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The Depiction of Education in Women's Memoirs

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci zpracovala samostatně a použila jen prameny uvedené v seznamu literatury.

V Olomouci dne 21.04.2022

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podpis

Poděkování

V první řadě děkuji Mgr. Barbora Bačíkové za laskavé a odborné vedení mé bakalářské práce. Dále také děkuji všem vyučujícím na pedagogické fakultě Univerzity Palackého, kteří mě provázeli bakalářským studiem.

Contents

Introduction 6

1 Definition of key concepts 7

 1.1 Memoirs..... 7

 1.2 Education 7

2 Authors..... 8

 2.1 Michelle Obama 8

 2.2 Tara Westover..... 9

 2.2.1 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints..... 10

3 An Overview of Educational System in the United States 12

 3.1 The Illinois Education System..... 12

 3.1.1 Magnet schools..... 13

 3.2 Idaho Education System 13

 3.2.1 Homeschooling..... 14

4 Comparative analysis of the memoirs 16

 4.1 Role of Family on the Children’s Intellectual Development..... 16

 4.2 Impact of Racial and Cultural circumstances on the Authors’ Education..... 21

 4.3 Effects of Sexism on the female academic development 24

Conclusion..... 28

Bibliography 30

Summary 36

Anotace..... 37

Abstrakt

Bakalářská práce se zabývá zobrazením vzdělávání v ženských memoárech z hlediska vlivu rodiny, kulturního prostředí a sexismu. Teoretická část obsahuje představení klíčových pojmů, autorek memoárů a taktéž přehled vzdělávacího systému v USA. Praktická část analyzuje a srovnává memoáry dle zmíněných hledisek, odkazujíc na data z vědeckých výzkumů a recenze čtenářů. Na základě nálezů mají zmíněné aspekty nesmírný vliv na pozdější přístup jedince ke vzdělávání.

Abstract

The bachelor thesis deals with the depiction of education in women's memoirs with regard to the influence of family, cultural background, and sexism. The theoretical part contains an introduction to the key terms and the authors, as well as an overview of the US educational system. The practical part analyses and compares the memoirs with regards to the mentioned aspects, referencing research data and reviews of readers. Based on the findings, the role of all the aspects mentioned has an immense influence on the later stance of an individual towards education.

Key Words

Memoirs, depiction of education, women's literature, Tara Westover, Michelle Obama

Introduction

The thesis *The Depiction of Education in Women's Memoirs* deals with the education depicted in women's memoirs and how the role of family, being a minority, and being a female impacts it in the memoirs of Michelle Obama titled *Becoming*, and Tara Westover titled *Educated*. The aim of the thesis is to answer the following questions: How does the protagonists' family background, cultural background and sex influence their academic achievements and both educational and psychological development regarding the memoirs.

The thesis will be divided into a theoretical and text analysis part; the theoretical part provides terminology necessary for understanding the context of the memoirs, such as the overview of the education system of the United States, an outline of the education systems of the states in which the authors were born, current issues related to them as well as the religion which one of the authors followed.

The practical part compares the educational aspects mentioned in memoirs, analyzes information in them, and provides further insight into its influence and implications. In the first chapter of this part, the thesis emphasizes the importance of a stable family background. The second chapter deals with the impact of different background towards education. The last practical chapter highlights the effects of sexism in the academic world, all with regards to analyzed memoirs.

The reason behind choosing this topic is mainly the impact of both women on education in the current time, which creates the need to discover and compare the education backgrounds both women grew up in. Especially with Obama's position as a highly influential woman and Westover's regular praise of education in many interviews, it is important to analyze both the positive and negative circumstances they had experienced.

This thesis draws and attempts to answer the research questions with the memoirs as the primary sources, analyzes them, offers relevant research data, as well as provides factual background and comments on reviews given by other readers of the memoirs, whether positive or negative.

1 Definition of key concepts

1.1 Memoirs

The Cambridge Dictionary defines *memoir* as "a book or other piece of writing based on the writer's personal knowledge of famous people, places, or events." The main purpose of a memoir could be to convey non-fictional life experiences, depict a person's journey to success and the obstacles faced, or simply exude one's knowledge about a particular topic. Not to be mistaken with autobiography, in which the author's primary concern is solely placed on themselves, memoirs have the added value of the writer directly impacting or being part of some historical occurrence (Britannica, 2020). Memoirs have possibly existed ever since the 1st century A.D, the first of them is sometimes contributed to Julius Caesar, who wrote *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*. However, most believe one of the first memoirs to be written by Leonor Lopez de Cordoba (1362-1420) in Spain. The inability to clearly define the first memoir's clear origin is due to its ambiguity. "There is no autobiography that is not in some respect a memoir, and no memoir that is without autobiographical information" (Pascal, 1960, p. 5). Throughout the mentioned memoirs, both women have attempted to illustrate their childhood, the impact the education (or lack thereof) had on their careers, how role models and specifically female role models influenced their life and how there are still serious issues in the American education system, given the diasporic systematization of the United States.

1.2 Education

According to Průcha, Walterová, and Mareš (2003), the word education can be defined in many approaches, for example:

1. Personal: education as a part of socialization (inquired knowledge, abilities, morals, and norms) formulated by the education process.
2. Content: education as a constructed system of information and actions formulated in the curriculum of various schools implemented in lessons.
3. Institutional: education as a socially organized action obtained by the institution, divided into several levels (primary education, high-school education...).
4. Socioeconomic: education is one of the categories characterizing society, determined by social and economic factors, influencing the structure of society.
5. Processual: education is a process in which the states of an individual are realized in the sense of approach.

2 Authors

In order to fully comprehend the works of both women, their importance, and their impact on current education issues, it is necessary to introduce their lives and background to proceed further.

