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Joumana Haddad: 'I live in a country that hates me'

Joumana Haddad is a ferocious critic of sexism in Lebanon, and her erotic magazine has brought death threats. A new book is her fiercest attack yet on Arab culture. So what drives her?



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Joumana Haddad: 'We have done, and keep on doing, almost everything we can to encourage intolerance towards us.'
Photograph: Eamonn McCabe

The first year that Joumana Haddad took her new magazine to the Beirut book fair, her posters were torn down, there were bitter complaints to the director and Hezbollah, whose stall was directly opposite hers, tried to close her down. The second year, despite the 250 other outfits she could have found herself facing, they encountered each other again. Despite their complete – and mutual – disapproval, "We were just smiling at each other, nodding, saying 'Hello, how are you?'" Peals of laughter.

Haddad has many other critics, not all of them so gentlemanly. They hack into her website and fill her inbox with threats of rape and murder and stoning, call her debauched, immoral, criminal and wicked, a bleak litany she appears to accept as an unavoidable consequence of what she does – which is to write deliberately personal, often explicit poetry; edit the cultural pages of Lebanon's leading daily, An-Nahar, the first woman to do such a job in the Arab world; and – the project that causes the greatest cascades of opprobrium – publish Jasad, a glossy quarterly magazine dedicated to the body. It contains serious reportage about polygamy, virginity and forced marriage, but also erotic stories and personal testimony, all of which must be published under the author's real name. The only threat she admits to being seriously rattled by was a promise to throw acid at her – that caused nightmares, and when, not long after, she suspected she was being followed, she didn't drive her own car, or even leave her home in a seaside suburb of Beirut for weeks.

The threats aren't likely to end any time soon: Haddad's latest project, I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of An Angry Arab Woman, began as a furious response to a

passing comment by a Swedish journalist interviewing her about Jasad ("Most of us in the west," said that hapless lady, "are not familiar with the possibility of liberated Arab women like you existing") and expanded into a vivid assertion of individuality, free speech, free choice and dignity against religious bigotry, prejudice and the herd instinct both within and outside the Arab world, and within and outside Islam; Haddad herself comes from a Catholic family, and she criticises Christians as well as Muslims. Written in forthright, aphoristic English (she also speaks French, Arabic, Armenian, Spanish and Italian) it is often frankly thrilling, because it carries the frisson of true risk, and of earned fury:

"These backward-looking obscurantists" – Arab defenders of chastity – "are thieves. They are desecrators. They are murderers. And, on top of everything, they are *stupid*. And this is perhaps the cruellest blow."

"We have done, and keep on doing, almost everything we can to encourage intolerance towards us."

"Being an Arab today means you need to be a hypocrite."

"The Arab mind is in crisis. And because of this it wants everyone to be in crisis with it ... The Arab mind cannot handle questions, because questions can hurt and upset the murky calm of the swamp."

"We constantly and obsessively think about sex, but dare not talk about it. We rid ourselves of one so-called abomination with one hand, then practice intellectual debauchery, which is much worse, with the other."

I Killed Scheherazade has already been translated into six languages (when we met, a fierce bidding war was being conducted in Brazil) – but not, yet, into Arabic. Haddad intends to write that version herself, and rather than tone it down, she plans to make it an even stronger attack on the world she comes from, and on her gender: not for her the idea of Arab women as a mass of silent suffering – rather, she sees a collection of individuals, many of whom "indulge in being a victim, especially when [they're] living a comfortable life, like many women in Saudi Arabia", or are content, like many Lebanese women, with only superficial emancipation. There are those, for example in Afghanistan, "who can do nothing about it for the time being", but many many more who must take some responsibility for their own erasure. "It's really important for me to say that. Because I frankly don't feel that many women are doing enough to change their state."

Haddad, in electric blue mini-dress, neon pink nails, aggressive heels, vivid makeup and cascading hair, is a flamboyant presence. The waiters at the Lebanese restaurant in west London where we met (a mistaken suggestion, for someone who makes no secret of how they feel about the place they come from – "Belonging?" she writes, "Thanks but no thanks. I grew up in a country that hates me, and that expresses this hatred in so many ugly ways") can't take their eyes off her. One suspects it's a reaction she's used to, but it's also one she would defend: equality is incredibly important to her, but so is femininity, a power and danger to be enjoyed to the hilt, along with more cerebral achievements. If she has an argument with western feminism, it is with those who would downplay this. "I would never want to look like a man or act like a man. I don't need to. I mean, I *love* men, and I love being with them, and I love communicating with them, but I don't want to be them. I don't want to feel like I have to be like them in order to be heard!" She has no time, either, for defence of women just because they are women – voting for Hillary Clinton, for instance, or Ségolène Royale, simply because they are female. "No, and a

thousand times no, for such an insulting, superficial kind of solidarity. Women deserve more. Much more."

