Beyond a Charted Identity

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Abstract
National identity is usually considered an important part of our human existence. Each of us lives in a specific geography and holds specific socio-historical memories; these memories could create a sense of belonging and as this sense of belonging grows and one's nationalism becomes evident, it can cause conflict, war and violence against other human beings in the name of protection and upsurge of nation-states (many present conflicts around the world are the fruits of such belonging). Michael Ontajee's The English Patient skillfully questions the reality and limitations of such imaginary sense of belonging. Following the life of the English patient as a survivor of the World War II, the novel longs for a cosmopolitan state where everyone free from restrictions and definitions of nation-state could live and die freely. War and violence in this sense become media that show us the vulnerability of our human condition and the impracticality and dangers of identification with nation-state and a geographical territory.

Key Words: Cosmopolitanism, belonging, identity, borders, territory, nation, war

A group of cartographers, of mapmakers, border establishers, who are composed of one woman and five men started their desert exploration in 1936. The discovery remained incomplete for the start of the Second World War in which the woman and the four of men died left one member behind: a "faceless man" who did not remember his name and his homeland and whose whole "identification was consumed in fire" (48), the man is later called the English patient.

The name “English Patient” which at the same time is the title of Ondaatje’s novel, utilizing a nationality (English) to talk about the identity of a burned man, suggests a kind of reading which considers identity in relation to nationality or lack thereof. Lack of nationality inspires a kind of homelessness, which can inspire cosmopolitanism. Home including one’s actual place of living, city of birth, country of origin or homeland is part of one’s identity. A character without a “home” is a character that has lost part of his/her identity. As one can see two characters in the novel, Kip and Hana, meeting for the first time, have introduced themselves based on their nationality. “I grew up in India... I was born in Punjab,” Kip said. “I’m from upper America,” she replied (76). While Kip and Hana have used their nationality to introduce themselves, the English patient falsified the judgment of others by employing a false nationality. The English patient who belongs to nowhere, possesses what Zygmunt Bauman would call a “cosmopolitan identity” (99) and defines as a nomad personality who belongs to everywhere. The difference between the name “English man” and his non-English reality reluctant to be manifested is in fact the difference between national and cosmopolitan identity. Being called English, Italian, Indian echoes belonging to a national state and its borders, and the English patient’s denial of it, is his denial of belonging to state and citizenship, and a sign of his cosmopolitanism.

Among the members of the exploration group, the “faceless” English patient is the only one who even before losing his identity has shown tendency for such loss. His inherent cosmopolitanism is evident in some of the descriptions that the novel provides. Though English, “a part of [his] brain reflects the desert precisely” so he was “not a foreigner there” (33). He has the innate ability to go beyond the borders of his nation and gets acquaintance with others. He was capable of making a quick relation with the unknown districts where he has never been before. He was a skillful map-reader capable of recognizing “unnamed towns” only by looking at “their skeletal shape on map” (18). Whenever he was lost among different desert tribes “unsure of where [he] was,” the only thing he needed was “the name of a small bridge, a local costume, a cell of that historical animal and the map of the world would slide into [his mind]” (19). He was a man of knowledge who has “information like a sea” inside him (18).

Belonging to a different state, “the Levant”(165) - a vast area including Syria, part of Lebanon and Jordan- through his title “English,” the patient erases the borders of state or further the borders of belonging. Once talking to another character Katharine about what he hates most in his life he named “ownership, being owned and being named” (238). In addition to his inherent tendency to become a cosmopolitan character, years of exploration in desert and later the World Wars have transformed him into a citizen of the world. Describing his excavations, the English patient talks about his loss of nationhood: “there were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I’ve met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African –all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations” (138).

Unlike the world of lines and *boarders* which the explorers occupy, the desert through its vast emptiness and lack of charted qualities motivates them to deny the former world which they used to live in and to accept them as whoever they are regardless of their nationality. As the English man suggests, “all of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape” (139). The citizens of the world not only desire to remove their national identity but also their nominal identity. The denial of name, which is a specific part of personal identity, has been inspired by the desert. As the English man puts it, “I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not belong to anyone [not even oneself], to any nation” (139).

According to Sheila Croucher, identity is not “static, essential and unidimentional” rather it is changeable” (38). The identity of the English patient is also not stagnant. The name of a person often reflects something about her or his nationality while the name English patient is the reflection of a false identity: a Syrian born person who has grown up in England, traveled and lived everywhere. The English patient who “deterritorializes” his nationality “declines the centrality of geographic state,” and moves “beyond and outside of the established boundaries of nation-states” (Croucher 12-13). He lives in a world beyond geography; in a “superaterritory” which is “no longer

