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Danish author Sara Omar: **Breaking taboos for Muslim women**

Born amid the horrors of war in Iraqi Kurdistan, Danish author Sara Omar now uses her voice to denounce violence inflicted on women in the name of reactionary Islam, a “calling” that has left her living under police protection. “I broke the taboo. I talk about the things you are not supposed to talk about. If I don’t do this, who will?” the 34-year-old tells AFP in an interview in Copenhagen. Her first novel “Dead Washer” sold more than 100,000 copies in Denmark when it was published in 2017, a literary feat in the country of 5.8 million where it was hailed as the “MeToo of Muslim women.” It has since been translated into several languages, including Norwegian, Swedish and French.

In her writing and when she speaks out publicly, Omar describes abuse inflicted on women and children behind closed doors—rapes, beatings, female genital mutilation and so-called honor crimes. Her depictions have angered a small fringe in Muslim societies and required her to now live under 24-hour police protection.

‘Given me a voice’

Her bestseller tells the story of a girl named Frmesk, which means “tear” in Kurdish. It follows her from her birth in Sulaymaniah, Kurdistan, in 1986 — just like Omar—to a hospital bed in Denmark in 2016 where she meets a medical student, also a young Kurdish woman, who dreams of breaking free from her overly controlling father but doesn’t dare. Omar says that many Muslim women—especially in the Nordic countries, where they often find themselves caught between the liberalism of their adopted country and their parents’ conservative values—have approached her to thank her for bringing their sufferings to life through Frmesk.

“My books have started a very quiet movement among women, especially women of Muslim background in Scandinavia, because they identify themselves with the topics and the characters in the novels,” Omar says. “A reaction that affected



Danish author Sara Omar poses during a photo session on the premises of the Danish newspaper Politiken, which is also her publisher, in Copenhagen. —AFP

me, and touched me in a way that I started crying, was from a woman between 45 and 50 years old. She came to me and she whispered in my ear: ‘Thank you for giving me a voice.’” As combative as her protagonist, Omar now refuses to speak about

her personal life, “due to her security situation and since her words can bring about severe consequences,” according to her assistant.

A ‘calling’

What is known from earlier interviews is this: After several years in refugee camps, Omar came to Denmark at the age of 15, like Frmesk. They also share a distinctive look—a streak of white in their jet-black hair. Omar has previously revealed that she has been married, is “the mother of a murdered girl” and began writing Frmesk’s story while in a psychiatric ward after several suicide attempts. For her, writing books is not “a dream.” “I see it as a calling, because I have sacrificed everything for it,” she says with a fiery look in her eye, which gives way to a melancholic smile as she refers to her security situation.

While she calls herself an “agnostic Muslim”, the author is not out to criticize Islam as such and says her message is universal. “Any monotheistic religion has a dark side and a light side. Islam also has this dark side but it is still up to interpretation. It’s all about who is holding the book,” she says. In a country preoccupied with immigrants who don’t assimilate and which is still recovering from the explosive Mohammed cartoons scandal, Omar’s ardent defense of freedom of speech has been warmly welcomed in Denmark. “As long as we have other people who are threatening authors and people fighting for the right to use words... then we have a problem,” she says.

Omar isn’t done telling Frmesk’s story. A sequel was published in 2019, “Shadow Dancer”, it too the recipient of literary prizes in Denmark. “I’m not finished with Frmesk’s story because I think she’s more than an abused child and an oppressed woman. She’s more than that. She’s a fighter and I need to write the rest of the story,” she says. Omar is currently studying for a Masters in Political Science, and is translating her own books into Kurdish and Arabic, which she plans to publish at her own expense to avoid any censorship.—AFP

BOTTICELLI ‘MASTERPIECE’ EXPECTED TO TOP \$80M AT SOTHEBY’S SALE

A portrait by Italian renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli is expected to sell for more than \$80 million when it goes up for auction at Sotheby’s in New York yesterday. “Young Man Holding a Roundel,” believed to have been painted in the 1470s or 1480s, is considered one of Botticelli’s finest portraits and is the highlight of Sotheby’s Masters Week sale. “This Botticelli is so much more spectacular in every way than anything we’ve seen coming to the market,” Christopher Apostle, Sotheby’s senior vice president, told AFP. The 23-inch by 15.5-inch (58-centimeter by 39-centimeter) painting shows a man in his late teenage years with long golden hair sitting holding a disc featuring a bearded saint.

