

# The New York Times

## Sex and the Souk

CULTURE

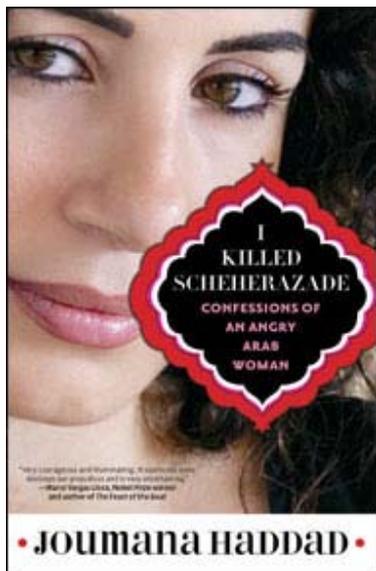
TMAGAZINE

By NINA BURLEIGH

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*Ambroise Tézenas*CHICK CRIT — Haddad in her Beirut office.



Her new book is a spirited call to arms.

Joumana Haddad, “the Oprah of Lebanon,” is flirting with a fatwa. In the Arab world, suddenly she’s everywhere, a dark-haired, golden-eyed looker sashaying onto talk shows in stiletto heels, provoking Hezbollah with her contempt for Shariah law, penning newspaper columns and books about Arab gender politics, publishing a racy magazine and flashing a winning smile as a judge on Lebanon’s “Celebrity Duets.”

This Arab Queen of All Media is more nighttime than afternoon, and she’s definitely not a girlfriend. A poet and the cultural page editor of the Lebanese daily [An-Nahar](#), she started publishing *Jasad* (“body” in Arabic), a quarterly erotic magazine, in 2008, with articles by intellectuals and poets about masturbation, homosexuality, fetishism and polygamy alongside antique photos of nude Arab boys luxuriating in voluptuous Ottoman settings and close-ups of female genitalia. Tame fare by Western standards, but guaranteed to steam the turbans, especially with a woman behind it.

Her latest project is a book in English, to be published in the United States later this year. [“I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman”](#) is many things: a coming-of-age memoir, a sexual polemic and a spirited call to Arab women to stand up for themselves. There is something in it for Western women, too, to the extent that the fate of the honor-killed, acid-scarred, burqa-bound Arab female has implications for the status of women worldwide.



Haddad as a baby with her parents.

Haddad, 40, is a born-and-raised product of Beirut, a city that used to be called “the Paris of the Middle East” but these days resembles “the mall of the Middle East,” albeit one pocked with craters and bullet holes. The Christian neighborhood where she grew up, Ashrafieh, betrays no trace of Ottoman glory; every other building is a sleek glass box, inhabited by Rolex, Gucci and Lexus.

The daughter of a middle-class bibliophile and a half-Armenian mother, Haddad was a chubby kid with body issues and had a strict Christian upbringing. She was studying medicine before she got married at 19 and switched to biology. “I was a virgin when I got married — I am so ashamed of that, but I wanted to get out of my parents’ house,” she says.

Educated by nuns, she grew up during Lebanon’s bloody civil war. But she insists that sex, not war, shaped her destiny. In her book, she describes a steamy Beirut afternoon in 1982. A bored, bookish 12-year-old trapped in a fifth-floor apartment with her family, she had just polished off a Balzac and was scanning her father’s shelves for a fresh distraction. A tattered yellow tome high up near the ceiling caught her eye: “Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue,” by the Marquis de Sade. She calls Sade “my baptism by subversion.”



Rabih

*Moghrabi/Agence France-Presse—Getty Images* Winning a journalism award for her work in the newspaper An-Nahar.

Haddad got her start in journalism as a translator for An-Nahar and eventually became editor of its culture pages. A mother of two sons by two different men, she is on her second marriage, to a fellow writer two decades older, and they live separately. She cultivates a wanton streak, and one current focus of her desire is Steven Colbert, whom she watches on her laptop nightly. “So smart, so funny,” she says. “Please, please introduce me! He’s edible.”

In regular columns published in Lebanon and Germany, Haddad writes often on the twisted state of Middle Eastern gender relations. There’s the Egyptian sheik who issued a fatwa that men and women may only work together in offices if the men have been breast-fed by the women. She says with a laugh: “The orgies they must have to comply with that!” (It was later retracted.) And then there’s virginity, and the contortions that even liberated young Lebanese women undertake to remain “pure” for their wedding night.

