



# Feminist Interpretation of the Novel of *Educated*

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## Abstract

*Educated* is an autobiographical novel by Tara Westover, which tells the story of Tara's life and growing process, which was dominated by patriarchy and domestic violence before she was seventeen years old, and the life reversal of Tara's self-study through the entrance examination of Young Bermuda, and then her master's degree and doctor's degree from Cambridge University. This essay analyses the effects of family controlled by patriarchal philosophy on Tara through feminist interpretation, Tara's life reversal reflects her insistence on her right to be educated as a woman, dissects Tara's awakening of women's consciousness and the struggle for women's right to speech, and shows her process of reshaping her female consciousness, getting rid of patriarchal spiritual slavery and building female living space of her own through education and historical retelling. Tara finally liberated herself from spiritual slavery, found her inner belonging, finally gained a positive, free and independent personality, achieved reconciliation with herself.

## Keywords

Educated, feminism

*Educated* is an autobiographical novel by Tara Westford, a story written by her own growth process. Tara, the heroine, was born in the mountains of Idaho, USA. She never went to school before she was seventeen, and lived in a twisted family dominated by patriarchal consciousness and full of domestic violence. Tara worked in her father's garbage dump as a child (Tara, 2019), helping her mother's midwifery and essential oil business. Later, she passed the Yang Bermuda School through self-study, and also got a master's degree in philosophy and a doctorate in history from Cambridge University, and went to Harvard to visit. The reversal of the heroine's fate shows that she gets rid of the patriarchal spiritual slavery and the awakening of feminist consciousness, and that women can build their own living space through education and historical retelling.

## 1. First, the influence of the patriarchal family on Tara

Tara, the heroine of the novel, grew up in a male-dominated family. Under the suppression of patriarchy, women's identity has no right to speak at home, and the absolute control of patriarchy blocks Tara's cognition of the outside world. From an early age, she accepted her father's distorted concept of public schools and medical institutions, was not allowed to receive a good education, and could not form a correct cognition of the world. Tara's father is the representative of the powerful male hegemonic discourse. He is an extreme Mormon, devout in God, autocratic but paranoid, absolute and crazy. He always instills his own thoughts into his wife and children forcibly, and defends his thoughts and status with absolute authority, which can't be challenged by anyone. Tara was attracted by all his beliefs and strengths and brainwashed by the ideas he instilled. Tara's father said, "A woman's place should be at home", refused to be associated with the government, and opposed school education. He believed that going to school was to give the children to the devil, and that "family education was God's will", so Tara never went to

school before she was seventeen. My father also refused to go to the hospital for treatment. He and his family were sick and injured in a car accident, so they didn't go to the hospital, didn't take antibiotics, and had to heal themselves with herbs prepared by their mother. The extreme father firmly believes that one day the world will be in chaos, so he leads his wife and children to store food, emergency supplies and weapons used to resist foreign enemies crazily. Father's extreme and ridiculous concept control kept Tara out of her normal life.

Men use verbal violence and physical violence to force women to accept their authority at home. When violence can't bring women to heel, men resort to physical violence to force women to heel: when Tara refused to accept her brother Sean's unwarranted accusations of making up and having a boyfriend, Sean had no qualms about stuffing Tara's head into the toilet and wrestling Tara in the public parking lot. Mother was Tara's supporter, and after all, she was her father's vassal. Tara's mother was originally a very educated city girl. After falling in love with her father, she came to live in the mountains with him, and gradually accepted her husband's exclusive thinking. Mother became cowardly, timid, numb and indifferent. Although she had her own economic foundation, she still focused on her husband. She never dared to disobey her husband's orders, no matter how ridiculous they seemed to others. She only obeyed mechanically, like a puppeteer with no soul, even when Tara asked her for help. Mother's silence became a vassal of patriarchy and an "accomplice" who hurt her daughter's heart.

