



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

Reviewed by: Sofia Malinao, MacEwan University

In her memoir, "A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose," Samra Zafar recounts the physical and emotional abuse she suffered from her ex-husband, Ahmed, and his parents, Amma and Abba. Before the arranged marriage, Samra knew what she wanted; she was going to pursue a university education and aspired to become a "doctor, lawyer, engineer, teacher, ... [or a] Chief Editor" (p. 20). Instead, she was married off to a man almost ten years her senior, ultimately placing her aspirations on hold. Samra's reluctant agreement to the marriage resulted from the social pressure to marry and the pretense of Ahmed being a loving husband, who would encourage her to attend "an excellent school in Canada" (p. 39). Samra's memoir depicts how society's oppressive treatment of women can catalyze abuse. Despite the suffering she faced, Samra's ability to define her own identity outside of being "a good wife" exemplifies victims' resilience and ability to cope and heal. Ultimately, Samra refused to give up and was able to muster up the strength to leave Ahmed and create a new future for herself and her two daughters.

In the earlier chapters, Samra gives the readers a glimpse of her childhood; her experiences while growing up serve as a foundation of how abusive behaviour towards women became normalized. Although Samra had a close relationship with her father, recollecting her parents' explosive arguments was an eerie foreshadowing of her future relationship with Ahmed. Her father

often fell into fits of rages that resulted in him "slapp[ing] or push[ing]" Samra's mother (p. 27). He was also prone to accusing Samra's mother of "being distant" and often had "jealous suspicions" towards her (p. 27). Likewise, Ahmed's abuses were not exclusive to verbal abuse; Ahmed slapped, choked, and kicked Samra. Ahmed's jealousy towards Samra manifested through her isolation from her family and friends. For example, Ahmed accused Samra of having an affair with her male childhood friend, Fahad. He demanded Samra stop communicating with him, isolating her further. Any interaction Samra had with the opposite sex was derided by Ahmed, referring to her as a "shameless whore" (p. 135).

While growing up, oppressive behaviours directed towards women became a norm for Samra. In men's eyes, women were valued for their sexual worth rather than their intelligence and personality. Furthermore, the women in Samra's life encouraged this perception of women as mere objects for men's satisfaction –being a good wife in a marriage mattered above all else. For example, in response to an eleven-year-old Samra getting groped by an older man, her mother disapproved of Samra and accused her of "growing up too quickly" (p. 31). Samra's mother also claimed the only way to avoid unwanted male attention was to be "safely married" (p. 40). Samra's confidence wavered due to her mother and Aunt Nasreen undermining her aspirations of achieving a good education. Aunt Nasreen advised her not to "give up a marriage proposal to go to school" (p. 40). Fatima (Ahmed's sister) was another prominent female figure in Samra's life that reinforced the belief that women owe a duty to their husbands. She summarizes the responsibility of a woman by bestowing Samra with the following advice:

Never stop your husband if he wants to do something. That will just upset him. And don't start anything yourself. Men don't like it when women are too forward. Always act shy. And finally, never use contraception. Birth control pills can interfere with your fertility (p. 67).

Despite growing up in an environment that sought to reduce women's identity to just being a good wife for her husband, Samra often responded by being defiant and refusing to give up her autonomy. As a child, she often maintained her boundaries and beliefs. An early instance was when she slapped a man who had groped her and her sisters and cousins (p. 35). Samra knew that women were not to blame for men's inappropriate actions towards them, stating, "they had clearly not invited any advances, and neither had I" (p. 34). When Ahmed would refer to Samra as a "whore" (p. 115) or a "bitch" (p. 199), she would retort by saying, "you don't have a right to call me that" (p. 198).

Samra's recollection also highlights the importance of a support system for women who suffer from abuse. During her brief reprieve from Ahmed when she and her daughter, Aisha, stayed in Abu Dhabi, Samra felt empowered and began to distance herself from the imposed identity of being Ahmed's wife. Although worried that her daughter would be without her father, Samra was comforted by the thought that Aisha "would still be surrounded by a loving family" (p. 149). However, after her father's untimely passing and her mother turning her away, Samra was thrust back into her life with Ahmed (pp. 173-174). Despite opting not to wear a hijab in Abu Dhabi as a sign of rebellion against Ahmed, Samra's return to her "old life" meant she had to cover her hair once more. The hijab proclaimed Samra's as Ahmed's, thus removing her individuality. Furthermore, her father's death was a significant blow to Samra's support system, as she had re-

garded him as her protector. Upon her return to Canada, she felt that she could not leave Ahmed as the only social ties she had in Canada were Ahmed and his family.

Despite this obstacle, Samra resolved to create a "reasonably happy life" (p. 179) for herself and her daughters. Thus, the momentum of attaining freedom from her abusive marriage was rekindled by creating an escape plan that comprised of:

a university education, [and] a certain amount of autonomy and control over my affairs. No more treading water—I had to swim. And no one was going to help me. I had to find a way to move forward on my own (p. 179).

Thus, Samra established a daycare using her resources. Eventually, the money from the daycare granted Samra the opportunity to learn how to drive and have her car. While driving past the University of Toronto signs, Samra remarked, "but at least now ... I was sitting in the front seat" (p. 184), signaling that she was beginning to take control of her life.

Upon entering the University of Toronto, Samra managed to reestablish a support system separate from her family and Ahmed's family. Samra began to realize that Ahmed's treatment of her was not normal; instead, she was the victim of domestic abuse. Samra's defiance towards Ahmed became more pronounced following the university counsellor making it clear to Samra that their relationship "wasn't normal or healthy" (p. 196). Samra's mother also began to support her daughter's freedom from her abuser, encouraging Samra to leave Ahmed on multiple occasions. Ultimately, Samra decided to give her statement against Ahmed despite having to recount traumatic memories. In doing so, she gave herself a voice and validated her trauma.

Despite backlash from her community, Samra remained steadfast in her memoir's purpose:

to speak up for women who feel trapped in abusive situations. As her abusive marriage left her isolated and removed her sense of identity, Samra aims to let them know they are not alone. It also reinforces the idea that women should not blame themselves for their partner's abuse and that it is not normal to be abused. Samra's journey of attaining her university education also serves as a lesson in never giving up despite any obstacles you might come encounter. Along with providing a voice for abused women, Samra's memoir is an interesting resource for sociological discussions concerning women's studies and family.

Furthermore, "A Good Wife" also raises discussions in sociology and psychology regarding the effects of trauma and abuse. I am fortunate to have never been in a similar situation as Samra, however, her story proved to be inspirational as she exemplified resilience and courage. I found Samra's prose captivating, and it made me empathize with her. I recommend it to people who want to glean perspective on women's empowerment and intergenerational trauma.