2.1 Michelle Obama

Michelle Obama, full name Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama, was born on January 17, 1964, as the youngest of two children in Chicago, Illinois. She is mainly known for being the first lady of the United States from 2009 until 2017 and the first African American woman to hold this position. But before becoming one of the most influential women in the world, Obama had achieved many accomplishments in her personal and career life. Obama's family roots trace back to slavery, with her grandfather being the grandson of enslaved people. Obama's grandfather worked at a lumber mill, which eventually closed, forcing him to move to Chicago, which was very common for African Americans in that time period, as they were inclined to run away from racial oppression, with the view of industrial job opportunities (Obama, 2018, pp. 37-38).

Obama herself grew up in a middle-class, racially mixed neighborhood, in her book describing that her family was "probably on the poor side of the neighborhood spectrum" (Obama, 2018, p. 21). She attended a class for gifted children at Bryn Mawr Elementary School (p. 17) and Whitney M. Young High School, Chicago's earliest magnet school, opened in 1975 (p. 54). In 1981, she was accepted into Princeton University, where she studied sociology and African American studies. She graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in 1985. There, she was a member of the Third World Center, a multi-cultural organization supporting minority students. She herself took part in arranging after-school programs for younger pupils (p. 81). In 1988 she earned her Law degree at Harvard University. She then started working at a Chicago law firm, where she met her future husband and 44th president of the United States, Barack Obama. After quitting her law career, Mrs. Obama worked, for example, at the University of Chicago Medical Center, where she improved community relations and strived to help residents find affordable health care (p. 175). Barack Obama was elected in 2008, and with the 2009 inauguration, Michelle Obama became the first lady of the United States.

In her position as the first lady, Obama established and was part of many initiatives related to the wellbeing and education of children. She started the *Let's Move!* program in 2010 to battle the issue of childhood obesity by, for example, supplying schools with healthier

lunches and encouraging children to move more. In 2014, Mrs. Obama launched the *Reach Higher Initiative* attempting to help students achieve their education goals. In 2015, Barack Obama launched a *Let Girls Learn* U.S government initiative to prevent young girls from not finishing their education, which Michelle Obama joined (Obama, 2018, pp. 400-401). She released her memoir *Becoming* in 2018, and in 2 weeks, it became the best-selling book in the US in 2018 (BBC News, 2018) and has, as of 2020, sold over 14 million copies worldwide (The New York Times, 2020). Most recently, in 2021, Obama was the executive producer and presenter of a children's cooking show premiering on Netflix (Benveniste, 2021).

2.2 Tara Westover

Tara Westover, the author of *Educated*, was born in Clifton, Idaho, USA, in 1986 as the youngest child of six. Westover was brought up as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and since her father did not identify with the concept of government, she was not registered for a birth certificate until she was nine years old; her exact birth date being unknown to this day. As her father got more radical in his political and religious ideology, he began pulling his older children out of public schools, resulting in Westover never having stepped into the classrooms until her college education and being homeschooled by her family until she was 17 years old (Alexander, 2018).

Despite her upbringing, Westover was able to score well on the American ACT Exam. She succeeded, although she had to study on her own and even managed to earn a scholarship at the Brigham Young University, from which she graduated with honors in 2008. She earned a Ph.D. in intellectual history from Trinity College, Cambridge as a Gates Cambridge Scholar in 2014 (Westover, 2018, p. 288). She published her memoirs in 2018, depicting her childhood growing up homeschooled and Mormon to earning a university degree. Westover's *Educated* has sold over 8 million copies as of December 2020 since debuting at #1 on the New York Times bestseller list. The book has already been translated into 45 languages and was included in presidents Barack Obama's annual reading list (Charles, 2018).

Despite the success, the book was heavily criticized by Westover's family as defamatory, her parent's lawyer filing a legal claim against Westover, when in her memoir she suggested that her father may suffer from bipolar disorder and her mother may suffer from brain injury, which would make Westover unqualified to release unproven information to the public (Alexander, 2018). In response to the memoir, Tara Westover's mother, LaRee Westover, has published her own version of the story in 2020, called *Educating*, in which she encourages

homeschooling and takes credit for the success of Tara Westover and tries to inspire the wider public to use homeopathic drugs instead of using regular medical care. However, her book has not been met with positive reviews, one *Goodreads* user writing: “This is the most dishonest book I’ve read in a while. I wish I didn’t waste my time on it. This woman is trying to erase facts and truth and gaslight what her children have experienced, it’s toxic and abusive. This is clearly the work of a narcissist abuser” (Goodreads, Larsen, 2021).

2.2.1 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is commonly referred to as the Mormon Church or shortly LDS. Westover’s family was a part of this church, and it was crucial in shaping their beliefs, education, and their way of life in every shape and form, often determining their educational and medical decisions. The church was established in the 1820s and 1830’s by a religious leader Joseph Smith in New York (Smith, p. 2). It is a self-proclaimed Christian restoration church that wants to restore the original church and rejects the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Although members like to refer to themselves as Mormon, in 2018, the church’s president has called for the end of referring to the members and the church itself by any names other than the church’s full name (Chiu, 2018). Westover, however, refers to herself as Mormon and most of the Church’s members find it acceptable to do so.

The main principles are drawn from the *Book of Mormon*, written by the founder Joseph Smith. The church also accepts the *Bible*, along with other historical holy scriptures such as *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price* (Partridge; Vojtišek, 2006, pp. 33-34). The church hierarchy functions in a strict order, and its positions are held mainly by the male members. In contrast, the female members are supposed to be responsible for the children and social initiatives of the LDS Church (Neusner, 2003, pp. 277-278). Standard practices include Sabbath Sunday, in which the members are not supposed to work, spend money, or participate in any kind of entertainment. They are also obligated to participate in Sunday worship, which can last up to several hours (Re:Online, p. 9). As of 2020, the church had approximately 16 million members worldwide, out of which about 50 % reside in the United States, making Mormonism one of the fastest-growing religions (Statistical report for the April 2021 Conference, 2021, p. 9).

