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**REFLECTION OF MUSLIM CULTURE IN LITERATURE**

**Abstract:** *The article deals with the intercultural differences depicted in literary works originally written in English, translated into Slovak, which plot is set in selected Muslim countries (Iran, Afghanistan). Regarding the question of migrating people from Eastern countries to Europe, which is also related to the understanding of “otherness”, we pay attention to differences in everyday life, such as the way of communication, use of titles, time perception, religion, hygiene, clothing, eating and other unique differences. This article is intended to contribute to the understanding of "otherness" and soften aversion towards different cultures.*

**Key words:** intercultural differences, literature, Muslims, East, “otherness”, stereotypes and prejudices, Iran, Afghanistan

**Introduction**

An increasing number of women’s dramatic stories, who have experienced living in a Muslim country as well as having a romantic relationship with a Muslim, have recently appeared in the Slovak book market, which encourages readers to explore a different culture. The readers respond to these stories ambivalently, on the one hand they consider these stories as literary and cultural enrichment, and on the other hand, they evoke feelings of rejection and resistance to the “otherness”. We encounter the “otherness” not only in books, but nowadays also in a real life due to the migration of people from so-called Eastern cultures. There are situations in contact with these foreigners that can be characterized as a conflict, confrontation or conflict of identities. These processes often manifest disinterest, refusal and discrimination. Although migration is not a historically new or unique phenomenon, the current refugee crisis (beginning in 2015) has affected almost all spheres of postmodern society, increasing the importance of intercultural communication and competence. Intercultural communication is a part of globalized world, which technology blurs the borders in. However, barriers in relationships, both personal and professional, remain.

In the literature on intercultural differences, authors (Olejárová, Borec) tend to generalize and merge the cultural differences of Muslim countries into one unit. We may even find that some confuse the Muslim world with the Arab world, resp. they use general terms such as the Middle East or Asia, without taking into account the differences between the countries belonging to these transnational groups. Despite the growing economic strength of the countries of the Asian continent and the increasing spread of Islam, whether to Europe or other parts of the world, such publications that explain the intercultural differences of individual Muslim countries are still absenting in the book market. While the countries of the European Union receive considerable attention and are analyzed separately.

**Novels from the Eastern Cultures - the Research Sample**

Culture consists of various elements of material and spiritual nature. One of the most important parts of culture is literature. Literature represents the culture of a particular nation and spreads it as well. That is why we based the intercultural research on a corpus made up of a set of novels dealing with the topic of life in Muslim countries. The first group of novels is from the Iranian environment, which consists of the unintentional tetralogy of novels by three authors, Betty Mahmoody, the author of the novels *Not without my Daughter* (1987) and *For the Love of a Child* (1992), her daughter Mahtob[[1]](#footnote-1), the author of a novel *My name is Mahtob* (2013), and Moody[[2]](#footnote-2), Mahmoody’s ex-husband and Mahtob’s father, the author of *Lost without my Daughter* (2013). This mixed trio controversially responds to the clash of two different cultures that have affected their lives.

The second, contrasting view of the issue of the “otherness” of culture is represented by an “insider”, the Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini, author of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), which tells the story of two women (Mariam and Laila), both generationally and socially different, whose lives are linked by marriage to one man and a war that has forced millions of Afghans to flee abroad. Violence, fear and the unfair position of women, but also faith, hope, protection of families and national values are portrayed in the novel. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* describes the development of Afghan society (from 1960s to the beginning of the millennium) and the impact of consolidating Islam on the lives of people in that country. Moreover, it is a touching story of family, love, friendship and a power of sacrifice.

**Novels’ Selection Criteria**

The selection of the research sample was preceded by an analysis of stories from the Muslim environment. The main criteria for selecting particular novels by Mahmoody family and Khaled Hosseini were triple. The first one was that a literary texts were originally written in English and translated into Slovak language, thus the Slovak readers became the target readers. In the last three decades, an increasing number of women’s dramatic stories, who have experienced living in a Muslim country as well as having a romantic relationship with a Muslim, have recently appeared in the Slovak book market, which encourages readers to explore a different culture. For an illustration, the novel *Not without my daughter* belongs to the first ones depicting the life in a Muslim country that were published after the Velvet Revolution (1989) in Slovakia. This novel can be read as an exciting bestseller about a brave woman and mother, but more importantly, it has an undeniable testimony about the tensions between “Muslim” and “Western” culture.

