

Shaping Identity Through Crisis: An Eriksonian Investigation in Educated by Tara Westover

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Abstract

The present research study aims to analyze Tara Westover's famous novel *Educated*. The objective of this study is to explore how identity is shaped through crisis. It examines how the challenges and conflicts faced by Tara Westover contribute to the development and transformation of her identity, highlighting the significant role that moments of crisis play in shaping who she becomes. Additionally, it investigates Tara's struggle to reconcile her past and present identities, particularly in the light of her family's beliefs and her determination to pursue education. This investigation follows a literary study that should not take this paradigm. This research has been collected from articles, journals, newspapers, interviews, etc. The secondary source is the commentary by Paul Main "Erikson's Psychosocial Development Stages" published on March 23, 2023, on Psychosocial theory by Erik Erikson whose psychosocial theory emphasizes the role of personal crises in identity formation, and Tara's journey demonstrates resilience, willpower, and self-knowledge in overcoming challenges and gaining purpose. The abstract shows something already done and examines how those interactions shaped the characters and helped them become who they are. It also examines the cultural and sociological elements influencing the protagonist's identity and how an author interacts with information.

Keywords: Shaping identity, crisis, conflicts, Psychosocial, Educated

Introduction

This research critically assesses identity crisis and the intricate formation of selfhood, examining the interplay between adversity, personal growth, and the transformative processes that shape an individual's sense of identity. In *Educated* by Tara Westover, the characters are enmeshed in anxieties, familial discord, and

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psychological coercion. Confronted with such harrowing circumstances, individuals are often compelled to make decisions that challenge their core beliefs, forcing them to question their essence, purpose, and direction amidst the turmoil. It is within this existential struggle that true strength is discovered.

Tara Westover's formative years were dominated by the extremist ideologies of her family, rooted in social isolation and defiance of mainstream society. Despite these formidable barriers, Westover transcended her circumstances, eventually obtaining an education that allowed her to break free from her repressive environment and view the world beyond her cloistered upbringing. Born on September 27, 1986, in Clifton, Idaho, Westover's educational journey did not commence until she was 17, as her family eschewed formal schooling, deeming it incompatible with their beliefs. Throughout her odyssey, Westover navigated myriad psychosocial challenges, and her relentless pursuit of knowledge became a pivotal component of her broader quest for self-identity.

Despite never attending school, Westover was fiercely determined to learn, ultimately leaving home to pursue higher education. Her remarkable academic trajectory culminated in a Ph.D. in history from the University of Cambridge. In her memoir *Educated*, Westover vividly chronicles her metamorphosis, from being raised in an isolated and ideologically rigid household in rural Idaho—devoid of formal education—to her ascent into the highest echelons of academia. Her narrative serves as a powerful testament to the transformative capacity of education and the indomitable resilience of the human spirit.

Beyond the confines of her narrative, Westover's story has resonated with readers, scholars, and educators alike. Her memoir has amplified the discourse on resilience and the transformative potential of education, elevating these themes to national prominence. Westover's journey has ignited a movement, inspiring countless individuals confronting similar adversities to seek knowledge and personal growth, despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In academic circles, her emphasis on the transformative power of education has sparked discussions about educational accessibility and the pivotal role education plays in shaping identity. Moreover, her literary contribution has enriched the broader intellectual landscape, showcasing the power of narrative in fostering empathy and understanding. Themes such as family dynamics, self-discovery, and the pursuit of intellectual autonomy are now inextricably linked to Westover's compelling story, which is articulated with

remarkable clarity, sincerity, and vividness. Her prose is distinguished by its raw vulnerability, balanced by a keen sense of observation and reflection.

Westover's journey can be further illuminated through the theoretical lens of Erik Erikson, whose psychosocial theory of development offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the stages of identity formation. Erikson, born in 1902 in Germany and later becoming an

eminent American developmental psychologist, is celebrated for his theory of psychosocial development, which posits that individuals progress through eight stages of psychosocial conflict, each of which is crucial to their psychological and emotional maturation. These stages—Hope, Will, Purpose, Competence, Fidelity, Love, Care, and Wisdom—are navigated sequentially, with each stage representing a critical juncture in the development of self-identity. Erikson's emphasis on the social dimensions of identity formation underscores the role of interpersonal relationships and societal forces in the ongoing process of self-discovery and personal growth. Through this lens, Westover's narrative can be seen as an embodiment of Erikson's theoretical principles, with her journey reflecting the profound impact of social interaction, conflict, and resolution on the construction of selfhood.

