





## “Jasad isn’t breaking with tradition; it’s renewing an old tradition from a modern perspective”

run of 3,000 copies. The Lebanese Council of Women immediately called for it to be banned. Proving that even negative publicity can be good publicity, the debut issue sold out within the fortnight.

Seven issues later, advertisers remain wary of *Jasad’s* incendiary agenda. The magazine makes its money from bookshop sales in Lebanon, Paris, and London – swathed in cellophane to deter casual or under-age browsers – and from sales to several hundred subscribers across the Arab world, including the Gulf states.

*Jasad* has its own Internet domain, but is not yet published online. “I was determined to produce a physical magazine, not just a Web site,” Haddad says. “Everyone said publishing online would make

it easier to get around issues of censorship. But I wanted the physical challenge of producing a magazine. We may launch a Web site version later.”

But the magazine has survived against the odds, winning support within the government. Senior Lebanese officials, including the former minister of information, Tarek Mitri, and the current minister of interior, Ziad Baroud, have resisted the clamor from religious conservatives to close the magazine.

Haddad has had to learn to live with hate mail, though. One writer called for her to be stoned to death. Another accused her of corrupting children. A third threatened to attack her with acid. Her critics call her sinful, corrupt, wicked, dishonorable, depraved, and worse.

Words can and do hurt, but Haddad refuses to be discouraged. “*Jasad* isn’t breaking with tradition; it’s renewing an old tradition from a modern perspective,” she says. “The question why we have come to this point of regression is one on which my books and magazine reflect. I think a combination of reasons has brought us to this point.

“One is the increasing influence of organized religions on the lives of people in the Arab world. Another is a defensive reaction against anything perceived to represent Western values. *Jasad* is a place to discuss these issues and to move them forward. After all, when it comes to treating an illness, the first step towards a cure is to talk about it.”

### Responsibility

If Haddad is determined to talk about sex, she demands the same fearless commitment from *Jasad* contributors. All must publish under their own names. There are no phoney avatars, no *noms de plume*.

“It limits the number of people willing to write for us, but it’s non-negotiable,” Haddad says. “It’s about refusing to hide behind our fingers any more. It’s about being responsible, as writers, for everything we say and do. It’s only by taking responsibility that real change will come. The alternative is hypocrisy, schizophrenia. It’s difficult, yes – but it’s all part of the challenge.”

Challenge is a word that defines Haddad, who has just published her first book of prose. “I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman” has been sold in six languages. Now, Haddad is working on an Arabic version that will address the Arab readership directly.

In the book, Haddad rails against the clichés and physical constraints that conspire to keep women in their place. While attacking the generalizations and mutual misunderstandings that divide East and West, Muslims and Christians, she urges her readers to free their minds and bodies, not least through the power of the word. ▶





## In her teens, while her girlfriends were reading frothy romances, Haddad was devouring controversial books

Convent-educated Haddad was born in 1970 to an intellectual Catholic family whose values she describes as “conservative.” On April 13, 1975, – Black Sunday – Lebanon imploded into civil war. Haddad was not yet five. On the day the war broke out, Haddad’s parents mistook the sound of gunfire for wedding celebrations. “It was not a fancy wedding,” Haddad writes. “It was a war that consumed the

best years of my childhood and adolescence. A war that killed people, destroyed homes and families and became a factory of widows and orphans. A war that made time feel heavy and thick... like mud. A war that turned me rotten inside, full of insecurities and putrid wounds that I did, and still do, try my best to hide or deal with.”

Haddad did not set foot in West Beirut until she was 17. A bookish child,

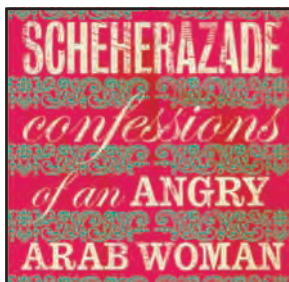
she took refuge from the war and from her parents’ volatile relationship in novels. Her father had a vast library of French-language books. They included classics from Russian, American, and European literature. Haddad spent the evenings of her childhood huddled over books, even when power cuts forced her to read by candlelight. Aged nine or 10, she started writing stories of her own.

