

Shawn's Violence and Tara's Laugh: An Analysis of *Educated* Based on Trauma Theory

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Abstract: *Educated* is an autobiography written by American author Tara Westover (1986–). This novel tells the story of how Tara, a girl who never received any formal schooling, earned a PhD from a prestigious university. During her growth, Tara experienced numerous physical and psychological traumas. One of Tara's sources of trauma was the violence from her brother—Shawn. It is worth noting that Tara would laugh when enduring abuse from her brother. Based on the trauma theory, this paper analyzes the trauma that Shawn brought to Tara and explains the profound connotation of Tara's laugh in violent situations as well as how Tara gets over the trauma. Tara's experience is argued to reveal the dissociative stress response brought on by persistent trauma, as well as the potential for healing—one achieved through establishing a safe environment, reconstructing the trauma narrative, and rebuilding a sense of connection.

Keywords: Trauma; Violence; Laugh; Narration

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1. Introduction

Educated (2018) is an autobiographical memoir by American author Tara Westover (1986–), depicting how Tara grew from a girl who had never received a school education to a doctoral student at a top university. Tara grew up in the mountains of Idaho, USA, in an extreme Mormon family. She was the youngest girl among the seven children in the family. Her father is a Mormon doomsday advocate who firmly believes in the prophecy in the *Bible* that the end of the world will eventually come. Every day, he asks the family to stock up on supplies together to prepare for the coming of this day. He is opposed to his children receiving school education and doesn't trust hospitals or the government either. He is paranoid and bipolar. The book was published in 2018 and is Tara Westover's first work. The following year, Tara was named "Influential Person of the Year" by *Time Magazine* for this book. *USA Today* commented that this work was "a heartbreaking, heartwarming, best-in-years memoir about striding beyond the limitations of birth and environment into a better life" ^[1].

Academic research on this novel is mainly based on initiation theory, spatial theory, and trauma theory,

exploring themes such as Tara's growth process, traumatic memories, original family, and education. One of Tara's sources of trauma was her brother Shawn's violence. It is worth noting that in the plot description of the novel, Tara laughed when facing her brother's beating. Based on trauma theory, this article analyzes the trauma that Shawn brought to Tara and explains the profound connotation of Tara's laugh in a violent situation, and explores how Tara recovers from trauma.

2. Shawn's violence: A complex traumatic environment

The complexity of the traumatic environment is mainly reflected in Shawn's contradictory personality. Shawn is Tara's second elder brother. In the novel, the author's description of Shawn reveals the duality of his personality. On the one hand, Shawn is gentle, humorous and charming. From time to time, he shows care for Tara, takes the initiative to protect her and offers her brief moments of tender comfort. On the other hand, he is controlling, paranoid, hypocritical and full of violence. Shawn once personally set the bones of Tara, who had suffered a spinal injury in a car accident, to relieve her pain. He once subdued a hot-tempered horse and saved Tara, then he patiently guided her on how to get along with horses. When Tara was teased by other boys, Shawn would stop them and not allow outsiders to bully her. While helping Tony drive long-distance freight with Tara, Shawn created a game of reversing letters, amusing Tara all the way, making the journey light and funny, and relieving the fatigue of the trip. He also taught Tara self-defense in martial arts and elaborated in detail on the weak points of the human body. Tara initially regarded him as a "defender, some fanciful champion," someone who wouldn't fling her into a storm ^[2]. Tara developed a strong sense of dependence on this elder brother in her heart.

However, Shawn's violent personality was already showing signs from the very beginning. The people in the town said that he was "trouble, a bully and a bad egg" ^[2], was always hunting or being hunted by some street hooligans, liked to fight, and he even carried a gun. But Tara didn't think it was Shawn's fault. However, Tara was wrong. Shawn soon resorted to violence against Tara. In the novel, the author repeatedly describes Shawn's violent behaviors, including verbal violence and physical violence. Seeing Tara put on makeup, Shawn called her "fish eyes," a derogatory term. This nickname was originally used by Shawn to mock Sadie. He used it to belittle Tara as shallow and hollow as Sadie, comparing her head to a hollow tire. In addition, Shawn abused Tara with words like "bitch," "whore," "slut," and "nigger." Apart from verbal abuse, Shawn also repeatedly subjected Tara to physical violence. Three of the four serious violent acts of Shawn mentioned in the novel occurred at home, and the last two even happened in front of his mother. The first account of Shawn's serious physical violence in the novel began when Tara was 15 years old. Shawn asked Tara to bring him water to drink. Tara found out that he was deliberately teasing her, just like teasing Sadie. So she dumped the water on Shawn's head and refused to apologize. Shawn grabbed Tara's hair, dragged her into the bathroom and dropped her head into the toilet, twisting her wrist until she gave in. The second violent incident happened when Shawn heard that Charles had invited Sadie to dinner. Furious, Shawn vented his anger on Tara. He grabbed Tara, shaking her constantly, pulling her hair, dragging her and forcing her to admit that she was a whore. The third violent incident occurred when Charles was there for dinner. Shawn deliberately jabbed a finger into Tara's ribs many times. Tara got angry and broke the plate accidentally. Shawn knocked Tara down, twisted her feet, dragged her to the living room, pressed her to the floor, sat on her stomach, and demanded that Tara apologize and admit that she was wrong. The fourth

