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## Beirut's 'Body' Language Pioneer

Lebanese Poet Breaks Taboos With Literary Magazine on Human Physicality

By Alia Ibrahim  
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BEIRUT -- When Lebanese poet Joumana Haddad decided to launch a literary magazine devoted to the human body, she expected criticism. And she got it.

The first issue of *Jasad* -- Arabic for body -- included fiction, essays and other literary works about foot fetishism, homosexuality and cannibalism. Complaints began coming in even before it debuted in December. "Stop promoting this blatant vulgarity and obscenity," a commentator wrote on al-Arabiya television's Web site when it featured an article about *Jasad*.

But the magazine has found an audience, a sign of the hidden hunger here for candid discussions of normally off-limits topics. The 3,000 copies of the first issue sold out in 11 days, and a second printing quickly sold out, too. The 5,000 copies of the second issue are selling briskly, Haddad said, and the next issue is expected next month.

Most subscribers are Lebanese, but many are from other countries in the region, especially [Saudi Arabia](#).

"Every person has the right to want to know about realities of life, many of which have become taboos in our societies," said Habib Younes, a writer who contributed to the first issue.

Haddad, 38, who is also a culture editor at an-Nahar, a leading Beirut newspaper, said the aim of her project isn't to provoke. "I may be controversial, but I am not looking for a controversy," she said. "I want my magazine to survive. I don't want it to be famous without existing."

Beirut, [Lebanon's](#) capital, has always been considered a haven for liberal thinking. A secular constitution and laws, as well as a diverse population, have made the city a sanctuary for political exiles and activists from across the Arab world. Compared with the rest of the region, censorship here is minimal when it comes to cultural and political issues.

Haddad said *Jasad* reflects her passion for the Arabic language and for what she calls the "universe of the body." Social, cultural, religious and even political boundaries restrict what can be said in Arabic, but those limits did not exist in the past, she said.

"It makes me feel oppressed sometimes that there are so many things we won't say because we have problems expressing ourselves in our own language," she said.

She cited passages from the classic book of erotica, "The Perfumed Garden," written in the 16th century by the Tunisian poet Sheik Umar Ibn Mohamad Nafzawi. The book was translated into English by Sir

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Richard Burton, who said what made it unique was "the seriousness with which the most lascivious and obscene matters are presented."

"This book is like a manual for sex, and it is all being said with a lot of simplicity," Haddad said. "You can feel that Nafzawi was looking for the best word without really asking himself, 'Um, can I say that in Arabic?' "

Haddad said her magazine doesn't have an equivalent, not even in the Western cultures she is familiar with.

"It doesn't exist there simply because they don't need it. In the West, people own their bodies. In the Arab world, our bodies have been stolen from us," she said.

The only daughter in a middle-class, fairly religious family, Haddad went to a Catholic school in Beirut. Her "revolution," she said, started when she was 12, after she read the Marquis de Sade's "Justine," which her father kept on his highest bookshelf. "Reading liberated me," she said.

Married at 17, she kept reading and studying languages: French, Arabic, English, Armenian, German, Italian and Spanish. She divorced and remarried, though she and her husband keep separate apartments "because I love him and because love can't survive the episodes of water cuts and children's bad grades at school."

Her desk is crammed with photos and statues of the Virgin Mary, and on the wall is a poster of Che Guevara bearing his slogan, "Let's be realistic, demand the impossible."

Haddad and her magazine have drawn a lot of attention, especially from Arabic blogs. Little of the reaction has been neutral.

"God bless her, there must be some angels protecting her," one blogger wrote recently.

"She is the perfect model of a person who has to be stoned to death," wrote another.

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