Jakub Drábik, “Prečo bola invázia ZSSR do Afganistanu neúspešná”, [Internet site: <<https://historyweb.dennikn.sk/clanky/detail/preco-bola-invazia-zssr-do-afganistanu-neuspesna>>, accessed 2018-12-30]
- Fukuyama 2012 – Francis Fukuyama, “The Challenges for European Identity”, [Internet site: <<http://www.theglobaljournal.net/group/francis-fukuyama/article/469/>>, accessed 2020-10-10]
- Hall 1994 – Stuart Hall, “Cultural identity and diaspora”, p. 222–237. [Internet site: <http://ls-tlss.ucl.ac.uk/coursematerials/ELCS6088_74357.pdf>, accessed 2019-03-08]
- Mudge 2007 – Alden Mudge, “Khaled Hosseini – Behind the Veil”, [<https://bookpage.com/interviews/8408khaled-hosseini-fiction#.XOUB_f7gqM9>, accessed 2019-05-07]
- Raofi 2018 – Wahab Raofi, “National Identity Crisis Threatens Afghan Peace”, [Internet site: <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/national-identity-crisis-threatens-afghan-peace_us_5a53a19de4b0ee59d41c0ccb?guccounter=1>, accessed 2018-12-30]
- Shalizi 2018 – Hamid Shalizi, “Who is an Afghan? Row over ID cards fuels ethnic tension”, [Internet site: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-politics/who-is-an-afghan-row-over-id-cards-fuels-ethnic-tension-idUSKBN1FS1Y0>>, accessed 2018-12-30]
- Slatinská, Pecníková 2017 – Anna Slatinská, Jana Pecníková, *Jazyk – kultúra – identita. Vybrané aspekty interkultúrnej identity*, Banská Bystrica: Belianum.
- Walter 2007 – Natasha Walter, “Behind the veil”, [Internet site: <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/19/featuresreviews.guardianreview21>>, accessed 2019-05-01]
- Zaher 2014 – Zahir Jaan Zaher, *Afganistan. História. Boje. Prežitie*, Bratislava: ZAHHER International Trade.

Ivana Pondelíková, Jana Pecníková

Afganų etninės tapatybės atspindys Khaledo Hoseinio romane *Tūkstantis saulių skaisčių*

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinės sąvokos: *tapatybė, tautinė tapatybė, tarptautinė tapatybė, etninė tapatybė, religinė tapatybė, afganų tapatybė, Tūkstantis saulių skaisčių, Khaledas Hoseinis.*

Straipsnyje kalbama apie šiuolaikinį reiškinių – tapatybę ir jos tipus. Aptariamas tyrimas siejamas su Afganistanu: remiasi afganų ir amerikiečių gydytojo Khaledo Hoseinio, šiuo metu garsiausio ir populiariausio autoriaus, rašančio apie Afganistaną, romano *Tūkstantis saulių skaisčių* analize. Tai antrasis Hoseinio romanas, pasakojantis apie dvi moteris, Ma-

