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## PROCEEDINGS



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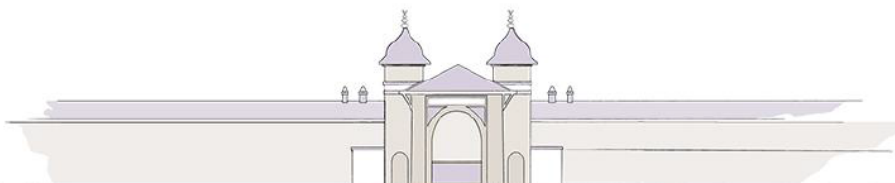
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# THE ISSUE OF IDENTITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY MACEDONIAN LITERATURE

Jovanka DENKOVA<sup>1</sup>

Mahmut CELIK<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper addresses the issue of identity in the contemporary Macedonian literature. Several aspects of the problem are analyzed: the quest for the roots the man/character, plunging into the past of their ancestors, then a desperate need of the character to preserve the values that are rooted in him and his genetic structure, the tradition, desire and the man's/character's insistence to affirm himself as one who is the foundation for the existence of every other man and eventually an identity erosion. The question of identity is a very frequent topic in the contemporary Macedonian literature. Because of this indisputable fact, the main issues of this research paper are the general characteristics of the identity question and their reflection in the works of the Macedonian contemporary writers. There are numerous examples that dealt with this issue. The novels "Pirej" by Petre M. Andreevski, "Pasija po Matej" by Hristo Krstevski, "Bunar" by Dimitar Bashevski, "Crno seme" by Tashko Georgijevski, "Razboj" by Vlado Maleski and many other are very important in this matter.

**Key words:** identity, roots, the past, tradition, existence.

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## 1. THE NOVEL "NEMA SMRT DODEKA ZVONI"

In the novel "Nema smrt dodeka zvoni", Dimitar Bashevski elaborates his favorite topic- coming back to one's roots. After many long years spent abroad, far away from home, the protagonist Spiro Kondev comes back to his house in his home village. And then the pursuit of his lost roots begins, manifesting itself as a search for his and his relatives' relics, some of which had already passed away, in the village registry: "The name might have even disappeared from the lists, these regular, municipal lists. Who would ever keep it, in his absence, for so long, since the distant beginning of birth? But he will check, if it's lost he will find it, if it's buried he will excavate it. That's why he is going far back, from death to birth. Now it can't be any different. If life wasn't exclusive, without any right of second choice, not even the truth would have existed, everything would have been one big calamity."<sup>3</sup> But, to make things even worse, the registry books from the time of his parents birth were long gone, and he finds himself in an absurd situation when he can not even prove who he is. That is one of the reasons why he can't prove his ownership over a small field that is practically stolen by his greedy neighbour Krusharski. All the time Krusharski tries to prove himself in front of the others, he is sure that no one can take away from him the field where his ancestors had lived, but the faith takes him abroad where all his efforts to preserve his identity fall through.

## 2. THE NOVEL "BUNAR"

In the novel "Bunar" (by Dimitar Bashevski), the author once again uses the topic of coming home, in order to show the protagonist's purchase of his identity. The protagonist Simon/Simon Poco, comes back in his home village Makazar, in order to write in peace, proclaiming to be a writer. Inspired by the villagers' lack of water he suddenly gets the idea to finance the well digging in his village. The water in the well disappears, but on its bottom Simon finds a metallic piece with his family name on it, and realizes it belonged to his ancestor mentioned in the 19th century travelogues as a trader and a benefactor.

From that moment on, the hero starts to pursue his past, to discover the reasons why his ancestor, Nikola, was a benefactor in his village: "This entire examination of the past and everything around me now, the examination of life and death, of what I do, will get me to know myself better."<sup>4</sup> Nikola's character is revealed more to the audience than Simon's character. Simon tries to do a research about his genetic past, and the author by using the story of Nikola Poco's destiny, whose benefactor's role hides weapon smuggling for the Turkish army, partnership with the Turks, illegitimate marriage with an Armenian woman and even a sexual attack

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<sup>3</sup> *Nema smrt dodeka zvoni*, Dimitar Bashevski, Skopje, Mislra, 1995, str.6.

