

(Intro)

Layla: I'm Layla Saad, and my life is driven by one burning question: How can I become a good ancestor? How can I create a legacy of healing and liberation for those who are here in this lifetime and those who will come after I'm gone? In my pursuit to answer this question, I'm interviewing change-makers and culture-shapers who are also exploring that question themselves in the way that they live and lead their life. It's my intention that these conversations will help you find your own answers to that question too. Welcome to Good Ancestor Podcast.

Dr. Pragya Agarwal is a behavioral and data scientist, author, speaker, and consultant. As a senior academic in US and UK universities, she has held the prestigious Leverhulme Fellowship following a PhD from the University of Nottingham. Pragya is a widely published freelance journalist on topics such as bias and prejudice, motherhood, gender and racial inequality, and mental health. Pragya is the author of *(M)otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*, a hybrid memoir and scientific analysis of women's fertility and an urgent and timely examination of how political ideas of womanhood and motherhood are constructed. *(M)otherhood* is our fifth book selection for the Good Ancestor Book Club. Pragya is also the author of *Sway: Unraveling Unconscious Bias* and *Wish We Knew What to Say: Talking with Children About Race*, a manual for parents, carers, and educators of all backgrounds and ethnicities to talk to children about race and racism. To find out more about the Good Ancestor Book Club and to join us for the discussion of *(M)otherhood*, visit goodancestorbookclub.com.

(interview)

Layla: Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and, today, I'm speaking with the author of this incredible book, *(M)otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*, Dr. Pragya Agarwal. Welcome to the show, Pragya. We're very excited to have you and very excited to be featuring your book as our selection for the month of July.

Pragya: Thank you so much, Layla. It's such an honor to be here.

Layla: It's such an honor to be in conversation with you. Your book has touched me deeply. I am a mother too but this is the first time that I've read a book that really got me thinking about my own journey as a woman and as a mother and I cannot wait to get into this conversation. I think that this is a conversation that is for everybody, it's not just for mothers, so I wanna make that really clear upfront. I think it's one that, regardless of your gender identity and regardless of your experience, is really relevant and what I love about it and I think one of the reasons why I haven't read too many books about motherhood is that I feel like you're talking to me in it and when I say that, I mean, it's very, unfortunately, still rare to have books about motherhood that are not centering white womanhood as the standard of womanhood and the standard of motherhood so I'm thrilled that you wrote it and it's bringing me so much to think about so thank you.

Pragya: Thank you and I'm so glad it came across like that because, yes, I think one of the reasons I really, really did want to write this book is that, yes, we don't see many narratives which are intersectional, which think about people who are on the fringes, on the margins of society, who are not idealized as the norm so I'm glad it comes across like that.

Layla: Yeah, absolutely. We're definitely gonna get into all of that but we're gonna start with our very first question that I ask every single guest. Pragma, who are the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Pragma: Oh, gosh, that's such a big question. When I think about my ancestors, of course, I think about the thread that runs from my grandfather and my grandparents to me. I didn't know my grandparents very well. I met my grandfather very briefly, my paternal grandfather. My maternal grandmother died when she was 14 but I always felt like she lived through the stories from my mother — when my mother was 14, actually, so I never met her so it was a huge part of her life and what shaped her so I think I always listened to her stories and she always lived through these little artifacts that my mother carried as treasured belongings and possessions that she would bring out from her box from underneath the bed and I felt so close to her and I do think that they are holding my hand through some of these things, my grandfather's love of books, these connections that we have through our ancestors but also, societally, I think all those people who have struggled for freedom, who have fought for our freedom and our right to be and our right to exist, and all the women who have struggled to make women not the secondary in society, I feel I owe so much to them because I am where I am because of so many of them. So, yeah, so many really.

Layla: Oh, that's incredible, thank you. It's interesting because motherhood is kind of the channel through which familial lines get continued on, right? We are the — yeah, like the route through which family lines can continue and so I think that this is such a perfect book and it's such a perfect topic of conversation, both for the podcast and for the book club, but this isn't your first book, this is your third book. So, I would love

if, before we dive into *(M)otherhood*, you could tell us a little bit about your journey as a writer and some of the other books that you've written and how they led you to eventually writing this book now.

Pragya: Yeah, I mean, so I was an academic. I came over to the UK around 20 years ago as a young single parent to do my master's and PhD and I write a little bit about that in this book and my previous books and so I did my PhD and I was an academic in UK and US universities and I was working and doing my thing and I wrote a lot of academic papers and research papers and some edited books and things. I was always interested in kind of the notion of how we form a sense of the world that we live in, the mental models that we form, and how these different models can be aligned so I was working a lot on technology and the bias in technology but also in the world about how we talk about the places that we live in and how our mental models shape our perception of the world and why there's so much conflict between different mental models. I gave up full-time academia for a number of reasons. I was going through infertility treatment and all those things and I was commissioned to write a book — I was doing a lot of consultancy around bias in organizations and I was commissioned to write a book called *Sway: Unraveling Unconscious Bias* by Bloomsbury at the end of 2018 so that book came out April 2020 in the UK and August in the US and that book is about the science of how we form the notion of bias in our brains, what's happening in our brain, why we are doing that, why — evolutionarily speaking, neuroscientifically speaking, why this notion of bias is there, and how that affects our perceptions of the world and how it affects our status in society as well, these hierarchies that exist so things like sexism, racism but also ageism and accent and all those kinds of things I wanted to discuss and I wanted to approach bias from a very interdisciplinary perspective. I'm a parent so I —and now I

have an older child who was born in India and I have five-year-old twins who are mixed heritage so I'm always very interested in the notion of how we speak to children about race and racism and these things obviously came to the forefront much more deeply and really prominently after Black Lives Matter last year so I was asked to write a book, which is *Wish We Knew What to Say: Talking with Children About Race*, which came out in October and it's not just for parents or just for white parents. I didn't want it to be a manual because I'm not a parenting expert but I wanted to bring across a developmental psychology perspective in how children form a notion of prejudice and bias and why we should approach it at a very young age rather than leaving these topics 'til a very later age. And I suppose, as I was thinking about — so all the books are kind of linked about social inequities and about racial and gender inequities and I just thought motherhood is something that really, really creates and strengthens and perpetuates these inequities, whether we choose to be a mother or not, and so which kind of led me to this book now.