There also seems to be a correlation between Mormonism and homeschooling. According to statistics from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and the 2010 LDS Church Almanac, there were more than 60 000 homeschooled Mormons in the United

States, number doubled from 2000. Leland Anderson, the Director of Distance Education at American Heritage School, an LDS-oriented private school based in American Fork, Utah, explains this may be due to the parents' fear that the local curriculum and the public-school environment will not meet their moral values (LDS Living, 2012).

3 An Overview of Educational System in the United States

The educational system in the United States follows a set structure, with each state regulating its own rules to a certain extent. Children typically start a primary school called the *elementary school* at the age of six, and after 5 to 6 years begin secondary education, which consists of middle school and high school, which usually concludes the 12 years of education, commonly referred to as the K-12, which stands for 'from Kindergarten to 12th grade', by graduating with a diploma. Students then may proceed with higher education, of which there are many types, such as community college, public college, or private colleges.

Universities usually accept students based on their college entrance exam scores, the most typical currently being SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) or ACT (American College Test) (Grove, 2020). The U.S. Federal government controls the financing through the U.S. Department of Education. Public schools are funded from many sources at the local, state, and federal levels. Approximately half of the finances come from state resources. Another 44 % comes from state resources, mainly from property taxes of each state (Chen, 2021).

3.1 The Illinois Education System

As already mentioned, the American education system is heavily dependent on local property tax propels inequity. Usually, more poverty-stricken districts tend to overtax themselves compared to the more privileged districts to balance out financial inequities. Despite this, these schools still seem to be underfunded compared to the wealthy districts. This could be due to many factors. For example, in cities like Chicago, where Obama was born, other non-school expenditures are included in the taxing, such as higher fire department costs compared to other cities. These taxes funding the education system are supplemented by the state contributions, which are supposed to close the gap, but often are not adequate (Kozol, 1991, pp. 54-56).

This creates an immense education disparity between districts, which has been linked to the inequality of races and social status since the establishment of the United States, remaining in many forms present. Furthermore, this system of districts, into which the students are assigned to schools based on their home location, also perpetuates the arrangement of all ethnic, poverty-stricken schools. In 1954, the Supreme Court found segregation of education unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education* (Kozol, 1991, p. 3). This was considered an essential achievement in the field of education. However, the district education system seems to create “ethnic” and “white” schools organically. And there seems to be an underlying race

issue. According to the current data, Chicago's schools with primarily white pupils faced close to no yearlong teacher vacancies in 2018. The ethnic schools could not get coverage from a requested teacher to substitute a class in more than a third of the cases (Karp, 2019).

As of 2021, specifically, Chicago's high school dropout rate has been at its all-time low, with only 3.8 percent. According to the data, the most significant improvement in this category has been for black males and black females, rates reducing by 2.6 and 2.5 percent, followed by both genders of the Latinx community by 1.3 percent (Chicago Public School, 2021). In the school years 2018-2019, the state of Illinois had 1 996 296 students total (Illinois State Board of Education, 2019), with 116 171 full-time teachers and 19 072 part-time teachers (Illinois State Board of Education, 2019).

3.1.1 Magnet schools

Another approach to the segregation issue lies in the concept of a magnet school, which Obama herself attended. Magnet schools are selective public schools created to stimulate the diversity of cultures within the school districts, having students attend from more extensive distances than the usual school zoning allows. The students are often accepted based on their academic results or test results. The term was coined by Dr. Donald Waldrip, who implied that such schools "worked like magnet in attracting the students" (2000). However, some say such types of schools seem to exclude other students even more. "Very poor children are even more isolated as a consequence of the removal of the more successful students from their midst" (Kozol, 1991, s. 59).

And it seems the diversity problem still prevails in such types of schools because of the lack of accountability held by the state over them. For example, the magnet school Michelle Obama attended had quotas set by the school board of Chicago, which required students' disposition to be 40 percent African American, 40 percent Caucasian and the rest Hispanic or other. However, at the time of her education, Obama quotes that "about 80 percent of the students were nonwhite", while the white children would usually transfer to private schools (Obama, 2018, p. 54).

3.2 Idaho Education System

Idaho's public education system is similarly to the one in Illinois, based on working within smaller districts, which school boards oversee. The funding is also primarily dependent on state financing. As of 2013, Idaho had 14 563 teachers and 284 834 students, resulting in the teacher-student ratio of 1:20, while the national standard was 1:16 (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2012 – 2013). Thus meaning Idaho is also facing the issue of teacher shortage. According to research, 20 percent of Idaho educators do not come back to teach the class they taught the previous year. It also showed that, as opposed to Chicago, the state encounters the problem of under-experienced educators. Alternative education certificated educators have also become increasingly more common, more than doubling from 2011 to 2016 in Idaho (Hanson; Yoon, 2018, pp. 7-9). The state of Idaho spent more than 24 % of its budget on elementary and secondary education in the school years 2012-2013, a more significant percentage than its bordering states. There were 698 schools total, out of which 69 were alternative schools and the rest regular schools (United States Department of Education, 2012 – 2013).

3.2.1 Homeschooling

Many parents seem to choose the route of educating children independently, as in Tara Westover’s case. Idaho is considered one of the most relaxed states of the United States when it comes to education requirements. As quoted on Idaho’s state department of education, where homeschooling is cited as one of the education options besides magnet school, alternative schools, and private schools, “the homeschooling education is directed by the parent/guardian. Since Idaho does not regulate or monitor home school education, it is up to the parent/guardian to select the curriculum they wish to use. There is no registration or sign up procedure required and the state of Idaho does not have a set curriculum to be followed for home school education (The Idaho State Department of Education).” This seems to give parents a free hand when controlling what and how their children learn.

