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2nd Buta Festival of Azerbaijani Arts London, November 2014 — March 2015



2nd BUTA FESTIVAL OF AZERBAIJANI ARTS
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3 - 15 FEBRUARY. ASIA HOUSE
FACES OF FREEDOM
BY ALEXANDRA KREMER-KHOMASSOURIDZE

All humans beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights



03 February - 15 February

FACES OF FREEDOM

ASIA HOUSE

In 1989, aged 22, I left Baku for France. I left behind my favourite monument, the “Liberated Woman of Azerbaijan” and said goodbye to a land where nobody – not even the grannies – wore the hijab. At that time rejecting the hijab was a symbol of the multicultural, multicoloured Soviet Baku, full of youngsters in miniskirts or stonewashed jeans.

I came back 22 years later as a professional photographer and arrived in a new chic Baku full of contrast. Around that lovely old monument there were still plenty of young and beautiful ladies, but now they were wearing the hijab.

Free and easy Baku is the capital of Azerbaijan, perhaps the only country with a majority Muslim population that does not allow hijabs to be worn in school yet still has a host of charming young girls donning the veil as they walk around the city. What lies behind this mix of symbols? I started thinking about it, and bought a hijab for myself.

When I saw my face in a hijab something completely unexpected happened...

I regard myself as a Western-looking person. My background is in Azerbaijan and Georgia, I have a Russian grandmother and I live in Paris with my two daughters. When I looked in the mirror I burst into awkward tears and couldn't stop crying.

It was a complete shock. Suddenly my soul felt ... protected! To my astonishment, the hijab made me feel unexpectedly sure of myself.

I was spellbound, realizing that when wearing the hijab I found a certain protection I'd always sought. It was protection against those who wanted to judge me for my looks alone. All at once I felt like a strong, self-assured woman, ready for great deeds.

But my biggest surprise was that I didn't want to take it off. The questions came thick and fast.

What the hell is going on?

How come I feel so amazingly free?"

Where is Freedom?

How does this relate to the freedom I was always striving for?

I kept asking over and over, does freedom lie in wearing the hijab or not?

I spent several months in my native Baku, putting together a team of volunteers who could help me search for answers.

This became one of my most exciting creative projects, introducing me to a multitude of interesting people with completely different approaches to the subject.

The core of this project, as well as my love for photography, was the questions I asked 50 different women. Most of them, like myself, grew up in Baku. But others came to my home town later in life.

Women of all nationalities, from Azerbaijan, France, Georgia, Russia, Iran, the United States; they all had something special and unexpected to say. We all led completely different lives, but we came together to talk about our attitudes to Freedom.

Women of different faith, status, age and profession were all ready to share their personal experience and intimate feelings with me and my camera.

And, of course, all of them were to wear the hijab!

Some of them wore it nobly, others appeared strange, or even alien, when they put it on. Nobody left my studio unaffected. Our conversations had a profound impact on each of us. The experience raised many other personal issues, thoughts and questions.

The complexity of people's responses was amazing. Some guests cried and vowed they would never wear a hijab again. Others said the exact opposite, saying they would happily wear it in future. The presence of the camera was similarly polarizing. Some of the women I invited were happy to be photographed while others refused.

"I can't breathe, when I have it on me. It is so strange. My only wish is to take it off. On the other hand I am not talking about any ethics or religion. I am indifferent to any of the reasons why people wear it, but when my two daughters had to put it on, bitter tears filled my eyes. They were just so small and looked so ridiculous, it was simply awful..."

"It is so strange, but I feel completely secure. You can do whatever you want, nobody sees you... For me this is complete freedom....."

"Personally, I feel completely at home wearing a hijab. I'm sure I will wear it when the time comes. For now I am still too young..."

"This is the first time I have worn it. I've never seen myself like this before. For me it 'squeezes me out'. My face is the place where I expose who I am. When I cover my face it is like I am losing my 'self'...."

"I live in London and never wear a veil there, but when I was little and lived in Baku, I always used to wear it, mainly for prayers. I feel peaceful under it and very secure. But everything has its place in life...."

"I feel uncomfortable wearing it, it doesn't let me breathe normally, but this is my religion and I will always wear it because it gives me more peace...."

"I wear it when I am in Iran. Not because I want to, but because I am obliged to do so. When I am away from my country it doesn't even come to my mind, because it would deprive me of my freedom. My choice of freedom is not wearing a hijab...."

"I feel protected. This is my religion. Someday I will wear a hijab. When I do, memories about my forefathers occur very deep in my soul. Yes, I for sure will wear it. But not now. I have two little sons, they would not understand me properly...."

"My choice is not to wear a hijab, but I respect the freedom of those who want

Photo Gallery



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