Layla: Oh, that's wonderful. I definitely see the link and, at the same time, so much about this book was so deeply personal and you share at the beginning where you sort of set us up for what this book is going to be about and I love the setup of this book but you kind of think out loud with us about your thoughts around how to structure this book, right? It's not, "Is it a memoir? Is it just a scientific analysis?" Like what is it and where do I place myself in that, right? And I love that it's a blend of everything. I was deeply invested in hearing about your story and your journey and I was deeply invested in learning about some of the historical contexts that I'm not aware of, the cultural context that I'm not aware of, and how they overlap each other. But as I was reading it, I was really struck by how personal everything that you were sharing was and how that is such a gift to us to be able to read it but I

imagine quite a journey for you to have to make, to open yourself up in this way. And, obviously, we have boundaries, you know? You're not telling us everything of what happened, but a lot of deeply personal stuff and it really got me thinking about my own journey as a mother and that there are many things that I went through and that we as a family went through that a lot of people don't know about that were really hard and very traumatic. So, what was that like in you making that decision to really open yourself up to us, your readers, in that way? And how did you draw the line for yourself so that you were still able to kind of keep what's yours yours while also sharing what was relevant so that you could do, you know, you could serve, you could be of service to us?

Pragya: Yeah, I think writing a memoir or something with a memory shtick leaning is very hard because you always, as you say, have to draw those lines and boundaries. First of all, I think I wanted to have that memoir shtick kind of bearing because I felt like I'm writing about something so personal, motherhood, which has really shaped my life, as you will find out in the book. I didn't want to be a mother and then I became a mother for two, three children and it has really shaped my life and, for a very long time, as I say in the book also, I didn't talk about it. I didn't talk about my mothering journey. I didn't talk about my motherhood or my motherhood struggles or even experiences in the professional arena because you always think that it's something domestic or it's something mundane or it's something who would be interested in it or it's something you have to hide away, otherwise, you wouldn't be seen as a professional person because I think there's a lot of motherhood bias, as we know, penalty that exists in workplaces. But then, when I started writing this book, I thought, "How can I write about motherhood without my lens, without talking about my own journey? And if I don't share my story, how can I be honest with the readers? Because, unless we share these stories, how

do we feel like we are not alone?" I didn't think that — I read a lot as you said at the start. I didn't read a lot of these memoirs or stories from women of color or women who were similar to me or even other women who were not like me but have had different varied experiences. We don't hear these varied experiences at all in motherhood and the mothering journey so we start believing that if we are not experiencing the same as what we are reading or seeing, then we must be — there must be something wrong with us or there must be something broken with us or that we are not the norm and that is really — I really wanted to address that because I wanted to hold out a hand to other people and say, "Look, I experienced this. You're not alone. This is how I felt," and I try to be honest about it and I think there was also a sense of trying to overcome some of the internalized shame that I also felt in some of those experiences which I didn't talk about because we accept these societal norms. We accept these shame and stigmas. We internalize them and we believe that, yes, we have to hide away because we are broken, because something is wrong with us, and I didn't want to do that. I wanted to open up and say, "Actually, it's not our fault. It's not my fault if I'm feeling like this," and I wanted to talk about the societal norms but how do I do that without talking about internalization of those societal norms and tropes and narratives as well? But, yes, you have to always draw the line. There were some things where I was uncomfortable a little bit talking about it because I hadn't even talked to even my own mother about some of the things but I always had a line. I always had a very strong sense of what I can reveal and what I'm going to reveal. First of all, I wanted to protect my children and my family because they're going to read it one day and there was not anything in it that they didn't know or they won't know one day and I really wanted to make sure that they are protected in that way as well. But I still wanted to make sure that I lay out that this is my story, it's nobody else's story. I'm not speaking for my partner, for my

children, for anybody else in this story. And, yes, as we say, people have different perspectives on the same situation but this is my perspective, my story, my situation. And, yes, I had very clear lines. I did edit out quite a few things that I wasn't comfortable with and I included things that I think people should talk about.

Layla: In sort of parsing out, "This is mine and I'm not gonna share it with anyone," or, "This is my family's and it doesn't deserve to be — it doesn't — it's not gonna be shared publicly and this is what I will share," and in writing the book with that kind of clarity, when you got to the end of the process of writing the book, where did it leave you having gone through that self-reflective journey? How did you feel on the other side and what maybe were some shifts that happened for you that were maybe expected, maybe unexpected?

Pragya: I think, on one hand, I felt quite liberated, in a way, because I've written it, I was going to put it out in the world, I was going to share it, talk about it openly. I felt free of this kind of weight that I was carrying. Maybe sometimes we carry things as a weight because we're not sharing things with people. But I also felt scared and terrified of some personal details and intimate experiences being out in the world and I felt really terrified at certain stages and I had conversations with my editor about whether I should really include this or not and they were very supportive, they were like, "Whatever you want, wherever you are comfortable with," so I took some stuff out at certain stages. I kept going back to it and reflecting on how I feel today and how I would feel maybe in five years' time, you know? I might feel okay about this being out in the world in five years' time but maybe I won't be okay about putting it out in five years. And what if my children read it, smaller children read it in five years' time? I really thought about it quite a lot. It was a really big process and that's why I also weighed it up with

scientific data and analysis at every stage because I was going to use my memoir as a backbone rather than make it into just a memoir.

Layla: That's right. Yeah, no, it absolutely is and thank you for sharing that and I wanted to kind of ask you that question because I think that — and you say this at the beginning of the book when you're talking about like who should write a memoir, basically, right? And the conversation that we have with ourselves, like, "Oh, my life isn't so interesting," like, "Who's gonna care to hear about this?" but, oftentimes, what we deem as "mundane" is not mundane at all and it's actually very resonant with different people's experience and that they need to hear it from us so that they feel safe enough and comfortable enough to also say, "That was also my experience," or, "It reminds me of this other experience I had," and it encourages more of us to speak the truth and, at the same time, it's really scary. When I think about being a good ancestor and I see you as a literary good ancestor is that it's not that you have no fear and you're just like, "Oh, I'm gonna share all of this stuff about myself," right? And it's fine, it's like it's a very deliberate choice and it's still, on the other side of it, still have those niggling thoughts, "Did I make the right choice? Is this correct? Did I do the right thing?" And, at the end of the day, I think what matters above everything else is that you did something and that, in reading, and I can just say from my own experiences, again, in reading this book, it has brought me — it is bringing me so many layers of myself to be able to investigate further what it means to me, Layla, to be a woman; what it means to me, Layla, to be a mother; what it means for me as I'm raising my children, one boy, one girl, right? And how their experiences are different but also I have to make sure that, you know, I'm not passing along biases to them as well. There's just so much in it and it's why it's so important that, whatever your

field, writing, researching, whatever it is, that people show up and share so I just wanna say thank you. Thank you for that.

