

Taslima Nasreen: Writing Women's Untold Story

Keynote luncheon

Saturday 15th october, 2005

Taslima Nasreen's powerful and moving keynote address at the Women's Forum luncheon today elicited a standing ovation and an emotional response from the audience. The journalist and human rights activist, born in 1962 in what is now Bangladesh, described the path she had taken from obedient young Muslim girl to an exile from her own country who has been living under a constant threat of death since two fatwas were issued against her in 1993 and '94 in retaliation for her criticisms of Islam. As a child, Nasreen was required to read the Koran in Arabic and wondered what the words meant. When she finally got her hands on a Bengali translation, she was disturbed to discover that according to the holy book of Islam, women were creatures

without rights, created solely to serve and please men. "In our minds, oppression is called tradition" she said, giving graphic examples of the many ways in which women are harmed physically, mentally and socially – from everyday submission to men to the extremes of rape, beatings, stoning and disfiguring by acid. Feeling that she must act, she began to write books and articles criticizing the Koran and advocating the separation of religion and state, and freedom and equal rights for women. Her publications provoked massive demonstrations by fundamentalists, the banning and burning of her books, and calls for her to be hanged. Her government charged her with blasphemy, and the fatwas were pronounced. She was forced into exile to protect her life and avoid possible imprisonment.

None of this has stopped her from writing "against oppression in the name of religion, and barbarism in the name of culture". "I'm writing many women's untold story," she added. "It is the same story that thousands of women know

about."Nasreen still hopes to be able to return to her country one day, although she feels like a foreigner there and in the Western country where she lives today. "I'm not crying anymore," she said. Her "home is love, the love I receive from women all over the world" and from the support she receives. She does not regret any of her actions and sees her challenge as educating people on women's human rights. "It is not enough to have the 8th of March," she said, "the challenge is to make every day of the year Women's Day."In conclusion, she spoke of her dream of a "beautiful world where no woman is oppressed", where sexual and physical abuse against women have disappeared and their human rights are respected.Hilary Bowker of Bowker Media + Communications, who had introduced Nasreen, decided not to take questions from the audience, saying that they would dilute the force of the speaker's presentation.