wholly mapped in terms of territorial places, territorial distances, territorial bounders" (Croucher 12). He lives in a borderless territory called "The Room." A man without nation, the English Patient lives in a room "without culture." A territory belonging to no country, a "villa" at the middle of nowhere. The English patient's Room to use Bauman's term would be a "space... without a certain culture." Talking about space in Huller's novel, Bauman suggests that the character dwells in an "imaginary home" where the boundaries of a "real home" have been dissolved. It is a dramatised space that resolves "the discomfort and anxieties of homelessness" (90- 91). The inhabitants of such a place do not identify with a certain culture, country or home. The room is the melting pot of different cultures. People come, people go, people tell stories, people listen, people read books and people review their memories; the memories through which other people live and die, enter the room and leave it. In all these comings and goings one person remained unchanged and never left the room: The English patient. Hana, the Canadian girl, coming to the Room reads books for the English patient, listens to his stories and his experiences of the past. Bringing with her huge amounts of war memories, of a lost father, husband, child, and of numerous dead soldiers whom she used to nurture, Hana let her multiple identities– which had been formed by war and hospital life as much as by her Canadian origins—interact with the multiple identities of the inhabitants of the room specially the English patient. She listens to him and adores him for his superiority in knowledge and his frivolous character, which accepts no form; she calls him the "bird," a word inspired by the fluidity of his character. A visual image that appears several times in the opening chapters of the book and echoes such formlessness is the desert wind. On pages 16 and 17, going through the English patient's notebook, Hana reads about different kinds of Desert winds: "the aajej, the africo, the bist roz, the khamsin, the nafhat, the beshabar, the simoom, the harmattan." As a natural element, air is the most fluid of all forms. Always on move, wind can be a symbol of restless travellers, identities without home. Its home is the world in which it is a dynamic nomad. Through its permanent movement and lack of belonging, wind reflects cosmopolitan identities capable of crossing geographical, political and cultural borders. Another character that bears such wind-like characteristic is Kip, the Indian man. He enters the room and soon becomes a friend of

English man. “I think he’s found a friend,” Hana says to Caravaggio. He is not only a friend but also a student for the English man learning from his experiences –“the young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English” (111). And in a little while they discover more similarities: the English man tells Hana “we have discovered a shared pleasure. The boy and I. For me on my journeys in Egypt, for him in India” (176). And added later “Kip and I are both international bastards –born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives” (176).

Caravaggio, the Italian man, enters the room aiming to recognize the identity of the English man. He is eventually convinced that such recognition is impossible. Inside the walls of the room the identification of person with certain nation, culture or war party does not make any sense. Far from special identification the room is “beyond and outside of the established boundaries of nation-states” (Croucher 13). The room has the identities of state, of its sharing characteristic and its multilingualism. A good example of such multidimensionality is the scene in which all characters enter the Room celebrating their findings. “They had celebrated in this evening’s brief dance in English patient’s Room their own simple adventures—Hana her sleep, Caravaggio his “finding” of the gramophone and Kip a different diffusing” (112).

The novel has considered an end for each of these characters, and the only character left without ending point is the English patient. Caravaggio leaves the secluded villa moving toward Italy: “He was thinking of rising and walking away from this room, the country, the detritus of a war” (251). Hana and Kip get married and start living in India, Kip works as a physician in a public hospital. Even the characters of the stories told by the characters of the novel meet their ends. Katherine and Clifton die in an air crash. Hana’s father and Patrick, his ex-husband are killed in war. The life of the English patient has no end for he has turned to an endless emblem of war victims. He is an excavator who suddenly sees himself in midst of an involuntary war, a man from whom the World War II has stolen his friends, his love and his face. War has left him as a faceless man whose identity has partially been removed and now in the post-war period he does not intend to reclaim an identity. And why is it so?

Maybe he prefers to remain in the time of war when his face, his friends and his love were not taken away.

Now at the post-war time perhaps if he reveals his identity they will certainly torture him to confess what he saw or did at the time of war in favor of one party or another. Another character that for a while is reluctant to quit the room is Hana. She desires to remain in the wartime. When the war was over she whispers to herself, “The war is over. The war is over. The war is over. She was told it would be like desertion” to quit the war. “This is not desertion” she thought, “I will stay here” (41). War killed her father and her husband, but that’s not all. For Hana war was something which both killed and revived them, they were revived in form of the English patient. In this sense, war becomes a means of hybridization, a mixture; a combination of different people from different cultures who share their identity through violence and bloodshed.

The English patient in this sense is the representative of victims of war, all the identities that disappeared, all known and unknown, dead and alive soldiers and persons who experienced war. Their identities become one in the sense that they lost their former identities as the citizens of specific countries, of lines and borders and adopted a new identity which is more a loss than an identity. They become cosmopolitan. One way or another, all the members of the room are more or less involved in accepting the citizenship of the world. Being born and brought up in India, Kip “was accustomed to his invisibility” as a member of another race in other countries. In England, “he was ignored in various barracks, and he came to prefer that.” His “self-sufficiency and privacy” was partly the result of being “the anonymous member of another race, a part of an invisible world” (196). “I was invisible” I went through [different areas], he tells Hana, “Like a cricket. Like a hidden cup of water” (200). Likewise, after recognizing the identity of the English patient, the members of the room remain silent about it and believe they “should leave him be and [after all] it doesn’t matter who he is” (165-166). It is “no longer important which side he was on during the war” (251).