Pragya: Thank you so much. Yes, I think all that you've said I think is so, so important. We are overcoming our fear. We are not unafraid but it's about how we overcome that fear and why we write things. I think we write things so that people can see themselves in it as well and become unafraid maybe of saying out loud things that they've been afraid about. Somebody just posted on Twitter about how reading this book not as a mother had made them feel so seen and made them feel so heard for the first time and they're not a mother, they didn't want to be a mother, they felt that they would never read a book with a title like that but then they read it and they've had all these feelings that have emerged and I think that is such a strong response to something, a piece of writing, because I think piece of writing should make us think and maybe change things in a little bit as well as you very well know —

Layla: Absolutely. Absolutely. Pragya, so I've talked a number of times about the intro to the book and I wanna pick out something else that I felt was really powerful in this intro and then it's sort of threaded throughout. So, we already talked about the fact that we don't often see, it's not the sort of mainstream thing to see a book about motherhood that centers people of color but not only that, you also speak about, at the outset, the fact that being a woman is also not a one-dimensional thing and being somebody who births, you know, gives birth into life is not also — you don't only have to be a woman to do that and so you speak about that and the fact that there are all kinds of people of all genders who are experiencing motherhood or not motherhood in different ways but, at the same time, that you were really clear that that is not your experience to write about because it's not your lived experience and also, and I felt like this was so key, that you

didn't just want to say things just to say them because that felt very tokenistic and performative. And then, throughout the book, what you point out, I think, almost in every chapter and every main thing that you talk about is the fact that we also need to bear in mind the experiences of trans-women, trans-men, non-binary, gender non-conforming people but that there's also such a dearth of research. There is no research that's being done. There is very little material from which we can draw from to include in. So, I wanna o ask you about sort of that part of the book, the way that you were trying to tell your story. Speak to the research that exists but also not make anyone else feel excluded from this conversation and also draw — it felt like it was drawing attention to me again and again to know, yes, there are these certain areas where you experience being oppressed or being marginalized but there are other areas that you are very, very privileged and that even a book like this still really centers me, because I'm cisgendered and heterosexual, so can you talk to us about how you went about kind of forming your thoughts around that and how you wanted to make sure that everyone was seen as much as possible in the book?

Pragya: I think I've thought a lot about what being a woman means. I grew up in a very patriarchal society where there's this notion of what a girl, what a woman is and how a girl or a woman is supposed to act or behave or what is expected from them is laid out from birth, basically, and so I've thought a lot about what being a woman means and then, writing this book, I was thinking more about what being a woman means, what being a mother means, and I know we have such a polarized debate and discourse around it at the moment that it's very difficult to create some kind of meaningful, well-informed discussion around it, but what I wanted to do in this book is also not just say — if I had centered just my experience and said, "I am so oppressed and I face so many biases and

prejudice and so that's why I'm writing this book," then that means I'm just centering my experience again and not thinking about the intersectionality of experiences and identities. And, for me, that is really, really important because, until we think of that, how can we know that, actually, we face biases and oppressions but we also carry privileges while some other people do not, might not have the same privileges? And, for me, that has always been very important and something I want to pass on to my children as well that they have to be aware of the biases they might face because of their identities but they also have to be aware of the privileges that they have because of their status in life and society so that they can be allies. They can be good supporters of other people. They can uplift other people who don't have the same privileges. And in doing — in writing this book, I was thinking so much about, as a person of color, as a woman of color, being on the fringes or marginalized in a lot of discourses but there are other people who are even further marginalized, who do not even have — who are not even part of the discourse, who do not even — the discourse doesn't even consider them as important.

Layla: Right.

Pragya: And I think, for me, that was really, really important to bring across that, look, yes, I am not the center of the discourse, I don't have an idealized body shape or body which is considered an idealized woman in many debates and discourses and narratives in our society but there are many others, and so it's about — which bodies are considered the norm and which bodies are not considered the norm was also one of the things that I wanted to think about. Yes, I didn't want it to be tokenistic. I don't want to speak for other people. I don't want to speak for people who often don't even have the voice because I shouldn't be the one speaking for them. They should have a platform —

Layla: That's right.

Pragya: — they should have a voice to speak and we need to do that. We need to create space for people who don't have a voice. So, in doing so, in writing this book, I was hoping that while I was creating space for maybe women of color to talk about their motherhood and mothering experiences, by bringing and highlighting some of the other demographics and other groups and communities who are marginalized and the prejudices they face, I could create a space where they could have a voice and where they might become part of the discourse as well. I spoke to quite a few people, but still not enough.

Layla: Right.

Pragya: I don't want to —

Layla: You say something —

Pragya: Yeah.

Layla: You said something in there like, you know, even if I spoke with like 100 people who belong to, you know, the LGBTQIA community, it's still not enough, right? Because each person's experience is their experience and, in the same way that we as women of color don't want to be made a monolith by white people, we should also not be making other people a monolith as well. So I just — I felt that that was — it was a real masterclass for me in really understanding how do I write about my experiences and talk about myself while not excluding other people but also not trying to speak for them because their experiences are vastly different to mine and it is not my place to do that. My place is to make space for them.