Both examined Muslim cultures are part of the Orient, which, according to Edward W. Said, is largely the world of text through books and manuscripts[[3]](#footnote-3). Thus, the second criterion become the plot setting in selected Muslim countries. Finally, in order to achieve the highest possible validity of the submitted research, we included only those authors who had had their personal experience with life in both a Muslim country and the USA, what made them valuable and reliable sources of intercultural differences.

In this paper, we analyze the zones sensitive to differences, which authors of literary works provide us with. Slovak-Iraqi orientalist Emíre Khidayer considers novels a reflection of life experience, and claims that “it is up to the author how he/she understands the reality and interprets it”[[4]](#footnote-4). There are many differences between East and West, however we pay attention only to those in everyday life, such as communication, use of titles, time perception, hygiene, clothing, eating and others unique differences.

**Differences and Similarities between East and West**

Without a basic understanding of the motives that cause people to think and act differently in a particular culture, coexistence or cooperation is almost impossible. Mahmoody also writes about her experience with the “otherness”, however she lacked the ability to respect cultural differences. She contrasts Iranian and American cultures all the time and sees huge differences between them: “Each task was hampered by cultural differences”[[5]](#footnote-5).

Barriers between two different cultures can be overcome by knowledge of the history, politics, culture, business etiquette of the country, rules of polite behavior, clothing, eating habits, but also differences in addressing, formulating requests, instructions, criticism, thinking, conducting an interview etc. Being aware of intercultural differences, accepting them, but not at the expense of suppressing one’s own identity, avoids possible clashes and misunderstandings.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Despite the differences between East and West, similarities can also be found. The Muslim world is primarily relationship-oriented. Just as in Slovakia, Muslims consider the family to be the most important social unit. Muslims and Slovaks prefer family, friends and people or groups that they know well and trust them. Unlike Americans, they also make deals with such people. They must first become friends before they can trade. Cultural traditions and religious customs must be respected when concluding business with a Muslim. Slovak culturologist Jana Pecníková points out that cultural education and teaching languages should prepare people for intercultural communication.[[7]](#footnote-7) The development of intercultural competences is the basis for effective business cooperation and harmonious coexistence.

**The Importance of Names, Titles and Addressing**

Names have entirely different meaning in the Muslim world than in Western cultures. Sometimes endlessly long Muslim names depict the whole family tree. Typical names usually consist of the name, origin (family line) and surname, which may be formed by the tribe, nationality, city, occupation, animals, or nicknames.[[8]](#footnote-8) In both novels, there are several examples. In the beginning of *Not without my Daughter* Mahmoody explains:

[...] my husband was of illustrious lineage in his homeland, a fact implicit even in his name. Persian names are laced with layers of meaning, and any Iranian could deduce much from Moody´s full name, Sayyed Bozorg Mahmoody. “Sayyed” is a religious title denoting a direct descendant of the prophet Mohammed on both sides of the family, and Moody possessed a complex family tree, written in Farsi, to prove it. His parents bestowed the appellation “Bozorg” on him, hoping that he would grow to deserve this term applied to one who is great, worthy, and honorable. The family surname was originally Hakim, but Moody was born about the time the shah issued an edict prohibiting Islamic names such as this so Moody´s father changed the family name to Mahmoody, which is more Persian than Islamic. It is a derivative of Mahmood, meaning “praised”.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In addition to this, Mahtob’s mane has a symbolic meaning: “In Farsi, the official language of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the word means ‘moonlight’. But to me Mahtob is sunshine”[[10]](#footnote-10). Name itself carries symbolism, identity, and is also connected to the one’s social status and importance. For example, the name Baba Hajji means “father who has been to Mecca”[[11]](#footnote-11). His wife *Khanum* Hakim “carried the proud nickname of Bebe Hajii, ‘woman who has been to Mecca’.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* the author explains the names of both main heroines:

Nana said she was the one who´d picked the name Mariam because it had the name of her mother. Jalil said he chose the name because Mariam, the tuberose, was a lovely flower”[[13]](#footnote-13) and “Laila. Night Beauty.[[14]](#footnote-14)

