

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

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“A Good Wife” chronicles author Samra Zafar’s life as a teenage bride, coerced into an arranged marriage with Ahmed, an unknown man more than ten years her senior. Ahmed and his family, she would soon discover, were abusive in all forms of the word. The story of their sorrowful marriage begins when sixteen-year old Zafar, born in the United Arab Emirates but residing with her family in Pakistan, was informed that she had received a marriage proposal. Still a young girl, Zafar was more interested in playing a game of cricket than planning her wedding. Most prominently, Zafar was a top student and did not want to get involved in any union that would hinder her in attaining a formal university education. It was commonly believed within her culture that marriage, not education, was the “real purpose of a woman’s life,” and that for a married woman, a university education would be aimless (p. 120). Despite this, Zafar’s father taught his daughters to dream differently. He beamed with pride as he told her and his other daughters, “What were you thinking of being today? A scientist? An engineer? You girls can be anything you want” (p. 17).

Unfortunately for Zafar, her mother wasn’t quite as progressive as her father, and focused her energy on encouraging Zafar to accept the proposal. Zafar was reminded by her mother that if she remains unmarried, she will continue to suffer instances of sexual harassment at the hands of the men in her life, including the men in her own extended family. Her mother’s plea propelled

Zafar to embrace the idea that unmarried women have to face unpleasant consequences, but Zafar still wasn't interested in prioritizing marriage over education. Zafar was then faced with a difficult decision when Ahmed's family convinced her that she could pursue both a degree and a career following their marriage. Fearful of missing out on a golden opportunity to receive an education at a top university in Canada where Ahmed lived, Zafar hesitantly agreed to meet Ahmed and his family (p. 52).

Throughout the book, readers witness Zafar being treated as mere property of her husband Ahmed and his family. This pattern began as early as when Zafar agreed to first meet Ahmed's parents, who marvelled at her as if she were a "new car or a shiny watch being assessed by its owner's friends" (p. 10). Questions and comments were made by Ahmed's parents on superficial matters only, such as Zafar's weight, skin tone, height, and cooking abilities. Before she was even able to agree to the proposal, Zafar's mother-in-law, known as Amma, slipped a ring on Zafar's finger and said, "you are my daughter now" (p. 54).

Once married life began for Ahmed and Zafar, it did not take long for Ahmed's true colours to show. Zafar became the mother of his child at the young age of eighteen, and Ahmed, twenty-nine, was far from being a loving father. He frequently treated Zafar as an object, and his jealousy led him to constantly berate her. He isolated her from all outside support, leaving her trapped inside of their house with nothing to do but please her difficult in-laws. On one occasion, Ahmed exploded at Zafar for hugging her female friends at a dinner party. He claimed that she only did so in order to get the attention of other men, and chastised her by saying he didn't want other men to look at his property (p. 226).

Ahmed's abuse did not stop with his cruel words and unreasonable accusations. He kicked, slapped, pushed, and choked Zafar on varying occasions, all while tormenting her psychologically and emotionally. Following his episodes of abuse, he often returned to Zafar with apologetic eyes, crying and begging for her forgiveness. He claimed that he only acted out of jealousy because he loved her so much. Zafar, who quickly became a mother of two, dreamed that the potential she had once seen in Ahmed during the early months of their marriage would return, thus, she continued to hold onto hope for their marriage. Zafar also describes being abused financially by Ahmed. She was not permitted to work for many years during her marriage to Ahmed, nor was she permitted to have a dollar to her own name. She also lacked a viable mode of transportation, and did not have much knowledge of the foreign country that surrounded her. Zafar succinctly explained, "I was poor. I was powerless" (p. 158). Her lack of money as well as an escape route nearly ensured her entrapment into a life of isolation and exploitation.

Throughout all of the maltreatment, Zafar was expected to put on a smile and be a good wife for her husband. She did all of the work in childrearing alone, as Amma once commented that for a husband to help his wife with changing the baby's diapers would be utterly shameful (p. 117). She was told to never refuse her husband when he desired sex, as a good wife doesn't want to make her husband upset (p. 17). Additionally, she was repeatedly reminded that her dream of continuing education was disgraceful, despite the fact that she only agreed to be married in the first place because of a false promise of education. Thankfully, towards the end of the book, Zafar is able to convince her reluctant husband and Amma to allow her to attend school at the University of Toronto, several years after she was originally supposed to enroll.

At the book's end, Zafar found ways to slowly reclaim her autonomy, and is nothing short of inspiring and triumphant. She began to run a daycare from home which provided her with her own income. Additionally, she obtained her driver's license, and was now able to leave the home without Ahmed on occasion. While on the university campus, her childhood confidence began to slowly return. One day, Zafar decided to visit the campus counsellor. The counsellor explained to Zafar that, despite what she has been made to believe, Ahmed is fully responsible for the toxicity in their marriage. Zafar learned that she was being abused, though the word "abuse" felt foreign to her. This was the first time that someone actually acknowledged that what had been happening to her was unacceptable and abusive (p. 239). It had been normalized to her from a young age, and even displayed to her by her own parents, that husbands are permitted to verbally and physically reprimand their wives. Now equipped with knowledge on abuse and the way that it tends to cycle, with the abuser becoming angry and violent for a while, followed by a brief period of kindness and tranquility, Zafar slowly began to discard her hope in Ahmed (p. 241).

With that said, it still took Zafar years to break free from the shackles of her marriage. She eventually found the strength to move out from her dream house with Ahmed and into residence on the University of Toronto campus with her two daughters. Yet, countless times she cried over her failed marriage and asked herself why she had ever left. Zafar wrote, "My route out of marriage wasn't fast, and it wasn't linear. It was a painful little dance, the emotional steps so incremental that it sometimes appeared I wasn't moving at all" (p. 326). With time, the support of her classmates, and the unending love she received from her two daughters, Zafar was finally able to

heal from her past. To say Zafar's story ends with success would be an understatement, as she was awarded the university's most prestigious scholarship and became one of the youngest governing council members at her university, all while sharing her story and helping countless other individuals walk away from abusive relationships.

In closing, Zafar reminds us that victims and abusers come from all cultures, races, religions, socio-economic backgrounds, and walks of life (p. 334). Additionally, she highlights the importance in creating a strong support network for victims of abuse, as abuse victims often benefit greatly from forging new bonds and finding a sense of true belonging (p. 337). Lastly, she stresses that it is crucial to share difficult stories such as her own, as speaking up is often necessary to break the silence on abuse (p. 345).

I would recommend this memoir as an essential read for all gender studies scholars, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, social workers, and teachers. No matter who you are, Zafar's story is an important one to be heard. Without a doubt, "A Good Wife" stands out as an empowering narrative, one that is guaranteed to leave its readers feeling profoundly moved and inspired, while also being an exemplary learning resource on intimate partner violence.