



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

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In Samra Zafar's book, "A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose," she outlines the complexities and opportunities brought into her life because of one single decision – to marry a stranger. At the young age of sixteen, Samra Zafar was offered the prospect of marrying a much older man, with the addition of moving to Canada with him and his parents. Before she had any chance to refuse, Samra was bombarded with family expectations and celebrations of the good news. Swiftly getting caught up in the preparations for the marital exchange, Samra was forced to put a pause on her dream of attending university. Throughout the journey of her arranged marriage, she highlights the detriments of marrying young, such as losing her self-identity and freedom. Her childhood aspirations were snatched right out of her hands and instead replaced with the restraints of marriage. However, although this memoir retells the story of Samra's abusive relationship, it also highlights her strength and growth as a young woman.

The practice of arranged marriages tends to center on familial ties between both parties. Historically, these marriages were proposed because they would be mutually profitable for the families, even if there were a vast age gap between the couple. This is evident in Samra's case, as her arranged marriage was seen as a beneficial union. With the promises of continuing school in Canada and bringing honour to her family, Samra was promptly pressured into accepting the

proposal. After all, “an unmarried, childless women invited nothing but pity and derision. No matter what else she accomplished, she would be considered a failure” (Chapter 3). These views of how women should live out their lives are prevalent in some cultures, especially in South Asia. It was a women’s destiny and duty to get married, have children, and keep the family united. With the completion of her nuptial ceremony, Samar was “no longer a person with any independence or autonomy,” and thus, at age seventeen, she became someone’s wife (Chapter 1). Having lost her identity as an individual, Samar resigned to “her destiny” and role as a spouse.

The idea of getting married and losing her independence was an unbearable thought to young Samra. Thanks to the teachings from her parents, Samra had grown up unlike the other girls her age. Her father always encouraged her and her siblings to “think of themselves as equals and not to hide from talking with others” (Chapter 9). This belief pushed Samra to aspire for greatness. She would not be confined to the customs of what a girl should or should not do. Instead, she played cricket in the streets, was bold in the face of harassment from strangers, and most importantly, strived for higher education. Her mother, an accomplished and intelligent teacher, showed her that a woman could be more than someone’s wife – that she could be someone with authority. However, once Samra was taken into her new family, she experienced constant emotional and physical abuse from her husband and in-laws. The boldness and confidence she displayed as a young child were no longer to be seen. Thus, for the first few years of married life, Samar was confined to the role of her husband’s property. Isolated and alone in Canada with her new family, she was forced to comply with her mother-in-law’s strict teachings and expectations. While constantly being ridiculed for her lack of skills and knowledge, Samra lost her self-esteem and individuality. Her once bright and glittering future was now a “small dark space” from which

she wanted to be released (Chapter 7). Samra faced heartache, disappointment, and despair at the hands of her husband and in-laws. With no one on her side and no one to help her, she prayed to Allah, her God, to have mercy and end her life (Chapter 7). This request demonstrates just how miserable Samra must have been in her marriage, as religion plays a significant role in her life and culture.

After living through constant oppression and trauma, hope remained within Samra – the hope of a better life, a happier family, and a higher education. Starting with small steps, Samra began to climb out of the prison she lived in. Beginning with trips to the daycare center, a part-time job, a car, etc., Samra realized that the changes in her life would be of her “own making” (Chapter 11). Her strong desire for education played an essential role in gaining confidence and a sense of independence back. Her enrollment at the University of Toronto allowed her to learn about abuse, specifically the cycle of abuse, and how her experience was very common. After a decade of being in an abusive marriage, Samra had finally gained enough courage to leave. After leaving, she stated that “the past ten years had chipped away at my sense of who I was and left me feeling incompetent in so many fundamental ways – as a wife, a mother, a woman. But here, in the classroom, I felt capable and accomplished. I knew my worth. And I wasn’t afraid to claim it” (Chapter 12). Education gave Samra the confidence to leave her husband, but her support system reassured her through the doubts. The faculty members and students she met while attending university, supported her throughout the struggles of being a student and single mother. They helped arranged resources and assistance for individuals in her situation. And lastly, Samra’s biggest supporters, her two daughters, Aisha and Sonia. They both backed her decision to leave her marriage and even encouraged her to spread her story.

Overall, this book recounts the hardships and battles Samra faced throughout her married life before gathering the courage she needed to remove herself from it. With the support of multiple people, Samra recognized her strength and realized that her voice and experience matter. This memoir tells her personal story to inspire and encourage young women who are experiencing similar situations. At the end of the book, we see this when Samra aids a young woman named Amna in leaving her abusive husband. By spreading this book, Samra intends to show that it is possible to leave a violent marriage and still be happy. Despite the social stigma of divorce and cultural shame and dishonour it may bring, Samra's story proves that women can survive and thrive without their husbands. She states that, even though "everyone in my old community referred to us as 'a broken family,' the girls and I had never felt so complete and happy before" (Chapter 17). I believe that this book was very well written and contains no limitations. After all, it is a story of someone's personal journey shared with the world. I applaud the bravery that the author has in revealing such an intimate and devastating experience.

The intended audience for this book would be individuals involved in social services and humanity work and studies. For example, social workers, psychologists, women's studies, cultural studies, and sociologists. Though this memoir focuses on the journey of a specific culture and female perspective, I think it can serve to encourage and benefit all types of individuals. It can inspire young and older women to strive for greatness and learn their own worth as an individual. It can educate men on the obstacles women face due to social norms, and overall, it provides a personal experience of what abuse can look like and how one can escape it.