As Muslim names are complex and complicated, for foreigners in a daily life communication it is recommended to use *Sir* or *Madam* in connection with name. Iranians use *Aga (*‘*mister*’*)*[[15]](#footnote-15) and *Khanum (‘lady’)*[[16]](#footnote-16) when addressing someone. Hosseini writes that in Afghanistan, it is commonly used to address women as *hamshira*[[17]](#footnote-17), meaning sister. Men are addressed as brother, but the author does not mention the Afghan equivalent. Of course, it does not immediately refer to friendly and informal relationship.

The same way of addressing functions in communications with the Americans. As a rule, if an American introduces himself/herself with name, address him/her this way, but it does not automatically mean informal relationship. There is a priority of using surnames together with academic degree in addressing people in Slovakia. Muslims are also fond of their titles and ranks. It is also necessary to use degrees, as they are important sign of status and competence for a Muslim.

**Ways of Communication and Greetings**

We can communicate with each other in different ways, for example orally or using written language, by silence, body language, overall physical appearance, fragrance, colors, habits, but also in certain ways that reflect the conventions of a society. We choose the means of communication depending on the purpose of the communication and the partner whom we communicate with.

Cultures also differ in the directness of communication. The American way of communication is straightforward and always to the point, because for every American time is money, and to waste it, is considered “sinful”[[18]](#footnote-18). This communication style is striking for Muslims and they consider it as an impoliteness and misbehaviour[[19]](#footnote-19). Slovaks have diplomatic approach to communication and the same approach is expected[[20]](#footnote-20). This style of communication is more acceptable for Muslims. Their communication is accompanied by indirectness, emotions, expressive utterance, gestures and noise:

To a westerner, a normal Iranian conversation appears to be a heated argument, filled with shrill chatter and expansive gestures, all punctuated with „Ensha Allah“. The noise level is astounding.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Verbal expression of “no” is considered very impolite. And they want to behave politely. “Yes” does not always mean consent. The basic rule is: if a Muslim says “yes”, it means “maybe” when he/she says “maybe”, it means “no”. Thus they avoid open confrontation. It is recommended to observe closely non-verbal signals that are more significant part of the communication than in other countries. For example, smacking lips may signal hard “no”[[22]](#footnote-22). For an illustration, we can provide an example from the novel *Not without my Daughter* when Mahmoody wanted to call home from school:

The principal raised her head and clicked her tongue. No. She muttered a few words, which Mrs. Azahr translated: „We promised your husband that we would never let you leave the building and or use the phone.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

As we have already mentioned, we can communication through language, gestures, but also using body language. Cultures can be divided into contact and non-contact cultures. In Eastern cultures, they avoid personal touch, which is especially true for greeting women. Unless she shakes her hand in greeting first, the man must not do so. This rule also applies in Western countries, but a possible violation is not considered as a great offense to decent behavior as it would in Orient. The men greet each other by shaking hands and saying *salam*[[24]](#footnote-24), peace with you.

**Time Perception**

Cultures understand time differently, which is related to several factors such as geography, historical as well as climatic aspects, but also the character and uniqueness of an individual, who is a part of a particular culture. We must not forget that every culture has individuals, who sometimes have a contradictory approach to time.[[25]](#footnote-25) Based on the time perception by individuals and their preferences, we divide cultures into monochronic and polychronic ones. Their characteristics are contained in Chart 1.

**Chart 1: Characteristics of people’s behavior in terms of time perception**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Monochronic** | **Polychronic** |
| Do | one task only | multiple tasks |
| Timetables and schedules | serious | no dogma, can be violated |
| The most important | work | family and interpersonal relations |
| Privacy | important | active contact with others |
| Work | independently of others | with more people at the same time |

(Source: Dolinská, 2004, p. 11)

We classify Western cultures as monochronic because time is of a great value. In contrast to them are Eastern cultures, where time is considered a relative term and understood quite differently. Family and private matters always take priority. Everything else just has to wait. From time point of view, we classify them as polychronic cultures. As stated by Mahmoody: “Time seemed to mean nothing to the average Iranian”[[26]](#footnote-26) and “Time means so little to Iranians; it is difficult to accomplish anything on schedule”[[27]](#footnote-27). Although it sounds illogical, the rule is that Muslims will expect punctuality and consider the phrase “I have no time” to be extremely rude, even as an offence.[[28]](#footnote-28)

**Hygiene**

Hygiene habits are also influenced by culture, religion and education. We remind that in Muslim countries one of the most important rules, which must be respected, is that the right hand is not the same as the left one. Muslims consider the left hand to be unclean because they use it for personal hygiene.

