

## Autobiography as Testimony: A Study of Samra Zafar's 'A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose'

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**Abstract:** *A bright student, Samra Zafar had big dreams for herself. She planned to go to the university and create an identity of her own. But destiny took her to Canada after being married to a stranger much older to her. She suffered emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her husband and his family. The paper aims at exploring the autobiographical truth bravely penned by Samra Zafar. She brings forth the realities of unspoken plight of suppressed women in the male hegemonic society. The highlight of this novel is that Samra chose to divorce her husband and made education her tool of liberation and empowerment. With the help of her academic and career achievements, she is now a mentor, educator and public speaker connecting with millions of people around the world.*

**Key Words:** *Abuse, autobiographical, hegemonic, liberation, empowerment, achievements.*

An autobiography generally signifies a narrative of the self (author). The writer chooses to write about himself/herself. He/she describes a substantial part of his/her life or events that shaped their destiny. Religion, education, community, neighbourhood, spouse(s), relatives provide the social, cultural framework in which the writer places himself/herself as the protagonist. A Good Wife is a memoir about Samra Zafar's experience of surviving an abusive marriage. Written in collaboration with author and editor Meg Masters, Zafar highlights many components of her life that she thought integral to explaining the intricacies of abuse, and the many forms in which it can be relayed. Samra, like most women writers, chose to write against the patriarchy. Muslim women are afraid to raise their voice against their suppression. Samra Zafar is a Pakistani woman. A third world country, where women are dispossessed of identity, name, social standing, right of choice.

The memoir is distributed into four parts and seventeen chapters. There is a prologue and epilogue and of course acknowledgements. They map the growth of Samra Zafar from an ordinary, insignificant housewife to an emancipated, liberated woman who is fighting for equal rights. She names the first chapter, 'Mehndi'- significant of an auspicious beginning in the many pre-nuptial ceremonies, both in Pakistan as well as India. 'Music was drifting up from the tent, but I couldn't find the celebration in it. Instead it sounded haunting and hollow, like a distant echo of happier times...It felt surreal to be trapped up here, all alone, reduced to watching and waiting.'(page 3).She continues to write, 'In two days' time, I would no longer be a student, no longer a big sister and beloved daughter, no longer a person with any independence or autonomy. I would be a begum- someone's wife. I was just seventeen.'(page 4) As she narrates her ordeal in the coming chapters, the reader realizes how true were Samra's fears. The last chapter is aptly titled, 'Freedom'- again signifying emancipation, breaking free from all bondages, violence both mental and physical. I will again quote a few lines from the last pages of the book. Zafar writes, 'Through all the years of our marriage, it had been Ahmed who did the talking. I had had no voice in our relationship. But those times were truly past. I was no longer afraid, but what surprised me more, I was no longer angry. All the resentment, the hurt, the humiliation had somehow slipped away. And in its place- a peaceful confidence and the power of forgiveness.....As we got up from the table an hour and a half later, Ahmed thanked me. I waved it away.....I walked to my car smiling, my eyes rimmed with tears of joy. It was an extraordinary feeling. ...I was free.'(page 324)

Samra was the eldest daughter of her parents who married her at the age of sixteen because they had three more daughters. Samra writes her reaction when she first saw Ahmed, her husband, "Oh my God, I thought. He's a man, not a boy. He looks like a tall uncle. I dropped my eyes. I couldn't fathom how this man could be in any sort of relationship with me. He was larger than life, powerful and intimidating. I was just a young girl, tall, yes, but an insignificant whisper next to him. I felt as if the life had been sucked out of me, as if somehow in his presence had ceased to exist." (pg. 8)

Zafar presents childhood memories that are tinged with warmth but marred by an often fraught relationship with her parents. Her father wanted his daughters to get good education but he unfortunately was in debt. Her mother thought she could protect her beautiful daughter by marrying her off at a young age. Samra recounts her harrowing tale with compassion and grace infusing her story with magic and detail. She writes, 'This marriage proposal is Allah's gift- his way of keeping you out of danger. If you say no, you will be showing your lack of faith in Allah, and you'll surely be

punished.”(pg.37) Samra yielded to parental pressure and married a 28 year old IT worker in Canada. The next ten years turned out to be a nightmare for this young cricket enthusiast. “I was rarely allowed to leave the house and never had a penny to my name,” says Zafar. For how many years, she was not allowed to learn how to drive. She didn’t have a cellphone. She wasn’t allowed to go to the grocery store on her own. She was humiliated and neglected. Eventually, the abuse turned physical too. Her husband would grab her wrist, push her around. Sometimes he’d slap her on her face or toss a glass of water. Zafar writes that, “victims and abusers come from all cultures, all races, all religions, all socio-economic backgrounds and all walks of life.”(pg.326) Race and gender stand at crossroads and women always suffer abuse from family members.

However, the unyielding Zafar didn’t give up. She wanted to continue her education. So she applied at universities and got accepted to the University of Toronto, but her husband refused to support her. She was ineligible to apply for student’s loan as her husband was financially well off. Her own parents didn’t have money to support her either. To earn her money, she began babysitting in her house. “I was making \$2000 and \$3000 every month, and though I had to turn over my earnings to my husband, I managed to sock away a few hundred dollars here and there. It took me two years to save enough for one year of school.”

She moved out of her husband’s house and lived on campus, where she got a lot of help, support and assistance from friends and fellow students. They helped take care of her daughters while she was in class or at work. She worked as a teaching assistant, a researcher, a student mentor. She even ran a small catering business out of her apartment. Her hard work paid off. On July 10, 2013, Zafar happily graduated with her bachelor’s degree in Economics. She was awarded the Top Student Award and the recipient of the prestigious John H. Moss Scholarship.

Women like Samra fight subjugation, suppression and control exercised by dominant culture. They fight under these anxieties, struggle to free themselves from the clutches of their oppressor and eventually emerge victorious, though they get soiled in the process. The fruition of their struggle results in riddance from injustice and prejudices committed against them, but the step taken in the process is drastic and a little dramatic. It is here that fiction bifurcates from the lived experience, and literature acquires didactic posture to inculcate strength and vigour to fight back injustice in every possible way. A writer should tell the truth of life to his/her readers. Samra Zafar exposes the hypocrisy of man, the outdated traditions, orthodoxy and presents the inhuman horror with naked truth. In the words of Mahmoud Darwish, “A person can be born in one place. However, he may die several times elsewhere: in the exiles and prisons, and in a homeland transformed by occupation and oppression into a nightmare....”(A River Dies Of Thirst)

I will conclude with an observation that, “An insight into the women of a society is an insight into its emotional core, beneath the larger conflicts and politics and into the center of family life.”(Jo Glanville)

## REFERENCES:

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