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Extended Essay

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Effects of Social Environment and the Power of Education

RQ: In what manner does the social environment affect the individuals' journey of personal growth in Tara Westover's memoir 'Educated' and Willy Russell's play 'Educating Rita'?

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I. Introduction

The journey of personal growth is an intricate process that is influenced by various factors, including the social environment in which a person lives. The force that propels humans into action is called motivation. To explain, in a simple and concise way, how this force operates; we shall first look in a basic general view to our needs. When put in the most basic manner possible; these five, at least these five, following needs are: physiological needs, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. Excluding some certain exceptions, all humans “are motivated by the desire to achieve or maintain the various conditions upon which these basic satisfactions rest and by certain more intellectual desires.”. These five categories are in correlation with each other and listed in a hierarchical order. This hierarchy rises from the loss of a category’s function as a source of motivation, as gratified needs no longer act as a source of motivation. Once the motivation is lost, the next step of need becomes the new motivation. (*Maslow A Theory of Human Motivation.*) Thus, actions and desires of the human are powered either by this motivation hierarchy or a threat to the stated needs.

Tara Westover's memoir 'Educated' and Willy Russell's play 'Educating Rita' both explore the transformative power of education in the individuals' social environments. Since this essay aims to explore the question: "In what manner does the social environment affect the individuals' journey of personal growth in Tara Westover's memoir 'Educated' and Willy Russell's play 'Educating Rita'?", it is important to understand what is the motivation behind Westover's and the Russell's characters' actions taken in the pursuit of personal growth. By analysing and identifying the elements from their social environment that coincide with the motivation inducing needs mentioned by Maslow, we can create a tool that would be of significant assistance for reaching a conclusion on the question's answer.

Another important element worthy of being put under observation aside from their motivation arisen from their social environment, is the impact of the said social environment

on their psychosocial development. As a method of doing so, this essay will refer to Erik Erikson's book 'Childhood and Society', which explains psychosocial development with eight stages and how a phenomena that we have been growing accustomed to for a while now, identity crisis, possibly occurs. Comparing Erikson's work with our characters' lives would allow us to backtrack from their perspectives and behaviour to the manner they were affected by their social environment.

II. Psychology Behind the Social Environment of Westover

For our analysis of the manner that Tara Westover's social environment affected her personal growth, we shall start from the general outside and proceed to details from that point. "Educated" is a memoir in which Tara Westover narrates her journey of overcoming the challenges, both physical and mental, presented by her survivalist Mormon family; setting on a path of education and personal growth. Her father 'Gene Westover' is a scrapyard owner with extreme beliefs and paranoia, that are thought to be symptoms of bipolar disorder by Tara after she learns about the disorder in university (*Westover 30*), and those beliefs and paranoia of his are the foundation of the social environment of the Westover family. Gene does not trust doctors and the government; believing that education and other facilities of the government are ways of brainwashing people, and thinks that federal agents will get them for not allowing 'the government brainwash their kids' (*Westover 8*). He believed that the world would end in 2000, this belief of him was so strong that he spent a lot of time and energy to prepare for it; and was even disappointed when the world did not end. This disappointment of his is conveyed to the reader by Tara stating that his features had a childlike disappointment at the first morning of the year 2000, and her analogy of the flood being withheld from Noah after he suffered willingly to build the ark (*Westover 91*). Similar similes and analogies are used throughout the memoir to utilize the facilities of language for a stronger communication

with the readers. This delusional perspective, beliefs, and way of living of Gene is inevitably inflicted on the other members of the family. This makes Westover's house a social environment with very little to no proper interaction with the outside, which limits the only knowledge of a social environment in the household to one that Gene holds. The vicious circle present here is not hard to see.

Normally, a person would still be able to recover from exposure to a delusional social environment in early stages of life after introduction of education to their life and interaction with people from different social environments; however, the problem in the case of the children of the Westovers' is how limiting the perspective the father of the family imposes on the children is. In an interview with Karamo Brown, Westover describes how she 'had her world made by the people she grew up with' and how similar perspective issues can happen in other social environments by saying: "*...whatever community you're a part of, people are gonna curate certain stories for you that are gonna represent your view of the world, and that's what's gonna be put in front of you, even if you go to a school; and the trick is to step outside of that.*" (Brown YouTube).

