

Zafar, Samra (with Meg Masters). (2019). A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose - A Memoir. Toronto: Harper Collins.

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The book “A Good Wife” is a heartening memoir written by Samra Zafar narrating her life story from her childhood through to adulthood, which was marked by notable experiences. The book recounts Zafar as a young audacious teen who had a tenacious desire for education and hopes to attend University. When Zafar is presented with the opportunity to marry a man at the age of sixteen, she was easily persuaded to accept an arranged marriage. Marrying Ahmed, twenty-six at the time, accompanied a compelling promise of being able to pursue her education in Canada. With her arrival to Canada and sudden pregnancy, she soon came to realize that the marriage she entered was full of false promises. Zafar’s marriage was characterized by emotional and physical abuse. She found herself coping with the impacts of abuse and feeling emotions of shame and loneliness. Determined to find a way out of her marriage and pursue her long-standing dream of getting an education, Zafar recounts the highs and lows of her journey as she strived to create a new life. The book is a testament of Zafar’s bravery to overcome the emotional and psychological impacts that plague victims of domestic violence. Furthermore, it explores the cycles that victims of abuse often encounter while focusing on the social factors such as race and gender, cultural and religious norms, socio-economic status and their impact on domestic violence.

From a cultural perspective, Zafar was pressured to accept the marital arrangement. She had been sold on the idea that her dream of attending University would be fulfilled. In her culture,

marriage is viewed as something that brings honour to the family name. Women who are married earlier and younger are more respected and valued within their society. Declining such an honour could have potentially brought “shame” to her family. Although these young girls were in school, the idea of getting married and starting a family seemed to be the ideal purpose. While Zafar hesitated on the offer, amongst her peers she was seen as being lucky. As she took on her new title, Zafar had to conform to the traditional roles of a woman. Although she was still a teenager, she now had to take on the role of a wife who submitted to her husband and acted accordingly and quietly when in public.

As she settled in Canada with her husband, the unexpected arrival of her first daughter led her to acknowledge that many of the promises she was given were empty. She recalls her in-laws advising her: “We gave you the opportunity to marry early, to get to a real purpose of a woman’s life... You should be grateful to us that we’ve saved you all this time. So just forget about school.” (p.111). When Zafar thought she would be encouraged by her husband in pursuing her education she was met with excuses regarding insufficient funds for “useless things”. Her story demonstrates the common barriers women in abusive relationships face having to remain in the relationship due to a lack of financial resources in addition to the psychological and emotional abuse and manipulation she encountered.

Zafar's socialization and cultural norms influenced her primary decision to remain in the marriage and accept the abuse. She was brought up with the concept and idea that it was the women’s role to tend to and protect her marriage regardless of the circumstances. As Zafar experiences violence in her own marital home, she reminds herself of her own parents’ marriage

where she witnessed her father being physically abusive towards her mother countless times. Within her unhappiness, she mentioned: "I had to dismiss the pushes, the pinching, the slaps and kicks, just as my mother had..."(p.253). While she recognized that the violence was not coming to an end, she was still seeking ways to salvage her marriage. And despite witnessing such events, she saw her parents always reconcile and have enjoyable moments, which ideally normalized the use of violence as a method for resolving conflict.

Throughout the book, at every attempt that Zafar makes to gain support / solidarity from her family and in-laws, she is met with responses that require her to conform to the belief that a woman is a man's property and therefore, is able to behave as he wishes. As she continues to experience the effects of the abuse, Zafar is reminded of her religion by her mother-in-law as she states that within Islam, it's permissible for a man to hit his wife. She goes on to explain that other women have had it worse and that Zafar must remain and carry within her duties of making things better and refrain from speaking on such matters to others. Zafar begins to understand that she must challenge the cultural and religious norms supporting violence that she has been told to accept. It is evident that the cultural and social norms aimed to normalize the abuse she was facing.

With the desire to still pursue her education, Zafar knew she had to find a way to attain this goal on her own. but was faced with many limitations. Creating her daycare business, she saved enough funds to attend university classes. Through meeting the school counsellor, Zafar came to discover that what she considered and was taught to be normal in her marriage, was actually her being abused. She began to identify the characteristics of emotional and physical abuse, and the tactics which her husband implored in order to gain control such as blaming the victim. For

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example, he would often make excuses stating that the things she does provokes him and he acts out due to the excessive love he has for her. With the help of her counsellor and sharing some of her hardships, Zafar was able to discover her truth. This in turn helped her in recognizing that she wasn't crazy and that the way they were living, was not normal nor healthy (p.232). As she stated, she now had a word for the pain she endured.

While Zafar strived to face her new reality, she knew that her education would be her breakthrough. While she lost her social connection, university was her new beginning as she found herself surrounded by a new and supportive community. Women within her culture gained their social status from their husbands, however, when faced with divorce, women often lose those social connections. While Zafar managed to begin her new journey with her daughters, she was often faced with sorrow and shame, as she was often provoked with the reminder of her cultural belief: that women aren't complete without a man (p. 298). Although she felt as though without a marriage her future would be a disaster, through her accomplishments she recognized her freedom and self-worth. Through telling her story, Zafar was able to face her truth and dismiss the social stigma faced due to cultural norms. She was able to utilize her voice to bring awareness on the matter of abuse, and help women of different backgrounds break their silence.

Zafar wrote this memoir in such an inspiring and courageous way. Even though she faced many critiques from members within her cultural community for telling her story, her story helped thousands of women worldwide speak-out on their cycle of abuse. While the book speaks on culture and religion, and its part in marriage, it also looks at illustrating the cycle of abuse. Zafar was able to demonstrate the many tries in leaving an abuser, while also demonstrating bravery and

steps on how women can leave abusive relationships. Furthermore, Zafar did a great job in educating readers on the characteristics of the different types/ forms of abuse and the lasting effects that such forms of abuse can have on an individual. Through her triumphant journey she raises awareness on an issue that is often taboo within different racialized communities and inspires many. Through her resilience, her story reveals to other women the resources available to leave an abusive relationship and also demonstrates empowerment, encouraging women to mount up such strength to commence their new beginning.

Zafar's journey is one that speaks so rawly of her struggles. This could be a book of aid to social workers, counsellors, and therapists. It could also be taught in classes such as psychology and sociology as educating everyone on this matter is essential. Zafar emphasized that education is key to help prevent abuse, by providing everyone with knowledge of what abuse looks like and how one can find oneself in an abusive relationship (p.330). Not to mention, the importance of sharing stories and listening to one another.

This book can be beneficial for women who are facing abusive relationships, women who feel as though they cannot attain an education due to their role of being a housewife, or even those who may struggle with having to face cultural pressure. Overall, this is a great book for anyone to read as it is very informative and speaks greatly on the cycle of abuse as this is a matter that is constantly in need of awareness.