Pragya: Yes, exactly. And I try and make it very clear that this book and the terminology I use and the way I write about things is through my lens, because this is my lived experience, this is my body, this is my embodied experience in the world and we make sense of the space and the world around us through our bodies and the shape it takes and the space it takes and the way we interact with other people and they interact with us and that's how we form a sense of our lived experiences. So, yes, it is through that lens. But, in doing so, there are other narratives that we need to consider as well if you really want to have an honest conversation about womanhood and motherhood and we need to include — do more research studies, more scientific studies. More data needs to be collected —

Layla: Absolutely, being — so it really got me thinking about, okay, so why aren't there the studies, right? It's that people who hold those identities are probably being excluded from being in those spaces where they can be funded, where they can receive their education, everything. It's not just — it's not that outright exclusion, it's the ways that they're cut off in the same ways that we are cut off from even being in those spaces, to even having our voices heard so it's brilliant. Thank you so much for including that. Pragya, okay, so you talk in the book about the idea of paradoxes, right? And you talk again about that at the beginning and I'm like, "I wonder why she's talking about this?" Like what is a paradox, right? And the idea of choice but you don't really have a choice and then as I'm reading the book, I'm like, "Oh, okay, I see it." I see it again and again and again the ways in which multiple truths exist at the same time and how we think we know what something is and then there are other layers to it and it really gets you thinking about, "Am I free to make a choice when I live in a cultural context of what it means to be a woman or what it means to be

a mother? Is this really what I want or is this what I think I should want because it's what's being reinforced to me again and again and again?" So it was kind of mind-boggling and I feel like that the cover, it's a beautiful cover, by the way, but it kind of — it really reflected to me the fact that we are whole, we are whole inherently, but what is being reflected to us again and again is this idea of our brokenness and are not-enoughness and us not knowing what's best for us and so having society set up in such a way that it's making the choices for us even though we think that we have choices. So, I wanna start with, first of all, just that as a general question, how was writing that for you and was it kind of mind bendy for you trying to find your way through of like, "What is it that I am actually trying to say here when there are so many layers to it? What is it that I'm actually trying to get across?"?

Pragya: It is. It is a bit because how do we write precisely about ambivalence? That is a question that I kept coming back to. How can I use precise language and write in a way that is normative, that is considered normative and that we are expected to write, that is considered good writing, about things that are not very clear, you know? They're not as clear as we think they are and it was really — it was trying to find the word, it was trying to find my way to it as well, in a way, so there were multiple drafts and I wrote quite a lot and then cut down and trying to find always my route through this maze and — because I was also reflecting on the choices, as you say, that I made and whether I made these choices because I really wanted to make these choices or whether I thought I should make these choices because they were the right choices and what do I think about these choices and I think we can't talk about choices or ambivalence in a very precise manner without considering the different frameworks of context that we operate in and I think that's why the notion of paradox, because there's always this —

Layla: Yes.

Pragya: But there's also the paradox of how — a constant paradox of this push and pull of why we are idealizing certain things but also stigmatizing them at the same time.

Layla: At the same time, right, right, right. So, let's start talking about this. So, you start off the book actually not talking about motherhood but talking about what it meant to be a girl in the context of, you know, the place where you were born and grew up, the family that you, you know, your parents, your immediate family, and the fact that your mother herself had gone through a number of miscarriages before, you know, before you were born and that, as you mentioned earlier, because of the society that you lived in, giving birth to a son was the first thing that was desired and you were not a son and that impacted you and your relationship with your parents and how — I was really struck, at one point in the book, you talked about the fact that you were just like — you would say, "I'm a boy, I'm not a girl, I'm a boy," but, at the same time, in the back of your mind, you knew girlhood is coming, right? A period is eventually coming. Can you talk to us a little bit about that? And, as I read it, I thought about how I — so I'm the eldest, I have two younger brothers. When I was young, I really rejected skirts, dresses. Did not like them, they felt very restrictive, I couldn't run around, and I felt like if you wear something like this, you're just supposed to sit down, right? Like you're not supposed to do anything else. So I rejected it. Now, as an adult, I love skirts, I love dresses, but I see the same thing with my daughter so she's also the firstborn, eldest, and she went from just being the most Disney Princess girl you've ever — which wasn't me, that was all her, just the most Disney Princess girl you've ever seen, to being very much just won't wear skirts, won't wear dresses and I see her rejecting these ideas of being

feminine in the same way that I did and I really idealized my father, I remember, when I was young as well and really rejected becoming the thing that was my gender which was my mother. So, when I read yours, I was like, “Oh, it’s not just me who did that. It’s also not just my daughter. Pragya did it as well,” and I sense it’s more common than we think it is. So, tell us about that.

Pragya: It’s really interesting to hear your experience so thank you for sharing that. I’m glad that it wasn’t just me either. But, yeah, I think we talk about being a woman, we talk about what being a woman means, but I wanted to start from the very start because now I’m seeing my children grow up, my smaller children grow up, I also saw my older daughter grow up, and we have to think about how these ideas are shaped from the moment they’re born, really, you know? How they are thinking and why they’re becoming the way they are. We talk a lot about girls are supposed to be like that and boys are supposed to be like that and I reject some of those ideas of the girls’ brains and boys’ brains are different and I reject these ideas because I believe that there’s a lot of socialization that goes on, these kind of trappings of what is feminine and what is masculine, these behaviors that are imposed on children from a young age. And if you grow up in a society where — or you’re always seeing this kind of idea that, oh, because your parents don’t have a boy, they are somehow not as good as other people or that they’re going to struggle in life or the fact that people would pity them because, oh, every time we said, “Oh, we are three sisters,” they would look at us with pity and so you kind of start wondering from a young age, why is that? Why am I not good enough, you know? And what does being a boy or a man would mean in this society? I always used to wonder that. What if I was a boy? How would I feel? How would I react? Maybe not as consciously and deliberately as I’m doing now but it must have been underlying some of my

behaviors and some of the things that I said and did because I don't know why I was like that, you know? That I was just rejecting all these feminine trappings, believing that they were inferior. I suppose you kind of internalize these things and you think, "If only I could take over that persona, I would be free. I would liberate my parents from the shame that they carry for my mother or my parents for not having a boy or a son. I could be the one that they could fall back on when they're older. I would be the one who will take care of them. I don't have to get married, I don't have to have children," all those kinds of ideas that are imposed on you so I was rebelling against that because this is always like, "Oh, you could choose a career because that would be easier for you and when you get married, it will be easier for you to do that from home where you look after children," so you're constantly rebelling against that. And I could see that girls were not supposed to play out on the streets, they were not supposed to behave in a certain way, there were certainly lots of social pressures around them so I was constantly rebelling against those, kind of anything that made me look feminine or anything. But, yes, I mean, we still talk about, even in this culture, we talk about how having period is the threshold for womanhood. Now you're a woman and that kind of transition has happened and I was recently discussing that on social media but also with a number of other people. In my newsletter, I was talking about first period stories from a number of women and they were talking about how they were told, "Now you're a woman," and you're suddenly — you might be as young as 10 or 11, how do you suddenly go from becoming a girl to becoming a woman? How do you just kind of become that? And that's something I wanted to talk about in this chapter.