When she was a child, Tara picked up and dismantled waste in her father's small work team. Her father wouldn't let her wear gloves and helmets. The life of picking up waste was dull and closed, and there was always a danger of injury. Father stopped Tara from studying, and when he saw her reading, he would try to drag her away; She was injured in the scrap factory, her leg was pricked by spikes, and her brother Luke's leg was burned beyond recognition. Tara began to desperately want to leave her father's scrap factory. When Tara put forward the idea of going to school, her father's attitude was resolute opposition and constant obstruction, and he tried every means to find her a job and occupy her study time (Yang Lixin, 2002). He tried to persuade Tara to give up the idea of going to school by virtue of God's fame. He said, "God has cursed his blessing and shamelessly pursued human knowledge. His anger will come soon because of you." His father's special rule made Tara want to leave the home." Life on the mountain gives people a sense of supremacy, a sense of independence and even domination." As the patriarchy rules the whole family. Tara's father violently interfered in her life with words, not allowing her to wear so-called inappropriate clothes, and condemning it as the manner of infidels or prostitutes.

Tara's brother Sean is a destructive personality. Sean likes to control and manipulate women, both to his girlfriend and to her. Sean often bullies Tara, slanders her with some unpleasant words, and even presses her head in the toilet. In his bones, he will hurt the women who love him. His way of treating women is manipulation and control, and he is violent. The first time he fought Tara and forced her to apologize, it was because she disobeyed Sean's control. "He grabbed my hair, a big ball, tightly pulled the root of my hair and dragged me into the bathroom....." The experience of that night hurt Tara deeply, and affected her all her life, making her deeply troubled, though she kept hinting to herself, "He didn't affect me, because nothing can affect me." And this itself is its influence. "In such a memory, what I see is an indestructible self that is as hard to deal with as a stone." She wants to fight, but she can't resist and can't move, which seems to be a woman's reaction to patriarchal control. Sean abused and beat Tara, and then apologized to her, saying that she was afraid that she would lose herself and become as frivolous as other girls, which made Tara confused about her gender consciousness.

Tara, who was seventeen years old before, had been living in such a suffocating family environment. Her childhood was full of scrap metal, canned peaches, guns and ammunition, and a beating that she would suffer from time to time. She was educated from an early age to respect her father's authority and not be a disobedient girl, that is to say, she could not have her own independent will. As Mueller pointed out, the predicament of women's survival at that time was caused by the historical tradition of "might is right", together with the right of men to be born male, that is, men have the right to give orders and women have the obligation to obey. He compared this situation to a slave-like life: women are completely attached to men's life, deprived of the right to education and the ability to work; Women can't protect their bodies and children in marriage; Lack of women's civil rights, such as voting rights and property rights; Women lack legal aid when they suffer from domestic violence.

## **2. Second, Tara's awakening of women's consciousness and the struggle for women's right to speech**

Taylor, Tara's other brother, likes listening to music. He gave Tara a musical enlightenment and discovered her musical talent. When Taylor came home, he saw Sean's violence against Tara. He suggested that Tara leave home

and go to college. He told her that there was another world out there. One day after Taylor's brother left, an idea suddenly flashed into Tara's mind: she was going to school, which was the bud of Tara's self-consciousness. From that moment until she stepped into the university campus, it was a long road of hard work. Her self-education began with reading religious books. She read the Book of Mormon and the New Testament twice, took notes, and worked hard and carefully to study the meanings of Mormonism. Patience reading what she didn't understand was a crucial learning skill. She used her spare time to prepare for the college entrance examination by herself. After two exams, she was miraculously admitted to the university, which fundamentally changed Tara's fate.