She grew up surrounded by war: at home her parents fought, constantly, conducting silent battles of attrition in which Haddad and her brother were conscripted as messengers. "They still fight. It's terrible. It was a big love story, but they were not made for each other." Out of doors, the Lebanese war began with gunfire that her mother initially thought was fireworks from a fancy wedding. Haddad eventually got used to everything – the severed limb of a neighbour lying on the pavement, the men tied to cars and dragged through the streets, the gunfire and bomb shelters – everything except the whistle of approaching shells.

Aged seven she came into the kitchen to find her grandmother, to whom she was close, and whom she was always told she resembled, lying dead on the floor, having poisoned herself. That was how she discovered that suicide ran in the family: years later she tried to come to terms with this by editing an anthology of poets who had killed themselves. "And while I was doing it, one of my aunts committed suicide as well."

At 12, already versed in Balzac and Dostoevsky, Salinger and Eluard, she discovered, in her printer father's large library, the Marquis de Sade's *Justine*, or the Misfortunes of Virtue. Horrified and hypnotised, she read the whole thing. "I like to refer to it," she writes in *I Killed Scheherazade*, as my 'baptism by subversion'. "De Sade let her know that "Everything is allowed in your mind. everything is possible." (As well as her other commitments, which include administrating the Arab equivalent of the Booker prize, she is currently working on a PhD at the Sorbonne – a translation of the works of De Sade into Arabic.) Thereafter she played the nice girl at the strict Catholic / Maronite school she attended for 14 years, absorbed her parents' fierce competitiveness – "just focussing on being first in everything" – and retreated to adult worlds in her head.

She also knows, however, that she is damaged, rudderless in a profound way, and that one of the results is that she is attracted to transgression for transgression's sake. Her achievement is to tether that instinct to her cause and to enact her beliefs; her recklessness in doing so is brave and immensely admirable, but also makes one slightly worried for her. Behind the laughter and defiance lurks a sense of what her unconventional path might have cost.

In Lebanon the two routes for clever people were medicine or engineering, and so, although what she really wanted to do was write, she did a first degree in biological sciences – "but you know – poetry is a lot about science as well – it's a lot about having a kind of rhythm and logic and structure in your head. I don't think they're so estranged." At 19, she married, and two years later had her first child; a second son was born seven years after that. She regards having children so early as a blessing: by the time she was writing and publishing poetry full-time, they were at school.

When she first started publishing there were suggestions that it was actually a man writing the poems – "it amazes you? Really? People think like that in the Arab world. A woman cannot have a talent. It's so *frustrating*." Initially she wrote in French and then in Arabic: at 26 she scandalised her father (who used to write classical Arabic poetry in secret) by putting the word "penis" in a poem. Why, he asked sorrowfully, can't you use the word "column"?

Haddad's own husband, a hotelier, became increasingly uncomfortable with her concerns and prominence – "he would make fun of my writer friends, would make fun of me – you know, childish stuff" – and, after paying to convert from Catholicism to the

Syriac Orthodox faith (though Haddad is, in fact, an atheist), they divorced when she was 29. It was amicable, and they are still friends. "I just wanted my kids. That was my only condition." She claims her rebelliousness has led her to raise them "without any taboos whatsoever, and sometimes I think, 'What did I take away from them?' Because not having any taboos – which is wonderful, for me, still – deprives them of a small, delicious pleasures, the pleasure of transgressing in secret, you know? And sometimes, there's friends of mine who tell me that they're both going to marry very traditional women." Another peal of laughter. "That they're gonna get back at me that way. Well, who knows?"

Her current husband, who she has been with for 10 years and married three years ago, is also a poet. They live in houses 15 minutes apart, because if there's anything she feels she's learned about relationships it's that "it's good to keep a certain distance, you know? Keep your own space. I think if it were economically possible many people would love to do that. You would *choose* whether you want to spend the night with your husband or partner or not. But not just wake up and fight over the hot water and who's going to make coffee, because at the end of the day these things are really what ruin a relationship."

Perhaps because he is 20 years older and met her at a different time, he is much more patient about her prominence, and while he "didn't want me to do the magazine, he doesn't like it, he is very supportive, and helps me any way he can. This is why I respect him. It's much more difficult to support people you don't agree with." A greater strain is the degree of travel she has been doing recently – when we met in London she had spent the previous three days in Genoa, Milan and Rome, and was en route to Beirut.

Why doesn't she leave altogether? Beirut seems to elicit such anger and loathing – but that's part of the point. If she left, she "wouldn't be so angry. A lot of the things that I write I write because I'm angry."

I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman is published by Saqi on 4 September.

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