violent incident occurred in the parking lot; his behavior there was even more despicable. To embarrass Tara, she was deliberately taken to the place where Charles was present, covered in dirt and not cleaned up after work. In the car, Tara was beaten up and dragged out of the car to continue beating her. This not only caused her physical pain but also mental humiliation. As bystanders watched, Tara was dragged and beaten. Her jeans slipped down her hips and her shirt rode up, revealing her undergarments, leaving her in a state of extreme humiliation. Shawn alternated between tenderness and violence. This cycle of interaction constantly tugged at Tara's psyche, accumulating chronic trauma that rendered her emotionally unstable. It also formed the basis of her subsequent stress response: hysterical laugh in response to Shawn's violence against her.

3. Tara's laugh: Dissociative stress response to trauma

After being violently beaten by Shawn for the first time, Tara hated herself for her own weakness. She hid in the bathroom and cried in silence, falling into intense self-denial. But to resist the mental breakdown brought about by trauma, Tara automatically activated a denial psychological defense, forcibly separating physical pain from emotional hurt, and deliberately creating an illusion of being invincible, believing herself to be "unbreakable, tender as stone" ^[2]. This kind of emotional numbness, self-denial, and inner suppression is a very typical internal manifestation in the early stage of the formation of complex trauma. The mental trauma caused by violence is also hidden beneath her seemingly nonchalant external disguise. Just as she herself said, "That it's not affecting me, that was its effect" ^[2]. Many years later, Tara was still disturbed by the experience.

The first violent incident occurred at home, with only Shawn and Tara present. If this incident brought Tara physical pain, then the other two described in the novel brought Tara more of a sense of shame. Herman argues that the core states of trauma are withdrawal or emotional numbness ^[3]. Traumatic events can make sufferers lose control over bodily functions, an experience deemed "the most disgraceful thing in trauma" ^[3]. And "shame is a reaction to helplessness, to the infringement of one's physical integrity, and to the loss of dignity under others' strange stares" ^[3]. The other two violent incidents occurred in front of others. On one occasion, Tyler returned home. The moment Tara saw Tyler, she, who was suffering violence, "laughed loud, a high-pitched cackle" ^[2]. Tyler has been away from home for many years and is now an "outsider." Tara believes that "the only thing worse than being dragged through the house by my hair was Tyler's having seen it" ^[2]. To conceal her sadness, Tara could only put on a false sense of calm with a distorted laugh. Because compared to being beaten and abused, what Tara couldn't accept even more was her privacy, disheveled and vulnerable appearance being exposed to Tyler. For Tara, the mental shame, embarrassment, and self-abasement far outweighed the physical pain. Another time, Tara invited Charles to her home to tutor her in college algebra. Shawn poked Tara in the ribs, causing her to break a plate by chance. Without apologizing, Shawn dragged Tara into the bathroom again, stuffed her head into the toilet and beat her up. Charles lifted Tara, who laughed loudly—a shrill, demented howl ^[2]. She laughed while crying in pain because her big toe was broken. An even crazier violent incident occurred in the parking lot. Tara had been beaten by Shawn and looked thoroughly disheveled, her clothes torn and slipping off her body. When she noticed someone looking at her, Tara "began to laugh—a wild, hysterical cackle..." ^[2]. The laughter was a disguise. Tara just wanted everyone who might be present to believe that it was just a joke between siblings. Tara had no strength to resist Shawn and nowhere to turn for help. She couldn't even express her sadness and could only cover up her sense of powerlessness with a false sense of ease. This belongs to the traumatic dissociative stress response

defined by French psychiatrist and clinical psychologist Pierre Jeanne. Traumatic events trigger unbearable emotional responses and thereby change the state of consciousness, leading to symptoms of hysteria. Jeanne referred to this change in the state of consciousness as “dissociation”^[3].

