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TRAILBLAZING FEMINIST: JOUMANA HADDAD 01 December 2010

Written by [Assumpta Ozua](#)



Author, poet and journalist Joumana Haddad is a feminist force to be reckoned within the Arab world and beyond. In this interview find out about her and her new book *I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman*

Born in Beirut, Joumana Haddad is a critically acclaimed translator, journalist and poet whose unwillingness to be silenced by her critics, in spite of numerous death threats, is nothing short of extraordinary. She describes herself as a feminist because Joumana believes that "you cannot be a freethinking emancipated Arab woman without being one".

Her candid and unapologetic writing style has caused fury within her region, but haven't deterred Joumana from writing or her books being translated into many different languages. She is the head of the cultural pages for the prominent An Nahar newspaper as well as editor-in-chief of *Jasad* magazine – an erotic magazine focusing on literature and arts of the body.

Joumana cites two main reasons as the driving force behind setting up the erotic *Jasad*; "I am very passionate about the body and erotica and I have always written about these things even in my own poetry. When I started thinking about doing my own editorial project I was looking for something new and necessary. I thought this should be it because we need to talk about these topics." The second reason she believes is more political. "I and many for the writers like me in the Arab world were becoming quite angry because of all the taboos and constraints imposed on the Arab language lately, especially when it wasn't the case before. I wanted to create a free space for writer, thinkers and artists to be able to express themselves"

In Joumana's latest book, *I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman*, she takes on an even bigger challenge. The book has a dual purpose; firstly to debunk western stereotypes about Arab women. Secondly it seeks to challenge women within the Arab world to take responsibility for their self-determination.

In *Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman* Joumana speaks on behalf of Arab women like her, those who are "fed up with the way most Western media represents the stereotype of the Arab woman; which I'm not saying is wrong but it's incomplete." Based on her life and experiences, Joumana wanted to challenge and correct the stereotypes. She wanted to show "that even in such a suffocating environment, some women are ready to do what they want to do and managing to say what they want to say. Of course there's a very high price, but there's always a price and it's really worth paying."

Early in the book Joumana states that regretfully, the preconceived notions that westerners have of Arab women do exist and in many ways is the dominant model. In light of this *Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman* "is as much addressed to Arab readers, especially the female Arab reader in order to tell her she should take responsibility for what is happening to her and she should stop moulding herself in the victim image."

In terms of the self-determination of the Arab women, Joumana doesn't think that she can foresee something happening on that level but is hopeful that one day it will. "I'm not that optimistic because I feel a lack of constructive anger...the kind of working women, what she hears everyday are the same words. Her rights, [they] are not priority, that there are so many wars being fought [and] so many problems. We feel that our rights are a luxury when definitely they are not."

Since Joumana cannot foresee the full autonomy of Arab women, when asked what she would like to say to them she answers emphatically, "I feel like saying stand up for yourself. Stop believing that you're a helpless victim. Because each and everyone one of us, can achieve something and even in the most difficult situations you can always find a way to make your small garden a better place for you and those who live with you."

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As a mother herself, Joumana stresses the importance of motherhood: "I don't feel like [mother's are] investing enough in it because she is frequently, (and without generalising) raising her girls to become another model of her, and raising her boys to become as patriarchal and macho as her husband and her father." According to Joumana, the Arab woman must learn to cultivate an identity of her own, "so she can really start investing in the younger generation and in the sons and daughters that she is raising."

Such strong viewpoints are examples of the outspoken nature that has led to Joumana receiving malicious messages threatening violence and death. However, she has always been unafraid of conflict and believing it to be inevitable when you stand up for something. To the woman who doesn't know how to deal with conflict and is too afraid or lacks the strength to speak her mind, she says: "Life is after all a big adventure. It would be a shame to go through [it] without having once, abandoned our desires to do something. I just say go for it. Go and try and take what you feel like taking, instead of sitting there and looking at the apple hanging on the tree. You want the apple to be in your hand. You can just stand up. I know it's not easy and [know] how difficult it can be. But conflict makes us grow, mature and makes us stronger. We cannot live our lives walking by the wall."

Irrespective of their location, young women across the world struggle with identity and being themselves without fear. When asked what advice she had for them Joumana recommends internal reflection, instead of focusing on the external. "We are always looking at the outside, we're always trying to comply with what society, TV, the magazines and the blogs and so many other things are telling us what to be. Instead I think it is important for us to look inside, to use those eyes we have inside. Try to find ourselves and find the strength and achieve those dreams that we all have. We just need to believe in our dreams and ourselves. And we shouldn't be afraid. This is very important."

I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman is published by Saqi Books and is now available for [purchase](#).

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