Aged 12, she discovered poetry and the power of forbidden prose. “Our teacher read us a poem called ‘Liberté’ by a French poet called Paul Eluard,” Haddad recalls. “I was so moved, so shaken by that poem – it felt as though it had lit a volcano inside me. I knew immediately that this was what I wanted to do. I went away and wrote a poem called ‘My Freedom’.”

But she also discovered and read her father’s copy of “Justine” by the Marquis de Sade, an experience she describes as “baptism by subversion.” In her teens, while her girlfriends were reading frothy

1970

Convent-educated Haddad is born to an intellectual Catholic family



16 YEARS

Age at which Haddad enrolls in medical school, later switching to a degree in biology



“I am a very angry writer and angry person. You cannot feel anger unless you have the passion to fight”

Barbara Cartland romances, Haddad was secretly devouring controversial, often sexually frank books by Nabokov and Kafka and Henry Miller – books not available in Arabic and still banned in many Arab states.

Despite writing being the only career Haddad wanted, at 16 she enrolled at medical school. Two years later she switched to a degree in biology, married her first husband and worked for a lingerie company to put him through college. She had children young – her sons are now 18 and 10 – but her marriage did not last.

Haddad joined *An Nahar* as a translator, juggling work, motherhood, and a growing reputation as a poet. Here, she met her second husband, the poet Akl Awit. At 58 he is a steady influence, supporting Haddad’s decisions even

when he disagrees with them. Together 10 years, they married three years ago.

Famously, they keep separate homes in a coastal suburb north of Beirut. “I definitely recommend separate houses,” Haddad laughs. “I just wish that everyone could afford to live apart.”

#### Dispatch

“I Killed Scheherazade” does not delve deep into the historical, sociological, or political forces that have shaped the lives of Arab women. While the book quotes many ground-breaking Arab writers and intellectuals – the sociologist Fatima Merinissi, novelist Hanan Al Shaikh, artist Ghada Amer, poet Fadwa Touqan, freedom fighter Djamila Bouhired, human rights lawyer Laure Moughazel, and filmmaker Randa Shahhal – it is less a battle

plan, more a dispatch from the front.

“It’s not a historical book; it’s more autobiographical,” Haddad says. “So many books have been written about our history, and culture, and politics. Always in my writing, the main source is the small cells that form me. My writing is always deeply personal. But the personal can become global, and the world lives inside us.

“That means that what I feel can be shared by so many others. I really felt the need just to be frank about my own life and experiences, and to offer these as a modest example of what can be done... Lebanese women do not necessarily have it easier than other Arab women. I come from a conservative family too.”

It is a family that has known its own suffering. Several of Haddad’s relatives have taken their own lives, including her favourite grandmother and an aunt. It was Haddad, then seven, who found her Armenian grandmother dead on the kitchen floor. Beneath the polemic lies deep-rooted pain.

And it is at this deeper level that Haddad’s book becomes a metaphor for the Lebanese experience. It does not – perhaps cannot – delve deep into the darkness of the past, lay bare the facts and put its demons to rest. Instead, “Scheherazade” is driven by anger and an angry refusal to let pain win. “War either turns you into a surrendering type lost in sorrow – and I don’t blame people who have that reaction,” Haddad says. “Or it turns you into a fighter, into someone who challenges their fate and the difficulties they face to build a better future. I like to believe that I belong to the second camp.

“I’m a very angry writer and a very angry person. But I believe this is positive. You cannot be passionate without feeling anger over injustice. You cannot feel anger unless you have the passion to fight. I would like to stop feeling angry one day. But there are so many things wrong in the world – so many injustices and lies. We face a choice: either to surrender to injustice or to use our anger to build a better future.” ■