

Trauma Recovery of Tara Westover in *Educated: A Memoir*

XU Xiaohan^[a], LIU Hui^[b],*

^[a] MA Candidate, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

^[b] Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Educated: A Memoir is an autobiographical novel of Tara Westover. This paper analyzes the protagonist Tara Westover's trauma experiences and recovery process based on trauma theory. Combining trauma theory with this book can help readers better understand Tara's experiences and deeply reveal the themes of this novel.

Key words: Trauma and recovery; Tara Westover; *Educated: A Memoir*

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INTRODUCTION

Tara Westover is an American writer and historian. Her 2019 debut novel, *Educated: A Memoir*, had made her a literary celebrity abroad and "Influential Person of The Year" of *Time*. *Educated: A Memoir* quickly ascended to the bestseller list and shortlisted for some awards, such as National Book Critics Circle Award in autobiography, and the Los Angeles Book Prize.

Tara's own experience and living environment are all reflected in her book. Born to survivalists in the mountains of Idaho, Tara Westover was seventeen the first time she set foot in a classroom. Her family was so isolated from

mainstream society that there was no one to ensure the children receive an education. When another brother got himself into college, Tara decided to try a new kind of life. Her quest for knowledge transformed her, taking her over oceans and across continents, to Harvard and to Cambridge University.

As it is relatively new, a few scholars study *Educated: A Memoir* from the perspective of religion, cultural identity and domestic violence. This paper uses the trauma theory of Judith Herman to interpret Tara Westover's *Educated: A Memoir*. The depiction of Tara Westover in the novel not only reflects the physical and mental trauma in her growth, but also shows the delicate changes in her emotional and spiritual world during her life.

TRAUMA AND TRAUMA THEORY

The word "trauma" is borrowed from the Greek, where it means a piercing or tearing of the skin. According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, trauma refers to "an injury or wound to a living body caused by the application of external force or violence; a psychological or emotional stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings or behavior, and the state or condition of mental or emotional shock produced by such a stress or by a physical injury" (p.745).

In the second half of the 19th century, trauma studies began to turn from the physical trauma to the psychological aspects. According to Sigmund Freud, "when one suffers trauma, his lifestyle and psychological state will be seriously changed, and he will have no interest in the present or even the future, thus falling into many memories of traumatic events" (p.156). It means that any behavior which deprives people of their family members or things which are very important to them will bring them severe trauma, which will unquestionably

exert a devastating influence on their inner world and on the later development of their character.

In the 1900s, the famous psychiatrist Judith Herman further developed Freud's trauma theory. Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth facilitated the appearance of cultural trauma and racial trauma. Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience* proposed her understanding of trauma, and she held that "trauma is an overwhelming experience of sudden or strophic repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon" (p.11).

Judith Herman argues that a traumatic event refers to "an uncommon event which is not because of its rare occurrence, but because of its serious destruction on ordinary people's adaptability to life" (p.67). She thinks traumatic events often consist of two categories: catastrophic natural disasters, including volcanic eruption, hurricanes, earthquake, war, car accidents and so on, and man-made disasters, like crimes, violence, child or women abuse, terrorism and so on. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman illustrates varieties of traumatic symptoms such as "hyperarousal", intrusion, captivity, child abuse, constriction, hyperarousal refers to the continuous alert on the danger, intrusion means that "the indelible imprint of the traumatic memory", constriction equals to "numbing response of powerless surrender" (p.24). Judith Herman also describes the three stages of the recovery from trauma: establishing a safe environment, reembracing and mourning, reconnecting with others.

THE ORIGIN OF TRAUMA IN *EDUCATED*: A MEMOIR

According to the trauma theory, there are some factors that can cause trauma. For Tara Westover, two things that happened in her childhood traumatize her and have an effect on her life. One is the spiritual control by her father, and the other is domestic violence.

Psychic Trauma Caused by Spiritual Control

Parents play an important role in kid's growth. However, Tara's father suffered from bipolar affective disorder, which caused shifts in his minds and affected his emotional regulation. As a heretic, he was bigoted and deeply affected by Mormon. The deeply-rooted concept of religious belief had seriously distorted his minds, which made him want to alter the way family think by enforcing a thinking pattern. Tara's father was opposed to public education, regarding it as a conspiracy of the government. "When Dad saw me with one of those books, he'd try to get me away from them" (Westover 71). Her father was trying to keep his children from being overly interested in school and books. Once he caught her looking at the math book, he asked Tara to spend an hour performing onerous chores. When Tara asked her father what college was,

her father said that "College is extra school for people too dumb to learn the first time around" (Westover 47). This is a kind of one-sided understanding of college. For Tara, education is an extravagant hope. Besides, Tara and her siblings were taught that hospital was an evil place and they were not admitted to take medicine. "We have no medical records because we were born at home and have never seen a doctor or nurse" (Westover 9). When Tara's brother Luke was burned at work, their father was so stubborn that he didn't take Luke to hospital. Tara's parents told their children that antibiotics poison the body, and that they cause infertility and birth defects. Living in this environment profoundly influenced Tara's long term social, emotional and cognitive abilities.