riam ir Lailą, skirtingų kartų ir socialinių sluoksnių atstoves, kurių gyvenimą vienija santuoka su tuo pačiu vyru ir karas, priverčęs milijonus žmonių bėgti iš savo šalies. Smurtas, baimė, neteisingas elgesys su moterimis ir tapatybės problemos, tikėjimas, viltis, šeimos apsauga ir ilgalaikės vertybės atspindimos kovoje dėl išlikimo. Straipsnyje aptariama dviejų tipų tapatybė – etninė ir religinė; šios dvi tapatybės iš esmės formuoja afganų identitetą. Afganų tapatybės formavimasis analizuojamas istoriniame kontekste, nes Afganistano istorija daro stiprų poveikį tapatybės raidai. Ne viena tauta bandė užkariauti šią šalį ir jos žmones, tačiau nesėkmingai. Afganistanas laikomas didžiųjų imperijų kapinėmis. Geografiškai tai yra kalnuota šalis, kurioje vyrauja atšiaurus klimatas, – dar ir dėl to svetimšaliams čia turėtų būti sunku gyventi. Net Aleksandrui Didžiajam, mongolams, britams, sovietams, NATO pajėgoms Afganistane nebuvo lengva. Slovakų skaitytojams dėl panašios patirties, siejamos su sovietų invazija (1968–1989), nelaisvės, asmens tapatybės slėpimo, persekiojimo, prisitaikymo prie režimo, gyvenimo, valdant kitai tautai, temos yra gerai žinomos. Būtina supažindinti skaitytojus su naujausia Afganistano istorija, kad jie galėtų susitapatinti su likimais pagrindinių veikėjų, gyvenusių nuolat besikeičiančioje ir daugiatautinėje visuomenėje, kur nuolat mainosi valdžios režimas, pavadinimas, simboliai. Tai sunkina nacionalinio identiteto sukūrimą. Afganistanas yra „audringas kraštas“, sukeliantis nuolatinio chaoso, laisvės ir konfliktų įspūdį. Kartu tai egzotiška, vakariečiams vis dar nepažinta Rytų šalis. Hoseinio vaidmuo yra ne suabejoti vakarietišku požiūriu į Afganistaną, bet jį praturtinti. Rašytojas skaitytojams suteikia naujų žinių ir paverčia paprastus Afganistano gyventojus mylinčiais žmonėmis, besiliginčiais oraus gyvenimo.

Ivana Pondelíková, Jana Pecníková

Reflection of Afghan Ethnic Identity in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini

S u m m a r y

Keywords: *identity, national identity, transnational identity, ethnic identity, religious identity, Afghan identity, A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Hosseini.*

The article deals with a modern phenomenon, which is identity and its kinds. The presented research is set in Afghanistan and is based on an analysis of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by the Afghan-American physician Khaled Hosseini, who is currently the most famous and popular author writing about Afghanistan. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is Hosseini's second novel, which tells the story of two women, Mariam and Laila, from different generations and social classes, whose lives are united by marriage to one man and the war that forced millions to flee abroad. Violence, fear, the injustice treatment of women, and identity issues, as well as faith, hope, the protection of the family and lasting values, are concretized in the struggle for survival. In the presented research, we examined two kinds of identity, particularly ethnic and religious ones as they are essential for forming an Afghan identity. We concentrated on the formation of Afghan identity in the historical context, because the history of Afghanistan has greatly influenced its development. Several nations

have tried to conquer this country and its people, but without any success. Afghanistan is considered a cemetery of great empires. Moreover, geographically, it is a mountainous country with a harsh climate, in which it can be difficult for foreigners to live or survive. Even Alexander the Great, the Mongols, the British, the Soviets, or NATO forces did not have it easy in Afghanistan. In the research, we focused on two significant historical events that strongly influenced the formation of Afghan identity, especially in the era from the Soviet invasion to the Taliban up to the present days. For Slovak readers, due to a similar experience with the Soviet invasion (1968–1989), the topics of unfreedom, hiding personal identity, persecution, adapting and accepting a regime and living under the domination of another nation are well-known. It necessary to acquaint readers with the recent history of Afghanistan so that they could identify with the fates of the main characters who lived in an unstable, ever-changing, and multi-ethnic society, where the government regime, name and symbols are constantly changing, thus, making it difficult to create a unified national identity. Afghanistan is a “troubled country” that gives the impression of enduring constant chaos, freedom, conflicts and war. At the same time, it is an exotic and oriental country that is still unknown for Westerners. Hosseini’s role is not to question the Western view of Afghanistan, but rather to enrich it. The writer brings new knowledge to readers and turns ordinary Afghans into loving people who long for a dignified life.

I v a n a P O N D E L Í K O V Á
Department of European Cultural Studies
Faculty of Arts
Matej Bel University
Banská Bystrica
Slovakia
[ivana.stykova@umb.sk]

J a n a P E C N Í K O V Á
Department of European Cultural Studies
Faculty of Arts
Matej Bel University
Banská Bystrica
Slovakia
[jana.pecnikova@umb.sk]

Straipsnis gautas 2020 m. spalio 20 d., priimta 2020 m. lapkričio 20 d.
Received 20 October 2020, accepted 20 November 2020.