The dual traits of gentleness and violence in Shawn jointly constructed the fragmented and traumatic situation that Tara experienced during her growth. Shawn’s occasional tenderness did not alleviate Tara’s pain or serve as a psychological buffer. Instead, it exacerbated dissociative symptoms brought about by violence: his meticulous care for Tara in the previous second made her feel cared for and cherished, while the subsequent abuse, pushing, and personal humiliation instantly destroyed this brief sense of security, forming a typical state of traumatic ambivalent attachment. Having been caught between the two extremes of warmth and violence for a long time, Tara’s ability to perceive emotions gradually became unbalanced, and she eventually developed a highly deceptive stress response—during Shawn’s violent acts, she showed an abnormal behavior of laughing. This kind of laugh is not a genuine expression of emotion but a passive self-defense strategy formed in a traumatic environment. Tara couldn’t escape from her situation by taking actions in the real world; she could only achieve it through a change in her state of consciousness. This “laugh” was Tara’s silent compromise and psychological disguise, behind which lay her psychological fear, emotional numbness, and self-dissociation state.

4. Tara’s journey of trauma recovery

4.1. Traumatic memory

Shawn’s violence left Tara with deep and severe psychological trauma. The lingering shadow always hung over her. “This moment would define my memory of that night, and of many nights like it, for a decade”^[2]. To get out of this kind of family environment, Tara followed her brother Tyler’s advice—to go to college. In order to get out of the mountains through education and stay away from Shawn, she made use of every available minute to ask for help from anyone who might offer assistance and worked hard to teach herself. Finally, with indomitable willpower and an unwavering spirit of pursuit, Tara was admitted to Brigham Young University at the age of seventeen, fulfilling her dream. However, everything was not as easy as imagined. Although she had left home and Shawn, the traumatic memories still kept haunting Tara, constantly tormenting her. When dating Charles, although she often looked forward to having some intimate contact with him like other lovers, such as holding hands or giving a hug, when Charles really tried to touch her, instead of feeling happy, she pulled her hand away involuntarily, her body twitching. Charles’ touch awakened the memory buried deep in Tara’s heart: the word “whore” that Shawn had insulted her would come to her mind. She couldn’t have intimate contact with Charles because it made her feel as if she had truly become “whore” as Shawn said. After Charles discovered that she had been beaten by Shawn, Tara became capricious, nitpicking, and full of hostility towards Charles. Tara often lost control of her emotions, to the extent that she eventually had to break up with Charles. Tara is not someone who rejects marriage, but Shawn’s violence against her made her constantly doubt and belittle herself, feeling herself unclean; consequently, she refused any man from approaching her. Gradually, she realized that Shawn’s influence was so overwhelming, just as she said, “He had defined me to myself, and there’s no greater power than that”^[2]. Because of Shawn’s violence and the lack of care and love from her parents, Tara has always been too ashamed to mention her family to others at school. When Professor Steinberg advised Tara to apply for graduate school, she began to doubt herself again. She found it hard to believe that she could become a

scholar. The image of her hunched in the bathroom with her arm behind her back and her head in the toilet always came to her mind. When Shawn learned that his wife Emily had once bought the wrong cookies for their son, he flew into a rage and threw her, who was wearing only a T-shirt and jeans and barefoot, out of the trailer, leaving her outside the door to suffer from bitter subzero temperatures. Tara couldn't help recalling what happened to her in the parking lot. Memories always come to mind at any time and place, in some casual moment. She had the same reaction as before: she looked forward to Shawn's arrival to express his concern for Emily, while resenting their son Cammy, who had witnessed everything without understanding the truth. Just as the time when the strangers around witnessed Shawn beating her back then, she screamed loudly, trying to convince them that her wrist wasn't broken and it was just a joke between siblings. Under Shawn's long-term verbal abuse, Tara unconsciously internalized Shawn's language. While playing with her sister Audrey's children, Tara quoted what Shawn had once said to her, "If you act like a child, I'll treat you like one" ^[2]. This was Shawn's excuse when he thought Tara was misbehaving by putting on makeup, buying new clothes, and having a boyfriend, and he wanted to teach her a lesson.

Shawn's violent behavior scared Tara, so she gave in time and again. When she mustered up the courage to tell her father that Shawn had a violent tendency and was a control freak, her dad called Shawn to confront her. When Shawn killed his son Peter's favorite German Shepherd and threatened Tara with a bloody knife, telling her to take her life, Tara was scared and shrank back. She lied to Shawn that her father had misheard. Her parents did not support her. And her elder sister, Audrey, betrayed Tara, claiming that Tara had incited her. After seeing the e-mail between her mother and Shawn's ex-girlfriend, Tara left home with her journal. However, Tara suffered a mental breakdown due to their betrayal. She developed sleepwalking and panic disorder and was unable to continue reading and writing. She could not continue her doctoral dissertation.

