



# *Nuse; an Albanian Bride*

*By: Bija Haxhicani*

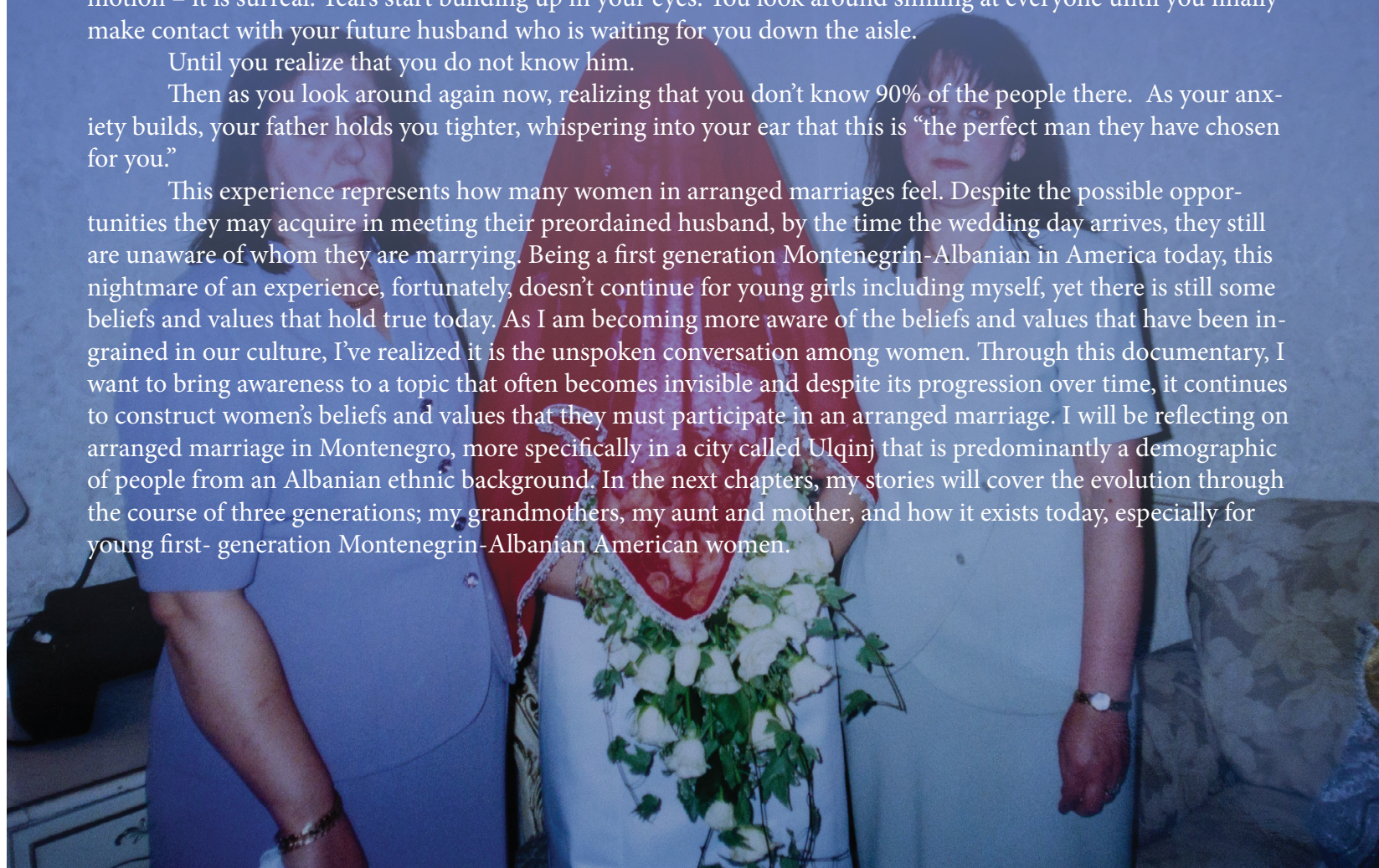
You are getting ready for your wedding. Looking into the mirror, you see your Mother crying in a very formal yet beautiful blue dress with your favorite black heels that she owns. Most importantly, you look at yourself in the mirror and are amazed at the completion of your look. Your hair is beautiful, makeup is stunning, and your dress is out of this world; therefore you feel magnificent. You are so overjoyed that you can't stop smiling – you are smiling so widely you are a little scared your mouth will rip apart. Your father is dressed in a formal black suit with his favorite blue handkerchief and cute black leather shoes comes in and informs you that it is time for you to walk down the aisle and get married. You rush to stand up and start feeling the adrenaline seek through every aspect of your body. You see tears build up in your father's eyes as he remarks how beautiful you look. You feel amazing, beautiful like there is nothing that can ruin this very happy day. You venture off to the doors that are right before the aisle you are about to walk. You grasp hold of your father's arm, noticing that your heartbeats are harmonizing in sync. The wedding planners in attendance countdown from three until they open the doors for you to start walking. As each number that progresses, the nerves in your stomach push you to the point of nausea, yet you persist.