<sup>4</sup> *Bunar*, Dimitar Bashevski, Skopje, Slovo, 2001, str.31.

against his daughter, tries to impact people's collective sense. These people were jaded by these so called benefactors and with time they became more and more suspicious about everything, and started questioning every sincerely offered helping hand, believing in ulterior motives and purposes. Thus, in this case, the search of the protagonist is in vain, since his destiny is sealed, just as the destiny of his ancestor who ended up in an unknown grave, under a pile of stones.

Dimitar Bashevski's protagonists from these two novels are returnees whose obsession for leaving a trace, something to be remembered by in their home towns, resulted in them being poorly motivated in finding themselves and their place in the world. Instead of calming the thunder and solve the dilemmas, they get lost in their inner conflict, realizing eventually that leaving their homes took its toll, since they were "gone with the wind."

### 3. THE NOVEL "PASIJA PO MATEJ"

Hristo Krstevski, in his novel "Pasija po Matej", an American with Macedonian background, Matt Jordan, goes back in his home town to complete his father's last will: to repair the family sepulcher in Raven, a place that exists only in the author's imagination. The author implies that it might be Shtip, since there are many local toponyms characteristic for Shtip only. Then he should build a family house, plant a tree and raise his own son: "...he tries to step on his fatherland, to conjoin with his ancestors, to become part of this universe, to mingle with his roots."<sup>5</sup> Suddenly, he finds himself thrown in a middle of a war in Former Yugoslavia, and becomes witness of many war crimes. When he goes back in his home house in Raven he repairs the family grave where he moves his parents from the far America. It is where Matt Jordan starts his own odyssey, his search for the roots in the past of his ancestors. He finds out that his grandfather Matej Jordanov, after whom he got his name only in an Americanized version, was followed and battered by the government since he did not obey as he "should", and since they couldn't accuse him of anything they sent him to Goli Otok.

### 4. THE NOVEL "CRNO SEME"

The novel "Crno seme" by Tashko Georgievski, depicts in its best the convulsive effort of the human to keep his identity. On a tropical island, where an outrageous torture over the Macedonian army officers was carried out, the author built a marvelous monument of the human effort to stay strong in the name of his dignity, humanity and after all, his identity. That inner force arises from their belief that everything can be ruined and everything can disappear, everything but the identity. Because of this, the protagonists Hristos and Done, in this little but philosophical novel reach the level of stoicism. It can be clearly seen in the part where Done sees Hristo's black eye and asks him: "Oh my God, Hristos, they didn't damage your eye, did they?, and Hristos, with a smile on his face, answers: Is that what really matters? The most important thing here is not to let anyone spoil your soul,<sup>6</sup> referring to betrayal, since in this novel "there are many people with rotten souls, many who let both terror and torture destroy the humanity in humans, to erase their past, to separate them from their national land, to destroy their moral ideal."<sup>7</sup> Another scene similar to the previous is the one when a Greek army officers torture Done to sign that he is not Macedonian but Greek. In that point, Done his consistency describes by the stigma: "Will you sign to be a horse, if you are not a horse?"<sup>8</sup> Thus, the national identity of these people transforms into a universal idea of the human disobey, despite all the evil forces that tend to change them into something they are not.

### 5. THE NOVEL "PIREJ"

In the novel "Pirej" by Petre M. Andreevski, these evil forces are all the wars in which Macedonian man was just a marionette, fighting for different sides alternatively. All that paradox of the cruel Macedonian destiny is portrayed by the doom of the two brothers, who against their will are taken to the battle field, where they met and realize they fight against each other. The title of this novel itself represents people's stoicism and their deadly efforts to vanish without any trace. The real *Pirej*, weed, in this novel is Velika, a woman who despite all the accidents, plagues, murders, her children's death, her husband's abuse, she keeps holding on and going strong. On the contrary, her husband Jon, participant in all brother killing wars every Macedonian was pushed into, falls in despair and insignificance because of his tragic faith. It seems because of that despair, he becomes dehumanized after his return from the front.