Clad in jeans, flat Italian boots, a tight, sleeveless black turtleneck and purple suspenders, Haddad sips a Pellegrino and fiddles with the intricacies of her hand-rolled cigarettes, spilling tobacco onto the table in an Italian coffee shop at the ABC Mall in Ashrafieh. A middle-aged woman with dyed red hair recognizes her and approaches, gushing gratitude. “Bravo, bravo, bravo,” the woman says, and then thanks her in Arabic. “Shukran.” Haddad blushes.

A British journalist called her “the Carrie Bradshaw of Beirut,” and she admits to a passion for in-home manicures, Italian shoes and handbags, but Lebanese journalists face hazards far more perilous than a pink martini hangover. Beirut — bombed by Israel as recently as 2006, home to Hezbollah and murderous internal politics — is a dangerous place to be “the most hated woman in Lebanon,” as one article recently described her. The editor who first hired her at An-Nahar and one of her editorial colleagues were both killed in separate car bombs during 2005.

One wonders where sexual politics fits into this volatile setting. “People tell me, ‘There are so many things wrong with the Arab world, why do you just talk about sex?’ And I say, ‘This is the main link.’ Who decides what’s haram — what’s allowed and not allowed? The religious figures. They are linked with the political powers, and together they work to control the society through this medium, the sex drive. If you break the power over sex, you can start undermining and questioning the religious and political powers. You cannot do it the other way around.”



Jasad, the erotic quarterly she publishes.



Jasad has earned Haddad attention and accolades but also threats of death, rape and acid to the face. For several weeks after she published the first issue, she didn’t drive her own car. The acid was what really scared her. She revels in her beauty. “People would love to see me as stupid,” she says. “There are two things in the cultural field that people run from: first, they think that if you neglect the way you look, if you don’t wash your hair, you must be smart. And second, if you are famous, it means you are bad. So when they see someone like

me — I write books, I am a poet, and I take care of how I look — it destroys the illusion of how an educated, cultivated person should be.”

Haddad claims to have spurned the head scarf her entire life. “Never,” she says. She recently refused an Italian photographer’s plea that she don a veil for a photo shoot, preferring instead to flaunt the Arabic “J” tattoo on her naked shoulder.

Haddad, who wrote in French before she wrote in Arabic, and whose English has a slight French accent, praises the French burqa prohibition: “It’s not racist; it’s about their way of doing things. I respect their separation of religion and state.” She ridiculed the claim that the burqa is a political statement. “If a man puts it on as well, I accept that it’s a choice. But why would she — the woman — be the bearer of this so-called traditional outfit? Why? Because she is the object of a temptation and she needs to protect herself and the man from temptation. She is held responsible for what she is. Her very identity is an accusation. When I go to Arab countries, I see hunger in men’s eyes.”

This kind of talk has won her fundamentalist enemies but also critics among the nonreligious Arab intelligentsia, who think she’s a lightweight shock artist. The Lebanese-American professor As’ad AbuKhalil, who teaches at California State University and calls himself a radical feminist, has excoriated her in the leftist pro-Hezbollah paper *Al-Akhbar* and on his English-language blog, *The Angry Arab*. “She poses in the Western press, where people who write about her don’t know Arabic, as a victim of fundamentalists, when I know of no fundamentalist who ever attacked her, and I don’t think they know who she is,” he says. As for *Jasad*, AbuKhalil pronounced it “nothing courageous and nothing daring: it is rather sleazy and attempts to satisfy Gulf oil princes. It is sold in Gulf countries as soft porn.”

Confronted with this and other criticisms, Haddad smiles without rancor. “To tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn,” she says. She enjoys the fact that her magazine is selling like hot cakes — via the Web, not in stores — in the conservative Gulf states.

Haddad is not considered a feminist leader in her own country, not least because she has publicly rejected the label. Farah Salka, a member of the Lebanese feminist collective *Nasawiya*, credits Haddad for raising awareness of sexual freedom but says she falls short as a sister in struggle. “She does not lend a helping hand in effecting change, or even connecting with women on the ground in any way,” Salka says.

Haddad would beg to differ. She plans to start an interactive Web site for “angry Arab women.” She thinks that if she builds a virtual bitchfest, they just might come. “As a woman, you have to feel humiliated, insulted and angry,” she says. “If you don’t feel humiliated and

insulted, nothing is going to change. We don't need reconstruction in the Arab world. We need destruction and construction. We can't just try to make it better. We have to cancel it and have a fresh start. I know it sounds utopian. I am not a hero, a heroine. I am not particularly courageous, but I have done this in my own small space."

That "small space" is expanding: she is on the verge of hosting her own nightly TV talk show, which she promises to pack with guests who agree with her take on sexual politics.

And that whirring sound? Only the censor's jamming machines, going into high gear.