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Lose Your Illusion: Essays by Joumana Haddad

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Here are a few statistics you may or may not be familiar with. The 2002 *Arab Human Development Report* estimated that the Arab world translates around 330 books annually, one fifth of the number translated by Greece. Taking the long view, the authors also estimated that the Arab world had translated 100,000 books since the Caliph Ma'mun in the ninth century. This is just under the average number translated by Spain in a year. How many books are actually produced? We don't really know. While they admitted that there were 'no reliable figures', the researchers indicated that 'many indicators suggest a severe shortage of writing; a large share of the market consists of religious books and educational publications that are limited in their creative content.

The Arab world was a civilisation of great literature and creativity before it got hijacked by an absurd and stupid religion. Like all Arab independent voices, Joumana Haddad lives under the constant thread of murder and acid attack. Yet a muscle unused won't always atrophy and something that's choked won't always die. There are sentences and paragraphs in Haddad's book of which no British intellectual is capable. One of the many reactions to read *I Killed Scheherazade* is a kind of embarrassment at the poverty of Western liberal thought. There's more insight and poetry in these 160 pages of Haddad, than there is in a pulped rainforest's worth of Armstrong, Eagleton, Grey, and all the other quacking equivocal voices on the op-ed pages and panel shows.

I Killed Scheherazade is mainly about the hypocrisy and ugliness of separation. The theocratic world incorporates the most extreme kind of puritanism in its scripture and policy, yet allows its male citizens to carry out appalling acts of sexual degeneracy that would never be tolerated in the decadent and godless West. As Haddad puts it, Islamic governments will burn copies of *Lolita* but won't prohibit child brides. The theocratic world denies sexuality yet also magnifies it to a degree far beyond the Western supermodel and billboard culture. Its clerics claim to be above base desire, and yet their laws on vice and virtue are detailed to a prurient and ludicrous degree (the Iranian artist Marjane Satrapi remembers being told off by the Revolutionary Guards for running in the street; the officers were concerned that the pistoning motions of Satrapi's buttocks could arouse passing males). Haddad quotes an old Lebanese saying: 'We want something and we spit on it.'

Sexual schizophrenia stretches far beyond Islam, of course. We portray ourselves as strong, high-minded men and women, and never betray the amount of imagination and

thought devoted to the beast with two backs. Sex is something that most people think about a great deal, yet culturally it's left to the admen and the stand-ups. In Arab poetry and prose, Haddad says, sex is described mainly in geographic or botanical metaphor (flower of paradise, bud of heaven, etc) and she recalls her father's distress when Haddad, then in her mid twenties, used the word 'penis' in a poem. 'How can you write such an atrocity, and publish it under your own name?' he cried. 'Couldn't you have used the word 'column' instead?'

Haddad went on to set up an erotic magazine, *Jasad*, with the aim 'not to help men ejaculate when masturbating, rather to inquire intellectually into the consciousness of the body, and its unconsciousness.' She questions the Christian separation of body and soul: 'Life, to me, is a physiological, physical, instinctual, sensory experience, in as much as it is also an emotional, psychological and intellectual one.' Contra the poet, you are not a soul strapped to an animal: *the animal is the soul*. And it's because we are made of matter that we can experience the great rushing moments that we call spirituality.

Many feminists hold on to the convention that vanity is a sin: think Germaine Greer, denouncing the British journalist Suzanne Moore for her 'fuck-me shoes and three fat inches of cleavage.' There's an impression in Western liberalism that you can be beautiful and intellectual but not both. For Haddad, the symbol of powerful femininity is 'the Sonia Rykiel boutique in the St Germain neighbourhood in Paris: extremely beautiful, stylish and seductive dresses can be seen side-by-side with selections of books and new releases by novelists, thinkers, poets and philosophers.' Yet feminists in the West tend to downplay sexuality, seeing it as contaminated by males. This attitude only reinforces the stud/slut double standard that endures to this day: 'If a woman writes of sex among other things, she is described as a daring 'erotic writer'... If a man writes of the same subject, it is just a topic among another, completely normal.'

In *I Killed Schehezerade* such lazy assumptions fall like blasted ducks. To those who claim that religious dress is liberating: 'isn't the defeminisation of women an act of surrendering *par excellence* to men's blackmail and their shallow view of the female entity as a sum of thighs, tits, asses, lips, and so on and so forth?' To those who believe that progress only comes through diplomacy: 'The person who courts consensus has no colour, no taste, no smell. We shouldn't need an obsequious court to feel safe. We shouldn't need to please ALL the others to feel pleased about ourselves.' To those who encourage people to believe in an afterlife:

What could paradise be other than a wonderful illusion invented by a few geniuses (sometimes they are called prophets, other times saints and mystics, depending on the cultural and social contexts) in order to control the masses, promising them a reward that they will never be able to grant?... Do you really want to bet your life, and principles, and behaviour, and choices, on THAT? Wouldn't it be healthier, and more rewarding, to set for yourself an earthly life ethic and morality, based on decency, respect and universal humanistic values?

To read Joumana Haddad is to lose your illusions and discover your dreams.

I Killed Scheherezade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman, Joumana Haddad, Saqi 2010

About the Author