

Buta: Contemporary Women's Literature in Azerbaijan
Alison Mandaville, Pacific Lutheran University

From at least the 19th century, women have participated in the world of letters in Azerbaijan, particularly in the cultural centers of Baku and Shusha (Nagorno-Karabagh region). Today, with the collapse of the post-soviet publishing industry and restrictions on free-speech, the general literary environment is, as one newspaper editor put it, "in a coma," a topic I discussed at the REECAS conference in 2010. Conditions for women writers are even more challenging, given a retrenchment of traditional gender social norms that both keep women busy with family and work and limit access to public resources and venues.

Nevertheless, based on observations over the past three years, there is some reason for optimism for a renewal of literature by women. One website showcasing women's writing is gaining traction (www.women-forum.net) and a new series publishing the work of young writers is including novels by a few women. In June of 2010 I conducted a two week intensive creative writing workshop for 20, mostly younger, Azerbaijani women writers. Most had already been self-publishing, or had pieces in the few local venues available. At the conclusion of the workshop, we gathered pieces by all the women, translated and edited them into English. The result is a newly published volume of short works by contemporary Azerbaijani women writers, with pieces in both Azerbaijani and English. Topics explored in these pieces include family, gender, women and politics, war, love and female friendship.

Literature remains a tough road to hoe for women in Azerbaijan. Long-time writer Afaq Masud comes right out and said in a recent interview that it is not a good path for a woman. With economic stagnation among all but the upper classes, women are increasingly pressured to marry and have children early, and contribute to their families through both wage labor and domestic household work. Women in the rural areas are playing a larger role in managing farms and cottage industries, even as their domestic responsibilities remain the same, as men emigrate to other countries for work.

In this presentation, I offer a quick review of contemporary literary history and current conditions in Azerbaijan for women writers, then present a selection of short works by several different authors to illustrate the range of topics and writing styles being used, as well as some of the problems still faced by these writers. I will have some gratis copies of the book available at the conference.

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Presentation Outline:

1) Brief History of Women in the Literary Arts in Azerbaijan

A) 19th century: Context and Themes

Imperialism, Oil and Education of Women

- Xeiran Xanum
- Xurshid-Banu Natavan

B) Soviet Period:

Theoretical Equity, Language and Politics

- Nigar Rafibeyli
- Medina GyulGyun

C) Transition

- Mehriban Vezir
- Afaq Masud
- Sara Nazirova

2) Buta Contemporary Writers: Context and Themes

Second Wave Global Feminism, Political Malaise, Generation Gap, Globalized Media

- 20 Younger Writers, some examples
- www.women-forum.net

3) The Future

- Politics of Literature
- Politics of Gender
- Educational Reform
- Shifts in Publishing Industry