Studying in the university has enabled Tara to learn more knowledge and open the way of awakening and reshaping the feminist self. In the psychology class, Tara heard the term "two-way affective disorder". The symptoms are: depression, mania, paranoia, delusions of grandeur and murder. Tara realized that her father was like this, possibly paranoid and delusional; Tara also learned the truth about the "Ruby Mountain" incident in class. It turned out that all childhood fears were caused by his father's delusion of being killed. Because of his father's paranoia and madness, his family and he experienced two car accidents. Many plans he came up with put his family in danger, which made his family scarred, bruised, bruised, concussed, his legs on fire, and his head blossomed, making Tara and others live in a state of vigilance and constant fear. All this truth overturned Tara's previous cognition, and Tara finally decided to resist and abandon what her father had instilled in her, instead of trying to live a normal life according to her father's wishes. And education knowledge made Tara have some basic knowledge about her father, brother, and herself again. "We are all shaped by the traditions given to us by others, and we all speak for a discourse whose only purpose is to dehumanize and treat others cruelly." She finally realized their cruelty as the representatives of patriarchy: men deprived women of their right to speak in order to defend their dominant position, and made them "lose their voice" for a long time. The awakening of Tara's feminist consciousness makes her want to break the silence, make her own voice, and express and stick to her opinions even if there is constant conflict with her father. She said, "All my life, I have lived in the narration of others, and their voices are forceful, autocratic and absolute. I never realized before that my voice can be as powerful as theirs." Foucault's discourse rights theory holds that discourse, knowledge and rights are the trinity: discourse is the carrier, knowledge is the representation and rights are the essence. Without the production of discourse, there is no right to implement. Tara, who gained knowledge in the university, demanded to produce her own words and realize her own women's rights, although the process was tortuous and difficult.

When Tara came home from college during the holiday, Sean constantly humiliated Tara when she saw her changes. She even beat her in public in front of her boyfriend, trying to pull Tara back to the past, locking her in the past and trapped in her past self. Tara always lied to herself when she was beaten by Sean. She contradicted herself in her diary and tried to correct her memories (Zhu Zhirong, 2007). First, she said that she was "like being beaten by a zombie, as if he couldn't hear me." After Shawn came to apologize, he wrote, "This is a misunderstanding. If I tell him to stop, he will stop." The uncertainty of this expression made Tara firmly believe in living in her own thoughts, not those of others, as if she had found her own privilege and strength. However, Sean's influence on Tara is far beyond her own imagination. Shaun's violent beating of her is a violation of women's rights, as if the endless humiliation of Tara makes Shaun happy. "It's not an accident or a side effect to humiliate me, that's his purpose." He always wants to prevent Tara from becoming a better person. That painful experience left a deep shadow on Tara's heart. "He defined me, and there is no power stronger than this." Sean's humiliation and abuse made Tara critical and capricious. She was full of hostility and lost control of her emotions, transferring all her savage anger and all her terrible resentment against her father and Sean to her kind boyfriend Charles. It caused serious harm to Sean Tara. No matter physically or psychologically, terrible memories have plagued Tara for more than ten years. He made Tara feel unclean and not a good girl, and she despised herself as long as she was close to the opposite sex. She even once feared marriage and didn't want any man near her.

According to Lacan's theory, the "mirror stage" is an indispensable key stage in the imaginary order of life growth: "A child's sense of identity arises when he/she internalizes the external things that he/she sees ... He/she fictionalizes a self based on the image in the actual mirror or in the eyes of others." (Zhu Gang). Tara locked the bathroom door after being beaten by Sean, and then stared at her wrist-clenched self in the mirror. She hates her weakness, and she wants to be an indestructible, stone-like self. And then turned this imagination into reality.

Tara realized that "women need to be liberated from excuses and prove themselves as individuals. Express opinions, take actions, and despise obedience". When she really voiced out Sean's violent tendency, her father said she had no evidence, and her mother turned to support her father in silence. Sean denied everything he had done, and

repeatedly threatened Tara to put the bloody blade that had just killed the dog in Tara's hand; My sister also succumbed to my father's warning and sent an email saying that she had forgiven Sean. It was Tara who incited her to keep Tara away from her. When Tara's female discourse expression challenged the authoritarian authority of male discourse in her family, she was suppressed and opposed by patriarchy. The family's questioning of her and her father's mental oppression also caused Tara to have symptoms of self-doubt, mental breakdown, distraction and depression. She lost sleep every night and sleepwalked into the street. After returning to the university, with the help of the bishop and psychological counseling, Tara healed the trauma of her heart by telling about the past. Little by little, she eliminated her sense of shame and slowly returned to normal. Because women who have the right to speak can create their own texts and stories in their own way,