Layla: And that, crossing that threshold, I remember for me, like the prospect of it was this thing that I was really looking forward to. I wasn't scared of it. I think my daughter's scared

but, for me, it was something that I was really looking forward to but I think because I had this idea of what it meant, right? And, actually, it happens and you're still the same person but it also becomes this point where you become even more aware of what it means to be a woman in the world and how the world is seeing you and that there are things that you're not supposed to do anymore or judgments that are going to be made about you and it does become very, very scary and that continues for the rest of our lives. You talked about — so, obviously, the book is about motherhood and the choices of or not choices of being a mother, not being a mother, maybe the choice has been made for you or you're being denied the choice to not be a mother anymore, right? If pregnancy was a result of abuse, of sexual assault. There's so much in there but it was very interesting to me to read about how we are — so talking about paradoxes, how we have historically and still in modern times were seen as our primary role as human beings, women, is to have children and to continue the human race and, at the same time, we're stigmatized for it, we are denied privileges for it. We are punished if it's, you know, in certain cultures and societies, if it's not, you know, if it's not a male, if it doesn't happen fast enough or whatever it is and we're supposed to hold all of that which seems like, okay, we're supposed to be really freakin' powerful then, right? Like we're — but like, no, right? That's not what's happening. And that who would we be allowed to be, who would we have the permission to be if our primary role was not seen as, "You are here to be mothers, to make children so that we can continue the human race."

Pragya: Yeah, exactly. How would we be, how would we see ourselves, how would we tell our stories, what would be — what things we could do and not do? I mean, all those kinds of things are really mind-boggling to think about but I think also talking about menstruation or period, it was important that,

yes, that is seen as a threshold to womanhood and that, in some ways, that is what allows us to be the people that society expects us to be, to give birth or to — we are taking on that role. But then, how is that considered dirty and filled with shame as well? And then, from that moment, yes, you talk about invisibility — I talk about invisibility. Invisibility, how we are hidden but also seen at the same time, and, through history, we see that women have been so associated with their womb. If we talk about medical professionals in the past, women were so intrinsically linked to their womb that even mental illness was seen as a cause of a dysfunction of the womb, which is hysteria, and which was called and so it was like we are just a walking womb and nothing else, kind of. That's the feeling you get. And, yes, you're judged for, even if motherhood comes, if you've not given birth to a son, then you're not as valued or you don't have the same status. So, within motherhood, there are different hierarchies as well so it's not just one, that you become a mother or not become a mother. Within motherhood or within not giving birth as well or not choosing to give birth or — is also there, these different hierarchies and we don't often talk about that because we homogenize that and every step of motherhood or making this choice is fraught with kind of anxiety because we have to consider so much, not just about our own bodies but who's telling us about our bodies. Often, these decisions are made for us by other people through legal frameworks that are imposed on us, through the societal norms that are imposed on us, so, yes, how do we make sense of our bodies where our sexuality is stigmatized but giving birth is considered valuable? Where the body that's carrying a child or not carrying a child is not seen as valuable but the act of giving birth is considered as valuable? And within the act of giving birth also, there's all these stigmas and pressures of whether you've given birth naturally or not and so women are supposed to bear pain and give birth a certain way to be considered valuable and not the

other way. So, all these — there's so much pressure and guilt associated with every choice we make.

Layla: Absolutely. What you were just saying about, you know, the so-called natural childbirth, that part really struck me as well because with my firstborn, I had a very early C-section because we had some issues with her in my pregnancy and that left me like I don't want children for a long time after that. She was she was born very small. She was in the NICU for a really long time. She then had some health issues as a result of that. And it was just — it was a lot. So when it came to my second born, my son, you know, I really wanted a natural birth. I felt like I had been robbed of this opportunity in my first birth. I felt like I wasn't a "real mother," right? I think part of that comes from — I always wanted children but didn't necessarily see myself as a very motherly kind of person and then having this childbirth, which was very traumatizing and it being a cesarean which wasn't what I planned for, it kinda felt more like she got evacuated out of my womb as opposed to being the idealized, homogenous idea of childbirth that we are given as, "This is the norm," and it was so striking to me that when we were going through that with my firstborn and I thought, I never — I did all of this preparation throughout this pregnancy and never at any point did I think I'm going to have a premature baby. Never at any point. And it made me really think about how often are things like this happening but it's not what we see. When we're reading books about motherhood, when we're seeing adverts about motherhood, it's just this seamless journey and that's not my experience and then, when it came to my second born, I really had to advocate for myself to be able to have a VBAC, vaginal birth after cesarean, and, you know, I would go from doctor to doctor to doctor and nobody wanted to do it. They would just advise against it and say, "Have a cesarean, have a cesarean," and it was so frustrating because I had read, you know, the science that it was okay and it was possible to do

that but I was having doctor after doctor after doctor telling me, “We’re gonna make this choice for you,” right? And so, I mean, thankfully, in the end, I did get to have that experience that I wanted to have and I kind of had to find a doctor over here and bring them to another hospital over there but, again, it was like, “This is my body. Why am I not getting the choice to choose how I want this experience to be?” And that happens to so many of us in so many different ways throughout the journey of motherhood. What is it about being a woman that is judged as we don’t have the same mental facilities or the ability to kind of, you know, make those decisions that is happening to us, because that’s how I felt. I was like, “I’m a rational person, you know? I’ve read, I’ve researched. I think it’s okay to do this,” and yet they’re telling me no.