According to the book of Erikson, one of the initial steps of psychosocial development is the infant developing a sense of trust, either trust or mistrust, towards their caretakers. It is apparent throughout the book that Westover had developed trust towards Gene. This trust can even be seen after Westover leaves for college and is upset due to her recent exam results. Despite knowing that she will always have problems with her father, saying "I knew it wouldn't last.", she still trusts him enough to open up about her problems (*Westover* 165). Like most of the fathers, Gene loves and cares about his children. His actions harbour no ill intent, the contradictory actually, he acts like how he thinks is the best for the family; which is why Westover develops the trust. When that trust and limiting perspective is combined, it makes it extremely difficult to break out of.

III. Motivation Behind Westover's Journey

The motivation that pushes Westover over the boundaries of that perspective and propel her to pursue education is one of the basic needs Maslow presents: 'Safety'. Westover faces multiple occasions of abusive behaviour from one of her brothers, Shaun. One of the worst occurrences of this abuse is the spark, motivation that triggers Westover's journey. Westover uses extreme imagery for the purpose of both being more descriptive and being more emotive. This extreme emotional response triggered on the reader by the imagery serves the purpose of demonstrating the significance of this moment for Tara's journey of personal growth. This imagery is done by her describing the pain in her head as 'needles in my brain', describing how she was dragged across the room via the relative motion of the carpet from her view, the chaotic yelling in the scene and how her vision had 'strange flecks of pink and yellow drifted before my eyes'. Another extremely powerful method of storytelling used is how Westover narrates these events. Despite these events certainly taking place, they are narrated as if they were all just assumptions or things that were not obvious what they were. Westover says that her mother 'must have grabbed him because I felt his body twist', that she 'was yanked to' her feet, that 'bits of carpet flying past my feet', that she 'was standing but not on my own strength', that 'two hands were gripping my throat'. Westover says that she was '*starting*' to understand what was happening almost a full page after the start of the event, and even then she says "Then there were tears in my eyes. *From the pain*, I thought." (Westover 116)

Needless to say, these descriptions serving the imagery and the choice of words combined with use of language in a way that makes the reader feel the powerlessness, lack of control and innocence of Westover, who was still a child back then, is extremely moving. It once again demonstrates the limited perspective and the trust Westover has towards her family, as she cannot make sense of what is transpiring despite the situation being abuse very

clear to the reader with a different social environment. This contrast of ability of identifying the situation as what it is further shows how the social environment of Westover has affected her up until this point. Not only that, but it also, as priorly mentioned, is one of the main motivation provoking points of her journey of personal growth; hence the extreme effort spent demonstrating the significance of the moment. According to Maslow, if the physiological needs are satisfied, which are for Westover, the next step of motivation is safety needs; and if not addressed properly, can dominate one's life almost as dominantly as physiological needs. In his study, Maslow states that "Confronting the average child with new, unfamiliar, strange, unmanageable stimuli or situations will too frequently elicit the danger or terror reaction", and gives unfamiliar or uncomfortable threats and quarrels and physical assault within family as an example. He also mentions that under threat, a child would frantically cling to a caretaker that they see as their 'protector', such as parents. In this situation with her brother, Tara is faced with a rather unfamiliar and uncomfortable threat. Her brother previously had abusive behaviour to some extent, however; this unusual severity of abuse and violence within the family that she had grown trusted during her earlier stages of psychosocial development is shocking for her as she struggles to make sense of the event. At the time of the event, another brother of hers, Tyler, happen to arrive at the house. Tyler had taken off previously in pursuit of education, which had caused her to wonder "...if perhaps school was less evil than Dad thought, because Tyler was the least evil person I knew, and he loved school—loved it more, it seemed, than he loved us." (*Westover* 60). Her dear brother's love for school made her more open to the idea of it, despite her trusted dad thinking that it was evil. This combined with how she used to spend the most quality time out of anyone in her family with Tyler, and him coming to the rescue of her from this terror inducing situation with Shaun made him a 'protector' in Westover's eyes; thus, when Tyler suggested that she also pursues education and

takes off from her current social environment she follows her brother's advice; thus, Tara Westover's journey of personal growth begins.

IV. Challenges of Personal Growth

However, the effects of Westover's initial social environment keep on showing its effects even after she decides to pursue education. She takes the ACT exam multiple times and gets accepted into Brigham Young University, a place which she describes her arrival to as 'touching down on another planet.' (*Anderson ACE Interview YouTube*). Only after arriving to the city, Westover realizes how much her prior social environment was different compared to the one that she was just found herself in. To convey this initial gap of social environments upon Westover, she provides the reader how things that would appear normal to them seemed from her point of view at the time; and also to allow herself to be understood better by the reader, she refers to events that transpired at her initial social environment. One example is her recalling Gene's words about people that dressed 'that way', that how he called them 'gentiles' while describing the shock she had when she saw one of her roommates', who also was a believer, attire; and avoiding 'getting too near them, as if their immorality might be catching' (*Westover* 154), resulting in a feeling of alienation.

