

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

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Samra Zafar's book, "A Good Wife" is the story of her incredible journey from a peaceful adventurous childhood in The United Arab Emirates, to an abusive married life in Canada. Zafar introduces many captivating themes in her book through the retelling of events from her life. The starting point for the book can be described as a major shift from her free-spirited childhood where Zafar's daring and individualistic attitude were encouraged, to a life of domestic conformity within an arranged marriage. Throughout the book, Zafar continually struggles with playing her culturally prescribed role of being 'a good wife', whilst fighting for her own dreams and ambitions. Zafar strategically divides her book into four progressive parts. The book begins by introducing her bright youthful ambition, which is revealed to often conflict with her deep cultural and familial expectations. There is then a focus on the transition into Zafar's married life, which begins in a fairytale like fashion but quickly falls into a life filled with lies, abuse, despair and hardship. However, this focus shifts again as she unrelentingly fights through the adversity and slowly begins to find independence after relinquishing her marriage. As the book winds down to the end, it is apparent that although the effects and remnants of Zafar's destructive marriage remain, she ultimately begins to thrive and succeed on the path to achieving a truly happy life.

Zafar's youthful ambition and rising internal conflict are apparent through her words and actions. Her recurring priorities are on education, a successful career, and marrying for love.

However, contrary to her beliefs, the concept of prioritizing an early marriage seemed instilled in the minds of her family and friends. One of Zafar's cousins even stated that "this is a women's destiny, after all" (p. 9). Unlike many of her friends and family, she showed a disinterest towards marriage and starting a family. However, when she is propositioned for an arranged marriage, she falls into conflict with her cultural and familial expectations. Zafar states, "I didn't want to get married but how could I reject something that was the envy of all my friends and young cousins?" (p. 17). The cultural implications and importance of marriage are continuously reinforced and subsequently become a source of conflict for Zafar. Despite having strong but subtle support from her father, Zafar was still pressured into reluctantly accepting the arranged marriage. While opportunities are presented for her to reject her familial obligations for marriage, Zafar does not possess the adequate support to make that decision. Her struggle highlights the importance of personal identity but also the difficulty of achieving aspirations when there are conflicting ideologies, and especially when an individual lacks emotional support.

The importance of marriage in Zafar's culture continues to be emphasized throughout her life, but matters become significantly worse when themes of a docile, obedient wife begin to manifest. A good example of this is immediately after Zafar's wedding, when her mother's friend Fatima, while preparing Zafar for sex says to her, "never stop your husband if he wants to do something (p. 69). Submissive concepts like this were encouraged to Zafar after her marriage and began to slowly deteriorate her youthful ambitious outlook on life. While there were bouts of happiness in Zafar's marriage and her husband exhibiting signs of care, assurance and support, it was often short lived, and followed by overwhelming abuse.

However, conflict did not always arise from Zafar's marriage alone, but another issue that should be highlighted is the conflict between her husband Ahmed and his parents. This can be observed through his erratic behaviour and constant mood swings whenever his parents are around versus when Ahmed was alone with her. As Zafar realized, "all I knew was that there was something about living with his parents that made Ahmed put a great distance between us" (p. 91). Despite Zafar's doubts, her optimism remained consistent with her desire to conform with the cultural importance of marriage and her obligation to make her husband happy. However, as Zafar and her husband's lives progressed, so did the culture of blame, duty, and subservience in their family. Divergent of Zafar's realization, Ahmed and his parents incessantly blamed Zafar for putting an apparent strain in their relationship and creating the problems in her own marriage.

The combination of blame, physical and verbal abuse Zafar suffered from her husband, created feelings of self-doubt and diminished her pride, self-esteem and dignity. She became indoctrinated with the idea that a wife must serve her husband and family at all costs. An example is when an in-law expressed to her that, even if a husband had sex with another woman right in front of his wife, she had to stay, or it would bring great dishonor to the family (p. 98). The problem was that her husband's abuse became so ordinary and extreme, that she didn't even register it as abuse, until a counselor helped her realize it. Up until that moment, she had never used the word 'abuse' whether in English or Urdu, and nobody she knew used that word (p. 230). The realization that Zafar had been experiencing the stages of abuse from her husband eventually inspired and pushed her to strive for a better life.

Despite all the abuse, Zafar continued to love her husband and was consistently hesitant to

leave him. This introduces the value and conflict of emotional support, which is accentuated after Zafar begins to have real doubt in the success of her marriage. When she was still attempting to fight for the ideal married life, albeit occasional, her husband was one of the only ones who provided her with emotional support. When she started secretly expanding her social circles and receiving the necessary support from her daughters, counselors, teachers, and friends, she could finally push towards the life she had always wanted. Zafar recognizes that emotional support and education were an integral part to success. However, what is most interesting is that Zafar did not continually blame her husband for all the difficulties in her life. During an interview for a scholarship, when asked ‘Who is the person who has taught you the most? Who has been the most influential?’, Zafar surprised herself and replied that it was her husband, because he taught her how not to treat people (p. 310). Instead of drowning in despair, Zafar used her abuse and failed marriage as an inspiration to revolt against her oppression, and fight for her happiness.

While some aspects of Zafar’s memoir can sound repetitive, it illustrates her struggle between individuality, and responsibility. It especially highlights the complexity behind abuse and love. As described in Zafar’s book multiple times, though her husband was abusive, there were many times when he was thoughtful and showed his version of love for her. This ultimately gave her hope that he could change and there was a possibility for the marriage to be saved. When an individual has a strong desire for something and is willing to achieve it by any means, abusive behaviour can seem justified and acceptable. In her husband’s own selfish way, perhaps he actually desired a happy marriage but because he was conflicted with his parental relationship and did not have the emotional support necessary to help him convey his feelings, he resulted to abuse.

Zafar's intended readership are those people who have gone through or are currently experiencing what she writes about. In addition, as the extended title of the book states, "Escaping the Life I Never Chose" can be relatable to anyone who has been forced into making a decision they did not want to make. While it isn't a theoretical book that distinctly states what one should or should not do, it is useful because it is a book that speaks from experience. Because Zafar's book is so personal, it becomes relatable not just for those who are going through an arranged marriage, but also those who are conflicted between their individuality and cultural obligations. In terms of the academic audience that would be interested in this book, I would suggest those studying in the fields of sociology, women's studies, feminist studies, social work, and cultural studies.

While some aspects of Zafar's life could never be imagined to someone who was born and raised in a place like Canada, what is important and relatable to everyone is the relentless fight for true happiness. Just as Zafar's husband was the most inspiring person in her life, we can use the negativity presented by his actions to know how not to treat people. Conversely, we can learn from Zafar to be more resilient, trusting of others, and realize that we aren't as alone as we may think. With the help people who unconditionally support us, anything is possible. I found "A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose" to be an expressive but truly inspiring story which was easy to read and difficult to put down. I would recommend it to anyone who is interested in a personal storytelling and heroic journey of fidelity, bravery and integrity.