And homeschooling appears to grow in popularity in recent years, not only due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows that homeschooled children seem to perform better, as they score more points on SAT and ACT college entrance tests. This appears to be a fact regardless of the education status of the parent or guardian providing homeschooling (Ray, 2013, pp. 324-341). Such positive outcomes could be accurate due to the personalization of education style and current access to electronic devices and the Internet. And higher scores are only one of the benefits, research has indicated. Homeschooling saves money for the taxpayers as well – while they spend annually on average 15 240 dollars per pupil, homeschooling costs the family of the pupil around 600 dollars, of which the taxpayers pay nothing (National Education Association, 2021). Homeschooled students also, according to available research, exhibit better social, emotional, and psychological growth than non-homeschooled students (Ray, 2017).

According to research done on homeschooling in 2012, more than 40 % of the homeschooled students in the United States come from rural areas, and more than 80 % of them are white. Parents declared the reason for homeschooling education to be the fear of other schools' climate in 91 % of cases, followed by the discontent with the available education and the inclination to give their children religious and moral education on their own (NHES, 2012).

4 Comparative analysis of the memoirs

4.1 Role of Family on the Children's Intellectual Development

This chapter will analyze how a stable, loving, supportive family background influences children in their educational and social process, their opinions, and later life compared to unstable, challenging, and unsupportive family backgrounds. The family plays a crucial part in the development of an individual and is often overlooked and undermined as the responsibility of education is usually placed heavily on teachers and educators in the children's lives. Sarah Hampson, a research scientist at Oregon Research Institute, says that childhood is a crucial time for the establishment and development of behavioral habits. Children's upbringing has consequences into adulthood, not only shaping their behavior and personality traits but also influencing health conditions such as weight, lifespan, and the probability for cardiovascular diseases even four decades later in their lives (Hampson; Edmonds; Goldberg; Barckley; Klest; Dubanoski & Hillier, 2016, pp. 447–454).

Tara Westover would be considered to have a volatile, challenging family background. Although she did not enroll in a public elementary and high school, she was unofficially homeschooled mainly by her mother. The latter, at first, seemed to put a great emphasis on the meaning of education. "There had been a time when Mother had been idealistic about education. She used to say that we were kept at home so we could get a better education than other kids." (Westover, 2018, p. 54). Her mother tried to incorporate the concept of school in the morning. At the same time, Westover's father would force the children to work outside in the family junkyard, resulting in a conflict between the parents because he tried to enforce a more "practical" education (p. 54-55). Her mother was also an unregistered midwife and required Westover to assist her during the labors from a young age, meaning Westover would be considered a child worker. And this presents a major issue, not only in the field of illegality but also in early child development. Reid Maki, director of child-labor advocacy at the National Consumer's League, says that "child labor on farms helps fuel a cycle of poverty where kids drop out of school or perform poorly so that they can work as many hours as possible." What may seem like simple chore is actually a dangerous pressure put on children, consequently hindering and negatively impacting their fundamental growth.

During the process of homeschooling, Westover's mother owned few inadequate official textbooks related to any of the public school's curriculum, or possibly very outdated to conduct a successful home education. Westover states that in the family bookshelves could be

found “books on herbalism, few old paperbacks, there were a few textbooks on math, which we shared, and an American history book that I never saw anyone read, and a science book for young children (Westover, 2018, pp. 55-56).” Furthermore, when in the process of home-schooling, Westover’s mother did not control or monitor the activities of her children, instead letting them choose the subject they are intrigued to learn more about, Westover describing that she would read and turn pages from a math book with no further understanding, her mother going as far as proclaiming that such pace would not be possible in a public school (pp. 55-56). And when asked about a certain topic, such as trigonometry, which was one of the topics found in the college ACTs, Westover’s mother herself did not possess the necessary knowledge to provide the answers to the equations (p. 145). The home-schooling lessons the mother was supposed to arrange were consequently irregular and lacked any structure to them, failing to sustain any clear division between the education process and regular day-to-day activities.

While most of Westover’s brothers were what could be considered “fast learners” by the mother, the fourth son, Luke, would be deemed to have a speculated “severe learning disability,” which negatively conflicted with the mother’s efforts. Because she had no difficulty teaching her other children the basics of reading, she could not understand where her methods had failed. This ultimately resulted in the mother ceasing any further efforts to seek any kind of information to better herself as an educator. As far as the children were able to read and write, the mother was content with their educational achievements, calling other subjects “brainwashing” (Westover, 2018, p. 55).

As for Westover’s father, he would often go as far as to prohibit any kind of theoretical education not correlating with his religious values and would only support extracurricular activities such as singing or piano lessons, deeming them as acceptable only because of religious reasons. When Westover expressed her desire to enroll in a university, it was undermined by her father’s discouragement, sexist remarks, and threats about God’s punishment, making Westover feel guilt when she tried to pursue college tests (Westover, 2018, p. 155). Westover also received support from other relatives, such as her grandmother, who had attempted to put Westover into a public school, but under the psychological pressure and fear of her father interfering with both the women, Westover herself declined this offer at a young age (pp. 10-11). Possibly the most positive influence on Westover’s education could be attributed to her older brother Tyler, who was the one to suggest a higher education for Westover (p. 140).

Westover's "home-schooling" process had caused various negative consequences and obstacles not only in her childhood but also in the social factors of her early adolescence. We could argue that because of Westover's intelligence, her integration into the world of academics had been less challenging than to an average student with such conditions. But the data shows it is quite the opposite. If executed correctly, research indicates that in an overwhelming majority of cases, home-schooled children exhibit the same and, in some cases, even better social growth than non-homeschooled children (Ray, 2017, p. 90). However, in Westover's case, she was also socially excluded because of her parents' hostility towards non-religious people.