We would say that he, without any justifiable motive, puts Velika through hard times... He even becomes contradictory when it comes to his own children. After the devastating news of his children's death immediately languishes in, until a moment of anger when he tells Velika that it is her children that died, not his.

<sup>5</sup> *Pasija po Matej*, Hristo Krstevski, Skopje, Slovo, 2008, str. 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Crno seme*, Tashko Georgievski, Misl, Skopje, 1980, str.28.

<sup>7</sup> Drugovac, M. (1990). *Istorija na makedonskata knizevnost XX vek*. Skopje: Misl: 569.

<sup>8</sup> *Crno seme*, Tashko Georgievski, Misl, Skopje, 1980, str.28.



against his daughter, tries to impact people's collective sense. These people were jaded by these so called benefactors and with time they became more and more suspicious about everything, and started questioning every sincerely offered helping hand, believing in ulterior motives and purposes. Thus, in this case, the search of the protagonist is in vain, since his destiny is sealed, just as the destiny of his ancestor who ended up in an unknown grave, under a pile of stones.

Dimitar Bashevski's protagonists from these two novels are returnees whose obsession for leaving a trace, something to be remembered by in their home towns, resulted in them being poorly motivated in finding themselves and their place in the world. Instead of calming the thunder and solve the dilemmas, they get lost in their inner conflict, realizing eventually that leaving their homes took its toll, since they were "gone with the wind."

### 3. THE NOVEL "PASIJA PO MATEJ"

Hristo Krstevski, in his novel "Pasija po Matej", an American with Macedonian background, Matt Jordan, goes back in his home town to complete his father's last will: to repair the family sepulcher in Raven, a place that exists only in the author's imagination. The author implies that it might be Shtip, since there are many local toponyms characteristic for Shtip only. Then he should build a family house, plant a tree and raise his own son: "...he tries to step on his fatherland, to conjoin with his ancestors, to become part of this universe, to mingle with his roots."<sup>5</sup> Suddenly, he finds himself thrown in a middle of a war in Former Yugoslavia, and becomes witness of many war crimes. When he goes back in his home house in Raven he repairs the family grave where he moves his parents from the far America. It is where Matt Jordan starts his own odyssey, his search for the roots in the past of his ancestors. He finds out that his grandfather Matej Jordanov, after whom he got his name only in an Americanized version, was followed and battered by the government since he did not obey as he "should", and since they couldn't accuse him of anything they sent him to Goli Otok.

### 4. THE NOVEL "CRNO SEME"

The novel "Crno seme" by Tashko Georgievski, depicts in its best the convulsive effort of the human to keep his identity. On a tropical island, where an outrageous torture over the Macedonian army officers was carried out, the author built a marvelous monument of the human effort to stay strong in the name of his dignity, humanity and after all, his identity. That inner force arises from their belief that everything can be ruined and everything can disappear, everything but the identity. Because of this, the protagonists Hristos and Done, in this little but philosophical novel reach the level of stoicism. It can be clearly seen in the part where Done sees Hristo's black eye and asks him: "Oh my God, Hristos, they didn't damage your eye, did they?, and Hristos, with a smile on his face, answers: Is that what really matters? The most important thing here is not to let anyone spoil your soul,<sup>6</sup> referring to betrayal, since in this novel "there are many people with rotten souls, many who let both terror and torture destroy the humanity in humans, to erase their past, to separate them from their national land, to destroy their moral ideal."<sup>7</sup> Another scene similar to the previous is the one when a Greek army officers torture Done to sign that he is not Macedonian but Greek. In that point, Done his consistency describes by the stigma: "Will you sign to be a horse, if you are not a horse?"<sup>8</sup> Thus, the national identity of these people transforms into a universal idea of the human disobey, despite all the evil forces that tend to change them into something they are not.