In addition, Westover faced feelings of despair, inferiority, inadequacy for the journey of education and learned helplessness due to her being yet to see the fruits of her efforts, mental resilience, and determination. This also is a stage of psychosocial development according to Erikson, which is usually seen at the time of elementary school; however, considering Westover's unique conflict of social environments, and Erikson's statement on these stages not being necessarily sequential and can be moved back and forth between, it is a situation to be expected. According to another psychologist, it is surprising how Westover

does not even suffer from severe PTSD (Saedi *A psychologist's take on Tara Westover's memoir, educated*). Westover resorts to a technique called intercalation in literature to convey her struggle with these feelings more effectively (*Wikipedia*). This technique is done by Westover cutting the narrative abruptly and inserting a memory or event from her younger self in her initial social environment. This is similar to the aforementioned example from page 154; however, instead of insertion of a small sentence or reference to past, a full small story with it's own narrative is inserted. Upon failing an exam due to not knowing how to study via a textbook properly, another effect of her previous social environment, she feels extremely discouraged and out of the place, suffering the feelings Erikson stated. After saying that she failed, Westover abruptly switches to another story from of her childhood in which she talks about an injured owl they had found. In this story, the description of the owl; the way it's feathers are soaked in blood, the anxiety of the owl, it's pathetic attempts of escape, are elements used both to contribute the general vivid and descriptive storytelling style seen in the memoir, and to draw parallels to her current situation and emotions. The physical visual of the book is also used in a similar manner. (*Westover* 163) The word "people" in Faye's dialogue "I treat people." being written italic turns a sentence that would be normal to be said in such a situation by a herbalist that is the only person with some knowledge of biology in the house into a sentence with a deeper meaning that reflects Tara's inner feelings of being out of place. It conveys the dramatic and painful extent of the aforementioned feelings of Westover to a reader that normally could have had trouble understanding due to Westover's social environment's extreme difference compared to the usual readers'. Westover feeling that she is out of place also coincides with the next step of psychosocial development of Erikson, in which a person attempts to find their role and place in society.

V. Susan's Motivation in Relation with Intelligence

“Educating Rita” is a play written by Willy Russell for two actors and takes place in a fixed setting of a study room of a university. Two characters that are acted out are the hairdresser Rita, whose actual name is Susan, and lecturer Frank. The journey of personal growth of Susan is motivated by her dissatisfaction with her life and the little meaning that the social environment of her working-class life provides her. This motivation arises from what Maslow calls ‘The desires to know and understand’, which is a different source of motivation from what we see in Westover’s memoir.

Eventually, Westover also starts to act upon desires to know and understand; however, initial push that propelled her into the path of personal growth was need for safety. This is understandable considering how her social environment was not one that was much of a fan of actually knowing and understanding; and fulfilment of the need of safety, freedom of inquiry and expression being prerequisites for other sources of motivation, according to Maslow. He also believes that this source of motivation is a more complex one in comparison to the ones mentioned in the introduction, and states that “...*though he has sufficient clinical evidence to postulate the desire to know as a very strong drive in intelligent people, no data are available for unintelligent people.*”; claiming that this source of motivation is an attribute mostly seen in intelligent people.

With a combination of her intelligence, the instinctive push to grow out of the aforementioned stage of psychosocial growth where a person attempts to develop a sense of self-identity and their role in society, and the desires to know and understand; Susan’s journey of personal growth starts. She believes that defying and stepping outside of the boundaries of her social environment, and pursuing education would allow her to escape the limited perspective of an average working-class citizen. Defying the dishonest delusion of satisfaction that other working-class citizens have and the gender roles that are seen as the norm for a

woman of the working-class, a defiance that further demonstrates her intelligence as Maslow predicted, she enrolls in an Open University course on literature. She meets Frank as he is assigned as her tutor, and a unique and unusual chemistry is formed between them.