Pragya: Yeah, I — so sorry to hear that experience and that’s a common experience where women’s narratives or beliefs about their own body are not trusted. But I think it’s kind of laid down in our society and we don’t think that that’s the case but if you look back to Greek philosophers where they first started talking about these binary dualistic notions of gender and sex and how men are more rational and women are more emotional, they started saying that and that was laid down where emotionality was associated with women and rationality and logic was —

Layla: And vilified as well.

Pragya: Yeah, absolutely. It’s vilified because emotionality is not rational and so men are rational and logical and they’re supposed to make all the important decisions and women are emotional and they act on impulse and so they cannot be trusted because they don’t have the sense of logic behind them and that is also the dualistic thing in narrative where rationality versus emotionality is being laid down as well, that either

you're rational or either you're emotional. Emotions are considered not good, you are too much or too little or whatever, all those kinds of things that are associated with women and, yes, women are often seen as overreacting and that is why women's stories in medical domain is not believed about their own bodies, about endometriosis, during pregnancy, during childbirth. Even if they want to have a C-section or a natural birth, even if during fertility, if you want to ask questions, you're always seen with like suspicion about, "Why do you want to ask all these questions? Don't worry your little head about it because it's okay, we're making all these decisions for you," and I think so much of it really frustrates me and so much of it is also deep — it underlies the kind of bias in medical healthcare through professionals and in diagnosis and treatment and we know that when gender and race intersect, it is even more heightened. We know that black and Latina women get four times or five times less painkillers during childbirth. Sometimes, black women die five times more in childbirth and maternity and all those kinds of things. We know that this data exists because there is bias in women. It's not about women not standing up for themselves, it's because, even if they stand up, they're not believed. So many times I've gone to the doctor and they've written down, "She looks okay to me," on their records and, until something really bad happens, until somebody else intervenes, until I have to go to the emergency and that's not a rare incident across all the women. So, yes, I think when it comes to women's bodies, they are still considered emotional and overreacting and they're not considered rational or logical. We also have this kind of — we know that more than 70 percent of medical professionals are still men and so men are making the important decisions and we let them because we also have kind of a status bias because we believe that anybody in status knows more than us and we want them to be on our side. We don't want to threaten the men in power or in status so that's another thing we've

internalized. I know from my own experience it's kind of really like art, like you don't know much or you don't want to ask too many questions or you don't want to contradict what they're saying so that they will always be on your side because you're in a very vulnerable position when you go to a doctor. So, yes, I mean, it is so hard to advocate for yourself when you're in a position like that but it is something that has to be examined from a young age, but also through our medical textbooks which are very gendered as well, through the training that's given to medical professionals as well.

Layla: You spoke about, earlier on in one of the chapters, about how, in school, we learn about sex and, you know, the sperm and the egg and fertilization and everything like that and how the languaging that's used to describe the sperm and what the sperm is doing and the languaging used to describe the egg and what the egg is doing is very gendered, right? The sperm is like rushing to get to the egg, it's this active energy and it's gotta be the winner to get there and the egg is just sort of passively floating, right? Just waiting for the sperm in shining armor, right? To come and do the thing that needs to happen. And you break down the science of actually how it happens and that the egg is not just passively not doing anything there and how that then — so we learn that at a very young age and that gets ingrained in us as well, right? As this is what male energy is, this is what female energy is, and how that continues along. It's very damaging. Very, very damaging.

Pragya: Very toxic, absolutely, yes.

Layla: Yeah.

Pragya: We start believing that our role is to be passive and calm and all these feminine stereotypes that are imposed on us like nurturing and caring and just wait patiently while the men

are supposed to take charge and be in control and so we start believing that and we start internalizing these messages as well and it's a very toxic narrative and I worry for women who internalize these messages and who start believing that this is our destiny, this is our role in life to be like this.

Layla: Right. Right. It starts at such a young age and it's so ingrained in ways that we don't question unless we read things like this that make us question it. Pragya, you have shared in this book your journey with infertility and I felt that that was so powerful for you to share it. Again, it made me think about my own experiences. I had my first child fairly quickly and then when it came to making the choice to have my second one, it took a really long time to conceive and I remember this year-long journey of, "What's wrong with me? What's wrong with my body? What am I not doing right?" and, also, again, with those messages around it's supposed to be what we are told by society is if you're not conceiving, it's because of a default within you, the woman, and that it's heartbreaking in so many different ways but you also layer, on top of your own journey and the science, you also layer within that who gets to be seen as the sort of standard image of what infertility looks like and who is encouraged to have children and who is restricted from having children. Can you talk about that?

Pragya: Yeah. I mean, the more I researched about it, the more it is clearer that so many of these messages are very racially charged and it's rooted in racism. It's rooted in systemic structural inequities. It's rooted in the hierarchies that are imposed on us in our society. So, we — if you look at the history of that, we know that women of color, indigenous women were often seen as hyper-fertile, that they would give birth very easily, that they can have large families, that they can have children at the drop of a hat while, because of imperialism and colonialism, there was a need for white women to

reproduce so that there would be more white children or children of a certain desirable characteristic and it was called the Great Replacement Theory around that they wanted to make sure that there wasn't — certain kinds of people were more than other kinds of people who are less desirable in society and I think there's all this hype around low birth rate that I'm seeing, which also terrifies me at the moment. It's also linked to some of these narratives as well about whose low birth rate are we concerned about more than others, and if you look at fertility or infertility data, until very recently, it wasn't desegregated that much. We didn't know how many Asian or black women or women of African Caribbean origin or, in the UK, I'm talking about, because I had access to that data, are going and getting fertility treatments because often due to social cultural pressures. We find that women don't talk about it because of community pressures, because it's still seen as stigmatized, infertility in a number of societies and communities. But, also, they don't get recommended for IVF or infertility treatment or medicalized interventions until much later compared to white women because doctors assume that it is going to be okay for them because women of color are considered to be hyper-fertile so they don't have access to these treatments. In the US, we also know that many women of color, working-class women are more likely to not have access to infertility treatments because they are on the lower socioeconomic strata so they, because of insurance and because of free access not being there, they don't have access to it. So I also wanted to talk about how it's very stratified. It's about how some of these — we talk about infertility, we talk about low birthrate, but we still don't talk about the imaginaries, the invisibles who are not even considered as part of this discourse because they are not considered to be the ones who are the desirables, you know? So, I think that is something that we really need to talk honestly about it and I think even when we talk about abortion, there is a whole racial

underlying argument to pro-choice campaigners as well, pro-life camp.

