

Zafar, Samra (with Meg Masters). (2019). A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose – A Memoir. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

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Samra Zafar's memoir "A Good Wife", is a compelling recount of the events in her life that contribute to who she is today. She uses her book to describe in detail the effect that abusive relationships can have on a woman, in the specific context of her arranged marriage. Samra grew up being taught to pursue her dreams, including her aspirations of a higher education in order to create a life for herself. When she is suddenly married off at age seventeen, to a stranger named Ahmed (an older man in Canada) she is expected to leave her life in Pakistan behind. Her new family promises to support her by allowing her to continue her dreams of going to university in Canada. After surviving years of her husband's physical and emotional abuse, Samra, with her two daughters become desperate to escape her husband's restrictive grasp. Following years of struggle to become independent, Samra is finally able to gain freedom by gathering enough courage to leave her marriage. Zafar brings an abundance of insight to the hardships that some women in arranged marriages face due to the expectations placed on them by their familial definition of what makes "a good wife" (p. 102), all while exposing the seemingly innocent ways that abuse can take form in a relationship.

In order to explain how Zafar's values of marriage and unity were instilled on her at a young age she brings attention to the fact that her parents were cousins forced to marry. She explains that

this is why “it wasn’t so surprising that they didn’t get along” (p.22). From birth, a child’s first role model is their parents, so Samra sees her parents as an example of what marriage is supposed to look like. Since her parents did not choose each other as lovers, she believed that they were bound to fight, and that this was acceptable behavior because they still experienced good times together.

Many people are raised with the expectation to become wed one day no matter what culture they are from. This is followed by the idea that women who are permanently single live an unfulfilling life without much purpose. This view on singlehood is what encourages Samra’s parents to support the offer of marriage at such a young age. If the offer was denied they were worried another might not come, which would bring shame to their family. These expectations and values are the reasons why that even when given the ultimate say in whether she wanted to accept the proposal, Samra felt extreme pressure to save her family from the dishonour that accompanies being unmarried.

Zafar discusses the very overlooked problem of an abuser’s capability to cut a victim off from their friends and family. When Samra was “the envy of all [her] friends and young cousins” (p. 17), it was because they believed that Samra was lucky to be proposed to and that her union in Canada could only help her reach her educational goals. The idea that Canada is an extremely free society with excellent educational opportunities outweighed the major downfall of Samra being essentially isolated and restricted from her home country and family. This seclusion is a major problem that a woman can face while attempting to leave an abusive relationship. Just because Canada claims itself to be an extremely free and liberated society does not mean that people do

not face abuse in relationships. Zafar proves this by the multiple accounts of psychological and physical abuse she suffers at the hand of her husband while living in Canada. Being in a new and unfamiliar country, Samra was faced with unanticipated problems because she “lacked life skills” (p. 328) in order to become independent.

Women are also taught that men are often the head of the household. “Never stop your husband if he wants to do something” (p. 69), were words instructed to Samra on her first night alone with her husband. These words haunted her through-out her marriage as it added to her victim mindset, in which her husband could do no wrong. Since the husband is in charge, his wife must do as he requests. Any objection to these requests is seen as a mistake on the women’s behalf, and any wrongdoing to her afterward is her own fault. As made apparent by Samra’s in-laws, married women are told to hide their marital problems and suffering and if they cannot do so they are seen as an unfit partner. Some important points that describe the impact of Ahmed’s abuse are highlighted in this passage from when Samra attempts to seek help from a counsellor:

They didn’t know my culture. They didn’t believe that the fact that Ahmed was hitting me or cheating on me meant I was a lucky woman. Nor did his occasional flashes of tenderness and generosity- like bringing me fast food while I was studying at night- strike them as hopeful signs. Their words, while soothing, could not banish from my mind the message I was getting from Ahmed, Amma, Abba, and even sometimes, my parents: *You are making a big deal out of nothing* (p. 144).

Zafar makes it clear that the main purpose of her memoir is to tell her story in order to stand with other women in similar abusive situations and to let them know that if she could gather the

courage to leave, so can they. Zafar even mentions specific programs that can help woman including “The Assaulted Women’s Helpline” (p. 143). By highlighting these institutions and the exact steps she took, Zafar is successfully giving information to potentially help someone in a similar situation.

Zafar is successful at opening people’s eyes to hardships associated with arranged marriages when values of union are instilled at such a young age. This point is a difficult one to make as Samra’s ultimate decision made her feel as though she was choosing between herself and her culture. The truth is that throughout the book Samra never turned her back on her culture. The values that were taught to her will continue to influence her life, but in choosing to leave her marriage, Samra was able to sustain her obligation to protect herself and her daughters. The main takeaway from this issue is that many people can find “respectful and loving partnerships within arranged marriages” (p. 326), but just like any relationship, the other person might not be who they were presumed to be.

A limitation that has been pointed out is that Zafar’s memoir can be seen as a lecture on her culture. This critique is easily disputed in her epilogue. Zafar’s story is not strictly focused on arranged marriages as she acknowledges that “victims and abusers come from all cultures, all races, all religions, all socio-economic backgrounds and all walks of life” (p. 326). This is made apparent through the fact that although living in Canada, Samra met women from many different backgrounds that still faced abuse in their relationships. She was not singling any culture or ethnicity out, but only telling her own personal story in an attempt to educate on abuse and familial pressures. Zafar’s duty while telling her story is to empower women of all ethnicities to find strength to leave abusive relationships.

Zafar takes the blissful hopes of a loving marriage and adds the reality that things aren't always as they seem. By giving such a raw recount of her life and relationship struggles, Samra becomes a vulnerable example of how to escape abuse. This book is perfect for people studying the possible outcomes of arranged marriages on women and their families. It can also be an important example for people interested in expanding their knowledge on the strength it takes for a woman to remove herself from an abusive relationship, as well as additional difficulties brought upon by familial/cultural expectations. Overall, the book delved deeply into the life of a woman torn between her cultural/familial expectations, and her personal choice to leave an abusive marriage. Zafar successfully shows victims of abuse that they are not alone and there are ways to get help. This is the reason why this book is highly recommended.