Her father not only controlled family members' minds but also interfered with their daily life, such as dressing and diet. "Dad said a righteous woman never shows anything above her ankle" (Westover, p.89). When Tara went to learn dance, she wore jeans, a large gray T-shirt, and steel-toed boots while the other girls wore shimmering skirts, and tiny ballet shoes the color of taffy. Tara was always the odd one out at her peers. Her father also enforced a strict dietary regimen, and took up preaching against milk. For them, breakfast became a test of loyalty. With these restrictive regulations, Tara felt unutterably depressed in her family.

Emotional explosion in adulthood seems to be a reflection of Tara's experiences as a child. When she wanted to accept education and construct her own new mind, Tara was viewed as an evil in her family, and she has suffered the abandonment and estrangement from her parents, sister and three brothers. "My parents said he was justified in cutting me off. Dad said I was hysterical, that I'd thrown thoughtless accusations when it was obvious my memory couldn't be trusted. Mother said my rage was a real threat" (Westover, p. 287). After going through this heartbreak, all of her moods flared up. Tara's mental state started to be worsened, and she behaved strangely. She awoke in the middle of the night, screaming and sprinting. Her skin broke out so severely that strangers stopped her in the street and asked if she was having an allergic reaction. Tara began to avoid any information that can arouse her traumatic memory. She stopped going anywhere and just watched TV in her room; she tried to read but her reflections were always of the expression on her father's stretched face the moment before he fled from her. All of these behaviors are the forms of trauma.

Physical Trauma Caused by Domestic Violence

The maltreatment and domestic violence of Tara's brother Shawn also aggravated her trauma. Tara's brother Shawn was extremely moody and rude, and always tormented Tara for fun. He kept insulting her, such as "slut!" "whore!" (Westover 126). And Shawn always blamed and hit her without any reason.

He grabbed a fistful of my hair, a large clump; his grip fixed near the root to give him greater leverage, and dragged me into the bathroom. I groped at the door, catching hold of the frame, but he lifted me off the ground, flattened my arms against my body, then dropped my head into the toilet. (Westover, p.120)

According to Herman, “Just like an animal frozen when attacked. In addition, any form of resistance is futile when a person is completely powerless. The system of self-defense was cut down entirely. The helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness” (p.42). Domestic violence leaves Tara depressed and anxious. In front of Shawn, Tara was only a vulnerable animal and she knew clearly that she was unable to resist and suffered in silence. Except for multiple bruises in her body, she fell into endless fear and helplessness, which have produced negative effects on her personality and aggravated her traumas.

RECOVERY FROM TRAUMA IN *EDUCATED: A MEMOIR*

Because trauma makes survivors fragile and vulnerable, there is a great need to recover from painful traumatic experiences. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman tells that “we don’t know how many succeed in this task, but we do know that people who recover most successfully are those who discover some meaning in their experiences that transcend the limits of personal tragedy” (p.56). In *Educated: A Memoir*, Tara is traumatized physically and psychologically. It is definitely not an easy thing for her to recover from the traumas. But she does not give in and shows a positive attitude toward life, trying to get rid of these terrible conditions and recover herself from trauma.

Establishing a Safe Environment

To get rid of her trauma, Tara needed to establish a safe environment to establish her sense of security. Judith Herman describes that: “This task takes precedence over all others, for no other therapeutic work can possibly succeed if safety has not been adequately secured” (Herman, p.159). In the safe environment she can restore power and control to her body and mind. In *Educated: A Memoir*, Tara establishes a safe environment through education.

When Tara was eleven, she generated an idea that the way to get away from her father’s junkyard is to get a job. This was the first step in her struggle with her father and life environment. “I was babysitting from eight until noon Monday to Friday, and then going to Randy’s to pack cashews until supper. I wasn’t paid much, but as I’d never been paid anything before, it felt like a lot” (Westover, p.87). She has no concept of money, but she took the first step.

With the help of her brother Taylor, Tara upheld the full faith that she want to go to college. It is difficult for Tara who has never been to school. Tara spent all her spare time preparing for the college entrance examination. “Every night for a month I sat in the opera house, in a chair of

red velvet, and practiced the most basic operations—how to multiply fractions, how to use a reciprocal, how to add and multiply and divide with decimals” (p.135). She studied so hard that she dreamed about mysterious angles and concussed computations every night.