In Muslim countries, personal hygiene is also associated with certain rituals arising from religion. Every Muslim must be ritually cleansed before praying, that is, before joining with God. This includes washing the face, ears, nostrils and hands, and should be accompanied by washing intimate parts. The Qur'an (4:43, 5: 6) prescribes a method of purification. If a Muslim does not have the opportunity to physically purify himself/herself, he/she can do so-called tayammum[[29]](#footnote-29), a symbolic purification.

In the novel *Not without my Daughter* Mahmoody orientalistically evaluates Muslim hygiene. Moody’s family belonged to the so-called higher society, but from the American perspective, they were only “dirty” Iranians, as can be seen from Moody’s cousin Mammal’s description who, “continued to wear the same foul-smelling shirt and blue jeans”[[30]](#footnote-30) or “a shower was a rare event in his life, viewed as a chore rather than renewing experience”[[31]](#footnote-31). Apart from the neglected appearance of domestic residents, who seemed sweaty and noisy, the dirt and smell were ubiquitous, according to her descriptions, whether in the city or in households. Her criticism was influenced mainly by the culture, which she herself came from. Americans are said to be quite obsessed with hygiene and a “nice fragrance”. One should be clean, neat and pleasantly smelling. Fine perfume or cologne is a necessity, which is related to the American sense of hygiene. It is customary for an American to never wear the same (neither trousers) for two consecutive days, and expects the same from others. Otherwise, they consider it as a sign of a lower standard of living. Having a shower is a daily hygiene issue in the Western world, but it may not be the case in Iran. Iranians prefer to visit the so-called *hamoom*[[32]](#footnote-32), oriental spas, which also penetrated to Slovakia, specifically, to Trenčianske Teplice[[33]](#footnote-33). *Hammams* provide a combination of physical and mental cleansing. A visit to a *hammam*[[34]](#footnote-34) is also extremely pleasant in Afghanistan:

there was nothing finer than stepping out and taking that first breath of cold air, to feel the hear rising from the skin.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Intercultural differences in the field of hygiene are manifested not only in the personal hygiene of individuals, but also in the whole society, from individual households to common premises, resp. outdoors.

**Dress Code**

Dress code is of a great importance in Muslim cultures. For a business meeting, a Muslim may come in traditional clothes, but for a Western, conservative outfit is required. A dark blue or black suit is suitable for a manager. Despite the heat, it is not recommended to take off a jacket, because a Muslim can consider relaxed behavior as a lack of respect. Women’s clothing should not reveal the skin and emphasize the figure. Suitable are subtle skirts or trouser suits, and the length of the skirt should be below the knee. We consider Muslim fashion together with gastronomy as the areas of the greatest intercultural differences, and therefore we focus on them in more details.

A very specific dress code is inseparable part of Muslim women’s lives. Khidayer explains that there are five reasons why women veil themselves. First is sun and wind protection, second is lack of money because not every woman can afford regular hair styling, third is religion, fourth is connected to the previous one – woman should not attract a man because she is devil´s tool to lead a man from the right way, and finally they voluntarily veil themselves against the eyes of men.[[36]](#footnote-36) Mahmoody describes her first experience when arriving to an Iranian airport:

I knew that women in Iran were required to keep their arms, legs, and foreheads covered, but I was surprised to see that all of the women airport employees as well as most of the female passengers were wrapped almost completely in what Moody told me were *chadors*. A chador is a large, half-moon-shaped cloth entwined around the shoulders, forehead, and chin to reveal only eyes, nose, and mouth. The effect is reminiscent of a nun’s habit in times past. The more devout Iranian women allowed only a single eye to poke through. Women scurried through the airport carrying several pieces of heavy luggage in only one hand, for the other was needed to hold the fabric in place under the chin. The long, flowing black panels of their *chadors* billowed wide. What intrigued me most was that *chador* was optional. There were other garments available to fulfil the harsh requirements of the dress code, but these Moslem women chose to wear chador on the top of everything else, despite the oppressive heat. I marvelled at the power their society and their religion held over them.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The coat for women is called *montoe*[[38]](#footnote-38). The scarf is called *roosarie*[[39]](#footnote-39)*.* Mahmoody had to wear them to go out on the street. If not, she could get into troubles with *pasdar*, a special police force.