Review of the Literature

Tara Westover, an esteemed American author, memoirist, and essayist, garnered widespread acclaim with her memoir *Educated* (2018), which debuted at No. 1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list. This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the existing scholarly discourse surrounding the selected memoir *Educated*, highlighting prior research and critical analyses that have explored its thematic and narrative dimensions.

In a critical review of *Educated* by Tara Westover, esteemed critic and PhD scholar Julia Martin, recognized for her diverse and accomplished professional background, offered a nuanced critique of the memoir, specifically targeting the narrative structure. Martin critically engaged with the plot, providing an in-depth analysis that questioned certain aspects of its construction and coherence. "Tara endured both physical and verbal abuse at the hands of family members and saw her education, as well as her overall wellbeing, neglected by her parents" (Martin,2023).

This encapsulates the severe adversities that impeded Westover's development, while also emphasizing her remarkable resilience in surmounting these obstacles to seek self-actualization and a better future.

In her review, seasoned entrepreneur and business leader Lisa Wan offers a critical evaluation of *Educated*, highlighting Tara Westover's arduous struggle against societal and familial constraints, emphasizing the immense fortitude required to transcend her oppressive upbringing. "My life was narrated for me by others. Their voices were forceful, emphatic, absolute. It had never occurred to me that my voice might be as strong as theirs" (Wan, 2022).

This quote encapsulates Tara Westover's profound realization of reclaiming her narrative and voice, underscoring her transformative journey of self-discovery as she becomes aware of the pervasive influence external perceptions have had on her identity and worldview.

Critic Michelle Dean examines Tara Westover's financial struggles, articulating the complexities and challenges associated with her reliance on familial loans, which further illuminate the broader economic issues intertwined with her quest for autonomy and self-sufficiency. "Money is a constant struggle; Gene works largely in scrap metal but it isn't enough. Cars driven by exhausted family members crash during long drives, but hospitals and Western medicine are forbidden so injuries persist and fester" (Dean, 2018). This quote underscores the dire financial conditions and insufficient access to medical care experienced by Tara's family, illustrating the precarious economic instability resulting from her father Gene's employment in the scrap metal industry, exacerbated by perilous incidents during extended journeys and a chronic deficiency of healthcare resources.

In another article, *When Memoirs Share Too Much, Too Soon* the critic Sarah Schutte who is a prominent figure in the realm of literature and journalism criticized the character of Tara by saying:

"This is a woman dealing with a very traumatic upbringing, an upbringing that will take her many years to fully come to terms with. She's been through more in 33 years than many have in a lifetime, has graduated from esteemed institutions, and continues her climb in the academic world — all without ever gaining her high-school diploma. It's sensational, yes, and heartrending and painful" (Schutte, 2020).

This statement stresses the psychological burden and long-lasting effects on the woman's well-being while showcasing the woman's resilience in the face of a terrible upbringing.

In a psychosocial theory, Kendra Cherry who is a mental health writer highlights the importance of trust in a child's development and comments "If a child successfully develops trust, the child will feel safe and secure in the world. Caregivers who are inconsistent, emotionally unavailable, or rejecting contribute to feelings of mistrust in the children under their care. Failure to develop trust will result in fear and a belief that the world is inconsistent and unpredictable" (Cherry,2024). An essential component of early childhood development, trust has a significant impact on a child's emotional condition. Inconsistency or emotional neglect can plant a basis of mistrust, making the child believe that their environment is unstable and possibly dangerous. In contrast, consistent emotional support and availability from caregivers create a sense of security, enabling infants to form an initial trust in the world around them.

Sal Flint, offers a critical reflection on Tara Westover's harrowing experiences of abuse and trauma, highlighting the profound psychological and emotional impact these adversities had on her formative years.

