

Lifestyle

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Bolivian designer exports high-end indigenous fashion

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A supermoon rises over the Statue of Freedom on the Capitol dome in Washington, DC November 13, 2016. The supermoon will venture to its closest point in 68 years, leaving only 221,524 miles (356,508 km) between Earth and the moon.— AFP

EXILED WRITER NASREEN FEARS FOR BANGLADESH'S FUTURE

Having herself been the subject of fatwas and forced into exile by fundamentalist critics of her writing, Taslima Nasreen despairs at the wave of assassinations of secular bloggers in her native Bangladesh. "You know Islamisation started in Bangladesh in the 1980s and in the 80s I was very worried," recalls the prize-winning poet and novelist in an interview with AFP in New Delhi. "I wrote about Islamic fundamentalists. I said that they should not go unopposed or they will destroy our society, that's exactly what's happened now."

It's 22 years since Nasreen last set foot in Bangladesh, having been forced to flee in fear of her life after tens of thousands of Islamists took to the streets to denounce her writing. Her novels and essays had brought her no shortage of enemies and she upset the government by railing against rights abuses and the treatment of women. She infuriated Islamists with her fiercely pro-secular views. She was feted abroad, winning the European parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 1994, but the government back home filed a case against her for hurting religious sentiment.

After three separate fatwas calling for her execution were issued, Nasreen fled first to Europe before moving to Bangladesh's giant neighbor India. Her plight is all too familiar to a new generation of secular writers whose blogs criticizing fundamentalism have been met with fury by Islamist groups. Dozens have either been murdered with machetes, gone into hiding or fled with their families to Europe and the United States. No one has been convicted of any of the attacks although some suspects have been killed during raids by the security forces.

Bangladesh, which gained its independence in 1971 after winning a war of secession against Pakistan, is an officially secular nation. But Nasreen says Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government has made the same mistake as her predecessors by failing to stand firm against hardliners who want the country to be defined by religion. "I am very worried.



Bangladesh was born as a secular state but now it's a kind of fundamentalist state," she said. "Islamic fundamentalists are very powerful, they can kill anyone if they want. "And because those atheist bloggers criticize Islam—they criticize other religions too—but because they criticized Islam they were hacked to death and the government didn't take any action against those killers," she added.

Living with fear

As someone who lives round-the-clock with protection, Nasreen says it's important not to allow oneself to be overwhelmed by fear. "I think I've got used to it, you have to," she said inside her small apartment, armed guards stationed outside. "Of course every time a fatwa is issued I get shocked, I get sad, I get scared and then you know you have to live your everyday life. "You cannot think of death all the time, then it's not a living. If I think of death all the time then I would not have been able to write so many books." Since her first collection of poetry came out in 1982, Nasreen has had more than 40 books published.

Arguably her most famous work was the 1993 novel "Lajja" (Bengali for Shame) which was about the persecution of a Hindu family living in Bangladesh, where more than 90 percent of the population is Muslim. Nasreen's latest book "Exile" is a memoir about how she was hounded out of the Indian state of West Bengal a decade ago following protests by Muslim groups who tried to force her out of the country for good. She remains effectively persona non grata in West Bengal and her enmity for her critics is as sharp as ever.

"Who are they to decide who can stay in India and who cannot? ... Those people committed a crime but you are punishing me for no fault of mine," she says animatedly on her rocking chair. "They issued a fatwa, put a price on my head—which is illegal in India but nobody was punished for that. I was punished for that, the victim was punished." Nasreen's home is dotted with stickers and banners with slogans of the causes close to her heart, such as "Proud To Be A Feminist" and "Atheism Cures Religious Terrorism". A book of cartoons from the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo is displayed prominently on her coffee table.

Right to offend

Twelve people were shot dead in Charlie Hebdo's offices in January last year by Islamist gunmen who had taken offence to cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. Nasreen argues the right to offend is a fundamental part of freedom of expression. "Many of my books, people say they hurt their religious feelings," she said. "But I think that if we believe in freedom of expression then we should believe also that everybody should have the right to express their opinions and everybody has the right to offend others and nobody has the right to live their entire life without being offended. "Freedom of expression cannot exist without the right to offend." — AFP

Munch, Monet, de Kooning to star in New York fall auctions

New York's fall auction season kicks off next week with a sparkling array of masterpieces expected to draw bidders from around the world at Christie's and Sotheby's. From Edvard Munch's Expressionist "Girls on the Bridge" to Willem De Kooning's abstract "Untitled XXV," the two major auction houses have put together an impressive collection of paintings and sculptures from some of the 20th century's greatest names for the prestigious sales running till Thursday. There will be dozens of Picassos and Chagalls on display in the auction houses' galleries ahead of the sales-together with paintings by Kandinsky, Sisley, Dubuffet and Rothko-rivaling the exhibits at some of the neighboring major museums.

Starting prices are often set well below artworks' estimated values in order not to discourage anyone interested and attract as many buyers as possible, says Christie's America president Brook Hazleton. There's no shortage of bidders in the United States, Paris, London and increasingly Asia, with growing Chinese fortunes spent on internationally recognized works at both major auction houses.

The sales will serve as a barometer of the global art market, which did well during this year's spring auctions despite a slow 2015. Records could be broken this time. Munch's "Girls on the Bridge," a 1902 canvas depicting women in colorful dresses that contrast with a dark, anguished landscape, has broken records every time it has gone under the hammer. It went for \$30.8 million in 2008, compared to \$7.7 million in 1997. This time, Sotheby's estimates its worth above the \$50 million.

The Norwegian artist's most famous work, "The Scream," became the world's most expensive work of art to sell at auction in 2012, at \$120 million. Claude Monet's "Meul," another likely centerpiece of the autumn season—to be sold by Christie's—is part of a series of haystacks the artist painted during the winter of 1890-91. It's estimated at \$45 million. As with many great Impressionist works, prices are determined by scarcity: most are now in national museums and out of reach for private collectors. The record for a Monet came in 2008 with the bucolic "Le bassin aux Nymphéas," which brought in \$80.5 million in London.

Testament to Chinese collectors' growing clout, the painting was exhibited in Hong Kong at the end of October before it went on display in New York. The prolific Picasso is also omnipresent in next week's sales.

At Christie's, his painting "Bust of a woman," inspired by his mistress and muse Dora Maar, is estimated at between \$18 and \$25 million. At Sotheby's, the spotlight returns a long-running series of Picasso paintings titled "Painter and his model," this installment from 1963, owned by New York's Oestreich family until now. The artwork is estimated between \$12 million and \$18 million. There's no shortage of gems among contemporary art for sale.

De Kooning is set to figure prominently next week with the imposing "Untitled XXV" — 6.5 by 7 feet (2 by 2.2 meters) — featuring his typically vigorous, multicolored brush strokes. Christie's estimates it at \$40 million. Gerhard Richter's "Abstraktes Bild (809-2)" is another abstract jewel, a canvas dominated by yellow and blood red, valued between \$18 million and \$25 million.—AFP



Exiled Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen speaks during an interview with AFP at her residence in New Delhi. — AFP photos