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Arab bodies, Arab desires

New publications rethink Arabs' relationships with their bodies and their sexuality

Hayeon Lee, NOW Staff , November 17, 2008



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The covers of *Jasad* magazine and *Desiring Arabs*.

Lebanon is the hub of free expression in the Arab world, so it is perhaps not surprising that two exciting bodily projects have emerged from the country. The newest and glossiest is *Jasad*, or *Body*, magazine, its cover resplendent with female curves and red silk. The other is a book called *Desiring Arabs*, a rethinking of Arab desire by a man described as the Edward Said of sexuality.

Jasad magazine

Sheathed in a cover picturing a naked woman enveloped in crimson silk fabric like a flower, the first issue of the Arabic quarterly magazine *Jasad* will be launched next month here in Beirut and become the first of its kind in the Arab world. The [magazine](#) describes itself as “specialized in the Body’s arts, sciences and literature.”

Jasad, according to its creator and editor-in-chief, Joumana Haddad, who is also a poet, will be a “forum” for *all* kinds of expressions of the body – erotic and non-erotic – in the form of essays, literature, arts, photography and more. *Jasad* is, she says, neither a women’s magazine nor Arab pornography; it is not about beauty, “as we define it.”

The first issue of the publication will include topics ranging from fetishism and self-mutilation to cannibalism, while the second issue will feature a lengthy piece on the “relationship between the handicapped and their bodies,” one fraught with “love and hate” – topics that are not normally associated with notions of beauty. While steering clear of any political or ideological labels, Haddad, nonetheless, hopes that *Jasad* will help people see another vision of the body, going beyond the “superficial” dichotomy

HAVE YOUR SAY

What do you think about Syrian-Lebanese coordination on security issues?

It is a necessary step for both countries in order to strengthen security and fight terrorism.

It is an opportunity for Syria to use security as an excuse to reassert its dominance in Lebanon.

I am remaining neutral until I see the results of this coordination.

Results

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Arab bodies, Arab desires

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related to “women’s pornography or its counterpart, the veil.”

Jasad will hit bookstores in Lebanon in sealed bags and be distributed via DHL to subscribers in other Arab countries in order to avoid censorship in a region where open expression on bodies, sexuality and eroticism is considered taboo. Haddad has been receiving “insulting or bullying” messages on the magazine already, but she is convinced that Jasad, as a “niche cultural project,” will gradually gain acceptance.

There are some good omens. For instance, Haddad had little difficulty in finding the 50 contributing writers for the first issue, while hundreds of subscriptions have been made so far, many of which, surprisingly enough, were from Saudi Arabia.

To possible charges that *Jasad* is an imitation of the West and its widespread practice of explicit bodily expressions, Haddad responds that the magazine is done “with your own culture, with your own words, with your own language, with your own writers, with your own artists. This in itself gives it the authenticity it needs.” On a different note, Haddad maintains that no one is “pure” from Western influence today – even her Arab critics probably eat McDonald’s for lunch and wear Levi’s jeans, she noted – and that we are by necessity “a mixture of everything.”



Joumana Haddad, creator and editor-in-chief of Jasad Magazine. (Giorgio Pace)

Desiring Arabs

Joseph A. Massad, a Lebanese associate professor of Modern Arab Politics and Intellectual History at Columbia University dubbed the “Edward Said of sexuality,” challenges – unlike Haddad – the very notion of “mixture” and “authenticity” regarding desire and its expression in the Arab world. Using theories of Michel Foucault, Massad analyzes the role of Western power in its production and imposition of sexual knowledge and identities in *Desiring Arabs* by surveying Arab literature from the 19th century onward to show how Western depictions of Arab sexuality influenced the discourse of desire among Arabs themselves, closing avenues of alternate sexual identities outside the binary prescribed by the West, that is, hetero- versus homosexual.

More specifically, Massad elaborates on how Arabs were previously seen as licentious and exotic according to Victorian standards, while later seen as repressed, once the West was sexually “liberated.” Both Western views at different times attribute inferior ranking to Arab “civilization” compared to the West, which justified the latter’s universalist, yet racist agenda that

“the fittest must shoulder the burden of righting the wrong of the unfit.”






According to Massad, international human rights and gay activism, which put a single face to women’s sexual rights and homosexuality, is the present equivalent of more direct Western military, social and economic intervention in the heyday of colonialism.

In response to such Western discursive violence, Arab writers and scholars – rather than stepping outside the box and evaluating the Western origins and power structures that define Arabs’ desires as “deviant” – engaged actively in this Western discourse, trying to produce counter-evidence that they are either more advanced than or on par with Western sexual standards.

New possibilities

Desiring Arabs has been endorsed by numerous well-known scholars, and Massad received the 2008 Lionel Trilling Book Award for it, in opening a fresh yet nuanced and critical academic space in discussing Arab sexuality. Similarly, Haddad’s *Jasad* magazine is looking toward generating much debate on the body and its desires in the region. Both touch upon the Arabs’ most “internal censors,” as Haddad puts it, and are definitely worth a read.

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