

# The Role of Education and Choice in the Lives of Women in *Palace Walk* and *Mornings in Jenin*

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the profound role of education in expanding women's choice, opportunity, and character growth. The novel *Palace Walk* (1956), which takes place before the 1919 Egyptian Revolution, and the novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2006), which spans twentieth century Palestine, both highlight how the restriction of education works to limit women's freedoms and uphold patriarchal values. The threat of occupation is present in both works where it causes male benefactors to either be more rigid in their authority, as a means to preserve the status quo, or cause them to prioritize education as a means to find truth and protect their identity. Through analyzing key scenes in both texts, with insights into historical contexts, it is clear that the restriction of women's education puts them in vulnerable positions where their legal rights and economic opportunities are diluted, making them subject to dehumanization.

## Keywords

Education, Choice, Character Development, Women's Rights, Dehumanization

## 1. Introduction

The novels *Palace Walk* (1956) and *Mornings in Jenin* (2006) signify the role that education can have in the enforcement or limitation of women's freedom. The characters of Amina, Khadija, and Amal all have complex relationships with education and how that has halted or propelled their character development. Sayid Ahmed restricts education access for women in his family as a means to uphold patriarchal control, asserting his authority, social status, and their heavy dependence on him. The lack of choice in these women's lives leads them to live with a false sense of security and an inability to envision a more free existence. Hasan, on the other hand, having lived through the tragedies of the 1948 Nakba, has a different approach to education access. He understands that restriction of

education can put his daughter Amal both in harm of believing false political narratives and limit her chances of building a secure life for herself that she can control. All in all, the representation of women in *Palace Walk* and *Mornings in Jenin* showcases how education can be a tool in either helping them achieve control over their lives or a tool in upholding patriarchal beliefs that can have dangerous consequences.

## 2. Rationale for the Study

Through the lenses of both education and choice, I aim to showcase how the restriction and or access of these features play a profound role in the critical turning points of these characters. The study contributes to existing scholarship by providing necessary analysis into the larger societal contexts and material conditions that influence the womens' ability to govern themselves.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1. Limited Choice and Precarious Rationalizations

In *Palace Walk*, the women in the story have little education access, limiting choice in matters outside of the immediate family which leads to troubling internal justifications. For instance, when Kamal would often boast of his knowledge of a myriad of facts, Amina would acknowledge her ignorance yet remain firm that her faith provided all the knowledge she would ever need. As seen on page 70, "She did not feel in need of further education or suspect there was any new knowledge worth adding to the religious, historical, and medical information she already possessed" (Mahfouz, 1956). Such an attitude reflects her acceptance of her position in life and that there is no need for the acquisition of a new skill or habit. The women are told that they are most virtuous and moral when they remain subservient and innocent. In other words, when they are unquestionably pious and uneducated. Amina's outlook also happens to largely influence her daughters who they see as an example of piety. As Khadija and Aisha's aspirations can only reduce to marriage and beauty, Khadija's struggles lead her to suppress her pain as she has no other outlet for control. For example, "Like her mother, Khadija surrendered to the fates... she yielded to her destiny" (258). Khadija finds that the only way to express her grief is through prayer. Eventually, feeling as though her sadness and insecurity have not gone away, she resorts to rationalizing her ill-fortune by blaming luck. As the narrator says, "We resort at times to logic to reassure ourselves about matters, like health or illness, happiness or misery, and love or hate, that bear no relationship whatsoever to logic" (259). Hence, we can gather that the women's attempts at surrendering control are simply ways to make up for the fact that they don't have control over their lives and that they lack alternate choices.

