

House of Pasha, 2018 (excerpt)

“ A Man is like a spoon it can easily be washed, while the woman is like a dish. It spoils.”

“ A Man can wash himself with just a bowl of water, while there is nothing that can wash a woman.”

Albanian Proverbs

My work from Albania explores notes on womanhood in a patriarchal society.

Using double exposure images, documentary photography and text fragments from popular Albanian love songs alongside proverbs I am drawing a subjective narrative on contemporary womanhood in Albania.

Domestic violence, child marriages and human trafficking are amongst the most severe mistreatments of women in Albania. In my work I want to focus on the underlying pressures, cultural expectations and taboos that the women experience on a daily basis, like for example the arrangement of marriages and demand for women for purity before marriage, to keep their virginity for their future husbands, without demanding the same from the men. The concept of shame and what others think of one plays an important role in controlling women in a small country of only 3 million where “everyone knows everyone”. The climate of suspicion and observation seems to be a remaining element of the communist past of the country, a past that has never been fully processed.

There is a well known saying which narrates that in villages the family used to give with the bride the dowry, but also a bullet. The groom had the right to shoot her when he finds her not to be a virgin at the wedding night. However also in Albania things are changing rapidly and medical procedures restoring virginity are in demand. Despite this being legal, they are mostly done in secrecy. “Girls get sewn! Men are coming from abroad” referring to the Albanian labor migrants in the EU who are coming home for the holidays to look for brides, a big newspaper wrote two years ago. “The culture is over sexualized while most men still want to marry a virgin” a gynecologist told us. Only a slowly proceeding economic independence can help some to be in charge of their lives. In the more traditional and poorer north, however this is still quite a distant reality.

The communism of dictator Enver Hoxha who ruled the country in a brutal and isolating way and the propagated egalitarianism allowed women to enter universities and factories, however in private the subordination to the men and the double burden of work *and* household/child rearing remained. On top of that a strict code of conduct called “The Kanun” stemming from the 15th century is often blamed to be responsible for the mistreatment of women. It does indeed propagate patriarch values and looks at women as ‘something to exchange’ (“A woman is an excess of her father’s house”), severely punishes female adultery and theft from the husband’s property. How much it really still influences the women in Tirana today is hard to define.

While in Tirana I also collected images of flowers, being universal signs of beauty and often purity. I later digitally joined them as an extra layer on portraits of young women that I had made during my time in Albania. I want this to talk about the hidden layers of truth which I had discovered during my research and which come to play in a society of double standards. It is also about projections and expectations that are made upon the women, a romanticization of their existence which ultimately creates a false reality. Just like the images, this reality is kitschy and unreal, unobtainable and feels ‘wrong’.