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The Physical State of Identity: Liquid or Solid?

Anyone with knowledge of chemistry is aware of the different physical states of matter. A liquid has the unique ability to change and fit its surroundings whereas a solid is far less malleable and is resistive to transformation. Because of their distinctive properties, solids and liquids can be compared to the formation of personal identity in modern day society. Some believe identity is predetermined, representative of a solid, while others would argue the contrary, that it takes the assets of a liquid and can be altered substantially throughout life. In reality, identity does not fit into either liquid or solid but is more of a combination of the two. Everyone’s identity is at first chosen by society and culture and will remain in this solid state unless any conscious work is done upon it; in which case it will melt down to the liquid phase and accept any changes before recrystallizing. In their works *Into the Wild* and “On Becoming an Arab,” Jon Krakauer and Leila Ahmed present the lives of two very different individuals and their attempts to reconstruct new, distinct identities. Despite their differences, Leila Ahmed and Christopher McCandless both follow general steps in their pursuit of mental freedom. By at first exposing a culturally preconditioned self and resolving an escape route, one can begin to apply work into their new identity and over enough time, can significantly alter their sense of being and identity as a whole.

Having spent her 1950s childhood in revolutionary Egypt, Leila Ahmed was exposed to many facets of society that shaped the way she thought about the world. At the time of her adolescence, Egyptian culture was on the cusp of an enormous change. As lines were drawn throughout the Middle East separating two very different ways of life, countries were forced to resolve their alliances and Egypt chose to side with the ‘Arabs’. This fast paced transformation of social identity was both tangible and confusing to teenage Ahmed; “I was Egyptian and not Arab, definitely not Arab? ... When, in fact, did Egyptians become Arab – or have we always been Arab?” (Ahmed 4). Ahmed’s use of open-ended sentences throughout this section of the text helps the reader to grasp her confusion and misunderstanding upon exposure to this new forced change. The need to question such a heavy topic as identity at such a tender age undoubtedly caused a rift in Ahmed’s consciousness. It is at this moment of her life that, through her fogged sense of self, Ahmed decides she is not okay with being toyed and used as a puppet of the state, her first step towards mental fluidity. Instead of joining the masses and falling blindly into the label ‘Arab’, Ahmed decides to question her past and construct her own, unique personal identity. The only difference between Ahmed and her Egyptian peers was her intuition towards deeper motives in societal culture. As others followed the crowd and adopted a new ‘Arab’ identity, Ahmed questioned why and decided to dig into the past: “I am looking into this whole question of the Arabness of Egyptian identity, I am trying to really look at it, deconstruct it” (9). Ahmed’s use of the verb ‘deconstruct’ illustrates her doubt in the legitimacy of Egyptian Arabness as she is alluding to the fact it was at one point ‘constructed,’ most likely with a draconian purpose. As she ventured deeper, Ahmed was met by revelations on secret administrative agendas and understood that the government was suppressing any disloyalties. Devoting countless hours to life-endangering research and discovery was Leila Ahmed’s way of escaping from her controlling society while slowly melting down her prior identity.

In her tendency towards rejecting predetermined ethics and instead building her own, Ahmed shares a strong connection with Christopher McCandless. In contrast to Ahmed’s persistent exposure to Arab nationalism, Christopher McCandless’ identity was influenced in a much more subtle, subconscious manner. Instead of being molded by the leading governmental power, Americans are guided solely by their desire to fit into society and because this process is slow and drawn-out, very few even notice its presence. It is likely that McCandless was relatively unaware of this mentality until he witnessed his own morals differ from his parents’, at which point he began to question other aspects of himself. “[McCandless] told me his dad was a genius, a NASA rocket scientist, but he’d been a bigamist at one time – and that kind of went against [Christopher’s] grain” (Krakauer 204). At first this passage only seems to reinforce McCandless’ contrasting views with his father but a deeper meaning can be pulled form the boy’s words. The fact that McCandless refers to his father as a rocket scientist and even goes to the extent to say he is a genius represents his personal confusion. As a child McCandless witnessed his father, a very intelligent, competent man, taking part in activities he strongly disagreed with, undoubtedly resulting in internal conflict. Throughout his years at University these feelings of misunderstanding began to boil over until he finally decided to act on his intuition. Because the boy’s identity was wrought by the people and environment he witnessed growing up, he decided his only choice was to free himself of all societal contact. By marooning himself in the wilds of Alaska, McCandless was able to create a new, untainted identity free of any predetermined ideals or motives.