Due to the social seclusion, Westover was often omitted from social situations, and if she had the opportunity to participate in them, she had trouble connecting with people her age. Because of the social and educational seclusion, Westover faced situations later in life where she was, for example, not familiar with the concept of an exam sheet (Westover, 2018, p. 157), the Holocaust (pp. 183-184) or the extent of slavery in the US. She was therefore not aware and ignorant of the negative connotations of the racial slurs commonly used in her family. Only when educated in a university environment on the topic of slavery and racial segregation, did she realize the repercussions of using such words and phrases (pp. 207-211). Although the research shows parents have only a moderate influence on children's ethnic views, apart from other social environments, in Westover's case, where she experienced a sheltered upbringing, the parent's impact could be the only determining one (Jugert; Eckstein; Beelmann; Noack, 2015).

Because of the disinterest from her parents, Westover was often obliged to initiate her own education. And research shows this is not uncommon in rural areas, as the students' educational accomplishments are more reliant on their own learning habits and practices as opposed to the urban areas (Li; Qiu, 2018). Westover found herself in positions where she had to pay for her own education and obtain two sources of employment, eventually accepting government grants, although this was against her beliefs (Westover, 2018, pp. 234-239). We could argue that Westover's parents saw her independence as a possible threat to their religion and their own income, eventually even threatening to stop supporting her financially. Westover showed attentiveness to find a job to provide for herself. This would ultimately mean Westover would not be able to continue working for free at the family farm holding.

Michelle Obama, on the other hand, is the prime example of how having adequate education and a stable family environment can bring children to their most significant potential.

She was taught to read at the age of four by her mother (Obama, 2018, p. 4), and at the same age, she also expressed the desire to play the piano, and because part of her family was musically inclined, she was provided piano lessons by her aunt, who had a rigorous way of teaching, eventually resulting in a collision between her and very ambitious Obama. Obama says that she expressed passion for education at a young age, always aiming to perform her best and wanting to advance immediately even at extracurricular activities, such as the piano lessons. And this yearning to be educated could be attributed to the positive environment, as the data show that children with parents more actively participating in their schoolwork show more significant endeavors in their learning habits (Li; Qiu, 2018).

Obama's parents raising style was very democratic and neutral and emphasized the availability of knowledge in the house. Obama in her book says that the children were taught the proper diction, how to argue and adequately express their opinion (Obama, 2018, p. 40). The parents bought dictionaries and encyclopedia sets, and the parental mindset of their upbringing was to display "just enough" praise or pity as not to overwhelm the children. At family discussions, both siblings were spoken to as adults from a very young age. There were no taboo topics, possibly contributing to their independence and the formation of their own beliefs and opinions. The parents also did not put any financial pressure on Obama, although she herself sensed that her family was not entirely comfortable in this department. For example, they would allow Obama to attend a school trip to France, even though they have never experienced a vacation in Europe themselves. When Obama announced her inclination to attend an Ivy League university, her parents did not try to influence her decision by worrying about paying the tuition because it would undermine her full potential (p. 59).

Obama's mother was also very involved in the school Obama attended. She became a member of the parent-teacher association (PTA), in which she helped to raise money for classroom equipment, provided dinners for teachers as a gesture of appreciation, and advocated for multigrade classrooms for higher-performing students (Obama, 2018, p. 44). Obama regularly shared the details of her school days with her mother. When she complained about her teacher that she felt did not care enough about their education, Obama's mother fought for Obama to be put in a different class, along with other higher-achieving children (p. 21-22).

Although Obama was quite ahead in her education compared to children her age, she often felt her ambitions were a psychological disadvantage to her, due to which she often felt distressed. Because of such pressure put on herself, Obama felt compelled to compare her knowledge to other children as early as in kindergarten. Obama states that even though she

knew her parents would not have been concerned over Obama making a mistake at her schoolwork (Obama, 2018, p. 18), she did not want to be “dismissed as incapable of achieving,” and we could conclude that perhaps Obama felt as if she did have to prove her entitlement to be educated, as opposed to Westover, who was homeschooled and therefore did not feel the need to compare her academic results to other children, which in a more stable environment could be positive, as the child would be able to dictate their own pace of learning.

To compare Westover and Obama, both had opposite family backgrounds and means of education. Nevertheless, despite their hardships in life, both grew up to be successful women. Although facing tragedies in her life, such as a death in the family, Obama validates the importance of family with her accomplishments, demonstrating that one cannot deny the extent of a family’s role in children’s lives. So how come it is possible that Westover overcame such unpromising conditions when so many studies, such as the research synthesis *The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development* (Redfordbattle; Bielick; Grady; Sandstrom & Huerta, p. 24, 2013), suggest that family instability is associated with behavioral issues and some academic difficulties? There is no denying that factors, such as the support of relatives and stable financial situation, immensely influence the behavior of children, but some propose these factors to be only part of the equation, often the less important one. Children that grew up without the psychical or emotional presence from their parents can become criminally involved as well as academically successful. Arguably, this is possible due to the genes of said child, not only outlining their appearance, but also personality traits with which they manage with the negative circumstances, therefore unconsciously defining their future (Levitin, 2020, p. 6). It is however crucial for parents to provide a stable environment and opportunities for children to reach their full potential as we have seen in Obama’s case.

To conclude this chapter, Obama and Westover were raised in, what we could argue were, completely opposite lifestyles, which later influenced their stance on education. While Obama was raised to see education as a possible means to positively impact the society she lived in, Westover was raised to believe in its uselessness and corruptness, showing how much children’s psychological growth can be manipulated by the people closest to them. Westover became independent only after discovering the education system, the first incitement being wanting to pursue singing in college. She later discovered her enthusiasm for history, leaving her initial objective in the spirit of her childhood home. For her, it was not about the degree she received, but it was mainly about passion for knowledge and gaining independence from her

parents that education provided her. Some critics argue that Westover's departure from her family was even more consequential any education presented in her book.

“Education is about experiences, but most important, it is about learning how to learn, how to wrestle with universal ideas and hone critical-thinking skills. Based on the story Westover tells, her primary education was less about learning facts and ideas than it was about coming to recognize the ugly cycles of abuse permitted and promoted by her family and her fight to escape them” (Schutte, 2020).

