

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, nationality, war

A group of cartographers, mapmakers, border establishers, who are composed of one woman and five men started their desert exploration in 1936. Their discovery remained incomplete when the woman and four men died during World War II, left one member behind: a "faceless man" who does not remember his name and his homeland, and whose whole "identification was consumed in fire" (48). He is later called the English patient. "English Patient" which is at the same time the title of Michael Ondaatje's novel, utilizes a nationality (English) to speak about a burned man. The title 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 or her identity. The English patient,

who belongs to nowhere, possesses what Zygmunt Bauman calls a “cosmopolitan identity” (99) and defines as a nomad personality who belongs to everywhere.

When the characters Kip and Hana, meet for the first time, they introduce themselves based on their nationality. “I grew up in India...I was born in Punjab” Kip said. “I’m from upper America” Hana replies (76). While Kip and Hana use their nationality to introduce themselves, the English patient tricks others by a false name. The difference between the name “English man” and his non-English identity reluctant to be manifested in the novel is the difference between his national and cosmopolitan identity. Being called English, Italian, Indian echoes belonging to national states and their borders. The English patient’s denial of it is his denial of belonging to state and citizenship.

Among the members of the exploration group, the “faceless” English patient is the only one who even before losing his identity has tendency for such loss. His inherent cosmopolitanism is evident in the descriptions that the novel provides. Though English, “a part of [his] brain reflects the desert precisely,” so he is “not a foreigner there” (33). He had the innate ability to go beyond his nation and get acquaintance with others. He is capable of making a quick relation with the unknown districts where he had never been before. He was a skillful map-reader capable of recognizing “unnamed towns,” only by looking at “their skeletal shape on map” (18). If he was lost among different 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 had “information like a sea” (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 erased the borders of state and belonging. Once talking to another character Katharine about what he hates most in his life he names “ownership, being owned and being named” (238). In addition to his inherent tendency to be a cosmopolitan character, years of exploration and later World Wars transformed him into a citizen of the world. Describing his excavations as the loss of nationhood, he says, “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* that the explorers create, the desert through its vast emptiness and lack of charted qualities motivates them to deny their former worldview and to accept people as who they are regardless of nationality. As the Englishman suggested, “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 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 to belong to anyone, to any nation” (139).

According to Sheila Croucher, identity is not “static, essential and unidimensional, but changeable” (38). The identity of the English patient is also not stagnant. The name of person often reflects something about her or his nationality while the name English patient is the reflection of a false identity: a Syrian born who was grown up in England, traveled and lived in many countries. 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 boundaries” (Croucher12). 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. English patient’s Room to borrow from Bauman is 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 space do not identify with a certain culture, country or home. The room is the melting pot of different cultures: People come and go, they tell stories, listen to each other, read books and review their memories; the memories through which other people live and die, enter the room and leave it. Amongst the 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, a dead father, husband, child, and of numerous dead soldiers whom she used to nurture, Hana lets 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 lightheartedness; she calls him the “bird,” 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 bistroz, the khamsin, the nafhat, the beshabar, the simoom, the harmattan.” As a natural element, air is the most fluid of all. Always on move, wind can be a symbol of restlessness, of identities without home. Its home is everywhere, 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 the English man. “I think he’s found a friend,” Hana

says to Caravaggio. He is not only a friend but also a student 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 patient 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 later adds, “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 patient. He is eventually convinced that such recognition is impossible. Inside the walls of the room the identification of person with certain nations, cultures or parties does not make sense. Far from special identification, 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 where all the characters enter the Room celebrating their findings. “They had celebrated 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 character, except the English patient. Caravaggio leaves the secluded villa moving to 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 starts working as a physician in a public hospital. The secondary characters are the same. Katherine and Clifton die in an air crash, Hana’s father and Patrick, his ex-husband are killed in war, while the life of the English patient has no end for he has turned to an endless emblem of victimhood. 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 a faceless man whose identity has partially been removed and now in the post-war period he does not intend to reclaim it. And what is the reason? He might prefer to remain in the past when his face, his friends and his love were not taken from him. 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 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 with her memories. When the war was over she whispers, “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, for her they were alive in the English patient. In this sense, war becomes a means of hybridization, a mixture, a combination of different people from different cultures sharing their identity through violence and bloodshed. The English patient in this sense is the representative of all war victims, all identities that disappeared, all known and unknown, dead and alive soldiers and persons who experienced war. Their identities is one in that they lost their former identities as the citizens

of specific countries, and of known lines and borders and adopted a new identity which is more loss than identity. They become cosmopolitan. One way or another, all members of the Room were 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,” 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 kept silent about it and believe they “should leave him be and 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, nationality and ownership. The English man describes him as someone “embedded in the English machine” (273). He kills himself and his wife due to his ownership (251). Unlike the English patient, he is interested in naming and owning everything, and in being named and owned. His wife, Katherine should have remained as his property or she should die. The English patient is a representative of cultural fluidity and dynamism. According to Croucher, culture is “not a static, uniform, organic” entity (27). Rather it is “malleable, fluid, and multidimensional” (Croucher36). The room is a fluid space; “landscape around 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 Girolamo (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 its capability to include everyone and stay away from everyone.

The room and the patient become one through interchanging their characteristics. “The Room has adapted itself to this wound” (11). The wound and destruction that war brought to its residents. Part of a former war hospital, the room is familiar with the wounded and burned identities of soldiers similar to the English patient. It turns to a timeless, locationless witness of the war’s mass identity theft. War changes the identity of those 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 that people lose in 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) A dialogue between Hana and Caravaggio suggests the same:

“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 are familiar with those dimensions of life that other people aren’t. 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 killing. People are killed in war and the only thing left after them is “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,” and according to Caravaggio when someone “talks in third person,[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). In a letter to Clara her stepmother, Hana 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. In midst of war among the numerous dead bodies from different parties, one may ask to which party do I belong? To which country? To which policy and nationality that “charted the country and turned it to a place of war”? (260). In war one fight “into and beyond each fortress... until [one feels] no difference between them” (104). War makes “all of the cities and towns similar” (292). Most of the soldiers often could not remember what town they were fighting in (211). Through such questioning of belonging, one

develops detachment from one's nationality or the political category of nationhood. Where is a homeland in midst of bloodshed and fire? In this way, the very core of war for which it took place i.e. the upsurge of nationalism disappears. Does one think about one's nationality while in battle? A soldier is denationalized through the act of bloodshed. Rather than an approval of national identity, the main function of war is its elimination. At the moment of fighting (killing, dying), the soldiers cannot say the difference between one nation and another. 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 towards 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 transnational identity in which no borders resist and where cross-culturalism surpasses the borders and definitions of identity.

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