After passing the self-study exam, she applied to Brigham Young University to start a new life. Due to her weakness in basic knowledge, Tara’s college life did not go well. She stood being laughed at in classroom and lived in fear of failing final exams. Her living habits were out of step with surroundings, and she didn’t even know that she needed to wash her hand after using the toilet. However, she did not give up. In order to become a better self, she overcame many difficulties to study hard. Furthermore, she made plans for the future. All her hard work paid off in the end, Tara graduated with honors from Brigham Young University, and received the Gates Cambridge Scholarship to study at Cambridge University. Tara met completely different people and things and received a new education. She realized her ignorance, her isolation from the real world and her alienation with others. Gradually, Tara was separated from the world and values her father created for her and entered a new world.

Reembracing and Mourning

In the second stage of recovery, the traumatized person is encouraged to “retell the traumatic stories to integrate the traumatic memory into her past life” (Herman, p.145). At the same time, she can give a new meaning to the traumatic experiences. Mourning the past plays an important role in the process of recovery, which is followed by remembrance ineluctably. Remembrance and mourning could bring renewed hope to the patient.

Tara mainly told her traumatic experiences to her boyfriend Drew. She did not talk about her past to anyone until she met Drew, and started to confide to him her traumatic experiences. Tara integrates her traumatic memories into her present life. “I told him about my conversation with Audrey. He was the first boyfriend in whom I confided about my family—really confided the truth and not just amusing anecdotes” (Westover, p.286). After Tara’s sharing her traumatic stories with Drew, they faced Tara’s sorrow and terrible things together, which helped Tara to get rid of the shadows of traumatic memories. At this point, Tara feels renewed hope and energy for engagement with life.

Reconnecting with Others

According to Judith Herman, “Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma. Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery” (Herman, p.197). In the third stage of the recovery, the traumatized have another task that they should battle with inner fears and conflicts, reconcile with themselves, and learn to connect with others who they trust in.

“I know I have myself”—could stand as the emblem of the third and final stage of recovery. The survivor no longer feels possessed by her traumatic past; she is in possession of herself” (Herman, p.231). Several years ago, when Dr. Kerry asked who writes history in his lectures, Tara’s idea was that it is not historians but it was someone like her father. At that time, Tara’s mind was dominated by her father. At this time, when she thinks about this question again, she gives an extremely new answer—it is herself. Not only did she reconstruct herself-identity but also reconcile with herself.

I shed my guilt when I accepted my decision on its own terms, without endlessly prosecuting old grievances, without weighing his sins against mine. Without thinking of my father at all. I learned to accept my decision for my own sake, because of me, not because of him. Because I needed it, not because he deserved it. (Westover, p.370)

After all these traumatic experiences, Tara finally understands that the original family cannot decide everything, and she is calm to face herself. She realizes that all the changes come from her own transformation and inner change.

Tara also tries to establish new and harmonious relationship with others. In Brigham Young University, she made friends with Vasenna and got along well with her roommates. Her roommates gave her goodwill and friendship, which made Tara feel warm. As for her family, some of her family members fully supported her. Tara’s aunts, grandpa and brothers enabled Tara to regain the warmth of the family to let her face life confidently. When Tara’s grandmother died, Tara went on an outing with her mother’s siblings and her grandfather to remember her grandmother; her brother Richard said that he was sorry for believing their father, and Tara could count on his support in the future. After coming back to family, Tara develops more intimate and harmonious relationship with family and regains love and concern from them.

CONCLUSION

Based on the trauma theory of Herman, this paper makes a systematic study of the protagonist Tara Westover in

Educated: A Memoir. It analyzes Tara’s psychic and physical trauma on two aspects respectively, including the spiritual control of Tara’s father, and the domestic violence of Tara’s brother Shawn. The stages of recovering from trauma are also discussed, such as establishing a safe environment, reembracing and mourning, and reconnecting with others. According to the above analysis, a conclusion can be drawn: Tara Westover’s *Educated: A Memoir* is a typical trauma novel which emphasizes the great importance of the family-of-origin for a person’s healthy growth. Tara gets rid of terrible conditions and recovers herself from trauma. She constructs herself-identity and enters a new world through education.

The analysis on Tara Westover’s in *Educated: A Memoir* from the perspective of trauma theory has both theoretical and realistic significance. On the one hand, it guides us to appreciate *Educated: A Memoir* in the light of trauma and recovery, and we can find more about Tara’s sufferings, thoughts and personalities. On the other hand, it tells us that people can understand the true meaning of life and start a new life by recovering from their traumas.

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