"It is not an easy read and her experiences have left more than physical scars behind. Westover is still coming to terms with the abuse she has been subjected to and is still, at least to some extent, escaping it and its effect" (Flint,2024). It emphasizes the lasting importance of Tara Westover's memoir which explores her horrific experiences with abuse and trauma, shedding light on the heavy psychological cost and intricate details of her story.

In the article "Choosing" not "Rebelling" the critics Sathvik Yadanaparthi and Mrs. Trombley talk about her memoir:

In one instance, Tara "awoke with needles in [her] brain ... [t]wo hands were gripping [her] throat, and they'd been shaking [her] ... [her] eyes were open but [she] saw only white flashes. A few sounds made it through. "SLUT!" "WHORE!" (Westover 116). (Studocu,2023)

In this articulation, the severe violence and persecution Tara faced, has been shown. The use of sensual details like needles in her brain and hands gripping her throat

serve as an indicator of deep-rooted sufferings in her life, and how she has been trying to face all the difficulties during her life at various stages. The continual use of mocking expressions illustrates the emotional bombardment of Tara's circumstances, demonstrating the inner pain carried out in opposition to her.

Methodology

The research methodology, which uses qualitative techniques that emphasize textual analysis, follows an established and rigorous structure. Westover's education with Erikson's psychosocial theory, namely his eight-stage model, serves as the main theoretical basis for this study. According to Eriksonian ideas, this thesis critically examines how identity is shaped through crises by combining analytical and descriptive approaches. The study is organized into four chapters: an introduction and literature review come first, and then chapter three, which concentrates on Westover's difficulties and the ensuing identity construction, offers a more thorough textual analysis. The research findings are summarized in the last chapter, which also discusses the research constraints and provides important insights into the theory's wider implications to the text.

Analysis

The term crisis refers to a difficult time or state of affairs. It often involves a crucial or decisive moment in a sequence of events, where the outcome can significantly impact one's well-being or future. Crises can occur on personal, societal, or global levels and may require immediate action or decision-making to resolve or mitigate their effects. Crisis plays a significant role in Tara's life.

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial comprises eight stages of life. During each stage, a person faces a psychosocial crisis. According to Erikson's concept, people encounter diverse psychosocial crises at numerous points in their lives. "I spent my summers bottling peaches and my winters rotating supplies. When the World of Men failed, my family would continue on, unaffected" (Westover 2). In the "Industry vs. Inferiority" stage, Erikson explores how adolescents are driven to cultivate proficiency across various career trajectories and skillsets. Beyond acquiring practical abilities, individuals develop a sense of industriousness and accomplishment through diligent engagement in tasks such as bottling peaches and managing resources, fostering their growing competence.

“I tried to imagine school but couldn’t. Instead, I pictured Sunday school, which I attend each week and which I hated” (Westover 10). According to Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, the quote reflects a psychosocial conflict characterized by emotional turmoil within a social context, specifically aligning with the "Industry vs. Inferiority" stage. It illustrates the protagonist's struggle to envision formal education due to her conventional upbringing, with her aversion to Sunday school symbolizing her alienation from structured learning environments and reinforcing her unfavorable perception of institutionalized education.

As in the novel, Tara says I wish I could go to college but her father disagrees with her decision and says: “When I told Dad that I planned to go to college, he’d said a woman’s place was in the home, that I should be learning about herbs_ “God’s pharmacy” he’d called it, smiling to himself_ so I could take over for Mother” (Westover 146). This quotation perfectly captures the “Identity vs. Role Confusion” stage of Erikson’s psychosocial theory, in which teenagers struggle to define themselves in the face of parental and social demands. In direct opposition to her father's deeply held beliefs about gender roles, Tara wants to pursue further education. He believes that she should be preparing to take over her mother's job in the home by studying herbal treatments, or "God's pharmacy." This relationship highlights the conflict between Tara's quest for more general intellectual objectives and the restricted, conventional abilities valued in her family's perspective.