The foil character that contradicts the inhabitants of the room is Geoffrey Clifton, the “very English English man” (255). He is the

“pilot, messenger, and reconnaissance” of the exploration party (229), and at the same time a member of British intelligence (252); the man of lines and borders, of nationality and ownership. The English man describes him as someone “embedded in the English machine” (273). “A husband gone mad,” he kills himself and his wife because of sense of ownership (251). Unlike the English patient, he is the one interested in naming and owning others, and in being named and being owned by them. His wife, Katherine, was his property who should remain his or she should die. Moreover, the English patient is a representative of “fluidity and dynamism” of culture. According to Croucher, culture is “not a static, uniform, organic” entity (27). Rather it is “malleable, fluid, and multidimensional” (36). The room is a fluid space; “landscape around [the English patient] just a temporary thing, there is no permanence to it” (86). The villa was changing its identity. “It was a hospital,” Hana says to Caravaggio, “before that, long before that a nunnery. Then armies took it over” and now it is the remote Villa San Giirolamo (56). The room is a global space within a local area; to borrow from Ronan Robertson, it is a “glocalized” space. Its cosmopolitanism comes from its lack of partiality, its freedom, and from its capability to include everyone and to stay away from everyone.

The room and the patient become one through interchanging their characteristics. “The Room has adopted itself to his wound” (11). The wound and destruction that war has brought to its residents. A part of a former war hospital, the room is familiar with the wounded and burned identities of hundreds and thousands soldiers similar to the English patient. It turns to a timeless, locationless witness of war’s mass identity killing. War changes the identity of the people involved in it and often leaves them alone each “in his own state of memory and solitude” (47). The war “pilots who fall into the desert –none of them come back with identification” (29). After war, confident clearheaded characters of the past, people like Caravaggio often have been drawn into “a time of darkness [with]...no confidence” (61). For “four months [Caravaggio] has not said a word” (27). Living “through a time of war when everything offered up to those around him was a lie” (117), he cannot trust anyone anymore. “War has unbalanced him and he can return to no other world as he is, wearing these false limbs that morphine promises” (116).

It seems that one personal feature which the people of war lose through war is love, as the characters of the novel did. They "were not romantic people" as the speaker suggests, "they had survived the Fascists, the English, Gauls, Goths and German. They had been owned so often that it meant nothing" (79) or as elsewhere the dialogue between Hana and Caravaggio has shown:

> She asked him:
> "You like women, don't you? You liked them."
> "I like them. Why past tense?"
> "It seems unimportant now, with the war and such things."
> He nods. (55)

Furthermore, the people involved in war become familiar with some aspects of life, which are not tangible for them before. A great experience which war brings to people is the experience of death. At the time of war when "the shadow of human is suddenly in the air" (284) they observe death in the harsh form of killing. People are killed in the war and the only thing left after them is "just a name" (194). Death for the survivors of wars is that "familiar matter of today." Experiencing life in death or death in life, the English Patient is one who "speaks sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person," and when someone "talks in third person," according to Caravaggio, it means that he is "already dead" (247). Especially in the character Hana, one can see such intimacy with death. "I know death, David," she tells Caravaggio, "I know all the smells" (83). Later, helping Kip to neutralize an unexploded bomb, she says, "I thought I was going to die. I wanted to die… I saw so many dying near me in the last year. I didn't feel scared" (103). "Soldiers were coming in with just bits of their bodies, falling in love with me for an hour and then dying" (83). And as in the letter to Clara her stepmother, she writes:

> How did Patrick end up in a dove-cot? His units had left him, burned and wounded. So burned the buttons of his shirt were part of his skin, part of his dear chest… and how was my father burned?... He was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. Do you understand the sadness of geography? I could have saved him or at least been with him till the

> end. I know a lot about burning. How long was he alone with doves and rats? With the last stage of blood and life in him?" (296)

What people experience during war are not only the instances of corporeal death but also an internal death, death of identity. In midst of war among the numerous dead bodies from different parties, one may ask oneself, to which party do I belong? To which war engineering country? To which policy and nationality that "charted the country and turned it to a place of war" (260). In war one fights "into and beyond each fortress… until [one feels] no difference between them" (104). War has makes "all of the cities and towns similar" (292). Most of the soldiers often could not even remember what town they were in (211). Through such questioning of belonging, one develops detachment from one's nationality or the political category of nationhood in general. Where is a homeland in the midst of blood and fire? In this way, the very core of war for which it took place i.e. the upsurge of nationalism disappears at the very moment of fighting. Does one think about one's nationality while in war? A soldier is denationalized through acts of bloodshed. Rather than an approval of national identity, the main function of war is the elimination of it. At the moment of fighting (killing, dying), the soldiers cannot say the difference between one nation and another, allies and the axis. All is the same. The categories are removed.

Overall, what is depicted in the novel could be considered as a model for what Croucher calls "transnationalism" (92). Transnationalism is openness toward all cultures and nations and an attempt to understand the dialect of others. It transcends and transgresses belonging to a specific nation. The English patient and the room bear such a transanational identity in which no borders resists and where crossculturalism surpasses the borders and definitions of identity.

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