

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

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The book “A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose”, written by Samra Zafar, is a memoir of Zafar’s life throughout her late teens to adulthood. It illustrates the journey she took during and after her arranged marriage as societal pressures pushed her parents to find her a suitable husband. Soon the promise of her new, progressive life in Canada with her loving husband faded into a vague memory. Zafar realized that things would not be as she believed. Her relationship soon turned abusive and her living situation was filled with fear and a lack of empathy. Her individuality was concealed, and she became the property of her husband, Ahmed. Later on, after the birth of two daughters, she began to establish a new life for herself. She finally attended university full time and used the support from her new community to pull herself from “the life she never chose.” Zafar’s book demonstrates the power of resilience and education, her captivating memoir has transformed many lives.

Zafar’s Islamic culture is a major theme throughout her book. Her culture consists of many strict demands that must be met. At the age of seventeen, her parents found what seemed to be a suitable match for her and jumped at the opportunity. By reading her memoir, one can tell she was not ready for marriage and to be taken away from her family and friends. Zafar did an amazing job at encompassing her fear during this point in her life to evoke the reader’s emotions. On her wedding night she was brought to Ahmed’s room by his sister, Fatima, and was told that she would

lose her virginity that night and must do whatever her husband demands. She was scared and uncomfortable, but she was now under her husband's rule. Although Ahmed does not force her into anything, her writing brings awareness to the fact that many women have to undergo these experiences. Zafar knew her new family adhered to Islamic culture, but she was led to believe they were open to a more modern way of life. However, they complied strictly to their beliefs. Ahmed's parents were central in his and Samra's relationship. Zafar had to spend her time alongside her mother-in-law and had to endure her constant insults. She could not find comfort in her husband, as his loyalty laid with his parents. Zafar made it clear she was living a strict life with no sympathy.

Religion is significant in Zafar's memoir. It provides insight into the intense devotion the Islamic community has to their God, Allah. They choose their religion and culture over everything else. Zafar's family was so disgraced by her tarnishing their family honour by getting a divorce, they provided her with no support when she needed it the most. Her own sisters stopped contacting her and her mother felt worlds away. She faced hostility and alienation all because she wanted a better life for herself and her children. Zafar's new family pushed their religion on to her in negative ways. Ahmed forced her to wear a hijab, even though it's a woman's choice, because he was insecure and jealous. If she didn't, he would call her awful names in an attempt to make her feel as if she was a disgrace to their faith. Samra's mother-in-law constructed a toxic environment by using their religious beliefs. Not only did Ahmed's parents make Zafar believe she was a bad mother, they also convinced her that she had no wifely skills and was a disappointment to their culture. They made her accept that she was bad at her faith and her given role just for making basic human mistakes. Zafar presumed she was marrying into a progressive family that had a western

and modern view on marriage. She believed she would be able to do everything she had always dreamed of in Canada. But she was lied to.

The cycle of abuse played a major role in “A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose.” Since the Islamic community possesses such a strong devotion to their culture and religion, many women justify the acts of their husbands because it is Allah’s will. Throughout their lives they are taught by their families that being treated in this manner is natural. Zafar’s own mother-in-law tells her that “It is perfectly permissible in Islam for a man to hit his wife. It is written in Koran. And other women have it much worse than you do, but they still stay. It is a good wife's duty to make things better” (p. 127). It was up to her to keep him satisfied and meet his unrealistic expectations when she received little in return. Islamic women are repeatedly told that they are nothing without a husband and can never achieve a successful life on their own. Even after Zafar explains to her family the terrible life she is living; she is told she’s better off with Ahmed. Through her writing, she was able to take the readers’ emotions through the cycle of abuse with her. This helps the audience to improve their understanding on why it’s so challenging for women to escape. Ahmed physically, sexually, and mentally abused Samra. Then, he would guilt her back into forgiving him, only to turn around and repeat the cycle. Zafar came close to ending her life after turning to Ahmed in a moment of weakness. This was her low point, but it was pivotal for her as it led her to see everything she would have given up. It made her realize that she can have a rewarding life and she can do it by herself. This proves that women can be affected by their abusive past for years to come. Zafar recognized that she was strong enough to pull herself back and choose happiness.

Zafar’s book highlights how she was able to save herself from her abusive marriage

through her time at the University of Toronto. After being shunned from the society she grew up in, the support she gained from her school community was essential for her to have the strength to keep pushing. By getting an education she learned that what she was going through was not normal and there are ways that she can escape. Samra managed to keep fighting for her dream although she was constantly being dragged down by her husband. Ahmed and his parents made it clear that she did not need an education, contradicting what was initially promised. The negativity and the neediness from her family members created an exhausting environment for Samra to complete her courses. But she did. When she was finally able to fully commit herself to her education her independence blossomed. She was able to fulfill her lifelong dream of graduating from university. Samra gained confidence and learned that she can be successful on her own. Zafar's memoir pursues a theme of female empowerment. The book builds up to her finally understanding her worth and how she breaks free from the conforming nature of her old community. Throughout her life she was repeatedly told that women had no place in university, their only job was to tend to their husbands needs and to be a good wife. Despite almost everyone being against her, she was able to preserve her dreams and ultimately reach her goals. Having gone through all her experiences and still being able to create a rewarding, honourable life on her own truly shows what an incredible woman Zafar is.

Zafar's gripping memoir can leave various audiences feeling influenced in some form or another. It can be useful to certain academic disciplines that deal with similar situations. Including social workers, psychologists, sociologists, therapists, and also gender studies. Zafar's book can provide helpful information for universities and student assistance programs as they need to be

able to make more exceptions for people who are in comparable circumstances. When she couldn't come up with the money for her tuition, she was turned away by the Ontario Student Assistance Program because her husband made enough. When she tried to explain that he would not give her any money for her courses, she was still turned down. But most importantly her memoir can, and did, inspire many women to seek refuge and change their lives. It helps other women to realize their situation is not normal and they can acquire support to construct a life for themselves that they truly desire. Zafar's story proves to women that they can make it on their own. Overall her memoir gives all readers a better insight into the lives that are forced upon many women. Like me, I cannot relate to her story in any way, yet it left an impact. It made me realize how many things I take for granted. I have no critiques of Zafar's book. It was well written, and was an enthralling read. The author did an amazing job at arousing the audiences' emotions. It brought to light something that many people do not understand the complexities of. Zafar did a wonderful job building up to her finale of attaining her freedom. This enticed readers and made them want to keep reading until the end to see her succeed and live the life she deserves. Even though I could not personally relate to Zafar's story, her writing took a hold of me and I could not put the book down. Not only was it an amazing read, it inspired many other women in similar situations to realize their self-worth and strive for a better life.