



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

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In Samra Zafar's memoir, "A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose," she writes about her life as a Muslim woman and the abusive relationships throughout her life. As a child, Zafar grew up in Pakistan. She later moved to Canada. She experienced both Western and Muslim culture. This book highlights themes surrounding abuse, including surviving abuse which was present in both Samra Zafar and her two daughters lives. Cultural normativity and expectations are another important theme in this memoir.

Samra Zafar's family had different norms than what was culturally acceptable in the Muslim community. Her and her sisters would play sports like squash and cricket as well as wear more western style clothing. She would wear traditional Indian clothing but only to very important family events like weddings or large family gatherings. Zafar had a very close relationship with her family. Her father was more progressive than her mother, in that he wanted to send her to university, encouraged her to play sports, and go out shopping with only her sister. Zafar's relationship with her mother was not as positive, she states "I had always been jealous of the attention my mother lavished on my younger sisters. I had my father's favour... but it had never been enough" (p. 33).

Zafar's mother was more traditional. For example, Zafar and her mother disagreed about

marriage from a young age. Traditionally, Muslim women get married quite young, usually at eighteen years old. This is uncommon in Western culture, where the typical age of marriage is between twenty and twenty-four for women, as of 2005 (Statistics Canada). In Western culture, the wedding day is looked at as one of the best days for many people. However, in Zafar's case, she was still a teenager and this was one of the scariest days of her life. Zafar was seventeen at the time of her engagement and eighteen when she got married. Since Zafar planned to attend university, her mother believed that she was too ambitious to get married so young. To placate her fears, Zafar was told that Ahmed and his family were very progressive and broad minded, and was promised that she would be allowed to study in Canada (p. 34).

Ahmed and his family seemed like a nice family. Nonetheless, they were very specific with who they wanted their son to marry. Amma, Ahmed's mother, was concerned about Zafar fulfilling household duties, specifically cooking. Although Zafar was promised a university education in Canada, this is not what transpired when she moved to the country, after her marriage. She seemed to be in a happy marriage with Ahmed, until his parents arrived in Canada and moved in with Zafar and Ahmed. That is when Ahmed became possessive and emotionally abusive to Zafar, as if it would please his parents.

Samra Zafar's story would not be the same without her sharing her painful emotions she suffered at the abuse, but it would also not be as inspiring without her growth, despite them. Millions of people can relate to abuse whether it was as a child or as an adult - emotionally or physically. Zafar was very transparent throughout her memoir. First, she felt fear when her father encouraged her to go on a roller coaster. Fear was something that opened her story up and is a

connection all peoples can make in their own lives. Her father said to her, that to face her fears, “this is how you will learn to love your life” (p. 8).

Shortly thereafter, Zafar had an unwanted sexual encounter with her male tutor that was hired to teach her about the Koran. When she spoke to her father about this, he dealt with it and made Zafar feel a lot safer. Zafar also sharing her story of child abuse at the hands of her uncle - someone who is family, who she should feel safe with - was painful to read. When she shared the encounter with her mother, it was brushed off and she was told to cover up and stay away from him (p. 30). This broke away the walls of safety and support that a mother usually provides. Her mother brought this encounter up when she was trying to convince Zafar that marriage was a good idea, because these things would continue to happen until she was married. Emotions of guilt and shame - as if she provoked her uncle to abuse her - filled this space and the loss of support continued. After her marriage proposal, her friends believed that because she was going to be a married woman and belonged to someone else, it would be best to distance themselves from her. More support systems were lost again, as loneliness and fear began to fill the space.

The abuse continued throughout her married life. Not only with Ahmed, the man she married, but with his family too. Amma was incredibly critical, controlling and manipulative. She would make Zafar feel shameful. This was very apparent when her first child was born: Zafar did not get to name her child and she was looked at as a poor mother when she could not calm the baby down or when she wanted to rest. Ahmed blamed her for being disrespectful to his family. He showed a bit of insecurity and possessive behaviour and he would constantly blame Zafar for looking at other men. Any interaction with another person, male or female would make him

uncomfortable. This blame would cause him to become very angry and physically abusive towards Zafar.

The most inspirational part of this book was when she started school and began to gain some independence. Her realizations that the way she was being treated by Ahmed and his family was abusive. She got support from her school and her own mother, after she saw what was happening first hand. The way she stood up to Ahmed was incredible and very brave of her. She did not just survive her abuse, Zafar was strong for her two daughters and matured from her hardships. She never looked at her abuse as a set back - instead, she looked at it as a learning experience.

Samra Zafar did a great job explaining her story to a multicultural and academic audience (p. 309-311). Her story would be valuable to psychologists, sociologists and social workers who study the effects of abuse in a cultural setting. She used some specific language in reference to the Muslim culture and way of life and I felt as though she explained what each piece was, where I did not have to look it up to understand the details. This book was more about overcoming pain, and breaking out of cultural norms. She states in her epilogue that this story is not just hers but the reality of millions of women and girls.

This memoir was so emotional to read. The way she describes the things she liked - for example, a traditional garment that Ahmed picked out for her, to the abuse she suffered, really made her book come to life. It was heart-wrenching reading some of the things that she encountered, but at the same time so uplifting and inspiring to any audience. Considering Zafar had the experience of both Western and Muslim culture, her memoir is educational at a cultural

level, without biasing one culture over the other. She was lucky enough to have a family that was truly progressive, in that it was important for her to get a good education, but that was stripped away from her in her battle with the very traditional family she married (as arranged by her family).

Samra Zafar did an exceptional job writing her own story with so much emotion and detail. She really catered to many different cultures by explaining Muslim traditional items, food and celebrations in great detail. The journey to get to a place where she felt comfortable sharing her story was probably very difficult but also a healing process for her, and that presented itself in the way she wrote. Each part was an emotional journey: just when things seemed to be bright, they would take a dark twist; it kept the reader interested.

Remembering the most dark and traumatic periods of her life, along with reliving them by writing about them is a difficult experience, but it inspires other people to come forward or make a change, for the better. The last thing she said in the epilogue was that a man reached out to her after reading her article in the *Toronto Life* magazine. He and his wife arranged a marriage for his daughter, who was very young. He found Zafar's story very inspiring. So much so, that he cancelled the wedding and is sending his daughter to university instead. This was the perfect ending to an emotional memoir. I would recommend this book to anyone who has survived abuse or looking for inspiration in their own life.