Both women used their life experiences to convey their message of the importance of education in their memoirs from an outlook of an adult, reminiscing of their childhood self, influencing not only young people in the process of education but also their parents.

4.2 Impact of Racial and Cultural circumstances on the Authors’

Education

In this chapter, I will dissect how both a different religious and racial background impacted the education of the authors. Obama identifies as a member of the African American minority, whilst Westover identifies as a member of the Mormon community.

When attending the Bryan Mawr Elementary school, Obama states the school was mostly attended by children of color, setting a natural environment for such children to create groups by their ethnic background. It was only later in life, especially at a predominantly white university such as Yale was that Obama experienced a more severe form of social exclusion due to her race. However, Obama experienced racism second-handedly since early childhood, for instance when her aunt would sue a university for discrimination, as she was forced to stay in a dorm “for coloreds” (Obama, 2018, p. 7). Afua Hirsch wrote for *The Guardian* that Obama's “persistent experiences of discrimination bred in her family a basic level of resentment and mistrust” (Hirsch, 2018).

Not only did Obama find herself in a disadvantage regarding the education system preferring white children, but she also often felt compelled to prove her background to other African Americans. In Obama's household, as mentioned above, there was a great emphasis on knowledge and grammar. Obama herself wrote that this was often seen as problematic, stating that: “Speaking a certain way – the “white” way – was perceived as a betrayal, as somehow denying our culture” (Obama, 2018, p. 40). Some critics even suggested Obama's childhood to be secluded from a stereotypical African American experience. Writer Ta-Nahesi Coates,

specializing in African American literature, said about the memoir that “In all my years of watching black public figures, I’d never heard one recall such an idyllic youth” (2018). It poses a question on what a ‘stereotypical African American’ experience is and how are the misconceptions of educated African American people being ‘rich, white-washed and condescending’ still prevailing in today’s society. In fact, studies present data affirming that college-educated African American people face racism more often than those with a high school level of education or lower (Anderson, 2019).

During her university education, Obama herself admits that she was inclined to socialize with people of color, as she did not have many white friends, possibly because the lack of her interest to familiar herself with them. Obama explains that because of the lack of representation at the premises of university, she often felt relieved and supported to be in a group of people facing the same issues as she did. Though not directly excluded, Obama felt that she had been disadvantaged compared to other, more privileged students, who were given SAT tutoring or had gone to boarding schools (Obama, 2018, p. 75). And the African American community at Princeton University called Third World Center was arguably inviting to young students, hosting parties, and offering to help with their homework (p. 73), creating a sense of belonging to a young person seeking to find their identity as well as helping less privileged students to match the more privileged ones.

Tara Westover grew up in a Mormon household, which impacted her greatly. The Westover family religion dictated not only their beliefs regarding social constructs but also their children’s education, as it is more common for Mormon people to homeschool their children. Westover was taught to read and write from the Book of Mormon and the Bible, and because the Mormon speeches and doctrines were one of the only literature available in her household, she wrote essays regarding religious topics. Although she could not comprehend most of the writings, she proceeded to spend hours devoted to educating herself regardless of the topic (Westover, 2018, pp. 74-75).

It is, however, crucial to bring attention to the possible religious contradictions occurring in Westover’s household, which directly dispute the Mormon doctrine. Peter Wilson, an admirer of the Mormon religion argued that “I hope that readers of *Educated* realize is that a few things that Tara’s family practiced were in opposition of stated Mormon policy or belief”, specifically highlighting the fact that most Mormon believers put a high emphasis on education. Wilson continues to state that “Amy Chua, in her book *The Triple Package*, says that Mormons are overrepresented in some the highest educated circles in America.” At the end of his essay,

Wilson indirectly credits Westover's academic achievements to her comprehension of the Mormon texts (Wilson, 2018). The review also suggested that Westover inflated the issues in her book regarding the Mormon experience, such as gender roles.

Nonetheless, Westover's religion earned her unique advantages, as Westover also decided to positively utilize her background and wrote academic research focusing on Mormonism as an intellectual movement to qualify for her PhD (Westover, 2018, p. 323). She also attended a university called BYU, where the Mormon students outnumbered not-Mormon ones (p. 282), and during her studies lived in an apartment with Mormon women resulting in her, same as Obama, sheltering herself in beliefs similar to the ones she grew up in. As opposed to Obama, however, Westover was not a minority at the university and did not face any negative consequences because of her religion. She was also offered by the Church to partially help with her tuition (p. 235), although she declined the offer for moral reasons.

Similar to Obama, however, due to her homeschooling, Westover felt more disadvantaged compared to other students at the university. As already mentioned, Westover did not possess many academic books during her childhood and because of that was unfamiliar of the concept of a textbook, thinking she only needed to listen at the lectures to pass an exam. When told by her friend to purchase a textbook, Westover studied more intensively than other students to reach the level they had achieved at public school, resulting in her rapidly improving her grades (Westover, 2018, p. 194).

To conclude, we could argue that the minority membership has a great impact on children's education from a young age, offering advantages such as the Church support in Westover's case, and disadvantages seen in racially and socially sheltering such children, as Obama did at Princeton University. And we can see that young people tend to cumulate in homogenous groups, because of the similarity it provides, such as Obama did at Princeton, or Westover did at BYU.

The deviation provided in both memoirs also unfolds from different religious beliefs, cultures, and ethnicity. When it comes to such, a woman of Black descent is bound to face dissimilar challenges that a Mormon woman would face. We could argue that perhaps the main intention of given memoirs is to bring attention to what a larger group of oppressed people may face today and to compare the educational system that is supposed to be at least partially integrated across the United States and showcase the issues that people of different backgrounds

face. Given the discoveries, it fails to do so even on the state level, segregating the opinions and opportunities of minority children.

