

**Zafar, Samra. (2019). A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose – A Memoir.
Toronto: Harper Collins.**

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Samra Zafar's memoir "A Good Wife" tells of her childhood in the United Arab Emirates, her young arranged marriage to a stranger eleven years her senior, and resulting move to Canada. Zafar's memoir follows her precarious marriage breakdown, while outlining her struggles and barriers to her dream of higher education. Zafar highlights her experiences in navigating the different roles she finds herself in as a teenaged immigrant, new wife, daughter in law, and mother. She displays her growth and development as she is abruptly torn from her known world and essentially dropped in an entirely new country, family dynamic and culture, alone with her new husband who she has only met a handful of times. These new roles come to her with a long list of non-communicated expectations that present a stark contrast to her independent personality and upbringing. Zafar quickly realizes that the appealing life she has been promised has been a façade.

Zafar begins her story at her mehndi, a pre-wedding party, where she describes herself as being stricken with panic at the thought of what she has agreed to. The book quickly jumps around before the wedding celebrations and back again, then to her childhood where she illustrates how she was raised in what would be considered a very liberal Indian family. Her upbringing plays a key role in many of her future interactions. The strict traditional gendered roles were not applicable in her immediate family. Zafar and her sisters were encouraged, particularly by their father, to be dreamers, play sports, defend themselves, pursue academics and prominent careers and above all

to think for themselves and be independent. They were taught that they were equal to males. “I don’t have four daughters, my father said with a laugh. I have four sons” (p. 10). This was in stark contrast to almost all of their female peers. As Zafar enters her teenage years, she begins to notice how these values were not supported by the public. Although her parents were raising their girls this way, they themselves were a part of a traditional arranged marriage. Zafar also witnessed her father’s physical and mental abuse toward her mother on multiple occasions throughout her childhood. She also outlines multiple incidents of being sexually molested by seemingly trusted male figures in her family life as she matures. There is a clear environment of male dominance outlined, even within this seemingly modern family.

Zafar recounts that when she was fifteen years old, her family received a marriage proposal from another family in the area. Their son was twenty-six years old and lived in Canada. Although her parents had raised her to be independent, they pressured her to consider the marriage. Many family members and peers relished in this proposal, forcing her to consider only the positive aspects of this arrangement. Again, her modern upbringing was displayed in contrast to the cultural norms of her peers. Only her immigrant British teachers seemed to find the idea appalling and encouraged her to consider first her own future and education. After originally turning down the proposal, multiple promises and reassurances were made by the proposing family about her being allowed to continue her education, pursue a career and the advantages she would be afforded in Canada. Eventually Zafar relents and agrees to the marriage, insisting on receiving support in her future education. After finishing grade eleven, reaching her sixteenth birthday, and with a few short encounters with her future husband, they are a married couple alone in Canada.

Shortly after arriving in Canada and having a few happy months alone together, Zafar's in-laws arrive and move in. Thus, begins the downward spiral of her marriage. She soon learns the extremely restrictive and degrading culture of her patriarchal family. The promises and façade of modernity are promptly dropped and it is made clear her role is simple, subservient possession. "Ahmed was telling the world that I was his property" (p. 129). The emotional abuse from her husband and his mother quickly becomes a daily routine. The abuse soon escalates into physical abuse as well, going so far that her husband even encourages his mother to also physically abuse her. "Why don't you grab her by her braid and give her a few slaps" (p. 133). Zafar demonstrates how she navigates the phases of highs and lows in the abuse cycle. She is not delicate or withheld in sharing the raw truths of her marriage, regardless of whether they may reflect negatively on herself. Her personal values are conflicted to her cultural norms in her struggle to repress her independent spirit in order to attempt to prove herself worthy to her abusers.

Though she is continually degraded, Zafar holds tight to her dream of university and quietly finds time to finish her high school education by correspondence. This was rife with many challenges as she is not allowed to leave the home by herself, is permitted little to no personal time, soon finds herself pregnant at 18, and is constantly rejected from continuing education, while being berated by her husband and in-laws for having the audacity to dream. "If we stop your education now, there's nothing wrong with that because you haven't achieved anything. We gave you the opportunity to get the real purpose of a woman's life... You should be grateful to us. So just forget about school." (p. 111). Any cry for help is met with increased outrage of her husband and complete dismissal by her mother in law. She is even encouraged by her own mother to endure

and try harder to be a “good wife”. Any idea of leaving her husband is crushed as she is made to believe that she is worthless and that the government would not allow a poor minority woman to keep her children.

Finally, small victories are accomplished and Zafar expertly finds ways to negotiate freedoms in her life, as long as they are disguised as being solely beneficial to her children or financially advantageous. She gradually begins to take control of her own life course without the knowledge of her husband or in-laws. After starting to earn a modest income with a childcare program in her home she is allowed to take some university courses so long as it does not interfere with her duties of home life, and she does not interact with anyone at all outside her home.

After a particularly arduous conflict with her husband, he dissolves their marriage by saying “Talaq” (p. 263) three times which constitutes divorce in her religion. Finally, after years of enduring abuse she has found a way out of her marriage, however, her struggles are not yet near the end. Zafar reflects on her experience of transitioning to single motherhood with two young daughters by her side, without the support of her culture, religion, friends, husband, and hardly her own family. She finds a new family in her university life. With the support of the financial aid department, university housing, and student association she perseveres in her extraordinary journey to self-sufficiency. In her determination she proceeds to graduate at the top her class and find her calling in becoming an instrumental support and example for women in abusive relationships.

Zafar is clear in her intention of positioning herself in this book as an overcomer rather than a helpless victim. There is no doubt in the extreme challenges and suffering she endured, but

above all, her message is clear to readers. She demonstrates how women in marginalized situations can find help and succeed, regardless of their limitations. Her memoir is one of hope and encouragement to women in repressive, abusive situations. She is a living example of having almost every barrier imaginable to becoming independent in Canada and yet she finds her way and far surpasses her goal of higher education and self-sufficiency. Zafar does a great job of outlining various options for women in abusive situations in her subtle stretches for independence and eventual escape. Her life story is shared in order to be an inspiration, to demonstrate that help is available and women are not resigned to the circumstances they are handed.

“A Good Wife” was an exceptionally engaging and exciting book, and I would recommend it for personal enjoyment as well as academic purposes. This memoir would be beneficial to studies focused on the abuse cycle, and the impacts of abuse on women and mothers within their family situations. The book would also be useful for anyone interested in the struggles faced by individuals in arranged marriages. Aside from the abusive aspects of the relationship the book gives insight into the learning curve of the couple and their families. Any field studying family and/or abuse would benefit from this work.