

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

Reviewed by Sophia Quinton, MacEwan University.

“A Good Wife” by Samra Zafar, is a memoir following her journey through an arranged marriage and the turmoil that followed as she began her new life in Canada. She describes her situation of being married and leaving her family to move with her husband to a new country at eighteen and the abuse that followed.

The book starts with Zafar’s recollection of her upbringing, values and beliefs as a child. She recalls having a passion for education from a very young age. She has fond memories of studying and dreaming about future possible careers. Her parents, specifically her father, instilled the idea she could be anything she wanted and encouraged her to go to university. Early in the book, going to university is one of, if not the biggest, aspirations in her life. At age sixteen however, she was given a marriage proposal by a man who lives in Canada. While not something she wanted to do, she felt she had to accept the proposal for her family. Despite feeling it was a bad idea, the wedding proceeded and at seventeen, she was a married woman.

A year after her wedding, her Canadian permanent residency papers arrived. She was able to move to Canada with Ahmed to begin their new life together. At first, things between Ahmed and Zafar were going well, but she hit a road bump when she discovered she did not have enough credits to get into a Canadian university. Another complication strikes when she discovered she

was pregnant. While it caused problems by interrupting her education, her real hardships began when Ahmed's parents came to Canada and moved in with Zafar and her husband. Zafar details how this started to create tension between her and Ahmed. She illustrates how Ahmed's parents would purposely lie to cause problems between the couple. Afterwards Ahmed would get mad at Zafar while his mother would pretend to comfort Zafar to get information from her. Zafar recalls how unrelenting the abuse on her was both from her husband as well as her from her mother in law, and how they messed with her trust and emotions.

After Zafar's daughter, Aisha, was born, Zafar hoped the situation would improve but things seemed to get worse. Ahmed was abusing her both verbally and physically and she felt more helpless than she had in the past. She depended on Ahmed for money and had no resources or friends to help her escape, all while having a baby to take care of. Ahmed and his parents instilled a fear in her that even if she tried to leave, Aisha would be taken away. Zafar felt she had no choice but to stay. Some relief came to her when she went back home to Ruwais. During her first visit, her family learned how she was being treated, and decided she should not return to Canada. However, after more manipulation and false promises from Ahmed, her family thought she should give him another chance and go back. Soon after this, she returned home to Ruwais again for her sister's wedding. While Zafar was there, her family received news her father's kidneys were failing. While initially they found a donor for a kidney transplant and the surgery was successful, things took a turn for the worst after he had a heart attack and died shortly after. This was a significant incident for Zafar as her father had been the person in her life who had championed her education the most and was the most cautious about her relationship with Ahmed. This experience also

showed a change in her relationship to Ahmed. While he came to be by her side after her father's death, he quickly revealed he did not care about Zafar's feelings. She had a new disillusion towards Ahmed disclosing that "I had lost my father - and I had fooled myself into thinking I had someone else to lean on" (p. 197).

The death of Zafar's father took a large toll on her but also inspired a new outlook this time around, as she said, "but gradually, my father's words began to break through 'you don't need anyone else'" (p. 208). Shortly after, she gave birth to another baby girl, Sonia, but this time had a different outlook. Zafar knew a baby would not fix her marriage but thought of her baby as someone that would bring love and happiness into her life. She started to push her way to greater independence such as starting a childcare business and getting her driver's license. Then, Zafar's dream came true, acceptance into the University of Toronto. At first, attending is difficult because Ahmed and his parents disapprove of her pursuing education, and critical of her putting that before her family. Still, Zafar found great escape and joy in attending university. It is here where she finally found the resources she needed to really start understanding how unsafe her marriage was. Earlier in her journey her marriage made her feel isolated, scared and unhappy. But it was not until she spoke with a university counsellor, she started to understand the danger of her marriage noted by her words "Abuse. Until the counselor gave me that word, it was not part of my vocabulary" (p.230).

While Zafar was coming to terms with the severity of abuse in her marriage, it was still hard for her to let go of the idea of her family. One of the steps Ahmed took to make up with Zafar was for them to move away from his parents. While at first this helps, her life took another difficult

turn when her husband “divorced” her under Muslim law. This shocked her because while she was planning on leaving him in the future, she realized that it might happen sooner than she thought. This was preceded by a conversation with her mother where, to Zafar’s surprise, her mother told her to leave Ahmed. Even though she tried to leave after this, the situation remained complicated for her. Ahmed, while promising to help her through it in the beginning, made the divorce more difficult by being uncooperative and manipulative. Following this, Zafar went to file an official police report against Ahmed. However, this made her doubt even more what she was doing as she then felt she had gone too far by involving the police in her family's life, which was echoed by Ahmed’s mother as well.

Zafar’s lowest point hit when she no longer wanted to live and thought about suicide, but the thought of her children brought her off this ledge and gave a reason to keep pushing forward. After this, her life finally started to take an upward turn. University becomes a huge part of Zafar’s life as she lived on campus and worked there as well. She started to make friends and connections and soon was able to graduate. However, her achievements did not stop there, as she won a scholarship for the most outstanding student at the University of Toronto. That scholarship helped her go on to graduate school and eventually get a seat on the governing council for the University of Toronto.

Zafar’s story is one that required a lot of courage and bravery to speak about. She mentioned multiple times there are many people from her culture who still do not agree with the decisions she made. However, she forged her own path to freedom and reached her childhood dream of achieving a university education. Zafar tells her story in a way that is understandable and

holds your interest throughout. An important part of this book is how it showcases how hard it can be to leave an abusive relationship. While some assume a woman should just leave as soon as abuse starts, there are many complex emotions, as well as legal and financial problems, that may occur. Zafar showed this as she detailed how she repeatedly was told, and believed, that staying with Ahmed was best for her family, when the reality was, she and her daughters were getting hurt. Another important aspect of this book is dealing with the complex realities of arranged marriages, especially one with a girl in her teens. I think the audience that should read this book are people working with or who know women in abusive relationships to help better understand what they may be going through as well as women who are struggling in these relationships themselves. Those who study in the fields of psychology, sociology, women's studies, cultural studies and social work would also find this book informative as well. This book is educational in how it helps you to understand how a woman suffering abuse might think and what sort of support she might need. Another thing this book does well is informing Canadian readers of the type of relationships that can happen in this country. A lot of people may assume this is something that would happen in other countries, but it is a problem that is also prevalent in Canada. Some who read this book may be women who also need to escape abuse. It would have been helpful for this book to provide information or links to resources that could help others in this type of situation.

Overall, Zafar does a great job in telling her story in an engaging and emotionally captivating way. I think Zafar sharing her story can give hope to other women who are or have been in situations like hers.