### 3.2. Danger of Restricted Financial Independence

The danger of the lack of alternate choices in the women's lives is presented in

how they largely depend on men for their well-being and financial support. For instance, in the aftermath of Amina's accident after leaving the home without permission during her visit to a religious temple, Sayid Ahmed kicks her out with no clarity on whether or not she'll be able to return or see her children again. As is written on page 210, "She did not know what to do with her life or what meaning life would have if her hopes were dashed and the worst did happen." Despite the abject cruelty from her husband, she still refuses to accept the idea that the fates would be unjust toward her, "No evil had yet afflicted her that was serious enough to deprive her quiet life of its confident trust. For these reasons, she was inclined to consider her ordeal a harsh trial through which she would pass unscathed" (211). Her trust in her husband continues to be undimmed; her trust in God continues to be limitless. Amina continues to accept her pain as a means to protect herself because her world would lack meaning if she sees the cruelty inflicted upon her as illogical. The problem here is that she lives with a false sense of reality and security because she has no alternate choice for safety and happiness. Sayid Ahmed is quick to punish her as a means to further solidify his control over her. Such a toxic dynamic perpetuates the idea that a man's honor is reflected in how submissive the women in their lives are to them. Yasin, Sayid Ahmed's oldest son, uses this idea in an attempt to punish his mother for "damaging" his honor after choosing to remarry. Despite it being their first encounter in years, Yasin shows no empathy toward his mother. After being unable to persuade her to halt the engagement, he says, "I wish I could kill you" (130). She responds, "If you do, you'll relieve me of the sufferings of my life." This scene is pivotal as it reflects how Yasin is barely aware of her pain, how completely devoid he is of acknowledging her emotions, and how difficult life can be as a secluded divorced woman in this society.

Such dehumanization of women as a result of deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs can be dangerous, especially if they come from a marginalized race or class. Yasin's internal turmoil and inability to view women as independent humans who are able to govern their own choices manifests in him committing acts of sexual abuse. He takes advantage of Umm Hanafi after Aisha's wedding. When his father decides that the way to control his desires is to marry, this eventually fails as he exploits their maid of African origin. For instance, "Even ugliness, so long as there was a woman attached to it, was excused by his blind lust, as it had been with Umm Hanafi" (408). Yasin's suppression of his desire is so strong that he reaches the point where he is unable to control himself and the way he views women. As explained by the narrator of Yasin's thoughts, "The very fact that she was a black maid would lend interest to the tryst and novelty to the experience" (408). He detaches them from their humanity, especially when they appear "lesser" than him if they are of marginalized backgrounds. In other words, he sees them as easier targets to exploit for his advantage. The richer, older men in the book don't have this problem because they can find discreet avenues to express their sexuality. Zubayda is a woman in the story who is an exception as she leads a career by taking advantage of the sexually repressed society by hosting

clandestine parties. For instance, “The motive for hosting these parties was not simply generosity... The aim was to increase the number of fine friends able to invite her to perform at their parties or help promote her by praising her in the circles where they were received” (105). Although these parties help Zubayda find lucrative career opportunities, she still has to appease these men in order to support herself. It is also worth noting that younger men or men of lower income groups who do not have such spaces to relieve themselves from the stresses of social conformity can make them more hostile toward women, as seen with Yasin.

### **3.3. Education and the Path to Autonomy**

In *Mornings in Jenin*, we are introduced to the complex character of Amal whose deep value in education helps her gain control over her fate. In the story, Amal’s world is turned upside down following the disappearance of her father after the 1967 Six-Day War and the loss of her mother. Lost and adrift, Amal seeks an education that ultimately gets her a scholarship to go to college in the United States. Since early childhood, Hasan has instilled in her a deep love of literature and books. For instance, he would read and recite poetry to her every day at the break of dawn much to Amal’s delight and admiration. On page 60, Hasan said to her, “The land and everything on it can be taken away, but no one can take away your knowledge or the degrees you earn” (Abulhawa, 2006). Having experienced the immense losses and displacement of the 1948 Nakba, Hasan understands the significance of education as his knowledge is the only thing that can truly remain with him. He understands the temporary pleasures materials can offer and that it is education that upholds his dignity and pride. Taking his example, Amal grew to become an exceptional student. While pondering the idea that she might not take up the scholarship, Yasmina slapped Amal across the face as a reminder of her incredible luck. Yasmina even retorts, “Who do you think you are, refusing such a gift?” (158). On the same page, Amal reminds herself “My father had wanted an education for me and I had obediently planted my life in the soil of his dream.” Pursuing education was not just for her own benefit, it was a dream and project that began with her father. As Amal says to herself, “There was nothing left for me in Jenin but scraps of my childhood and the debris of the family lost forever... If I returned, unavoidable marriage awaited me in the traditional culture of Jenin’s refugee camp” (158-159). The path to higher education would lead the way to independence, opportunity, and security. Without education, she would remain vulnerable to the restrictive forces of patriarchy and military occupation. Education would provide her with control over her fate.

