

# A WRITER WHO LOVES TO BE HATED

Joumana Haddad, the Beirut-based author praised and scorned in equal measure, tells Kaelen Wilson-Goldie what provoked her new book and why westerners' perception of Arab women as oppressed makes her so angry



Joumana Haddad has been called the most hated woman in Lebanon. She is a poet, a translator, the culture editor of a mainstream daily newspaper and the publisher of her own magazine. She has written five books and speaks seven languages. She is the administrator of the “Arab Booker”, a prize that has changed the course of literary translations from Arabic to English, among many other languages, in four short years.

She is also a working mother who lives in Beirut with her two sons. She travels all the time. In a business not well known for satisfactory compensation, she says she is well paid. She loves what she does. She is still two months shy of 40, a fact that made her eligible this past spring for being named one of the Beirut 39, the Hay Festival’s closely tracked list of the 39 most exciting Arab writers under the age of 40.

And if all of that were not enough, Haddad is beautiful – tall and trim with a tangle of long black curls and a sparkling smile. You would think that it must be other women who hate her for having it all.

But her most ominous and vociferous opponents, the ones who write her hate mail and threaten to throw acid in her face, tend to be men who think her work is too provocative and destabilising to the status quo.

Why? Two years ago, Haddad launched a quarterly journal about the body in literature, art and science called *Jasad*, which means “body” in Arabic. Some found the magazine prurient (as one reviewer remarked: “If the cover does not give fundamentalist groups a heart attack, the contents will”). Others found it liberating, fiercely intellectual and of high literary quality (contributors to the first issue alone included the Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun and the poets Abbas Beydoun and Abdo Wazen). The Nobel Literature Laureate Elfriede Jelinek has called her courageous. The Lebanese novelist Rabih Alameddine has called her a revolutionary, and has warned that anyone who does not read her runs the risk of being left behind. The investigative journalist Roberto Saviano has held her up as a shining light “for all those who fight to go beyond their own limits and chains”.

Still, setting aside those who send her death threats, Haddad’s staunchest critics insist she is no more than a scandal-seeking sensationalist. For example, when she rented out a stand for the launch of *Jasad* at Beirut’s most prominent international book fair in December 2008, Hizbollah allegedly tried to shut her down, and she wore the Party of



Joumana Haddad: 'It's weird, but books impose their language on me.'

God's displeasure like a badge of honour. But even sceptics admit, however begrudgingly, that they respect her for her verve.

Verve is what it took to start such a magazine. The support of key political figures in the Lebanese government – such as Ziad Baroud (the minister of the interior) and Tarek Mitri (previously the minister of culture and currently the minister of information) – did not hurt. And anyway, Lebanon is a relatively liberal and tolerant place. But what irked Haddad most about the reactions to *Jasad* were not the death threats (although she will not open a bricks-and-mortar office for the magazine because she thinks it is still too dangerous). Nor was it the kind of condescending disapproval she got from some of her friends, colleagues and peers, who told her she was not only out of her mind but also had gone way too far.

No, what irked her most were the questions posed primarily by western journalists: How did an Arab woman like you end up publishing a controversial magazine like this? Is it because you come from a Christian rather than a Muslim background?

"Most of us in the West are not familiar with the possibility of liberated Arab women like you existing," one such journalist told her.

"If you are not aware that we exist," Haddad retorted, "then it is your problem, not ours."

That exchange was the spark that ignited *I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions Of An Angry Arab Woman*, which was published simultaneously in the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Brazil in September this year. The book offers a

160-page response to the journalist's observation, along with an apology and a thank you.

"She meant it as a compliment, of course, but I remember being provoked by her words and rather rude in my reply," Haddad writes. "Later in the evening, I regretted my defensive reaction. Still, the journalist's [statement] remained stuck in my head, and I tried to understand better why she had said it, and why it had irritated me to that extent."

That effort to understand soon sprouted: first a small text, then a long piece, then an essay, then a collection of essays, then the book. With seven expository chapters buttressed by a handful of experimental texts at the beginning and at the end, *I Killed Scheherazade* is, by turns, pensive, bawdy, sensitive, bold, uproarious, generous and defiant.

Haddad eviscerates not only western stereotypes about Arab women but also the tendency among Arab

women to resign themselves to what she sees as victimhood, submission and silence. In other words, the book cuts both ways, or many ways, at once. (Scheherazade, the heroine of *One Thousand And One Nights*, is primarily just pretext here, and a symbol, for Haddad, of negotiation and compromise at

the expense of real resistance or change.)

