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Jasad: Sex, Fetishes, and the Erotic in a new Arabic Glossy

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Posted by Ethar in [Books/Magazines](#), [Culture/Society](#).

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Sex.

Always an attention getter.



Jasad's cover. Image via the magazine's website.

So there's no wonder why *Jasad*, or "Body," a new quarterly Arabic magazine published in Lebanon, is making waves in the Arab world by promising to "deal with the forbidden," the *gasp* human body. The magazine's logo is 'body' spelled in Arabic and the first letter is a broken handcuff, alluding to the taboos the magazine breaks. An article in the *Guardian* reports:

Officials of Hizbullah, the powerful Lebanese Shia movement, tried to close *Jasad's* stand at [the] Beirut book fair. One outraged visitor ripped down a poster, complaining that the subject matter was "haram" –

forbidden. Visitors to the website of the popular al-Arabiya TV have attacked it. "Stop promoting this blatant vulgarity and obscenity," was **one furious comment**.

As the *Jasad* declaration (which is a fascinating read, by the way) states:

This is, of course, exactly what one would expect [...] and it's an inevitable reaction to reports of a forthcoming magazine concerned with the 'literatures, sciences and arts of the Body.' To make matters worse, the magazine's in Arabic. And as if that wasn't enough, the editor in chief is a woman. Which, basically, means it's a Molotov cocktail primed to explode.

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I've been trying to get a hold of their first issue for weeks, but alas it still hasn't arrived in Egypt. That doesn't mean, however, that there's not plenty to talk about. A quick Google search about the magazine returned hundreds of results, so I decided to get the information straight from the horse's mouth by interviewing [Joumana Haddad](#), the magazine's editor-in-chief, over the telephone.

Thirty-eight-year-old Haddad is a Lebanese poet, translator, and journalist. She speaks seven languages and has published several poetry collections. Asked why she decided to start the magazine she replied:

The body is always very present in the way I see the world; I always say that I write with my nails and my body. When I had the idea to start my own project in journalism I thought about doing a magazine but when I gave it a little more thought I realized I needed a bigger challenge, something new and that I'm very passionate about, so why not a cultural magazine that talks about the body? This magazine is also a need in my society—if I go to a bookshop this magazine is not there, it's not present. It's time to address the body in our society and as a subject that has been stolen from us.

For me it's outrageous that the body is something that we can't talk about because if you go back to our cultural and literary heritage you'll see that we have Arabic writers who go back to 10th century who speak about these topics in a beautiful free way. On a more recent level in our contemporary time it's become taboo to say things freely. When we come to say a word we say it in Arabic or French because it seems vulgar in Arabic but normal in English or French.

And although her family and friends thought she was crazy, telling her now wasn't the time or place, she insisted, and the reaction has been much better than she expected. The first issue, which launched in December 2008, sold out in 10 days. That's 3,000 copies mostly in Lebanon and with a few hundred subscriptions around the Middle East. Feedback from readers has also been mostly positive, though there has been negative feedback, mostly from anonymous readers objecting to the explicit content and graphics.

I'm a bit skeptical of complaints because I'm sure the people who are condemning it are the people who are reading it in secret," says Haddad. "As the Lebanese saying goes: "We want something and we spit on it." We are living in such a hypocritical and schizophrenic society. I know some people are just against it on principle but some feel the need to say out loud that they're against it.

Hate

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As a comment on this, I ask Haddad

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if many who would read *Jasad* would do so for the vicarious ‘thrill’—how thin is the line between art and pornography? Personally, I feel that the website header of keyhole with erotic pictures and provocative statues sliding under it; links to erotic sites; the fact that the magazine is sold in sealed plastic envelopes with the words ‘For adults only’ written on it (porn, anyone?); and the nudity in the magazine as well as the explicit nature of the writings may attract a slightly different audience than the target one.



Joumana Haddad. Image via Giorgio Pace.

Add to that the fact that, while searching for articles written about the magazine, I found out that almost every article was accompanied by a model–y photo of Haddad, with wind blowing in her hair or even one of her in a long evening dress, posing in what is obviously a staged set. The photo most commonly used is pictured above right. The writers of the articles make sure to include a photo of Haddad because they can contrast it with the oppressed view of the ‘covered’ woman. She’s gorgeous and ‘uncovered,’ which somehow means she’s brave enough to discuss the issues tackled in her magazine.