At the age of fifteen Tara faced troubling episodes of family dynamics and the impact of gossip and rumors within her community. This shows the Eriksonian adolescent stage. “Once, when I was fifteen after I’d started wearing mascara and lip gloss, Shawn had told Dad that he’d heard rumors about me in town, that I had a reputation. Immediately Dad thought I was pregnant” (Westover 231). Tara's revelation of wearing lip gloss and mascara signifies a pivotal moment in her adolescent journey of self-discovery, yet it is met with harsh criticism and condemnation from her family and insular community. Shawn’s propagation of these rumors exemplifies a profound lack of empathy for Tara's emotional well-being, while her father’s immediate assumption of pregnancy highlights the entrenched mistrust and dysfunctional communication that permeate familial relationships.

The term identity was coined by famous psychologist Erik Erikson who proposed that identity is the sense of self that a person develops during his life, especially

during teenage years. Tara faced a crisis in the novel, during which she sharpened her identity. This crisis proved beneficial for her, as she learned many things from it. Despite her family's lack of support for her education and her father's complex mindset that women shouldn't venture outside, she continued to care for her mother and contribute to the development of their household. Despite enduring physical and verbal abuse from her brother Shawn, she refused to give up and confronted all challenges with strength, never losing hope.

"I had been educated in the rhythms of the mountain, rhythms in which change was never fundamental, only cyclical" (Westover 2). In the "Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt" stage, Tara Westover's deep introspection on the formation of identity is masterfully illustrated through the metaphor of the mountain's rhythms. Her childhood, deeply enmeshed in the immutable cycles of the natural world, imparted a profound understanding of resilience and adaptability. The mountain's enduring, repetitive patterns symbolized life's inevitable fluctuations, instilling in Tara the fortitude to confront challenges with unwavering determination and shaping her identity with an acute awareness of life's cyclical nature and the resilience necessary for survival.

"I pictured myself lying flat on the floor, still and silent, listening to the sharp chirp of crickets in the field" (Westover 16). The cruel, conflict-ridden atmosphere of Tara's childhood, where violence was a constant danger, is captured in brutality. She uses the peace of nature as a source of inner comfort amid this tumult. Westover's capacity to find beauty and power in the ordinary, a quality that greatly influenced her identity and strengthened her resistance to life's obstacles are highlighted by the symbolic focus on the crickets' chirping, which symbolizes resiliency and vitality in the face of hardship.

"I chose a Sunday evening when Dad was resting on the couch, his Bible propped open in his lap. I stood in front of him for what felt like hours, but he didn't look up, so I blurted out what I'd come to say: "I want to go to school" (Westover 79). Erikson's "Identity vs. The Role Confusion" stage is shown in the statement, "I want to go to school," which represents a turning point of self-assertion and confrontation. Tara's desire to go to school, despite her intense fear of her father's complex thinking, is a major defiance of the long-standing conventions in her family and community. Her rebellion highlights her independence and agency in creating her own identity as well as a brave break from traditional norms. Her courage in the

face of probable rejection and the deeply rooted religious beliefs that guided her upbringing are both symbolized by the prolonged tension as she faces her father and his serious stance, Bible in hand.

“The past was a ghost, insubstantial, un-affecting. Only the future had weight” (Westover 315). Westover's depiction of the past as a "ghost" and the future as weighty encapsulates her evolving perception of time, emphasizing a growing prioritization of forward-looking potential over retrospective experiences. By labeling her past as "insubstantial," she suggests a deliberate detachment from the formative yet painful memories, potentially as a psychological strategy to navigate and transcend the trauma of her upbringing. Her focus on the future underscores an unwavering sense of resilience and optimism, as she envisions the future as a realm of transformative growth, where she actively exercises agency in shaping her narrative and destiny.

“You could call this selfhood many things. Transformation, Metamorphosis. Falsity. Betrayal. I call it education.” (Westover 377). Westover illustrates this life-changing experience through a variety of, occasionally conflicting, lenses, acknowledging the significant influence of her schooling in transforming her identity. By using words like "metamorphosis" and "transformation," she emphasizes the powerful role that education plays in self-evolution, growth, and independence. She also asserts control over her story and highlights the importance of knowledge and self-awareness in helping her forge her path through the challenges and complexity of life.