In contrast with what many Europeans think, the custom of covering oneself has more regional, financial or status-bounded varieties. We agree with Khidayer that veiling is not only religious symbol but also social and cultural.

Another part of clothes so-called *hijab* is mentioned in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The word *hijab* originates from the word *hajaba* that means to hide or separate. *Hijab* is used as a cover of a head or a veil hiding hair. According to the Qur'an it is also a place separating women from men who came for a visit.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Fashion varies from one country to another. There are no commonly valid rules for all countries. Meanwhile in some countries the veil is strict or orthodox, in another countries there exist only recommendations. It can be seem that there is actually no fashion in the Muslim world. However, this stereotype is not true. Muslim style can be observed also in Western cultures. In fashion world, there are no new trends such as extended tops, tunics, pashminas made of cashmere, scarves, various colourful ornaments and patterns.

**Eating Habits and Hospitability**

Hospitability is one of the most characteristic features of Muslims. Home has always been a place of careful preparation of meals, and cooking is definitely a female duty expected from a woman by society. It is not only a typical action concerning cooking, but it also frequently has a form of a home celebration, involving all its inhabitants.[[41]](#footnote-41) There are certain rules when dining with Muslims such as not using left hand for eating. It is necessary to learn what is allowed and what is forbidden at the table. Muslims do not eat pork and rarely drink alcohol. The nation’s culinary specialities usually reflect its ethnic and geographic diversity. Dining together with family or friends, presented in both selected stories should be an indication of idyll. However, both novels are far distant from an idyll.

Afghan cuisine is mostly influenced by Iranian (Persian), Indian and Mongolian herbs and spices, ingredients and food. India brought chillies, saffron, garam masala (mixture of cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, cumin, bay leaf and nutmeg) and pepper to Afghanistan. Iranians contributed with coriander, mint and *sabzi* (green vegetables such as spinach and green herbs). And Mongolian influence is in dumplings and noodles. But Afghan cuisine has its own style based on country’s main crops such as wheat, corn and rice. In addition, fat and meat, especially lamb and mutton, play an important role as they are important fuel for the people who live in harsh Afghan countryside.[[42]](#footnote-42) Moreover, various kinds of bread, vegetables and dairy products, especially yogurt are essentials of Afghan cuisine. Yogurts are used for dressings and also to soften spicy meals. Typical for Afghan gastronomy is *dogh*[[43]](#footnote-43), salty yogurt drink prepared with cucumber and mint.

Meals are usually eaten with hands, especially with the right hand, with the usage of bread as a scoop. Bread is served with every single meal. In Afghan cuisine, they have two basic kinds of bread. First is a large round, flat bread called *lavash* and the second one is a *naan-style* bread baked in the tandoor oven. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, when Mariam got married, she started to live with her husband Rasheed and her responsibility was to take care of their household, and baking bread was one of her duties that she learned while living with her mother: “Nana showed her how to knead dough, how to kindle the tandoor”[[44]](#footnote-44). It is not unusual for Afghan people that they bake bread in public ovens: “put on a *hijab*, and set out for the communal tandoor”[[45]](#footnote-45). *Tandoor* is a ceramic, cylindrical-shaped oven used in Asian cuisines for baking bread and making various kinds of dishes.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* provides insight into the Afghan culture with all its customs, gastronomy included. Expressions of various kinds of meals, herbs and spices, side dishes and vegetables can be found in the novel:

Nana taught her to sew too, and to cook rice and all the different toppings *shalqam* stew with turnip, spinach *sabzi*, cauliflower with ginger.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Inseparable part of an exotic cuisine is *daal*, rice and *kichiri*. *Daal* comes from India and it is a kind of stew of usually red lentils but also beans and peas. *Kichiri* is an Indian food made of rice and lentils with various kinds of herbs and spices such as coriander, garlic, ginger, etc. As we have already mentioned, Mariam in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* spends time cooking for her husband:

But he did look pleased that she had already set his dinner plate, on a clean *sofrah* spread on the living-room floor.

