

Level III – Grades 9-12

California: Level III First Place Winner

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Wrote to Naguib Mahfouz, author of *The Palace of Desire*

Dear Naguib Mahfouz,

I lay here with a hardcover copy of *The Palace of Desire* on the opposite side of the globe. I was born in Egypt, have Egyptian parents, live to fulfill the obligations of Egyptian culture. However, I didn't even think about picking up a piece of literature that would mirror my heritage until my second year of high school. Unfortunately, my intention behind it wasn't enjoyment or a desire to learn; rather it was to satisfy the requirements of my English grade. My parents would help me if it was an Egyptian novel, I thought, it would be very simple.

As I began to flip through the pages, I became appalled at the length of the novel. I couldn't imagine how I would finish it in such a limited time. I began to read it, and became more interested in the storyline page after page and chapter after chapter. The Abd-al-Jawad family not only caught my attention with their heartbreaking lives, but also seemed to reflect my own family in many ways. They faced innumerable hardships, but the one that became closest to my heart revolved around the issue of gender.

“A woman is like a dish of food of which you quickly get your fill.” When my eyes laid attention on that passage, I couldn't put the novel down until I had finished it. It had answered many questions that I had never gotten a truthful explanation for.

Although I had migrated from Egypt when I was just a toddler, I had realized that I was treated much differently from my brother, my father, my uncles, my male cousins. I felt much

more restricted in the society which I belonged to. For example, when I went to visit Egypt every summer, I could never pack my entire closet. I had to take certain clothing: long sleeved shirts, long skirts, many pairs of pants. My mother never gave me permission to pack typical summer clothing, such as tank tops, shorts, or denim skirts. Amina, Aisha, Khadiga, and even Zanuba, the belly dancer and prostitute, also had these restrictions. When I look in the mirror today, I not only see my own face, but also the troubled faces of these female characters. They each desired to have an independent voice, an equal opportunity, the right to dream. Nevertheless, their society made these hopes an impossibility for them. The Egyptian belief that women were created for the satisfaction of men has tainted societal beliefs, and has therefore eliminated many female rights. I not only sympathized with these vulnerable characters, but also more importantly came to empathize with them.

I had always wondered why I couldn't walk down the street by myself, why I couldn't make my own decisions, why my brother could go out every weekend and I had to stay in and study. By reading your novel, I finally gained an insight into why these restrictions exist. I not only became aware of the situation, but also became filled with an unquenchable desire to change it. Just because I am thousands of miles away from the jail cell of Egyptian society doesn't mean that I am not affected by this unfortunate mindset. I still live with the knowledge that a man is superior; it is reflected in my daily life and my relationship with my family.

I am now ready to reach for the stars as I approach my college years. I am thankful everyday that I am a woman with this amazing right. After reading *The Palace of Desire*, I now want to be able to give that privilege to every unfortunate woman. I may not be able to change

the views of a stubborn society; however, by encouraging others to read the gift you gave to me,
I can enlighten many blind eyes and minds. Thank you for this priceless gift.

Sincerely,

Sandra Kaddis