### **3.4. Identity Struggles and Detachment**

Though highly educated and passionate, she is flawed and goes through many identity crises. Amal’s opportunity to grow her intelligence and pursue higher education creates the path for her to grow into a skilled, independent, and

self-reliant individual. However, her path is not perfect nor does she go through college without flaw. She loses touch with her family, her childhood friend Huda, and detaches herself from her past by taking on the new persona, "Amy." For example, "I metamorphosed into an unclassified Arab-Western hybrid, unrooted and unknown... I spun in cultural vicissitude, wandering in and out of the American ethos until I lost my way" (173). Feeling detached from herself and her past, Amal loses her sense of direction and purpose. It's not until years later, during her graduate studies, that Amal regains her sense of self. Upon receiving a telephone call from her brother Yousef and getting word of his whereabouts in Lebanon, she immediately decides to return to her family. She says, "Ever since Yousef's call, I had thought of little else but to return to my family, to myself" (181). Despite facing numerous tragedies, she became a renowned figure in the Palestinian liberation movement.

### 3.5. The Influence of Material Conditions on Choice

Taking all characters into account, it is clear that a lack of choice halts character development. Amina, Khadija, and Aisha have little to aspire to outside of the family and outside of being wives. As a result, their personalities remain stagnant and they remain vulnerable to the whims of the men in their lives. Moreover, they don't exist in a world that is completely foreign from Amal. The threat of imperialism is a dominating feature in both societies that set differing expectations on how women should behave. In *Palace Walk*, to assert the power and honor of the men, women have to remain subservient, especially as a means to limit the threat of changing the status quo. It is important to mention that the access to luxury, status, and wealth in this world are features that only the men have control over which means that they can be more assertive in their strict expectations for their family members who rely on them. In the world of *Mornings in Jenin*, where Hasan's family lost their land and possessions, the notion of valuing luxury and the projection of wealth would be farcical. While they both value education, Hasan, unlike Sayid Ahmed, values it especially for his daughter. Hasan also sees education for more than a tool to attain social capital. He sees it as a tool to dismantle false and oppressive narratives and for one to find dignity and hope. Though patriarchal beliefs still exist, Hasan recognizes that Amal cannot ever be truly free if she cannot think for herself. Education has provided Amal the resources to build a life for herself and though her path is rocky, it is ultimately what provides her the tools to fulfill her purpose and reclaim her identity.

## 4. Conclusion

Overall, these comparisons prompt one to ask: What does it truly mean to be liberated by education? As seen in the character trajectory of Amal, it is to have choice, control, and freedom of mobility in your life. Not only this, but to also be proud of your identity and not easily influenced by others to lessen yourself. By

willingly fitting into the unjust standards of others, you still fall under their control. Amal changing her identity and attempting to erase her past is her unconscious way of submitting to a different value system in which her identity is not valid. Ultimately, her past is unable to escape her and it is within her history that she finds her calling to return to family, “My Arabness and Palestine’s primal cries were my anchors to the world” (179). The stories of these women provide us with the insight to not unconsciously limit our freedom and understand how to use education to recognize injustice.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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