4.3 Effects of Sexism on the female academic development

This chapter will dissect the impact of gender on the educational opportunities depicted in both memoirs. There is no denying that throughout the history, the education system seems to prefer men to hold more high-ranking positions and therefore implements subjects relating to such positions, while women are anticipated to bear more “feminine” positions.

Westover was very early in her life influenced by the opinions of her father, who had a very clear concept of what a woman should be, and those beliefs relied heavily on his religion. Her father believed that a woman should not work and be financially dependent on her husband (Westover, 2018, p. 23), should not pursue higher education and indirectly suggested that women should not have their own opinion. Westover in her book claims that her father was often heard arguing that “a woman’s place is in the home” (p. 33). Such remarks indirectly influenced Westover’s opinions on her self-worth, her right to education and depicted that her value is placed on her ability to be a good wife and mother.

President of the LSD Dallin H. Oaks spoke regarding female education in 1974:

“It is important for our young women to receive a proper education. Education is more than vocational. Education should improve our minds, strengthen our bodies, heighten our cultural awareness, and increase our spirituality. It should prepare us for greater service to the human family. Such an education will improve a woman’s ability to function as an informed and effective teacher of her sons and daughters, and as a worthy and wise counselor and companion to her husband (Oaks, 1974).”

While the Church does promote the importance of education in a woman’s life, it also indirectly proclaims that education is only a preparation for women to exceed at their highest calling, which is motherhood and being a good mother (The Eternal Family Teacher Manual, 2016).

Not only was Westover’s father manipulative in the formulation of Westover’s self-confidence as a woman, but he also controlled his daughter’s wardrobe and her self-image from a young age. He prohibited Westover to participate in a dance recital, stating that the costume the girls performing were supposed to be wearing was too “revealing”. What may seem like a usual protection from a parent is in effect a hidden issue in how girls are sexualized from a very

young age, not only in the media, but worse, in their family circle. They are told to dress a certain way during their psychical development, as to not offend others, developing a certain fear of being objectified if they do not dress by the standards of society and it also raises concern on why there is the need to sexualize children and their bodies in the first place.

This may result in girls constantly putting pressure on themselves and their appearance, connecting their value to such, causing psychological problems and obsession with how they are regarded by others (Curry; Choate, 2010, p. 2). During Westover's childhood, she was forced to associate covering up her body as "modest, pure and good", while wearing any type of clothing seemed as "revealing" with being "whorish, slutty and promiscuous". As Westover reached puberty, she naturally wanted to experiment with her appearance and sexuality, nevertheless, she was sexualized even by her older brother, who called her a "whore" only playing to be "saintly and churchish" for wearing a clear lip gloss and having a male friend (Westover, 2018, pp. 134-136).

When attending university, Westover faced an inner argument of what a woman can achieve. As she wanted to take more courses providing general education in areas she had not been educated in by her mother, such as history and politics, she pondered on whether such interest does conflict with the idea of a woman her parents had planted into her. Such isolation from the concept of gender equality resulted to Westover only becoming aware of the term 'feminism' being used in an empowering way during her university education, although Westover in her book states that the term feminism was even at this university used with a negative connotation, often in a way to "signal the end of an argument", which she had lost (Westover, 2018, p. 299).

Westover's view on the role of women was most crucially formed by the fact that her mother was frequently intimidated and manipulated by her husband, and their relationship often showed signs of psychological and physical abuse. Westover's mother failed to provide any type of guidance for a young girl experiencing changes in her body due to feminization, and when Westover first experienced her menstruation cycle, she was not provided any sort of information of why such occurrence was happening. This lack of sex education later influenced the young woman's life when Westover at the age of 15 did not understand the concept of women becoming pregnant, fearing she might become pregnant from holding hands (Westover, 2018, p. 231).

And surprisingly, it was not only in her family circle Westover faced similar discouragements but also in a university environment among people her age. Originally with the intent to study music at BYU, Westover became fascinated with history and politics but was scared to persuade it further, due to her gender (Westover, 2018, p. 263). When asking her male friend had he studied law if he were a woman, he argued that: “Women are made differently. They don’t have this ambition. Their ambition is for children” (p. 264).

In Obama’s household, there was a positive outlook on the empowerment of women and the equality between genders. Obama was surrounded by strong, educated women throughout her childhood, whether that would be her mother, aunt, grandmother, or her female teachers. Obama’s mother helped to support her financially, sewing her school clothes and cooking (Obama, 2018, p. 135). Obama states that she did not see her mother as a “housewife”, but rather a selfless provider, who raised Obama to be confident and independent, and most of all, did not differentiate her parental style concerning the genders of her children (Obama, 2018, p. 173). Obama’s mother never directly complained about gender inequality, but rather demonstrated to Obama what an independent woman looks like through her actions, promoting a healthy mindset towards Obama. This influenced Obama to, as opposed to Westover, not restrain herself from attempting her ambitions regardless of her gender, as the professions such as doctor, lawyer or a politician were not connected solely the male gender but were reachable based on her academic achievements.

Only later did Obama face the struggles connected to being a woman in a society constructed to suit the male perspective. This can be mainly seen in her university experience. The reviews offer their narrative on this issue. “Becoming can also be read as a form of resistance narrative as Obama refuses to give up, despite the backlash she receives throughout her academic journey. The resistance of the narrator can be associated with “talking back” or “backtalk” (Petrov, 2020). The term of “talking back” was coined by bell hooks, who defines it as disagreeing or having a certain point of view with a person of a higher influence (hooks, 1986, p. 123). British feminist activist Caroline Criado Perez argues that the phenomenon of being saw as “overwhelming” is mainly associated with the female gender, causing a bigger issue in society, stating that men are appraised for being assertive, while women are often called “bossy” and overbearing (Criado, 2019, p. 268). Obama states that she was often associated as being “an angry black woman”, or “intimidating” (Obama, 2018, p. 265), simply because of her voicing her opinion.