The doors finally open and you are absolutely stunned. Everything that you had been planning is now in motion – it is surreal. Tears start building up in your eyes. You look around smiling at everyone until you finally make contact with your future husband who is waiting for you down the aisle.

Until you realize that you do not know him.

Then as you look around again now, realizing that you don't know 90% of the people there. As your anxiety builds, your father holds you tighter, whispering into your ear that this is “the perfect man they have chosen for you.”

This experience represents how many women in arranged marriages feel. Despite the possible opportunities they may acquire in meeting their preordained husband, by the time the wedding day arrives, they still are unaware of whom they are marrying. Being a first generation Montenegrin-Albanian in America today, this nightmare of an experience, fortunately, doesn't continue for young girls including myself, yet there is still some beliefs and values that hold true today. As I am becoming more aware of the beliefs and values that have been ingrained in our culture, I've realized it is the unspoken conversation among women. Through this documentary, I want to bring awareness to a topic that often becomes invisible and despite its progression over time, it continues to construct women's beliefs and values that they must participate in an arranged marriage. I will be reflecting on arranged marriage in Montenegro, more specifically in a city called Ulqinj that is predominantly a demographic of people from an Albanian ethnic background. In the next chapters, my stories will cover the evolution through the course of three generations; my grandmothers, my aunt and mother, and how it exists today, especially for young first-generation Montenegrin-Albanian American women.



The ideal future for every young girl in Ulqinj in the 1970s was to be married off and have a beautiful, healthy family. When this wasn't achieved at a relative 15-17 age frame, the young girls and their families would be shamed by their entire community. These same customs existed for my grandmothers on both sides whom were from small villages in the countryside. As my father's mom Mirjeme Hadzicanovic mentioned, her only focus growing up was to get married and have "a big and healthy family and that was it" (Hadzicanovic).

Once young girls in Ulqinj began entering the ages of 15-17, conversations of setting them up for marriage were the only things being discussed. The young women in these situations would have " 'little say over whom they eventually marry' while 'boys at least get the chance to look at a photograph of their intended bride, and say no'" ("Tahirih - Forced Marriage Initiative"). In marriages such as my grandmothers', Belkize's and Mirjeme's, they both had a messenger, or matchmaker, who would communicate between their father and the

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family of the son they would be married to. The messenger would be designed to facilitate exchanging information between the families to ensure that their child was being married into the right family. Meanwhile during the exchanges, the girls would be left alone filled with anxiety anticipating who the man they marry will be. My mother's mom, Belkize Kraja, mentioned that while this whole process was occurring, she definitely was not ecstatic because when attempting to find out information, she was shut down by her entire family. Therefore, she constantly wondered to herself "How could I be happy and excited when I didn't even know who he was or what I was getting myself into. I was scared and anxious for what was going to happen" (B. Kraja).

The next step in the arrangement is a women's response. After the arrangement occurs and a decision is made, the day of their wedding quickly arrives. Highlighting this process through its existence in a very small village in Montenegro, my grandma Mirjeme Hadzicanovic described her experience of her wedding day:  
I knew the date for when I was getting married and I got ready with my female family members for my future husband and his party to pick me up. They came over to my house to pick me up in an old Yugoslavian car. After I was picked up, I was driven to my husband's house where the party was happening. I remember standing by the wall the entire night looking down sad wearing the traditional clothing; which included a red veil. I remember being in this position the entire night while everyone else was enjoying themselves eating, drinking and dancing. There was loud music and I could do nothing. After the party, I went to sleep with my husband's sister and in the morning, I met my husband.



Top Right: Naxhije Kraja  
Middle: Saba Kraja, Izet Kraja and Ismet Mehmeti

In comparison to how arranged marriage existed in the 1970s, for young women, especially my mother and her sister, they had the opportunity to have more of a say in their decision. Either by having a guy start talking to you after noticing you at an event such as a wedding for my aunt Sabahete or a setup made for my mother Mide, the young women were allowed to have supervised conversations to get to know their possible future husband through a brief conversation. To further expand this part of the arrangement process in more detail, my mother, Mide Kraja, explained her experience of meeting my father:

When we went to the restaurant for coffee, my mother who coordinated the meeting with her distant cousin, Riza, (matchmaker) and my future husband. I remember sitting at the restaurant and I felt that my mother was really engaged with her conversation with my future husband. I felt like I was experiencing my mom on her first date. I remember saying to my mother afterwards, you looked like you were on your first date. For example, she asked if he played cards or if he gambled. I thought that maybe this is what my mother always longed for, she never had the opportunity to experience a first date or even a boyfriend. My mother at the age of 17 was arranged to marry my father in 1975 and my mother did not meet him until the day of their marriage. Therefore, this day at the restaurant had been very exciting for my mom. When she asked me what I thought about the guy, I replied with 'I don't know' and that 'I was very upset.' Then as we left the restaurant that day, my distant cousin Riza called up my mother and said that this guy would like to meet her daughter, aka me, again and was wondering if it was possible for us to get together. At this time, my little brother came from the states back to Montenegro. I brought my little brother with me to this restaurant in Montenegro to meet the guy. While this guy was trying to engage with me and talk about things that he wanted in a marriage, my little brother was just sitting there watching the whole thing. (M.Kraja)

