Cultural Identity

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**Introduction**

Cal Stephanides is the main character in the book *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides which told the life story of a Greek-American intersexed individual. Throughout the book Cal develops not only his gender identity, but also his cultural identity. At birth, Cal was announced a girl because of a distracted doctor, and was raised a girl until the age of fourteen. Then a tractor accident put him in the hospital. It was then learned that Cal is built differently than most girls, so his parents took him to a specialist where Cal discovered that biologically he is a boy. Cal decides he cannot put his family through this and runs away across the United States to California. Once in San Francisco, Cal develops his identity and eventually is forced to come home where he is accepted by his family. Throughout the story Cal’s Greek heritage affects the way he views the world around him, and helps create the man he has become.

**Conformity**

The conformity stage in the cultural identity model consists of the individual sharing common values, lifestyle, and physical characteristics with the dominant culture rather than their own.

An example of conformity being done to Cal was when the debate of whether or not to baptize Cal is addressed. Desdemona strongly believed that Cal should be baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church but her son Milton, who was Americanized, believed that baptism was “hocus-pocus.” Although, Milton preferred that Cal was not baptized, Desdemona won the argument and Cal was baptized.

One example of Cal conforming to the dominant culture was by not learning the Greek language, even though it was commonly spoke in the house by both his grandparents and his parents. When this started to go bad with the Zebra Room, the adults would regularly speak in front of the children in Greek so they would not know how bad things had become. They were repressing their culture and embracing the American culture by learning English but not Greek.

Another example of the Stephanides following the dominant culture, even though it is trying to repress them, was when they moved out of Detroit to the suburb of Grosse Point. The point system was used to disqualify the family from buying the house but when Milton offers cash, the realtor sells it to him anyway. By moving to Grosse Point the family was fleeing the blacks, just like most of the white culture did at that time. Milton represses his own cultural beliefs on what a house should have in this situation.

At the age of twelve years old, Cal decides that he can no longer eat Mediterranean food and must switch to the American diet in order to grow like a “normal” girl. He blames his cultural food for his lack of sexual maturity, and demands that his mother cook normal food. He is trying to repress his culture in order to blend into the American culture.

Another example of Cal conforming to the American culture was when he started riding his body of hair in order to blend in. Since his family came from Turkey also known as part of the Hair Belt, Cal struggles with dark body hair all over his body. When a church goer points out that he is growing a mustache, Cal begins to wax the hair in order to fit in with the dominant culture.

When Cal discovers that there is war in Turkey and he will not have to vacation there, he is relived. He had no interest in traveling to the country that his grandparents came from which shows that he is repressing his culture. In fact he is excited that there is a war, because now he can go on vacation with the Object which shows that he does not identify with this culture.

**Dissonance and Appreciation**

The dissonance and appreciation stage of the cultural identity development model represents when the individual has a conflict between their own cultural beliefs and the dominant culture’s beliefs.

An early example of cultural conflict in Cal’s life is when he hangs out with the “ethnic” girls in his all-girl school. He realizes that they are separated from the other girls in the locker room. He questions why his friends are considered more ethnic than the Charm Bracket. He also says that this is the first time he did not feel entirely American.

Cal struggles with his Greek features, especially his nose, so he decided to keep his hair long even though the dominant culture valued short hair at the time. This conflict led his family to become frustrated because his hair was getting all over the house. Cal is uncomfortable with his Greek features and uses his hair to hide them.

**Resistance and Immersion**

The resistance and immersion stage consists of the individual rejecting the values of the dominant culture, and beginning to immerse themselves into their own culture.

Cal begins to identify with his own Greek culture when he compares his sexual experience to the Greek Oracle. While Cal is making out with Jerome he begins to feel like the Oracle experiencing ecstasy. He feels as though he is out of his body and seeing things through both himself and Rex. While inhabiting Rex’s body to make out with the Object, Cal does not notice that Jerome has started to have sex with his real body.

When Cal reads in Dr. Luce’s notes that he is biologically a boy he begins to feel guilt and shame about how this affect his family and also he feels anger towards Dr. Luce for lying to him. As a young boy now, he does not trust anyone and does not feel comfortable in his body. He feels as though he is acting out a new part and relearning simple actions, such as walking.

Cal begins to feel like his grandparents felt when they were forced to flee their home when he decides to be a man. He is fleeing his old identity but compares his experience to his grandparents fleeing Turkey.

**Introspection**

In the introspection stage, the individual realizes the impact of the dominant culture and begins to focus on making their own decisions.

While Cal is in San Francisco, he focuses on learning about himself. Away from his middle-class American culture back in Grosse Point, Cal is able to learn about the world through many diverse individuals. In the strip club, Cal meets other intersexed individuals and he begins to heal from his traumatic experiences. Through the strip club, Cal meets Zora who educates him on hermaphrodites and assures him that they are not monsters. She explains the difference between gender and sex, and also the different cultures’ views on intersex.

When Cal returns to Detroit, he realizes that the days of black men winking at him when he was a female are over. Now they see him as an oppressor. This makes him realize that even though he does not want to be seen as The Man, this is the way that he is viewed.

**Integrative Awareness**

The integrative awareness stage is when the individual has developed a positive self-image and has a strong sense of pride about their culture.

Cal claims that while he is Berlin he feels comfortable being surrounded by the Turks despite his family history. He spends time in the shops, eating the Turkish foods, and seeing faces that look similar to his. Cal says that he feels drawn to Turkey and requests a transfer to the embassy there. Cal is reaching out to the Mediterranean culture in this part of the book.

At the end of the book, Cal stays behind from the funeral to perform the old Greek custom of blocking Milton’s spirit from reentering the house. Since Cal is now a man, he is qualified to do this. Cal realizes that since Milton’s spirit did not try to get back in the house that day, his father has acknowledged him as a man.

Cal develops a positive self-image when Julie accepts him for who he is. Even though he worried that she would not be able to, she takes the news that he is intersexed well, even joking with him. She asks him what that means his sexual orientation is to get a better understanding what it all means for him and for them as a couple.

References

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