An article in the *Huffington Post* (which contrasts Haddad’s picture with women dressed from head to toe in black) says,

She’s provocative, sensual and dares the censors [...] The attractive 37–year–old brunette’s come–hither picture on the website that provides information about the quarterly magazine in English and Arabic adds to the marketing cachet surrounding this controversial publication.

Haddad answers:

Jasad is not an Arabic version of *Playboy*. Some people will see it as pornographic but they didn’t read it. If you see the list of contributors you’ll see that they are some of the Arab world’s most renowned readers and writers, and you’ll see it’s a serious magazine. You need to read it, and you’ll find that it defends itself on its own, it just needs a person with a certain degree of openness.

So what exactly does the magazine cover? The answer is, a *whole* lot of stuff.

The website says:

Jasad aims to reflect the body in all its representations, symbols and projections in our culture, time and

societies, and hopes, by doing so, to contribute in breaking the obscurantist taboos. [It] consists of different sections and columns, ranging from reportages, testimonies and articles, to essays, translations and creative writings, all covering the fields of cinema, literature, arts, theater, science, etc. And, of course, a wide variety of photos, illustrations and paintings that revolve around the axis of the body. Each issue will feature on its cover, as well as inside, the works of a controversial [Arabic] artist.

Haddad breaks it down for MMW:

Each issue consists of three main dossiers, each which represents the body at a particular level. First is the erotic dossier—we talked about foot fetish in the first issue, and we're talking about the penis in the second.

Second is the social dossier—we talked about homosexuality in the first issue and we're talking about incest in the second.

Third is the anti-aesthetical dossier and here we aim to represent the body in its horrors and ugliness to represent the obscure side of our bodies that we don't like to imagine or see. We talked about cannibalism in the first issue, and we're talking about battered men and women in the second.

Then there's a big art section, a literature section, a cinema section, and a spiritual section. Question is, at just under 200 pages, can all these topics really be addressed in depth? [A review in Menassat](#) thinks not.

The magazine fails to divine any concrete understanding of the relationship Arabs are meant to have with their bodies, and *Jasad* falls short of declaring ownership of what we should or should not be allowed to do to our own bodies.

Since I haven't read the magazine, I can't comment on the content, but I can say that a point in its favor is the fact that it is not a woman's magazine, but covers issues concerning men and women equally.

But in a world where Muslim women are expected to be covered, it's understandable that quite a few hackles will be raised. It's also understandable that quite a few of the articles written about the magazine in Western press (including the *Guardian* and *Huffington Post* article I quoted) made sure to focus on the contrast between West and East. [As this article](#) puts it:

It's great to see [coverage of *Jasad*, but] it makes me wonder whether it's not so much about Arabic literature as the still-tantalizing Orientalist myth of the erotic East, at once sternly veiled and sybaritically laid bare. While *Jasad* itself explores sensually, sparkily and thoughtfully a diverse world of sexuality, including cannibalism, fetishism, cinematic voyeurism, gender difference and body theory, the [*Guardian*] article presents it simply as a controversial "culture clash" of Western values (its "articles and illustrations are of a quality that would not be out of place in Paris, New York or London") and Arabic social mores. [It] carries with it, for Western readers and editors, a whiff of Burtonesque jasmine, a seduction — into easy arguments as well as erotic reveries.

Since I'm writing this post for MMW, I ask Haddad about whether or not the fact that she is a Christian play any role in the vision of the magazine, and if she considers religious sensitivities in the way she portrays women:

90% of my writers are Arab writers and artists, 65% are men, and 35% are women—but that's only because it's hard to convince Arab women to write about these issues and not under a pseudonym. The human body is not a female body, though a lot of Arab readers think woman's body, then sex.

80–90% of the writers are Muslim. I try not to tackle religion, though in issue 2 we have an interview with a French philosopher who wrote a book asking people to free the body from religion. But you have to realize it's not just Islam where the body is part of a religious conflict, there's no difference in the audience *Jasad* is addressing. I'm speaking about the Arab world and in it, a lot of Arab Christians think like Arab Muslims when it comes to the body. We want to break the taboos.

Jasad's second issue will be out March 6th.

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Comments»

1. Saha – February 9, 2009

a fascinating article Ethar, I'd love to read it too, but even if I could get a copy, I'd still be stuck!

2. SakuraPassion – February 9, 2009

That's interesting. :)

Judging from the description of the magazine, I don't view it as pornographic. The purpose of it is not to sexually excite the viewer. Of course when dealing with issues of the human body there's going to be talk of sexuality.

message

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url

say it!

Notify me of follow-up comments via email.