Layla: Can you can you talk about that? Because I also found that just a really important thing to understand.

Pragya: Yeah, I think it's linked to the same thing about — I recently wrote an article for *Byline Times*, if people are interested. It's about how, again, it's linked to the great replacement theory that women, white women, should give birth more so that they are not superseded by people of color, basically, and that is what underlines the pro-life campaigns a lot as well. I mean, we have to consider that a lot of the science that we even think about, science is not free of bias, it's also got the racial and patient bias underlying it in a lot of cases. Eugenics has seeped into many of our scientific theories still, especially in the medical domain, about who can bear pain more, whose skin is thicker, all those kinds of myths and misconceptions are still around that, around who has bigger wombs and bigger uteruses and who can — yeah, as I said, all these issues are, I think, something we're not still talking about, honestly. About infertility, I thought was a very white middle-class narrative, that still the representations we see of infertility and the discourse we have and the stories we hear are centering white middle-class narrative and women of color are often invisible in these discourses and so the specific pressures they might feel are also not considered, the specific biases and prejudices they might encounter are also not considered.

Layla: So, in the book as well, you talk about the fact that, in addition to kind of all of these other factors, there's also different decisions that women are making now based on modern life, what we live in, right? And people wanting to focus on their careers or making choices later in life about when they want to have children and, oftentimes, problems

with infertility that were always there aren't detected until later when a person makes a choice that they want to have children, but also how we don't live in a world that supports women "having it all." And I remember when I had my — so when I had my first child, I had been raised always as like, you know, "You gotta work hard, you're gonna go to university, you're gonna have this amazing career and all of this and also you're gonna get married, you're gonna have children," and I thought it would just all — I don't know how I thought it was all going to work out, right? Until I got pregnant and had this baby and I'm like, "I'm not working. What? I can't leave this child," but, also, I felt this great sense of disappointment, sort of heartbreak at the fact that, oh, like if I was a man, I could have a child and just continue on with my career but because I'm a woman, nobody prepares you for the fact that it's not going to be the same and that society itself doesn't support you being able to have it all and this is this great, again, like that paradox of "I have choice but I don't," you know? I can have the career but when it comes to the choice of "I want the children," absolutely, but I'm also thinking about so what's supposed to happen to my life now? Can you talk about that and how you have seen women trying to navigate that point in their lives?

Pragya: I mean, this is a huge thing, the discourse, and we have to look at the global picture again, I suppose. When I first became pregnant, suddenly, it was a huge shock, yes, because I realized that, oh, if I was a man, I could — yes, as you say, I could go out and do everything but people expect me to be the one staying at home. I can't even express that I want a career, that I'm ambitious because it's considered a dirty word. How can you prioritize yourself or your career compared to your child? So, again, it becomes like a binary thing, either you love your child and you sacrifice yourself completely or you do not and then it's implied that you don't love your child as much. And I suppose women internalize this guilt and so there's

always this motherhood guilt about “I’m not doing enough. I’m not prioritizing my child enough. If I’m going out to work, my child’s going to suffer,” and all these media panic around, oh, women are having problems conceiving because they’re prioritizing their career or the fact that their children are suffering, they have all these data that is kind of misconstrued by the media in terms of how children of working mothers suffer in their lives or they don’t attain as much or achieve as much and we look at that and this motherhood guilt, mom guilt is just heightened and just constantly drumming against our ears and thinking, “You’re not doing enough. You’re giving yourself time. You’re giving yourself space,” and so all that was happening and I don’t think anybody really prepares you for the reality, but now I think, especially on Twitter, social media, especially during the pandemic or lockdown, I think it became easier to say, “I’m struggling,” because everybody was in the same position. Our personal and professional lives kind of blurred these boundaries and everybody could see, men were working from home as well so it wasn’t just — I mean, women were carrying the emotional and mental load in many families but even in families which are very gender equal, like in my family, you feel like you’re supposed, you’re expected to carry more of the load because you’re the woman or the mother, but I think it became easier for people to say, “Look, actually, I can’t have it all. I can’t manage it all. My house is not that clean. My children are having ice cream for breakfast. I am letting them have it because I can’t do it all and I’m really angry sometimes.” There’s this notion when maternal rage became something that we were talking about more honestly about, “Yes, I get angry. I apologize and feel really awful after that but I do get angry because I sometimes feel like I can’t take it anymore,” and I think during my life when my children were really small, I, even five years ago when my twins were born, I remember the health visitor came and they were constantly saying, “Are you working too much? Are you doing your own work still?” and it’s

almost like I am putting them at a disadvantage by prioritizing myself by trying to do work and always looked at my husband, it's like, "Oh, poor him, he's going out to work but still looking after the children," and this was only five years ago so I think we take on this kind of responsibility that we are supposed to be more nurturing, more caring, we are not supposed to be maternal, it's our responsibility to do everything, we are supposed to look after the children and if you're not, we're bad mothers. And I don't think anybody could have it all. If whatever "have it all" means, I don't think so.

Layla: Right.

Pragya: Yeah. I mean, what does "have it all" mean? But I think we create this kind of idealized scenarios in our head that we will be perfect at everything we do, that we will not compromise at anything and I did that for a very long time. I created this kind of Superwoman myth around me that I will never ask for help, I will not show weakness, and I suppose that comes from being a woman of color where you don't show weakness or failure.