"Both a testimony and a meditation on what being an Arab woman does and could mean today," Haddad writes, *I Killed Scheherazade* is an extended act of intimate self-criticism as well as an exercise in loud literary performance.

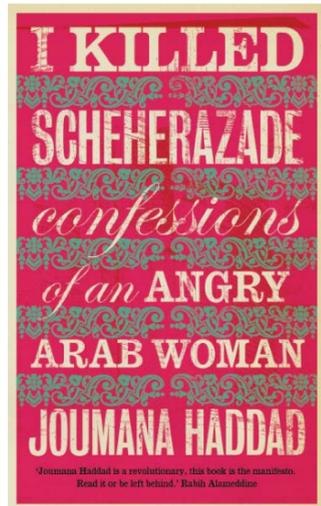
Haddad rails against westerners who take a woefully myopic view of the Middle East, against Arabs who are hypocritical, and against so-called "obscurantists," whom she calls thieves, vandals, desecrators and murderers of a vast and rich culture. "And, on top of everything, they are stupid," Haddad adds. "This is perhaps the cruellest blow to our contemporary Arab identity."

**I**n *I Killed Scheherazade*, Haddad draws heavily on her own experiences – growing up in Lebanon during the country's 15-year-long civil war, being the rebellious daughter of kind but conservative parents, finding herself in literature and discovering the pleasures of forbidden books, and developing her voice as a poet, a journalist, a publisher and, most recently, as an intensely angry essayist.

On a steamy summer afternoon, I catch up with Haddad in her office at *An-Nahar*, the newspaper where she has worked for 13 years. The new issue of *Jasad*, with a cover photo by the Beirut-based artist Joe Kesrouani, is sitting in front of her on her desk, next to a brick-sized novel by fellow writer Alawiya Sobh. Behind her is a terrific Joseph Cornell-esque collage by the Lebanese artist Mohammed el Rawas, titled *A Mother's Heavy Burden*.

It is preternaturally quiet for a newsroom, but Haddad explains that, because she has so much going on all at once, she has recently moved one floor

down from the day-to-day ruckus. She has also just returned from Mexico, where she went to give a poetry reading. Haddad travels incessantly, but even when the purpose is to promote her writing or her publishing, she does not consider such travelling as work. "I don't like to call it work. It's mainly just for



PHOTOGRAPHS (FROM TOP): CYNTHIA KARAM / REUTERS; COURTESY SAQI BOOKS  
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poetry readings. It's exhausting, but this is what life is all about."

In addition to *I Killed Scheherazade*, Haddad has just completed a children's book, which she wrote in Italian, called *The Seven Lives Of Luca*. "It's an ecological tale," she says. "It's meant to raise a certain consciousness among youngsters about what the Earth is going through right now." Add environmental activist to her ever-expanding list of talents and vocations.