As Tara lived in a male-dominated family when she was a child, in her cognition, the boy will be the decision-maker of the future family and the defender of the family order, while the girl is the one who is called ". That is to say, in Tara's initial consciousness, women are in a subordinate position, under the control of patriarchal ideology, and have no right to speak. By reading the works of the first wave writers, Riitala reinterpreted her female identity and the reasons for her anxiety as a girl. She was deeply inspired when she read about Mill's thinking about the essence of female sex. Mill claimed that "for many centuries, women have been coaxed, coaxed, pushed and squeezed in a series of distorted concepts, so that it is impossible to define women's talents and ambitions now". He also said that "as far as the essence of female sex is concerned, there is no final answer". Tara felt comforted for this, and agreed with her female identity and essence, because only when she found her true self, her mind would be calm. It was after she had awakened her feminist consciousness that Tara liberated herself from spiritual slavery, found her inner belonging, finally gained a positive, free and independent personality, achieved reconciliation with herself, and faced her past life calmly.

### **3. Third, the construction of female living space**

Tara walked out of the closed and boring mountain, where there were endless scraps and essential oil bottles. She fled from her father and brother who represented patriarchy, and came to Yang Bermuda to pursue her right to education and independent women's rights, and to construct her own living space. The so-called construction is to open up one's own space from scratch and reshape one's individual identity. Hooks said, "Opposition alone is not enough. When you resist, you have to update yourself in that blank space." At the beginning, Tara didn't adapt to the new college life. She couldn't understand the professor's lessons, and her relationship with her roommates was tense. Everything was contrary to her previous life and the beliefs instilled in her by her father-the farther away from home, the greater her father's influence on Tara. "My loyalty to my father is proportional to the distance between us." She also wavered between loyalty to her father and betrayal, because Tara, who had just left home during this period, had only gained a negative freedom, which had not yet reached the real one. "Negative freedom is freedom that is not restricted or hindered by the outside world, and refers to the action of a person's body that is not hindered by others; Freedom is self-control, and self-rule by self-control is to control one's own thoughts, to be liberated from irrational fears and beliefs, and to be liberated from addiction, superstition and all other forms of self-oppression." "Free ourselves from spiritual slavery, only we can free our minds", and build our true self.

Tara, after the awakening of feminist consciousness, decided to reshape herself and build her own value. Tara sought the advice of Professor Dr. Rick, how to make her mission as a wife and mother go hand in hand with her personal interests. The inspiration the professor gave her was "find out where your ability lies first, and then decide who you are". Tara, a tutor, was recommended to participate in the project in Cambridge. Tara began to read and study history extensively, write papers and rebuild history. She realized that her personal knowledge of the past was limited and limited to what others told them. Just as her father had been instilling in her that her history was actually not the history that most people agreed with, she wanted to know how those great historical gatekeepers compromised their ignorance and prejudice. The process of reading was Tara's process of reinventing herself. "The most powerful factor that determines who you are comes from your heart. Under the guidance of the professor, Tara finally found her research direction, explored her potential, made her go further and further on her own academic road, started her visit to Cambridge and Harvard, gained a freer and broader development space, and lived out her own female self.

Tara, the heroine, went out from Barker Peak to Yang Bermuda School, then went to Cambridge to study abroad and visit Harvard. The transformation of space represents a completely different life. She grew from an ignorant little girl in a waste factory in the mountains to a doctor in Cambridge. Tara witnessed and experienced more truths

in a wider space, and used these truths to construct her own thoughts, escape from the control of her father's patriarchal ideology, become a person who can think independently, make firm choices and have the right to speak, and build her own female living space, just as the name of this book is.

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