



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

Reviewed by: Anabella Reyes, MacEwan University

Samra Zafar's memoir "A Good Wife: Escaping the Life I Never Chose," chronicles the harrowing reality of her experience as a teenager in an arranged marriage. Zafar had not yet graduated high school when she received a marriage proposal from an older man who resided in Canada. Although she was hesitant to leave her family behind in Abu Dhabi, her husband Ahmed and her in-laws, Amma and Abba, reassured Zafar of a promising future. Enticed by the opportunity to pursue a university education in Canada and overwhelmed by cultural expectations, Zafar reluctantly accepted the proposal. However, in this emotional read, Zafar reveals the mental and physical anguish she suffered throughout her years in Canada. In sharing these traumatic experiences, Zafar emphasizes how attaining education and building social support aided her in her journey toward escaping an abusive marriage. Moreover, Zafar reflects on how patriarchal values upheld by cultural and religious practices perpetuate abusive behaviours toward women.

A potent theme in Zafar's story is the conflict between societal pressures to conform to the traditional role of women and striving toward educational ambitions. Despite growing up in a culture where women are socially conditioned to accept their purpose in life is to become wives and bear children, Zafar aspired to accomplish different goals. From a young age, Zafar's father instilled in her the value of education and independence. With the encouragement of her father's

progressive views, Zafar relished her enthusiasm for playing sports and passion for learning. Zafar acknowledged that her interests deviated from societal expectations, but she continued to express her dreams, pondering about possible careers such as “doctor, lawyer, engineer [or] teacher” (Chapter 1).

Yet, throughout her life, Zafar faced pressure from her relatives and peers to discard her dreams to fulfill her predestined fate as a woman. In her culture, unmarried women without children were stigmatized and pitied. Regardless of what such women would achieve, they would be deemed failures (Chapter 3). A compelling conversation with her Aunt Nasreen aggravated her anxieties about the future. Her Aunt had turned down marriage prospects in her youth to prioritize education, only to end up childless and in an unsatisfactory marriage. Zafar feared her life would take a similar course by postponing her inevitable fate as a wife. Since Ahmed and her in-laws supported her educational pursuits, Zafar worried about the uncertainty of comparable prospects in the future.

However, it became adamant to Zafar in her interactions with others that her role as a wife was more important than her education. When Zafar returned to school wearing her engagement ring, her study partner asked, “Why do you care about school, now that you’re going to be married?” (Chapter 3). Even in Canada, years later, Zafar faced criticism from her in-laws. Although Ahmed and her in-laws gave her the impression of being supportive of her education, they expected her to be a submissive housewife. Insufficient high school credits, the birth of her daughters, and Ahmed’s disapproval had delayed her from applying to schools. Zafar hoped to negotiate an agreement with Ahmed and her in-laws to attend university. However, they blatantly

expressed their disapproval, “Why would your potential depend on education? A woman’s real potential is in her work as a wife and mother. And you don’t need school for that.” (Chapter 8).

Similarly, a recurring theme Zafar discusses is how traditional gender roles perpetuate inequality in relationships and may lead to women being trapped in abusive marriages. While Ahmed worked to support the family, Zafar was confined to domestic work. In keeping with the tradition that women are to be submissive housewives, Ahmed prohibited Zafar from going out alone. Rather he pressured her to entertain her domineering in-laws and fulfill her domestic responsibilities.

Zafar realized that her lack of independence was imprisoning her marriage. Without her own money, she could not treat herself or her daughter; more importantly, she could not escape Ahmed’s abuse, as she was isolated and alone in Canada, solely reliant on his income. Amma threateningly reiterated this point to her, “If you were ever to leave, the government would give Aisha to Ahmed since you have no education and no money” (Chapter 7).

When Ahmed began experiencing financial difficulties, he allowed her to apply for jobs to help pay off his debts. Zafar was ecstatic to have a little freedom from her monotonous routine as a housewife. Over time, Zafar gained the confidence to devise new ways to acquire independence from Ahmed. By tutoring children in her apartment building and starting her own daycare business at home, Zafar was able to take the first steps toward freedom. Having her own money allowed her to buy plane tickets to visit her family, pay for driving lessons and purchase a vehicle. More importantly, since Ahmed dismissed her university education with her own money, Zafar paid her tuition without his help.

Another major theme Zafar highlights is how patriarchal ideas deeply embedded in religious and cultural practices may be used to justify harmful behaviours against women. Wearing a hijab is a common religious practice for many women of Muslim faith. Zafar was accustomed to not wearing a hijab, as she never had growing up in Pakistan. However, in Canada, Ahmed pressured her to wear one whenever she went out. At first, he tactfully manipulated her by saying she would look “more beautiful” in a hijab, saying he loved her so much he wanted to protect her from the “gaze of other men” (Chapter 4). Eventually, Ahmed demanded Zafar wear a hijab; rather than be concerned for her safety, he became extremely possessive of her. If Zafar would so much as look in the direction of a man, Ahmed would call her names such as “whore” or “bitch” perceiving her behaviour to be promiscuous (Chapter 7). He would say, “I don’t want other men to look at my property. It’s your job to protect my honour” (Chapter 11). Ahmed had taken away her autonomy in their relationship and reduced her to being a wife.

Ahmed went as far as installing spyware on Zafar’s electronic devices, monitoring her conversations to ensure she was not talking to her former male friend in Karachi. Ahmed’s extreme jealousy pushed her into social isolation. Since women are supposed to comply with their husbands, Zafar believed she was to blame for the abuse. She thought that if she was a “better wife,” Ahmed’s coldness would disappear, and he would return to his kind, loving self (Chapter 7).

A pivotal moment in Zafar’s life was when a counsellor at the university explained to her “the cycles of abuse” (Chapter 12). The revelation that Ahmed’s abusive behaviour was unacceptable brought a whirlwind of emotions to Zafar. Reflecting on her childhood memories of witnessing

her father beating her mother, Zafar realized how the normalization of these abusive behaviours would affect her daughters. The terrifying thought that her relationship with Ahmed would set a precedent for her daughters regarding how a relationship ought to be, gave Zafar the courage to stand up against Ahmed. Thus, the university not only led her toward achieving her lifelong goals but provided her with a sense of community and belonging. In addition to the university's counselling services, the students union group showed Zafar and her daughter's genuine friendship and emotional support.

Although emotional to read, Zafar's story is inspirational and provides insight into the complexities of abusive relationships and navigating identity as a woman when challenged by rigid cultural norms. Zafar's vulnerability and detailed recollection of her experiences captivates readers by evoking feelings of empathy and compassion. Her writing style is engaging; each chapter includes vivid descriptions that create anticipation about how her journey unfolds. Thus, I found no weaknesses in Zafar's memoir. I commend Zafar for her bravery in sharing these traumatic experiences to bring awareness to the oppression women face when forced to comply with patriarchal ideologies. Moreover, she does an excellent job of explaining her negative experiences and the stigma she faced from her religious community without generalizing that all members authorize abuse toward women. In her epilogue, Zafar emphasizes that abuse occurs in "all cultures, all races, all religions [and] all socioeconomic backgrounds." (Epilogue). I think readers who've been victims of domestic abuse, regardless of their background, may find inspiration from Zafar's resilience toward breaking generational cycles of abuse. I would recommend this book to academics in social work, education, gender studies, and social science disciplines, particularly

psychology and sociology. Anyone working in helping professions, such as counsellors, will gain valuable knowledge on understanding how cultural expectations affect victims of abuse and the importance of education in women's liberation.