After this meeting process occurs, young women are then expected to give their answer if they are interested in marriage. Eventually, the wedding day arrives and, in most scenarios, the wedding planning consists around the man's family paying for an entire wedding with 95% of the man's family and friends while the bride can only have 5% of their family there. Unlike Mide's uncommon practice of a wedding through the city hall in Ulcinj, Montenegro, my aunt Sabahete Kraja had an extremely traditional wedding in San Jose, California that had over 300+ guests and very little input from her on her wedding. She recalls,

It began with me at my house where I had to do different customs that were to be created/completed to ensure the pureness and hope behind the whole marriage. I remember constantly standing and standing and having to look down with a red veil covering the hair and face the entire time. I also had to cry because this situation represented a sad time where I was leaving my parents. At the time, they considered it inappropriate for a girl to look like she was enjoying her wedding. The groom came with his friends and family in their cars covered in various decorations to represent a wedding was occurring and they picked me up. Through the constant car horns, people kissing me on the cheeks and people crying I felt lost because I knew that I wasn't happy and this wasn't a wedding I wanted to be at, despite it being my own. The groom took me and from there we did some additional traditions and took photos/videos for our tape. After all of this, we ventured off to our celebration portion of the wedding where we spent the night with hundreds of people at a big venue with everyone dancing, cheering, appreciating the moment with my husband while I was left at my station to look down and somber. (S.Kraja)



Bottom Right on previous page: Najim and Belkize Kraja

Arranged marriages are still an option for young women in Montenegro-Albania. In many areas, arranged marriage isn't as traditional yet many ideas exist through a modern format. Instead of a typical arranged marriage, today many young girls are expected to marry into their culture and religion. When they don't complete this, they are often shamed by their family and community. It is a situation that no girl wishes to subject herself and her family into because of the fear of being shunned by the community as "marriage was an important way to create bonds of friendship between families and to maintain or improve the family's status in the community" ("Montenegrin-Albanians Marriage and Family"). Therefore, they marry within the culture in the influence of pressure and guilt brought by the family. Mide explains the relevance of arranged marriage today: "some are more progressive since they meet their guys online and they have the opportunity to get to know them and see if they are compatible" (Mide).

Aside from the opportunity they have to get to know their partners better and have more of an input on the final decision, these girls still have to go through their parents' approval to marry. "Although arranged marriages are less common nowadays, parents still have to approve of relationships between people. Despite the increasing possibility of meeting guys on their own, young women still must allow their parents to have input in their final decision.

In my experience being a 17-year-old girl of two parents from Montenegro, I feel like I'm stuck between the two worlds: the American Dream and the Balkan tradition. It is in these two worlds that I'm caught between the tension of living from my heart and fulfilling my family's needs. I recognize that I may not need to go through the traditional arranged marriage; however, there still exists a huge expectation that I marry into the same culture and religion. As a result, I often feel filled with guilt when realizing that I may disappoint my family and bring



In mainstream American society today, arranged marriage is frowned upon. A vast amount of families do not support the continuation of this tradition because of its negative outcomes. It is recommended for young girls to be a good wife and to marry an individual that shares the same values, religion, and culture as the family because in everyone's eyes it is easier.

In "7 Things I Wish More People Understood About Arranged Marriages," Huda Al-Marshida argues that arranged marriages are easier because, in her words, "I have already lost so many of my family's culture and traditions, and I appreciate having a spouse that can help me pass down as much of my heritage to my children as possible." Yet, this does result in freedom being taken away from many young girls, especially their hearts, because they are limited in love.

My mother often compares arranged marriage to creating a ceramic piece: a young woman is brought into the world as a lump of clay which is then molded by the beliefs and values of the family. To undo or reshape the fixture of the mold, it requires strength and right conditions (undoing the beliefs and values). (M.Kraja) However, I believe that strength needed to help reshape this fixture is comprised of the voices of young women in this situation who want to create change. If no one speaks up, the story won't be told, and arranged marriages will persist in their traditional, patriarchal form.

# About the Author



Sebija Haxhicani is a Junior at Freestyle Academy and Mountain View High School. She enjoys spending her free time with her friends and family, playing water polo, swimming, and helping grow her garden. At Freestyle Academy, Sebija is beyond grateful for the various technological and communication skills she has acquired and hopes to apply them at a great university soon, where she plans to study dentistry.