Layla: Yeah, I think it's both. I think it's being a woman and being a woman of color and expected to be the one to just not show pain, not show anything and just get on and move on with it and that's what really struck me as I read your book that I was like, wow, I went through a lot of stuff in my pregnancy and I just never — I just kept it moving, right? Part of it was just trying to cope in the moment but also that there's this expectation that, you know, it's to show that vulnerability and to really surrender to like, "This is what happened to me," is a sign of weakness and that — so it's really hard. So, I'm wondering how, with everything that you share in this book, and I really wanna encourage people to join the book club as well because we're gonna go deeper into this book there in the

discussions and we're also going to be having an author event with Pragya where our book club members can ask her their questions after having read the book so we'll definitely have a deeper discussion about this book. But I'm wondering, Pragya, after writing this book and all the research that you've done and just sort of examining your own personal story, how are you thinking about how you talk to your own children about womanhood and motherhood in ways that really, you know, prepare them and empower them but, also, the fact that we still live in a very patriarchal, racist world and, you know, because you share a lot of stuff in here about like ancient Greek philosophers and practitioners but many of those — they look different but it's still the same as what we're in now, in 2021, it just shows up differently, you know? A lot hasn't changed. So, how do we talk to our children about these things so that they are prepared, so that they feel that they have a sense of agency while the world still hasn't changed for them to fully be able to, yeah, to show up in their full selves in the way that they deserve to?

Pragya: It's such a difficult thing to do, difficult path to navigate, and I'm constantly thinking about it because I want to — I'm raising them and saying, "Your bodies, your choice," you know? You choose for your bodies. You should have the ability and autonomy and agency to make your own choices. But as they grow older, I still have to protect them from racial bias and from sexism and from misogyny and all that and when they go out in the world, they will get harassed and they might get abused or they, whatever, I need to be able to protect them so how do I talk to them that, okay, I'm telling you to be a feminist, I'm telling you to be a strong feminist, but you still cannot do some of these things because, you know, society looks at you like that so then I start thinking so I'm actually limiting this narrative but I'm giving the message —

Layla: Right, am I enabling? Right.

Pragya: Yeah.

Layla: Yeah.

Pragya: Because I'm saying that you should think about what others think of you but, at the same time, saying, you should be able to make your own choices. I'm constantly thinking about it. I think I've had to — in bringing up my older child and now, I think through the years, I've had to unlearn a lot of these messages that I had internalized myself and the fact that I might be enabling some of these messages because I wanted to protect her so much from anything like what I might have faced in the world. But, also, I think I just want them to know that they have the ability to respond to some of these things that they might face, that they are empowered, that they have the tools and the strategies to face it and to respond to it in a sense that I maybe didn't have the language to be able to retort to some of these things. And then it's not their responsibility how others behave and do what they do but they cannot internalize the shame. It is not their fault if something happens because they didn't do anything. It's not because they were wearing a short skirt, it's not because they went out late at night, but it's a constant fear or terror that you live with about how do I navigate this very tricky part of empowering them and making them feel like their bodies are their own but still protect them, you know?

Layla: Yeah. What is it that you want your readers to take away from this book, having read it? Because I'll tell you, again, from just my own experience, there's a lot still settling, you know? Where I'm like, oh, you know, I never thought about that or just sort of mining my own memories of things that either I thought were normal, like what we were talking about with

how the textbooks describe how, you know, sex happens, or I knew it was wrong at the time when it was happening, I knew it wasn't fair that, for example, I was being treated differently to my brothers but there was no backing for me, right? There was no way for me to speak or to say it or even if I said it, I would not be supported, and I'm really just sitting with all of that and really examining what that means for me and really trying to better understand how I see myself as a woman and a mother. What is it that you would like your readers to take away from it?

Pragya: I think you've summed it perfectly, in a lot of ways. I think, yes, I would hope that they see themselves in some way that it makes them reflect on their own journey and their own experiences and make them maybe aware that it's not their fault, that, if they ever felt shame or hidden certain aspects of their stories, it wasn't their fault. I think that is something that I really want people to think and understand. Also, maybe people feel more emboldened and empowered to make choices about motherhood and about what kind of woman we want to be. There is no standard norm. There shouldn't be a standard norm for a woman or a standard norm for a mother. So, how do we break out of these shackles and these boxes? And I suppose some of the polarized discourses I get terrified by or maybe a bit unsettled by because I feel like so much work that went into feminism to break some of these boxes, we are trying to put those boundaries around us again and saying, "Actually, this is what I am and I don't want anybody else in," and I think I really want people to also reflect on their privileges through this book and think, "How do I create space for other people who don't have the same privileges?"

Layla: That's wonderful. Well, you are definitely — your intention and the impact are definitely matching for this book for me and I know that our book club members are going to

love this book. We cannot wait to be in conversation with you again for our private author event and I wanna encourage everyone listening to this episode, if you haven't read *(M)otherhood*, pick it up, it's an incredible book, and if you'd like to join us for discussion in the book club, you can go to goodancestorbookclub.com for more information. Pragma, this was such a pleasure and, before I ask you our final question, I just wanna say thank you once again for what you've contributed here with this incredible book. I actually can't wait to go back and read your other books because when I first heard about you, I discovered you on Instagram and it was from your other book cover so the one about talking to children about race and I was like, "I want an —" because I'm writing a young reader's edition, right? *Of Me and White Supremacy* so I was like, "I wanna read that book and I wanna speak with her," and then found out that you had a newer book coming out and I was like, "That is a good topic, I really wanna talk about that," and you're just such an incredible writer and so generous with your story and I love writers who are able to layer the two, the personal with the research, and really get us thinking about what is it that we thought we knew that we don't actually know and, if we knew, how might it empower us to think differently about ourselves and about the world and you do that so seamlessly so I just wanna say thank you so, so much.

Pragma: Thank you so much, Layla. This means so much. It's been a huge pleasure and I've such huge admiration for you for so long so this is like a dream come true. Thank you so much for speaking with me.

Layla: Oh, thank you, Pragma. Thank you so much. So I'm gonna ask you our final question now: What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Pragya: Yeah, I think I want to create a better world for my children and for the future generations. If, through my lifetime, I can create some change, even a little bit, for them to inherit a more equal world, a more equitable world, where they have the freedom to express themselves, I think I would have been successful to be a good ancestor.

Layla: Thank you, Pragya. Thank you. I'm right there with you. That's my mission too so thank you.

Pragya: Thank you so much, Layla.

(Outro)

This is Layla Saad and you've been listening to Good Ancestor Podcast. I hope this episode has helped you find deeper answers on what being a good ancestor means to you. We'd love to have you join the Good Ancestor Podcast family over on Patreon where subscribers get early access to new episodes, Patreon-only content and discussions, and special bonuses. Join us now at Patreon.com/GoodAncestorPodcast. Thank you for listening and thank you for being a Good Ancestor.