



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

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In Samra Zafar's book, "A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose: A Memoir," she tells the emotional story of her life; her escape from an abusive, arranged marriage through the power of education and emotional support from new-found friends. Throughout the memoir, Zafar explores themes of societal and cultural pressure to conform and the importance of emotional support, education, and the power of resilience when overcoming difficult circumstances. Zafar also provides much cultural and religious context for the story as a Pakistani Muslim, as it plays a major role in the continuation of her cycle of abuse. Zafar organizes the memoir into four distinct parts as it follows the cycle of her life: (1) her childhood background and the marriage arrangement; (2) her move to Canada and the beginning of the cycle of abuse; (3) her venture into education and the realization that she can have a better life; and (4) her final escape and finding her voice. The story is a crushing, yet heart-warming tale of a situation all too familiar for many victims of domestic abuse and provides hope and a happy ending to all readers who may relate to her situation.

Zafar does an impeccable job at providing the cultural insight and context needed to understand why the cycle of abuse was able to continue for so long in her life. Even before we learn of Zafar's abuse in the book, she displays many examples of how the norms of her culture

and religion perpetuate misogyny, conservatism, and conformity. Zafar provides many examples of how her father established and reinforced the importance of her education and freedom, which was progressive for a man of their culture, as she explains many other men her father's age looked down upon her father for allowing his daughters more freedom. She recalls one example when her and her sisters were outside playing cricket and one her father's friends shamed her father by stating, "tch, tch, Zafar, how can you let your girls play like this?" Yet, even as progressive as he may have seemed, Zafar recalls moments of abuse and aggressive behaviour from her father towards her mother. For example, when her mother and father had gotten into an argument Zafar states, "my father did not relent. His hands fell on plates, bowls, coffee cups. One after another, they took flight, landing with successive blasts, like firecrackers. The kitchen floor quickly transformed into a glinting carpet of china shards, as the cacophony of shouting, crying and shattering dishes continued for several seconds" (ch. 2). As well, despite her father's progressive views, he allowed Zafar to be placed into the arranged marriage, displaying that individual morals and values are often over-powered by the pressure to conform. By experiencing aggressive behaviour in the home as a child, she normalized and justified her own abusive experience. Since Zafar's abuse was so similar to her childhood and the experiences of her friends and family, if she were to complain, she would seem ungrateful or weak.

The normalization and justification of abuse is a by-product of the misogynistic and patriarchal views that are so prevalent within the culture Zafar came from. Zafar recalls a moment as a girl when she was fondled inappropriately by an adult man, a friend of her family's, while at his home. When she tells her mother, her mother is upset with Zafar and only responds with, "you

are growing up too quickly” (ch. 2). Even her own mother was unable to escape the misogynistic, victim-blaming attitude of their culture. To display the extreme differences between her culture and western society, Zafar recalls the difference in opinion between her young, female peers and her teacher of English descent when she tells them of her arranged marriage to an older man. Her peers were jealous and congratulated her, while her teacher, Ms. Harr, stated, “You are just sixteen. How in the world can you be thinking about this?” (ch. 3). This example is one of the few times prior to her final escape of someone from an outside culture explaining to Zafar that life does not have to be how it is proposed by her culture, that she can have more, but one voice in a sea of many had little to no effect on Zafar’s decision at the time. The cultural pressure to not bring her family shame, to not end up alone, and to not disappoint her friends was far too much for Zafar and she decided to go ahead with the marriage despite her own grievances.

Zafar’s marriage did not start out abusive, much like many victims of domestic abuse; the process was slow, but once it began it became more aggressive and violent as the years went on. While Zafar provides many examples of the abuse she received from her husband, I found the examples of her resilience and slow, yet brave journey towards escape much more impactful, as she is more than the abuse she endured. Zafar recalls a moment when the abuse she endured had become so bad that she wished Allah would end her life, but as the thought crossed her mind, her young daughter crawled into her lap for comfort and Zafar realized that she was not as alone as she had thought, giving her a reason to live. Zafar also shows incredible strength when she demonstrates how much work she was doing once she had actually left her husband. We learn that she was in university full-time, working as a teaching assistant, working part-time at the Students’

Union info booth, and running an at-home catering business, while also being a single mother to two young girls. Zafar's demonstration of incredible strength during this time is a testament to her resilience and the power of educated and supported women. Women are able to accomplish as much as men when they are given the same tools to success.

When in an abusive situation, individual strength is important, but emotional outside support is vital to the victim's chance of escape and recovery. Zafar receives support from another Pakistani woman, Nuzah, who she meets when she joins a parent-child drop-in centre. Nuzah encourages Zafar to call an assaulted women's help hotline and even though Zafar does not immediately take the advice of the hotline and Nuzah, she was able to hear some outside perspectives on her abuse, which ultimately led to the help of her escape. Zafar describes her calls to the hotline and Nuzah's support as, "a relief to know that [she] wasn't crazy, that others found [her] distress and unhappiness completely understandable" (ch. 7). Zafar reiterates the importance of emotional support when she recalls her introduction to the Students' Union at her University. The members of the Students' Union provided Zafar with childcare, food, entertainment, help with applying for government assistance, and so much more. She describes her experience with the Students' Union as "a world that would both support and sustain [her] in the coming years" (ch. 15). While individual strength is important, Zafar demonstrates to readers the overwhelming strength and importance of emotional human support and connection when overcoming truly difficult circumstances.

While Zafar's book is great for a general audience, as anyone can be impacted by her story of resilience and courage, the book could also be of great importance to psychologists and

sociologists when studying domestic abuse and the impact of cultural and societal pressure on domestic violence victims, specifically in religious circumstances. The book would also likely be of great use to gender-studies and feminist scholars, as it is a great display of the effect of the patriarchy on individuals and how misogyny is ingrained into many cultures. In my opinion, in “A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose: A Memoir,” Zafar sets up the story in a logical and easy-to-read way by separating it into parts, while the resilience and strength of the author and main character made the book interesting and hard-to-put-down. Zafar does a great job of engaging the reader and making them feel emotionally connected to her, making the happy ending even more impactful. I would recommend this book to sociologists, psychologists, and feminist scholars and a general audience alike.