Excluding women's opinions and undermining their capabilities starts as soon as they enter elementary school. Five years old girls starting primary school regard themselves as intelligent as the opposite sex, but from an age as young as six, they start doubting their capabilities being as adequate as boys'. This could be happening due to many decades of academic bias towards the male sex (Perez, 2019, pp. 100-101). Constantly underappreciating women in an academic world leads to a vicious circle, in which we exclude them from opportunities men are given.

After becoming the first lady of the United States, it is no wonder Obama mainly focused on promoting and supporting education, with a major attentive on the female gender. She privately met with many female students, personally helping them achieve their educational goals or to discuss their ambitions in regular meetings, including a Nobel Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, who spoke to Obama in relation to girls' education (Obama, 2018, p. 401). This was arguably due to Obama's own experience of the female education segregation.

When comparing the difference between the women's upbringings in regard to gender, it is apparent that while Obama was raised to aim for her ambitions regardless of her gender, whilst Westover was taught to see her gender as an obstacle. Westover was educated that a woman could only achieve what was seen as "acceptable" by her father, and that was being a good wife and a good mother. Although her gender was not seen a drawback for her father to force Westover to perform a stereotypical "male" work, suggesting that her father wanted to primarily control her, rather than educate her his ideology. We could conclude that the way society differentiates male and female education has an impact on their self-worth, ambitions, and social perception. This could become a problem for women, who are capable of accomplishing the same academic results as men but are intimidated to do so because of the society pressure and segregation in the education environment, which in the US apparently prevails.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to compare, dissect and analyze the depiction of education in women's memoirs, focusing on topics such as being a minority, being a woman and the role of family in regard to education. The main aim was reached by highlighting important parts of given books and providing opinions and reviews written by other readers, contrasting, or solidifying the findings.

The theoretical part dealt with introducing the reader to the key concepts, such as education, memoirs and introduced the authors, whose memoirs were being analyzed. It also gave a brief overview of the education system in the states the authors were born in, subsequently providing further information on the types of education options the authors were provided with and an overview of the religion one of the authors.

My thesis reached the conclusion of a great influence of family background, which positively or negatively affected mentioned author's education, and later in life reflected on their stance towards education, not only the academic achievements of a child, but also in the psychological point of view, shaping their beliefs, opinions, personality and most importantly, their self-worth.

The findings also provide an insight to the great difference across the United States when it comes to education. Given the considerable size of it, many states have an immense variety for providing education on the government level. Although the academic results have gotten better compared to the last millennium, the system still fails to provide matching education levels to minorities as it does to white children and male students.

Lastly, the findings confirm that young girls who are not given the same opportunities in the academic world are often raised to believe they cannot reach the same positions as men as compared to young girls, who are not met with sexism and segregation in gender.

Given the findings, I believe there are many inadequacies in the US education system. Although there have been initiatives over the last decades to refine it, they might seem unproductive, and rather than pouring money into schools to segregate children even more, it would benefit from greater emphasis on family relation to education, as well as social change, such as proving money to attract more qualified and younger educators.

What is interesting is the fact that such people wronged by the system are in these cases the ones fighting for the improvement of it, suggesting the desire of people to persuade changes,

subsequently proving the flaws of the system. It is also crucial to highlight the fact of both women coming from entirely opposite racial backgrounds and still being disfavored by the system, which also proves many smaller unseen discriminations than only the ones which were being fought for on court levels.

To conclude, further research could benefit and allow insight to the psychology of education to a greater extent, as memoirs are a direct documentation. This could be on an account of comparison of additional memoirs and providing further scientific research on the psychology of the education.

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Summary

The bachelor thesis deals with the depiction of education in women's memoirs. The theoretical part explained the key terms, such as the definitions of memoirs and education and the introduction of the authors, as well as the education system in the birthplace of the authors. In the practical part, the analysis of inequalities of the education depicted in the memoirs was created, with regards to the role of family, cultural background and the effects of sexism in the academic world.

Resumé

Bakalářská práce pojednává o zobrazení vzdělávání v ženských memoárech. V teoretické části byly vysvětleny klíčové pojmy jako definice memoárů a vzdělávání a představení autorů a také vzdělávacího systému jejich rodiště. V praktické části byl vytvořen rozbor nerovností ve vzdělávání zobrazeném v daných memoárech, z hlediska role rodiny, kulturního prostředí a vlivu sexismu v akademickém světě.

Anotace

Jméno a příjmení:	Beatriz Marešová
Katedra nebo ústav:	Ústav cizích jazyků
Vedoucí práce:	Mgr. Barbora Bačíková
Rok obhajoby:	2022

Název práce:	Zobrazení vzdělávání v ženských memoárech
Název práce v angličtině:	The Depiction of Education in Women's Memoirs
Anotace práce:	Bakalářská práce se zabývá rozborem vzdělávání zobrazeném v memoárech významných žen. Teoretická část obsahuje definici memoárů a vzdělávání, představením autorů a popisem vzdělávacího systému v rodišti autorů. Praktická část rozebírá a porovnává vzdělávání v memoárech z hlediska vlivu rodiny, kulturního prostředí a pohlaví.
Klíčová slova:	Memoáry, zobrazení vzdělávání, ženská literatura, Tara Westover, Michelle Obama
Anotace práce v angličtině	The bachelor thesis deals the analysis of education depicted in memoirs of influential women. The theoretical part contains the definition of memoirs and education as well as the introduction of authors and the description of the education system in the birthplace of the authors. The practical part examines and compares the education in the memoirs regarding the influence of family, cultural background and gender.

Klíčová slova v angličtině:	Memoirs, depiction of education, women's literature, Tara Westover, Michelle Obama
Přílohy vázané v práci:	0
Rozsah práce:	38
Jazyk práce:	Anglický