



1st Place - Grades 9-12

What I Would Be & Why

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Growing up, I was told that as a young Muslim girl, there were certain things that were off limits. The obvious prohibitions, which I understood, need not repeating, but it was the subtle denunciations, backed by cultural beliefs that irked me. The message shoved in my face was "be who you want to be", but it was also doused with a healthy side dish of "as long as you follow the status quo". But just as Islam is about following the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah, it also about expanding our role as human beings with a purpose on this planet. How else, if not allowed to experience and interact with the world while still maintaining our Islamic identity- which, yes, I believe is possible-are we to contribute to an increasingly disillusioned world and leave it a better place? When we tell our young sisters what roles they can play in our society, which are usually as mothers or wives (and this is in no way denigrating motherhood or marriage), we are limiting their potential and curtailing their full abilities.

If I could be anything I wanted, I would be a professor of literature, an art historian, a wandering scholar, or a head of a non-profit organization. But I am often faced with indirect and even blunt criticism of my choices; I am advised to choose a more traditional route, which hints at medical degrees or proposals. Why does the Muslim community often stray away from the arts, even if they do not negate core Islamic principles, and discourage our youth? Have we forgotten our illuminating history of brave, scholarly women like Aisha, to whom prominent scholars would confer with, and Fatima al Fihri, the first person to start a university? Where are our Rabia Al Basris and Ibn Rushds? Muslims are already facing Islamophobia and are struggling with the process of reconciling the social, political, and religious aspects of their identities. We need to prepare the future generations and instill in them a deep-seated thirst for knowledge and personal growth, and love for the written word, the spoken tongue, and the curved angles of a calligraphy print. What we don't need to do is discourage them and then use Islam as our defense. Indeed, Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty.

We should not be focusing on ambiguous, hypothetical situations, but working to make them into a reality. By breaking stereotypes and nonsensical gender barriers, I and other Muslim women can truly lift the state of our ummah and achieve our goals, ultimately becoming people "we want to be".



UIF would like to thank Students, Principals, Teachers and Parents for their support in making the Essay Competition a community success.

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