McCandless decision to venture into the Alaskan taiga may at first seem completely dissimilar to Ahmed’s research into the ‘Arab’ past but they both were successfully utilized to create new, individual identities. How is it that these two activities, which share no common ground, can be exploited with the same purpose? The reason McCandless and Ahmed’s methods for achieving mental freedom were so very different was because the ways in which they were exposed to conditioning were altogether opposite. In the case of Ahmed, the Arab nationalist ideals were everywhere. She recalls; “I hated that incessant rhetoric… The moment one turned on the radio, there it was: military songs, nationalistic songs, and endless, endless speeches in that frenetic, crazed voice of exhortation” (2). Hidden in this passage, Ahmed reveals the strategic use of repetition to influence a change in Egyptian identity. Though constant exposure to incessant nationalistic songs and sadistic speeches, the Egyptian leaders undoubtedly hoped citizens would eventually accept their new ‘Arab’ uniformity. Even though she despised it, Ahmed admits that at first the constant propaganda was enough to “[work] on [her] and on others. To question [their] Arabness and all that [their] Arabness implied became unthinkable,” proving that as soon as the blind majority begins to accept the change, it becomes a landslide and to fight is almost futile (3). The methods used to control the social identity of Egyptians involved references to the past and an allusion to Egyptian nationalism reinforced through all sources of media. Since she was interested in freeing herself from these stretches of truth and manipulation, Ahmed realized that in this situation the only way to liberate herself from false identities was to research the Egyptian past, her own past, in the one medium not being controlled by the government; literature. In so doing, Ahmed’s knowledge of Egyptian truth’s slowly solidified into a new sense of identity.

In contrast, McCandless was molded and wrought by his family and friends in a way far more innocent than the Egyptian governmental control of masses. Through constant contact with people, McCandless adopted habits and ways of life which were by nature, not entirely his own. As he progressed through adolescence, his contempt towards society grew and even became visible to some of his close friends, as one proclaimed that: “[Christopher] was born into the wrong century. He was looking for more adventure and freedom than today’s society gives people” (Krakauer 214). Because he was never given an opportunity to experience true ‘adventure’ and ‘freedom’ Christopher’s childhood identity never fully became his own. Through his allusion to the present day and how it’s the ‘wrong century,’ the boy’s friend is explaining how McCandless would have fared better in a time when there was not a constant contact with society, back when people would only interact when necessary. In a last ditch effort to reclaim his sense of being; the boy took his longing for adventure to the extreme by attempting to survive in the frontier of Alaska. This action, albeit crazy, was actually a perfect solution because it gave him the sense of excitement he was craving as well as freed him of all societal contact. As his solid predefined identity began to melt in the Alaskan summer, McCandless was able to replace it with a new liquid state, free of any cultural influence.

In many modern-day countries, a uniform social identity is established to help maintain order and solidify nationalist ideals. Even without a strict social etiquette people tend to fall into sync with their neighbors and develop a subconscious uniformity. If one desires to break free of their predetermined identity, they first must recognize the reason it exists and then devise a method to reverse its effects. Because Leila Ahmed was being fed lies and deceit about her past, she sought out the truth in literature and reinvented her new identity without such contamination. On the other hand, Christopher McCandless’ identity was molded by the people and community he grew up in, thus he concluded his only option was to live without any human interaction for several months, entirely alone in the Alaskan Taiga. Similar to the way a solid becomes a liquid; only through a conscious application of work can one melt down their predetermined identity and mold a new one.

Works Cited

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