“The admissions committee was efficient; I didn't wait long. The letter arrived in a normal envelope. My heart sank when I saw it. Rejection letters are small, I thought. I opened it and read “Congratulations” (Westover 174). This statement reflects Tara's unexpected dream coming true. She says she applied to BYU and she had no idea how to write an application. Then her brother helped her write the application and she thought that this letter was a rejection letter. The moment she reads the word “congratulations,” shows her abilities and self-aspirations. This successful conclusion could improve her confidence and strengthen her belief that she is a capable individual. It might also change the way she sees herself, confirming her potential and merits. Reflection on Westover's prior experiences, objectives, and aspirations is probably a part of her admission process. Her identity is still being

shaped, and the emotional rollercoaster she goes through encourages reflection and personal development.

“Never had I found such comfort in a void, in the black absence of knowledge. It seemed to say: whatever you are, you are a woman” (Westover 300). Tara Westover’s observation regarding solace in ignorance has significant ramifications for her identity and self-realization. This quote, taken from her biography “Educated,” captures a turning point in her quest for self-awareness. “Whatever you are, you are” implies a deep acceptance of oneself, free from social conventions or outside expectations. It represents an understanding that one’s identity and values are independent of conventional success or validation indicators. Rather than seeking comfort from the known, Westover embraces the ambiguity and uncertainty that frequently accompanies the process of self-discovery. Her identity is further enhanced by the recognition that she is a woman in this gap, underscoring the interdependence of her experiences.

Conclusion

The principal aim of this research endeavor is to elucidate the intricate process of identity formation through crises, employing the lens of Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory. The concept of identity is paramount in shaping an individual’s self-perception, wherein an identity crisis can engender profound internal conflicts. Both Erikson’s theoretical framework and Tara Westover’s memoir, *Educated*, provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of identity and its evolution within the context of personal and societal challenges. This thesis articulates how identity serves as a cornerstone in the formation of self-perception and how crises can precipitate significant existential dilemmas for individuals. The psychosocial theory posits that crises are instrumental in sculpting personal identity.

Within the narrative of *Educated*, Tara Westover navigates a profound crisis of autonomy, particularly as she grapples with her aspiration for education amidst the suffocating expectations imposed by her family. This dichotomy between her burgeoning need for self-actualization and her familial obligations exacerbates her internal struggle. Westover’s life journey is punctuated by transformative crises that serve as catalysts for her identity formation, demonstrating the dynamic interplay between personal aspirations and external pressures. Incorporating Erikson’s psychosocial theory enables a nuanced analysis of Tara’s experiences through the

various stages of identity development. Her relentless pursuit of education illustrates the conflict between initiative and guilt, wherein her desire to transcend her circumstances clashes with the guilt associated with challenging her family's entrenched beliefs. Tara's indomitable will to learn and her commitment to self-creation, even in the face of overwhelming adversity, are testaments to her resilience and fortitude. Ultimately, Tara transcends the crises that sought to define her, emerging from her journey with a renewed sense of self and purpose.

This narrative encapsulates Erikson's notion of identity achievement, as Tara confronts and reconciles the myriad challenges that arise along her path. The memoir provides a poignant exploration of how identities are forged amidst hardship, emphasizing the transformative potential of crises in shaping the self. Tara's odyssey underscores the idea that adversity can act as a crucible for personal growth and self-discovery, reminding readers of the profound impact that life experiences can have on identity formation.

Through her journey, Westover illustrates the intrinsic power of resilience, determination, and the relentless pursuit of knowledge in crafting one's identity amidst life's myriad challenges. Both Erikson's theoretical constructs and Westover's lived experiences elucidate the psychological turmoil individuals encounter as they navigate a society laden with expectations and predetermined identities. These works advocate for a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of identity, one that acknowledges the diverse circumstances and complexities faced by individuals in their quest for self-definition.

In conclusion, *educated* serves not only as a narrative of personal struggle and triumph but also as a profound commentary on the broader implications of identity formation within the psychosocial framework. Tara Westover's journey embodies the essence of resilience and the unwavering pursuit of self-knowledge, inviting readers to reflect on the intricate tapestry of experiences that shape our identities in the face of adversity.

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