



MIDDLE EAST

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Lebanese poet Haddad pushes boundaries on erotica

By Junaid Ahmed
BBC News

Joumana Haddad, the editor of an erotic Arabic-language magazine and author of a new book that challenges sexual taboos in the Arab world, is drawing praise and death threats alike.

The Lebanese writer and poet publishes *Jasad* - Arabic for body - a glossy quarterly that deals with eroticism and body-culture.

Published since December 2008, *Jasad*'s articles range from violence in relationships to voyeurism and masturbation.

Her works have been opposed by Muslims and Christian groups alike, but Ms Haddad says she will not be silenced.

"When I started doing *Jasad*, I started receiving a lot of hate mail and threats," she told the BBC World Service in a recent interview.

"I didn't want to be intimidated and compelled to stop doing what I was convinced I needed to do," she says. "I just kept on doing it."

She has been described by some as the Carrie Bradshaw of Beirut - in reference to the main character from *Sex and the City* - but says the purpose of her work is not to emulate the West.

"I don't think this is Western," she says, "I get feedback from women all over the Arab world telling me how great it is to read this magazine."

'Angry woman'

Ms Haddad, who grew up in a conservative Christian family in Lebanon, says the main image of an Arab woman in the West is the one of the victim, "the one who doesn't have any decision over her body, her life."

But that should not be the only image of an Arab woman in the world, she argues.

"Even though that image does exist," she says, there is also another Arab woman who is liberated and emancipated, "and she represents the hope for the first one."

Ms Haddad, first began publishing her work when she was in her mid-20s, first in French and then in Arabic.

She launched *Jasad* two years ago, and says the magazine is read by a wide range of people despite the taboo of sex in the Arab world.

It has the obvious readership, "the people who are not embarrassed to buy it in front of everybody else," and what she calls the background readership - people who attack it in public, and read it in secret.

Even though the material is controversial, Ms Haddad insists that they must be written by Arabic writers using their real names.

"I do not accept fake names," she says.

Church and mosque

Her latest book, *I killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman*, takes aim at Middle Eastern women themselves - for not doing enough to fight for their rights.



Even in her home country of Lebanon, where many women dress more freely than in other Arab countries and can go out at night, Ms Haddad says there is still a lot of discrimination.

"Women have to be very careful about not falling into that trap of superficial freedom," she warns.

Ms Haddad sees confrontation, not capitulation, as the key to women's advancement.

"This is why I attacked the image of Scheherazade [in my book]," she says, referring to the queen at the centre of the age-old stories contained in *A Thousand and One Nights*.

"[Scheherazade] negotiated with the man [the king]. She told him: 'I'll tell you a story each night, and you let me stay alive'.

"The woman is sometimes the worst accomplice against herself," she says.

Ms Haddad says her book aims to reflect the real dilemmas of women in Arab societies.

But her work has received almost the same number of complaints from various Christian churches as it has from Shia and Sunni Muslim groups, she says.

"I think we underestimate the power of the Church. There is a lot of discrimination in the Church and I talk about it in the book," she tells the BBC.

"Christianity, as far as I am concerned, is not that different from Islam.

"I'm convinced that religion in general is one of the worst enemies of women's emancipation," she adds.

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