The roundel, which depicts the saint with his right hand raised, is an original 14th-century artwork attributed to Siene painter Bartolommeo Bulgarini. Art historians suspect the Botticelli depicts a nobleman proudly showing off the earlier artwork. “This image symbolizes and exemplifies the Renaissance in Florence. We haven’t seen anything like it in my lifetime,” said Apostle, describing it as “a masterpiece.” The portrait was handed down through several generations of an aristocratic family in Wales for around 200 years. Art scholars were unaware of the paint-

ing’s existence until it first appeared on the market in the early 20th century. “Portrait of a Young Man Holding a Roundel” has spent much of the last 40 years on public display since its current owner acquired it in 1982 for just 810,000 pounds (\$1.1 million at 2021 rates). It has appeared at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery in London and elsewhere. Sotheby’s says a sale of over \$80 million would establish the work as one of the most significant portraits to have ever sold at auction. The previous record for a Botticelli was set in 2013 when “Madonna and Child with Young Saint John the Baptist” sold for \$10.4 million.

Rembrandt

The sale would rank alongside Gustav Klimt’s “Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer II,” which sold for \$87.9 million in 2006 and Vincent Van Gogh’s “Portrait of Dr Gachet,” which fetched \$82.5 million in 1990. The auction house says “Young Man Holding a Roundel” is as significant as Botticelli’s “Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo the Elder” and “Portrait of Giuliano de’ Medici.” Botticelli, who lived from the 1440s to 1510, is one of the most celebrated painters of the early Renaissance period, but only about a dozen examples of his work survive



In this file photo a Sotheby’s employee poses for a photograph with the artwork “Young Man Holding a Roundel” by Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli. —AFP

today. His best-known works are “The Birth of Venus” and “Primavera.”

“I think we underestimate how groundbreaking he was,” said Apostle. The Sotheby’s sale, which is virtual and starts at 10:00 am (1500 GMT), is also selling one of Rembrandt’s 136 biblical paintings. The Dutch painter’s “Abraham and the Angels” is expected to go for between \$20 million and \$30 million. It has been in private collections for 150 years and last sold at auction in 1848, for a mere \$64. —AFP

Cannes Film Festival postponed to July due to virus

The Cannes Film Festival has been rescheduled for July 6 to 17 — postponed by around two months due to the ongoing virus crisis, organizers said on Wednesday. The delay looked increasingly likely in recent weeks, with infection rates still high in France and talk of another lockdown looming. “As announced last autumn, the Festival de Cannes reserved the right to change its dates depending on how the global health situation developed,” the organizers said in a statement. “Initially scheduled from 11 to 22 May 2021, the Festival will therefore now take place from Tuesday 6 to Saturday 17 July 2021.”

It is another sign of uncertainty for an industry battered by a year of shuttered cinemas, delayed openings and cancelled productions, with many unsure about when the glitz of the red carpet will return to its full pomp. The festival was cancelled entirely last year for the first time since the Second World War, with just a small online presentation from its official selection in October. The postponement sets up a “potential confrontation” with its rival European festival in Venice, scheduled for September, said The Hollywood Reporter, “as the two events compete for the world premieres and red carpet star power.”

“The move, while expected, will have a domino effect across the festival circuit. The Venice Film Festival is scheduled to kick off on Sept. 1. Cannes’ new dates mean there will be less than a month between Europe’s number one and number two festivals,” the industry magazine wrote.

The Venice festival managed to go ahead last year under strict health restrictions, taking advantage of a lull in infection rates over the summer. But the continent’s other major cinema event—the Berlin Film Festival—announced last month that it was delaying its industry segment from February to an online version in March, and would postpone its public screenings to June. —AFP