Social environment of Susan consists of financial issues, lack of prior proper education and the expectations of her role as a woman. Her husband wants to have kids and does not approve her persuasion of education. Susan believes that this attitude of his towards her desire for self-improvement and search of a definite identity is due to him not being able to understand her feelings and reasoning with a perspective that has set boundaries accordingly to the social environment that Susan is trying to escape; saying that “he’s blind”, that when she tried to explain her desire for a better life “...he listened to me. But he didn’t understand because when I’d finished he said he agreed with me and that we should start savin’ the money...” (Russell 24). Due to her intelligence, she is in constant conflict with her initial social environment. That environment also acts as a hindrance towards understanding literature and academics of the middle-class social environment, as the shortsighted perspective her social environment inflicted on the members of the working class made it difficult for her to comprehend the way of thinking of the middle-class citizens such as Frank. She overcomes the limitations of her social environment bit by bit via her study sessions with Frank; and one of the key moments of her journey of personal growth is her admitting that she is unfamiliar with American poets when asked about the topic during her summer trip. This development of confidence takes her by surprise as well, and after noticing the development she gains the ability to be socially active in the middle-class social environment. This increases the exchange of views from perspectives with different social environments which would aid her in her journey of personal growth, which’s contribution is also highlighted as Westover had mentioned the relation of getting access to different world views with personal growth (*PBS NewsHour*).

VI. Aftermath of Personal Growth

Later in the play, Frank believes that this personal growth of Susan has caused her to lose her personality; believing that Susan's life had not gained any deeper meaning but only looked different as he says that she actually did not find a "culture" or a "better song to sing" but instead she "found a different song, that's all", a song that lacks her original personality and now is "hollow and tuneless" (*Russell* 98). However, Susan's personal growth creates a method of satisfying her desires to know and understand; and allows her to live a more fulfilling life. By the end of the play, both Susan and Frank are at the last stage of psychosocial growth; which consists of one reflecting on their own life with either a sense of integrity and satisfaction, or with despair and regret. Susan achieves to change her social environment into one that she would reflect upon with satisfaction, meaning that her personal growth was successful; whereas Frank struggles with the latter scenario.

VII. Conclusion

In both Tara Westover's memoir "Educated" and Willy Russell's play "Educating Rita", the effect of the social environment of a person on their journey of personal growth is present and worked upon. They both have their motivations for setting off on the said journey and they both are affected by their initial social environment. Both go through some stages of psychosocial development Erikson suggests. Since their social environments are different, so their respective manners in which they affect the characters' journey of personal growth and the conclusion of the journeys are.

Westover is initially motivated by unfulfillment of one of the basic needs in Maslow's study; the lack of safety in a household with an abusive brother and a father ignorant, even when directly warned by Tara to the wrongdoings of his son that follows his way of life the

most; believing that ‘it was God’s will’ that Shaun is forgiven (*Westover* 292). Upon re-visiting her family, Westover once again finds herself in an abusive situation where she is threatened by her brother Shaun; and just like the times when she could not make sense of her brother’s behaviour, could not name it as abuse with full confidence. However, upon inspecting her reflection on the mirror, she recalls her doctor’s words and realizes that she is not the same person. The full realization of change is given by Westover acknowledging upon giving a fake smile and apology to her father that her old self “wasn’t there, and the smile was a fake.” (*Westover* 288). These events are later on followed by a mail from Tyler and Stefanie, addressed to Tara and sent to the whole family. “*Our parents are held down by chains of abuse, manipulation, and control...They see change as dangerous and will exile anyone who asks for it. This is a perverted idea of family loyalty...They claim faith, but this is not what the gospel teaches. Keep safe. We love you.*” (*Westover* 316). What Westover initially assumed to be an aggressive letter from her brother turned out to actually be a supportive one, one which Westover mentions in the most effective way to convey the estrangement this journey of personal growth brought upon, but also how far she come from her initial manipulative social environment. After all as she stated in the previously cited interview with PBS NewsHour, “A lot of what the book is about is estrangement.”. Additionally, she describes this journey and ‘actual education’ as “*...realizing there is a choice that I could make here. I can stay and embed myself further in this or I can find out what else is possible.*” (TODAY with Hoda & Jenna, *YouTube*).

Susan’s journey acts as a benchmark and a demonstration of how the journey of personal growth can differ. She is an intelligent lady who in contrast to Westover desires the estrangement from her initial social environment from the beginning. Her motivations are more complex in comparison and she already has the necessary safety and freedom of inquiry

prerequisites fulfilled prior to the journey despite her oppressive husband that lacks her level intellect that allows her to desire beyond what her perspective presents her.

Without Westover's sudden and unfamiliar, terror inducing need of safety; and her supportive brother Tyler, she would not have been able to push herself over the boundaries of Gene's perspective on life and family; unlike Susan, due to their differences in social environment. This further demonstrates how the manner the social environment affects one's journey of personal growth can vary, however; both Russell's character and Westover found power, control and independency in their lives and completed their journey of personal growth via education.

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