



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

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Samra Zafar's book, "A Good Wife," is a memoir in which Zafar retells events from her hopeful childhood, surviving an abusive arranged marriage, and freedom. Details that she describes from her childhood/adolescence played a key role in both her tolerance of the domestic abuse and her continued pursuit for education that led to her escaping it, reclaiming her freedom.

Zafar grew up in an uncommonly progressive Pakistani family in which her mother had a professional career and her father encouraged her and her three sisters to engage in limitless experiences. Her dad would say "I don't have four daughters. I have four sons!" (p. 10) Zafar grew up playing cricket and squash, venturing through Abu Dhabi on her own, and was encouraged to pursue education by her dad who said "I don't have to save for weddings. I have to save for university" (p. 11). However, due to her culture, the pressure to get married came quicker than she had hoped. This new chapter in her life promised a husband that also came from a progressive family which meant she could continue and attain a higher education attending universities in Canada. It was not common in the Pakistani culture to see women in academia. They were meant for domestic duties and raising families, a belief that Zafar had heard from her aunt in particular who told her, "even if he doesn't let you go [to school], it doesn't matter. The most important thing

is that a woman gets married” (p. 36). Zafar dreaded the marriage but she saw it as an opportunity to pursue her education and live out her academic dreams. Everything changed when she got to Canada and realized all the promises her husband, Ahmed, had made to take care of her were false. Instead, she was abused. At first it was emotional and verbal abuse and later escalated to physical.

Although Zafar’s childhood/adolescence was hopeful growing up in a progressive family, certain events contributed to why she stayed in her abusive marriage. On more than one occasion from the ages of four to fifteen, Zafar was either sexually assaulted or approached suggestively by older predatory men. Each time she confided in her mother about these occurrences, her mother responded with “you are growing up too quickly” (p. 27) or “just cover yourself properly” (p. 30). She never addressed that what those men did was not right, instead she shifted the blame on Zafar and made her seem like the common denominator in the above cases. On one occasion Zafar was approached suggestively by a male relative. Her mother simply told Zafar to stay home and avoid the potential unwanted attention to her. She once again reinforced the idea that Zafar had to change because she was the one inviting the unwanted attention. This influenced her tolerance of domestic abuse because time and time again she blamed herself about what she could have done differently to divert Ahmed’s aggression.

Despite being in an abusive relationship, Zafar still had a passion for education and this passion and drive to go to school is what led to her ultimate discovery of what exactly her marriage was called: abuse. She confided in the university counsellor about all her experiences at home with Ahmed and his parents. The counsellor then brought up “the Cycle of Abuse” and “the Power and Control Wheel” (p. 231) to help her understand what entailed an abusive relationship. To her

surprise, the power and control wheel displayed wedges that explained exactly the complications of her relationship from her husband controlling her economically, destroying her property (laptop), and trying to isolate her in his many attempts to get her to abandon school (p. 231). The counsellor also explained the cycle of abuse that mirrored Zafar's marriage. The counsellor noted that during the calm phase in the cycle, the abuser reconciles with the abused and acts as if nothing happened. All too often in domestic abuse relationships, the abused holds on to the calm phases as a ray of hope and convinces them to stay. The hope that their abuser is "changing" gets reinforced every time there is a calm period, which is what made it so difficult for Zafar to leave. Abuse from Zafar's mother-in-law also contributed to Zafar's tolerance of domestic abuse. Her mother-in-law also verbally abused her and used scare tactics in the name of religion and her granddaughter to prevent Zafar from leaving. She states that "it is perfectly permissible in Islam for a man to hit his wife. It is written in the Koran. And other women have it much worse than you do, but they still stay. It is a good wife's duty to make things better. After all, you need to keep your family together. If you were ever to leave, the government would give Aisha to Ahmed since you have no education and no money" (p. 127).

Once Zafar had a name for her suffering, she pushed even further in her education so she could become more independent. She excelled in school and gained more confidence which gave her the recognition she deserved from faculty staff, peers, and her daughters. She found the courage to separate from Ahmed and eventually divorce him. There was a weak point where she wanted to go back to her old life and suffering because it had become a familiar routine however her counsellor advised her that if she raised her two daughters while they witnessed Ahmeds abuse, it

would become normalized and they would group up either committing abuse or accepting it themselves (p. 266). This had been a full circle moment for Zafar because as a reader, it took us back to when Zafar would describe how her father would hit her mother and then the next day, life would become normal. Zafar decided to end the generational abuse tolerance and stuck to her decision of continuing to finish school and following through with her divorce.

Zafar also discovered her self-worth once she began to recognize what her life had become. Her self-worth was defined by her education which lead her to become established as a faculty member at her university and it was defined by her children, who got her through the lowest times where she wanted to rid herself from her life. By the end of the book, Zafar became a voice to those who were in similar domestic abuse relationships as she once was. She became an advocate for supporting domestic abuse victims and became their inspiration to raise their voice against it. It's unfortunate that domestic abuse is such a social stigma in many societies and that women are told to keep quiet and maintain their household by doing whatever makes their husbands happy. In many traditional South Asian societies, divorce was considered an extreme taboo. As a result, many women suffer and continue to stay in abusive marriages because of the social stigma around divorce and women being single. Once a woman was divorced, she became damaged goods, a term often used in the book, society would look down on her and she would bring embarrassment and shame to her family. Zafar conveys a message for all young women and girls suffering in abusive relationships that if she can do it, anyone can and encourages them to seek out the support.

The book was exceptionally written as it contained raw descriptions because that is the reality of such situations. Sugar coating and censoring the details would not do justice to all the

women and girls in similar situations. The intended academic audience the book reaches out to is humanities, sociology, and psychology however, I would recommend this book to anyone as it also showcases the struggles of arranged marriages, raises awareness to domestic abuse, and encouraging more conversations in regards to abuse to let those suffering feel like they're being heard and are not alone.