“I made *daal*,” Mariam said.

She poured water for him from the *aftawa* to wash his hands with. As he dried with a towel, she put before him a steaming bowl of *daal* and a plate of fluffy white rice.[[47]](#footnote-47)

If we compare *A Thousand Splendid Suns* with *Not without my Daughter*, we can observe the author’s different approach of writing. Mahmoody’s style is rather explanatory and helpful for a reader. She precisely specified Iranian cuisine that is also famous for usage of saffron and *sabzi*. Mahmoody portrayed Iranian society with detailed descriptions of various cultural or religious customs, women conditions in the Muslim society and provided insight into Iranian gastronomy and food serving as follows:

Women carried in food and placed it on the *sofrays* spread over the carpet. There was plate after plate of salads garnished with radishes cut into lovely roses and carrots fanned out to resemble pine trees. There were wide bowls filled with yogurt, platters of thin, flattened bread, stabs of acrid cheese, and trays piled high with fresh fruit were spaced around the floor. *Sabzi* (trays of fresh basil, mint, and the greens of leeks) was added to complete a brilliant panorama of color.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Two huge pots of rice – one filled with regular white rice and one of “green” rice, cooked with *sabzi* and large beans resembling limas – were prepared in the Iranian style that Moody had taught me long ago, first boiled, then glazed with oil and steamed so that a brown crust form on the bottom. This staple of the Iranian diet is then topped with a wide variety of sauces, called *khoreshe*, prepared from vegetables and spices and often small bits of meat.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Iranian cuisine is also known as Persian cuisine and includes exotic spices, flavours but also cooking methods, food serving and traditions of this country. As Iranian culture with its national cuisine is gaining popularity in multicultural society, it is necessary to understand not only history, traditions but also eating customs of Iranian people. Typical Iranian dishes are combinations of rice, vegetables with meat, mostly lamb, mutton, chicken or fish. “It is a country where oil is a sign of wealth, even cooking one.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

Bread is an inseparable part of Iranian cuisine. During the peace, baking bread in Iran is the masculine task, however, during the war: “the men to fight; the women to cook and also to take over the masculine task of baking bread”[[51]](#footnote-51). Except *lavash*, in Iran they also have “*barbari*, a leavened bread baked in oval-shaped slabs about two feet long. When eaten fresh and hot it is delicious, far more palatable than the more common *lavash*”[[52]](#footnote-52).

One of the biggest differences between East and West is the way of eating. While sitting in Western countries at the table and using cutlery, in Orient it is common to sit cross-legged on the ground and eat with hands. Tea is the most popular drink. In Iran, it is poured into *estacons*, tiny glasses. Tea is prepared and drunk in Iran according to the aesthetic ritual that can be observed several times a day. “The color of the tea and its subtle aroma are an indications of the brewer’s skills.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Oriental countries are distinguished by their hospitality, which is completely different from Western. Even in more modest conditions, they will honor guests by preparing the best food they have.

**Unique Cultural Traits**

The diversity of cultures is also reflected in the customs that are typical for only one particular culture. Such a custom in Iran is *taraf*[[54]](#footnote-54), a social convention how to politely but vaguely invite someone. The concept of honor and shame is important in Afghan society. The man, the head of the family, is responsible for protecting the honor of the whole family.

In the novel *A Thousand Shining Suns* we can learn about adherence to *purdah* in Afghan society. *Purdah* is a religious and social isolation of women that protects oriental women from the views of men other than family members. *Purdah* has two forms, namely the physical segregation of women (e.g. separating a part of the house only for women to avoid encountering strange men[[55]](#footnote-55)) and requiring women to cover themselves up. *Purdah* can also be interpreted as a “veil”[[56]](#footnote-56) for oriental women. Mariam did not mind following *purdah*. She was rather flattered, considered it a manifestation of her husband’s care. She felt rare, important, and protected, which changed after she was unable to give her husband a child.

