

# Joumana Haddad, Poet, Rebel and Murderer of Scheherazade

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“Although I’m a so-called ‘Arab woman’, I, and many other women like me, are not veiled, subdued, illiterate, oppressed, and certainly not submissive; we are like you.” This is how Joumana Haddad writes in her internationally acclaimed book *I Killed Scheherazade*. Born in Beirut in 1970, this writer, journalist and translator was recently selected as one of the most influential women in the world and is one of the most important figures in the fight for the rights of Arab women. She writes without fear to freely express the injustices and inequalities endured by women and her words are a tireless struggle in search of freedom.

This woman poet, rebel, writer, head of the literary section of the great Lebanese newspaper *An Nahar* and soul of the erotic magazine *Jasad*, has cultivated in her books the feminine myth of Lilith, which represents the opposite of the Biblical Eve, created by God from Adam’s rib. Scheherazade is the central character of *One Thousand and One Nights*, who with her narrative cleverness manages to entertain the sultan and put off her death again and again.

“I’m a mother and I’m a poet,” this angry Arab writer told me, simply, in her glass office at the newspaper *An Nahar*, packed with books in all languages. Her children are always on her mind, and she cited them at the end of her list of acknowledgements in her famous book *I Killed Scheherazade*. “Thanks to them,” she wrote “to Munir and to Onsi for teaching me every day how to deserve them more, as a mother, as a woman, as a human being.” Joumana was first a poet. At the age of 24 she published

a book in French, *Le temps d’un rêve* (“The Time of a Dream”). From the age of 15 she started writing a weekly article for the newspaper *Le Réveil*, which pleased her family, whose father owned a large library. Later she wrote poems in Arabic, some of them translated into Spanish, such as “The Time of a Dream”, “Invitation to a Secret Dinner” and “The Return of Lilith”. *There Where the River Burns* is an anthology of Lebanese contemporary poetry, translated into Spanish by Joumana Haddad herself. In her prologue she evoked the fruitful cultural ambiance of 1960s Beirut, started by the journal *Shir*, founded by Yusef El Khal coinciding with the poetic renewal of Arabic literature. Its pages promoted the work of Adonis, multiple Nobel Prize candidate; Onsi El Hange; Chauki Abi Chakra or Fuad Rifka. Poets of dream and freedom, highly influenced by surrealism, who broke from the stagnated traditional style.

Lilith is a mythological female creature who inhabits her poems and essays, such as *I Killed Scheherazade*. Haddad kills the heroine of *One Thousand and One Nights* because she is a symbol of submission to the sultan, and because she represents “a conspiracy against Arab women and women in general.” Scheherazade and Eve are two female prototypes imposed by the male hegemony. Thus, the author vindicates Lilith, whose name means “the night” in Arabic, who was created in an earlier mythology both by God and man, who rebelled and left Paradise, provoking Adam’s uneasiness and discontent, from whose rib God made Eve.

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With *I Killed Scheherazade*, translated into 17 languages, Haddad achieved international success. Later, based on texts such as “An Arab Woman Reading the Marquis de Sade” or “An Arab Woman Unafraid of Provoking Allah” she issued an indictment against the prejudices towards Arab women in her work *Superman is an Arab*, which addresses issues such as the invention of machismo, the battle of the sexes or the invention of chastity. Both works were first written in English before being translated into Arabic. Some people warned the writer of the danger of doing this, because she clearly asserted her atheism.

Joumana Haddad has been working for *An Nahar* for 17 years as a literary critic. Meanwhile, she has many readers in Arab countries and in the West as a poet and writer. A Mid-

dle Eastern magazine has proclaimed her as one of the most influential Arab women. In 2009 she created a luxurious art paper magazine called *Jasad* (“body” in Arabic), which broke with the rooted sexual taboos of this so hypocritical and conservative society. The magazine, which was sold for the price of 10 dollars, included mostly literary texts, fine photographs and strange ads. It was not a pornographic magazine which served, as Joumana Haddad says, to “help men masturbate.” The cover reproduced handcuffs to express its will to break with sexual taboos. Wrapped in a plastic cover, it was aimed at adults. Outside Lebanon it was only sold by subscription and was not displayed in any newsagent’s. The largest number of subscribers was in Saudi Arabia, the most repressive country in the Middle East. Despite the threats received by Haddad, such as “God will punish you” or “I hope they throw acid at you,” it is no longer published because of financial problems. Joumana Haddad hopes to resume it online.

Born in 1970, the very jaunty writer exercises with gymnastics and by dancing salsa. She regularly goes to bed at nine in the evening and gets up at four in the morning to write. “You don’t need to find the words, they’re here,” she tells me energetically. “We need to respect their rhythm and, when the time is right, they will come to me.” Untiring, she confesses that when she gets up she is afraid of not being able to do anything, but she is immediately consumed by her vocation. Let’s finish with some important words from her work on Scheherazade: “Although I’m a so-called ‘Arab woman’, I, and many other women like me, are not veiled, subdued, illiterate, oppressed, and certainly not submissive; we are like you.”