By Abhisri Ramesh

What does it mean to be “educated”? 

Some may argue that Westover, author of the memoir *Educated*, is the epitome of what it means to be “educated” due to her impressive academic accomplishments; however, the true education she has received rests on her newfound ability to change her perception of the world around her.

The radical shift in Westover’s mindset is apparent when analyzing the setting in which she was brought up. Westover’s outlook from the beginning of the book is particularly grim, not surpassing the foothills of Buck’s Peak. Labeling her family as “survivalist,” the reader becomes privy to Westover’s life, narrowly revolving around her delusional father, Gene, her abusive elder brother, and accounts of scrapping metal in the junkyard and mixing oils and herbs for her “healer” mother. Particularly surprising is the lack of formal education she received as a result of her father’s paranoia about government control and religion.

Westover transports the reader straight into her uncharacteristic upbringing from the very first chapter of the book, in which she details an “imagined memory” conjured by her father of the 1992 Ruby Ridge standoff. Her memory is strictly limited by the facts her father provides, as she declares, “The memory was formed when I was five ... from a story my father told in such detail that I and my brothers and sister had each conjured our own cinematic version, with gunfire and shouts …” (Westover 3). Subsequently, Westover narrates various precautions her father takes in the name of God, elucidating the closeted worldviews projected upon her by her parents. In the beginning, Westover appears reluctant to test her boundaries.

As time progresses, Westover begins to challenge the rigid limits that she was confined to during her childhood. For example, she starts learning trigonometry, enrolling in dance lessons, and studying for the ACT. Upon achieving a satisfactory score to gain acceptance to Brigham Young University, she makes one of the most life-changing decisions against the wishes of her father: attaining a college education.

The disparity between the closeted perceptions of Westover and reality is immediately evident when she describes her experiences at college. Despite the stark contrast between “her” world and that of those around her, Westover is consumed with a voracious thirst for knowledge, a
characteristic that eventually earns her coveted fellowship spots at Cambridge University and other prestigious institutions.

As she works to unravel the pronounced differences between herself and her peers in college through education, she herself becomes unshackled from the confines of her upbringing. Her time gaining an education is filled with a plethora of firsts; she tries painkillers, attends counseling, and asks a professor for help. The effects of Westover’s education become especially glaring when she learns about the reality behind the 1992 Ruby Ridge standoff, unadulterated by her father’s accounts. Upon this realization, Westover becomes equipped with the ability to change her perception of the world around her, beyond fallacies of government murder and control. She is provided with the ability to formulate her own thoughts, which she uses to separate herself from her family after they refuse to believe her abusive accounts of her older brother. She is able to find herself and make significant strides in personal growth, all while becoming more “educated.”

Reading this memoir about the importance of education sparked distinct connections to my own personal life. “Sa vidya ya vimuktaye” is an ancient Indian phrase that means “that which liberates us is education.” The emphasis my culture places on education inspired me to take on tutoring as my primary form of educational charity, as I realized education could empower future generations to effect a lasting change.

Realizing that mastery of the fundamentals is core to success, I co-founded HiFive Tutoring to tutor students in academic subjects. My mission was to connect with students on a personal level and incorporate various learning styles to help students conceptualize subject matter. Similar to how Westover enabled herself to become more independent through an education, I instill similar values in my students. The goal of my tutoring is not to inculcate blatant knowledge in tutees; I aspire to draw out comprehension and stimulate student minds to discover their own, novel solutions to problems.

Educated ends with an insight into what education really means: the ability to disentangle oneself from a narrow mindset and seek liberation. Westover, by broadening the lens through which she views the world, self-invents herself and receives a true education, even if it is at the expense of leaving her very own family behind.

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