In addition to cultural customs awareness, it is also important to know what to avoid in each country. Iranians are particularly sensitive if they are mistaken for Arabs. Political topics should be avoided in both countries. Demonstration of respect and modesty is an essential part of Muslim culture.

**Conclusion**

If we want to communicate with people from different cultures with as few misunderstandings as possible, we must understand the world and think like others, but not at the expense of hiding our own identity or overly eager to adapt to others. It is difficult to imagine harmonious coexistence, if we are unable to respond effectively to the cultural stimuli of local people and use them to meet our expectations in a particular country or culture. With a previous analysis, we have pointed out that literary works can also convey important information about intercultural differences. The more we know about other people’s everyday lives, the greater is the hope that through mutual knowledge and understanding, old aversions will be forgotten and new ones will be blocked. It is not enough to understand, but it is also necessary to be open and tolerant to the “otherness”.

Nowadays, when dealing with foreigners, the knowledge of cultural differences is emphasized more, which does not mean that language preparation is less important. Language is not only a means of communication, which we use to express our thoughts, but through it, we also spread the culture, which essential part is literature. Selected novels belong to the postcolonial literature. The postcolonial approaches to literature examine, in particular, the negative portrayal of the “otherness” as a danger and a threat. Moreover, the non-Western knowledge and thinking are devalued.[[57]](#footnote-57) Postcolonial theory gives new life to oriental ideas by presenting a very exotic and essentialized understanding of the Orient that is diametrically opposed to the West.

Betty Mahmoody is rather negative about the Iranian culture and its traditions, however she provides the readers with detailed description of intercultural differences. On the other hand, Khaled Hosseini is attempting to make an objective representation of reality. To conclude, literary works can be considered a relevant source of intercultural differences, and authors of literary works can adequately convey not only the way of life in a different country but also the thinking of its people. Reading books enriches our minds and souls, helps develop and improve our intercultural awareness and build relations with others based on accepting differences, but not in the cost of suppressing own cultural values and identity.

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1. As the surnames of mother and daughter are the same, we use only the first name, Mahtob, to distinguish between them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As the surnames of Betty Mahmoody and her ex-husband are the same, we use only the first name, Moody, to distinguish between them. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Said, 2003, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Styková, 2019, p. 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mahmoody – Hoffer, 1989, p. 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Borec, 2009, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Pecníková, 2017, p. 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Borec, 2009, p. 127 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mahmoody – Hoffer, 1989, p. 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ibid, p. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ibid, p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ibid, p. 138 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hosseini, 2008, p. 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ibid, p. 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mahmoody – Hoffer, 1989, p. 138 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hosseini, 2008, p. 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Friedová, 2004, p. 166 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Borec, 2009*,* p. 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Poliak, 2015, p. 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mahmoody – Hoffer, 1989, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. ibid, p. 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Mahmoody – Hoffer, p. 151 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Hosseini, 2008, p. 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Dolinská, 2004, p. 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Mahmoody – Hoffer, 1989, p. 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ibid, p. 379 - 380 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Borec, 2009, p. 125 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Al-Sbenaty, 2015, p. 153 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Mahmoody – Hoffer, 1989, p. 434 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Mahmoody – Hoffer, 1989, p. 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Khidayer, 2010, p. 189 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Hosseini, 2008, p. 88 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Khidayer, 2010, p. 138 – 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Mahmoody – Hoffer, 1989, p. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. ibid, p. 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Khidayer, 2010, p. 141 – 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. A. Buda, *Food As the Representation of Idyllic Landscape of Victorian World in the Novels by Thomas Hardy*, [in:] *De Gruyter*, https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/clear.2016.3.issue-1/clear-2016-0005/clear-2016-0005.pdf [access: 18.06.2017]. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *About Afghan Food*, [in:] *SBS*, http://www.sbs.com.au/food/article/2013/02/14/about-afghan-food [access: 18.06.2017]. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
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44. ibid, p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. ibid., p. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. ibid, p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. ibid, p. 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
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49. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Mahmoody – Hoffer, 1989, p. 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. ibid, p. 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
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54. Mahmoody – Hoffer, 1989, p. 108 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Forster, 1949, p. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
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