### 5. THE NOVEL "PIREJ"

In the novel "Pirej" by Petre M. Andreevski, these evil forces are all the wars in which Macedonian man was just a marionette, fighting for different sides alternatively. All that paradox of the cruel Macedonian destiny is portrayed by the doom of the two brothers, who against their will are taken to the battle field, where they met and realize they fight against each other. The title of this novel itself represents people's stoicism and their deadly efforts to vanish without any trace. The real *Pirej*, weed, in this novel is Velika, a woman who despite all the accidents, plagues, murders, her children's death, her husband's abuse, she keeps holding on and going strong. On the contrary, her husband Jon, participant in all brother killing wars every Macedonian was pushed into, falls in despair and insignificance because of his tragic faith. It seems because of that despair, he becomes dehumanized after his return from the front.

We would say that he, without any justifiable motive, puts Velika through hard times... He even becomes contradictory when it comes to his own children. After the devastating news of his children's death immediately languishes in, until a moment of anger when he tells Velika that it is her children that died, not his.

<sup>5</sup> *Pasija po Matej*, Hristo Krstevski, Skopje, Slovo, 2008, str. 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Crno seme*, Tashko Georgievski, Misl, Skopje, 1980, str.28.

<sup>7</sup> Drugovac, M. (1990). *Istorija na makedonskata knizevnost XX vek*. Skopje: Misl: 569.

<sup>8</sup> *Crno seme*, Tashko Georgievski, Misl, Skopje, 1980, str.28.



He is actually a martyr, who because of the hard times could not dedicate himself to his family, especially to his children.<sup>9</sup> So, it is more than obvious why Jon transforms or distorts morally. His awareness of losing his national identity and his family is too much to handle, so he finds his comfort in alcohol and everyday torture against Velika until the day of his death.

## 6. THE NOVEL "RAZBOJ"

In the novel "Razboj" by Vlado Maleski, the protagonist is a woman named Kalina, who feels enormous lust for life fulfilled with dignity, life in which she can reach her maternal identity and leave some trace behind her. "Her hopes to get pregnant, to feel a baby in her womb, goaded her maternal instinct, her passions that arise from an un-lived, unrealized life and their slowly quenching-it all represents unforgettable manifestation of this extraordinary character. The reader will take Kalina within oneself, as an unquenchable thirst for right, dignifying human life and as a pain for the lack of it."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Kalina's thoughts in the long, sleepless, lonely nights without a man and a child beside her are even more heartbreaking: "Can a woman married for eight months, not feel a life in her womb?...Why all of my friends, married after I was married, are already pregnant? Why?...Since love is no love if it doesn't give a birth to another life to love..."<sup>11</sup>

The return of her only love Stojmir from Belgrade, will cause her unrest and one night, right before his death, Kalina tries for the last time to realize her maternal dream with him: "Give me a child Stojmir, present me a little, beautiful mollycoddle, same as you, to keep from the soldiers, I won't give it to the evil ones, don't you worry, and if you die in the mountains, even if you are far away, you'll live through him..."<sup>12</sup> And Stojmir acted like a coward, saying: "I am not a woman stealer...We united as we are, do not steal each other's wives"<sup>13</sup>, and when Kalina ensures that her womb is not dead, in a dark night, darker than her soul, she offers her body to Bojan Karachul, a drummer from Struga and a night friend for the Struga's widows, who will take their secret to grave.

In this novel, the question of identity is considered from few different aspects: as search of the man/character for his roots, going back to the ancestors' past ("Bunar" and "Nema smrt dodeka zvoni"), then the desperate need of the character to preserve the values that are traditionally within oneself and one self's genetic structure ("Crno seme"), the tradition, wishes as well as the insisting to affirm as a man who will be a foundation of the existence of every other men ("Razboj"), and eventually identity erosion ("Pirej").

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<sup>9</sup> Cane Zdravkovski, *Dvaeset romansieri*, Misl, Skopje, 1995, str. 135.

<sup>10</sup> Cane Zdravkovski, *Dvaeset romansieri*, Misl, Skopje, 1995, str. 37.

<sup>11</sup> *Razboj*, Vlado Maleski, Kultura, Skopje, 1969, str.64.

<sup>12</sup> *Razboj*, Vlado Maleski, Kultura, Skopje, 1969, str.425.

<sup>13</sup> *Razboj*, Vlado Maleski, Kultura, Skopje, 1969, str.425.