Years of verbal humiliation and physical hurt left an indelible scar in Tara's heart, and the long-term internalized negative perception trapped her soul. Fortunately, there was still a way out in the midst of hardship. Tara was not completely devoured by her trauma. She eventually found ways out of her trauma.

4.2. Recovery from trauma

Herman divided trauma recovery into three stages. The first stage is the establishment of security; The second is to look back and mourn. The third is to rebuild a sense of connection ^[3]. Tara's path to trauma recovery also went through these three stages.

The top priority in trauma recovery is to establish safety for people with trauma ^[3]. Tara was forced to apologize after being subjected to Shawn's violence for the first time. She hated her own weakness and submission, and detested her vulnerability in front of Shawn. After that, she kept evading Shawn, fearing that violence would strike again without warning. She was extremely insecure. After being beaten again, although Tara had no confidence, she still followed Tyler's advice: go to school. Going to school means being able to get away from home, from Shawn, and go to a safe environment to rebuild a sense of security. Although she can't completely get rid of Shawn for the time being, at least she can leave the violent environment during her school years. After learning that her parents refused to accept the fact that Shawn was violent, and that her sister and Ellie also denied the previous accusations against Shawn under the coercion and persuasion of Shawn and his parents, Tara left Buck's Peak with her journal. After learning that Tyler and his wife Stephanie believed in her, Tara regained her confidence and took the initiative to seek help from the university's psychological counseling service, making positive efforts for her recovery.

Jonathan Shay, an American psychiatrist, believes that “trauma recovery depends on openly recounting the trauma, that is, being able to truly tell the trauma to a certain or some trusted audience” ^[4]. Narrating trauma is of great significance for trauma recovery. Trauma patients can achieve self-reshaping and get out of trauma by telling their trauma stories, reviewing the trauma, and reconstructing the trauma stories. In the novel, Tara adopts the narrative methods of keeping a journal and an autobiography as well as communicating with others. Tara recorded in her journal the process of being abused by Shawn. Tara’s journal account of violent trauma experiences has changed over time as her self-awareness has improved. At first, in her journal, Tara used “vague, shadowy language,” and later on, she did not “hide behind hints and suggestions” ^[2], truthfully recorded everything that happened. But after reading Shawn’s apology letter, Tara took the initiative to correct her journal. She wrote, “If I’d asked him to stop, he would have” ^[2]. In this way, Tara downplayed Shawn’s harm to her, deceived herself with her journal, and maintained her loyalty to her family. But Tara kept both conflicting versions of her journal at the same time, indicating that for the first time she allowed herself to have doubts and was no longer simply self-brainwashing. After learning that her sister had a similar experience of being abused by Shawn, Tara returned to Buck’s Peak to confront her with it. Back in Cambridge, Tara recounted in detail, for a full eight pages, precisely what her sister had said ^[2]. The journal became a tool against forgetting. Tara no longer deceived herself.

Herman believes that “sharing traumatic experiences with others is a prerequisite for rebuilding a sense of meaning in life” ^[3]. During Tara’s trauma recovery, her in-depth communication with the bishop, her boyfriend, her brother Tyler and his wife Stephanie, and even her mother Faye played a significant role in her trauma healing. After pouring out her heart, Tara’s sense of shame gradually faded, and she felt she was surrounded by her mother’s love as well as the support of the Tylers.

“Writing is a more effective way to heal trauma” ^[5]. *Educated* is Tara’s autobiography. The author, through writing the novel, “re-recognizes and reinterprets trauma, thereby achieving the literary therapeutic function of trauma narrative” ^[5]. Only by clarifying the traumatic memories can Tara truly reconstruct the traumatic story and gradually emerge from it.

Tara left the violent environment and reconstructed the traumatic story through narration. “Leaving the original environment, one must establish a new life in a completely different culture” ^[3]. Tara returned home many times, trying to feel the care and warmth of her family and reintegrate into it. But after many attempts, Tara gave up. She left Buck’s Peak, having not seen her parents for many years, but she was in close contact with Tyler, Richard, and Tony. Drew became Tara’s boyfriend. He was the first boyfriend Tara was willing to reveal the truth about her family to. Tara no longer feels helpless and isolated. She “had built a new life, and it was a happy one” ^[2].

5. Conclusion

Tara suffered physical and psychological trauma from her brother Shawn’s violence. It was so severe that Tara developed a traumatic dissociative stress response: she laughed out of control when being abused. This laugh is not an inner joy but a manifestation of dissociation from trauma. By staying away from violent environments, keeping journals and writing novels, and rebuilding connections with others, Tara recovered from her trauma and embarked on a new life.

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