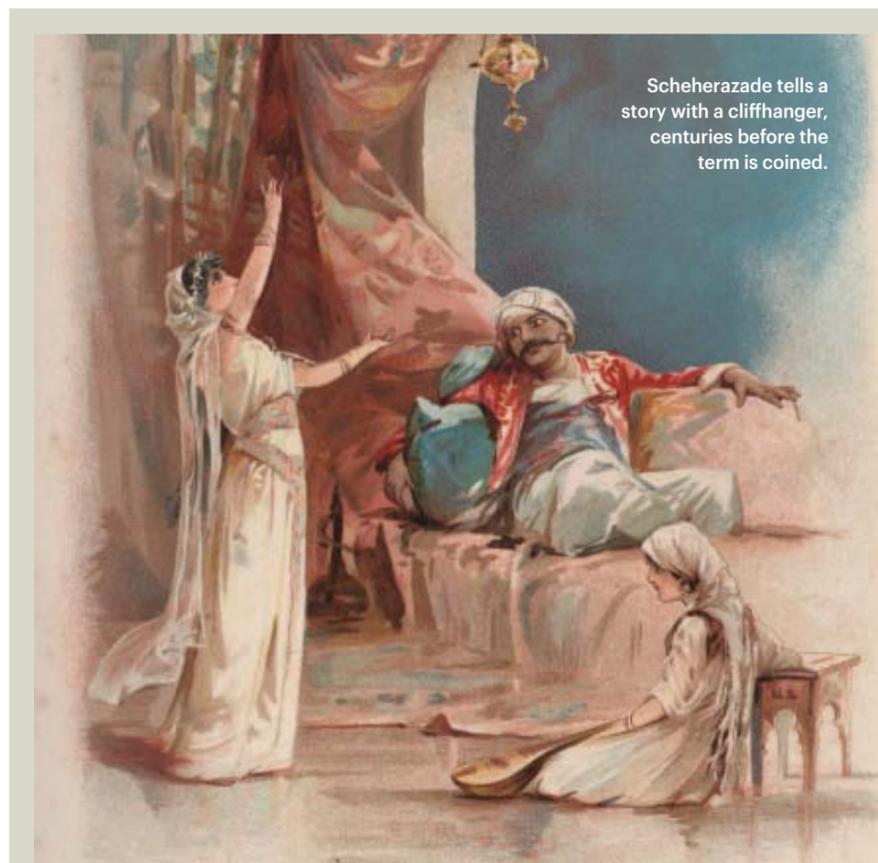
**h**addad has written books in Italian, and in French, in Spanish and, obviously, in Arabic. But *I Killed Scheherazade* is her first book in English. "I'm always asked this question: How come I write in other languages, in addition to Arabic?" she says. "It's weird, but books impose their language on me. I don't choose them. I'm working on another essay now and I'm writing it in French. This is just how it came up. I don't decide. But from the moment I have the ideas, they arrive in a particular language, and I put them down in that particular language. I like exploring the diversity of what you hold inside. When you write in a different language, some parts of you become different. It's good to explore yourself in many voices."

Of all the things Haddad has been called over the years, the one that stands out, in part because it is so memorable but at the same time so far off, is the *Sunday Telegraph* dubbing her "The Carrie Bradshaw of Beirut." It is misleading in that Haddad, in *I Killed Scheherazade* at least, does not kiss and tell the way the characters in *Sex And The City* do. Her book dwells critically and affectionately on her relationship with her father and with her sons. But nowhere does it even mention, let alone mythologise, her relationship with her first husband, or her second.

"I didn't want to get too personal," Haddad says. "I do talk about men, and about how I think the relationships between men and women should be.

"But I didn't want to get personal because I have another project on the side, apart from this book. I am writing another book about the men in my life. I am divorced. And I have a second husband now. And I don't have a problem talking about my private life.

"But my second husband is a very private man. I didn't want him to feel awkward about me, you know, flashing the details. Plus we have a very nontraditional life. We don't live in the same house. I would love to discuss this



Scheherazade tells a story with a cliffhanger, centuries before the term is coined.

## A woman ahead of her time

Joumana Haddad chose one wily woman to kill.

Scheherazade is the narrator of *The Thousand And One Nights*. Possibly history's first feminist, Scheherazade is well-read, well-educated, daring, clever and captivating. She's the modern Arabic woman centuries before her time and thus a fitting persona for Haddad to have as a role model.

After all, as more than one literary critic notes, Scheherazade is the perfect woman: wife, mother, friend and courtesan.

As the story (told as early as the 10th century) goes, Sultan Shahryar, ruler of the Persian empire, discovered his first wife was unfaithful. In revenge, he weds and kills a new wife each day, until three years later there are only two eligible women left in town, the vizier's daughters, Scheherazade and Dinarzade.

After the consummation of their marriage, Scheherazade prompts her sister to ask her to tell a tale. She fascinates the sultan with her story, but stops before getting to the end.

The sultan's curiosity is aroused by her simple ruse, and he decides not to kill her. Instead, he listens to the tale's continuation the next night. This strategy goes on for 1,000 nights. Scheherazade bears him three children, he pardons her and they all live happily ever after.

Rick Arthur

but it deserves a book of its own."

With the help of a literary agent Haddad is working on getting a publisher in the United States for *I Killed Scheherazade*. She is also planning an Arabic translation, which she will do herself. But for now, she is confident that readers in Beirut, the hometown for which she has surprisingly little love, will have no trouble

tackling her book in English or French. How does she think they will respond?

"Oh, they're going to hate it," she says with a satisfied smile and a little shrug.

*I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions Of An Angry Arab Woman*, by Joumana Haddad, Saqi Books, Dh51