

**RECONSTRUCTING VIRGINITY: HIDDEN SENTIMENTS AND COMPLEXITIES
BEHIND HYMENOPLASTY IN KYRGYZSTAN**

By

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Declaration of Original Research and The Word Count

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; It contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form on bibliographical reference.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the experiences and perspectives of Kyrgyz women towards the hymen restoration surgery in Kyrgyzstan. Previous studies covered an importance of female virginity in Kyrgyz society through focusing on the practice of bride-kidnapping and the gender construction of kidnapped women. In my thesis, I will draw attention to the phenomenon of hymenoplasty through bringing voices and experiences of Kyrgyz women. The discourse of hymen restoration practices is neither a subject of open discussions nor a highly represented phenomenon in social media.

Through applying qualitative research and in-depth interviewing, I examine how various Kyrgyz women perceive hymenoplasty procedure in their given socio-cultural settings. I argue that hymenoplasty is a complex phenomenon that cannot be identified through the dualistic model, and it has different meaning for Kyrgyz women depending on the intersection of various social categories they belong to. Building on the theoretical framework of agency I posit that Kyrgyz women exercise their own agency through undergoing hymen restoration surgery and negotiate between two opposite poles of conformity and resistance.

This study investigates existing socio-cultural and gendered expectations towards young women's state of virginity and their sexual choices; however, it also brings a comparative analysis of perspectives of medical workers and ordinary women.

Keywords: women, gender, hymen, virginity, biopower, agency, intersectionality.

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1. Introduction

“If all society cares about is girl’s vagina bleeding during the wedding night, then why to care about an actual sex? Just sew yourself up three nights before the wedding day and voilà – you are accepted in the new family with all the appropriate respect and appreciation. But before...what before? Go and have some fun!” (Bermet, 27y.o.)

Hymenoplasty, also named as hymenorrhaphy or hymen reconstruction - is a type of gynaecological surgical operation often done by women who seek and desire to repair reconstruct their broken hymen , usually for socio-cultural reasons (Abder Rahman, 2009; Ahmadi, 2016; Amy, 2008; Cinthio, 2015). This surgical procedure became known worldwide at the end of 1990s and started involving a lot of discussions around the topic of female virginity and hymen restoration (Amy, 2008). Although in many societies the status of female virginity is not of a great significance and value, there are still societies who put their strongest emphasis on the status of young women’s hymen. Being raised in one of those societies means to constantly learn how to be a proper daughter at first and later a proper wife. As Simone de Beauvoir famously stated more than half century ago: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”(Beauvoir et al., 1949, p. 273). The gendered expectations not only shape our own bodily experiences but also our vision and expectations of the bodies of others. They do not derive from biology but are framed and constructed by the social norms. Our socio-cultural visions of what is proper femininity and masculinity are the product of civilization and socialization processes (Risman et al., 2018).

The construction of femininity and masculinity start from the early childhood. One of the examples of such construction is discussed by feminist philosopher Young (1990) in her analysis of how body is shaped in accordance with society’s gendered expectations. Through bringing an example of the very basic action of throwing things, Young illustrates how girls are learning to take less space and throw things in a specific way which is shaped and dictated by the society and others. Young(1990) says “If feminine embodiment is characterized by being both subject and object, masculine embodiment strives toward pure subjectivity” Another prominent feminist scholar Sara Ahmed also writes on the embodiment of women: “Being a girl is a way of being taught what it is to have a body and how you experience your body in relations to space”(Ahmed, 2017, p. 25). Indeed, gendered embodiment deeply affects the way we learn to use our bodies, the way we experience things, and the way we treat other bodies.

1.1. *An Image of Proper Kyrgyz Daughter*

In Kyrgyz culture, an embodiment of womanhood happens not only through the gendered expectations and socio-cultural prescriptions, but also through a very powerful instrument – *uyat*, which from Kyrgyz language means shame. Whatever is considered inappropriate and unacceptable is followed by the phrase *uyat bolot* which literally translates as “such a shame!”. The concept of public shaming in Kyrgyz society is extremely helpful in order to understand why virginity matters and for whom. One of the essential factors of being a good proper woman in Kyrgyz society is to preserve your virginity for your husband (Borbieva, 2012; Sataeva, 2017). As a young Kyrgyz woman, myself I confirm that an idea of ‘virginity matters’ gets deeply embedded in girls minds and conscience by mothers and surrounding society. Since early childhood girls are taught that virginity is the most important treasure of woman and serves as an indicator not only of her own chastity, but of her entire family and kinship. In Kyrgyz society kinship plays an imperative role when it comes to the formation of individuals; including social, economic, political and cultural realms of life. As discussed by Abu-Lughod (1988), a woman in such societies is usually “identified through her paternal line and seen as the linchpin of her father’s or elder brothers’ reputation and respectability in the society”.

If by any means women deviate from this socio-cultural code, there comes social pressure, condemnation, stigma and even physical abuse. I find the perfect description in Sara Ahmed’s book “Living a feminist Life” that suits Kyrgyz society in case of woman’s ‘deviant’ behaviour: “if something happened then you failed to prevent it” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 26). Thus, in Kyrgyz society, if woman loses her virginity before getting married, it means she failed to prevent it. The blame and burden lie exclusively on woman and her misbehaviour.

1.2. *Religion and Hymenoplasty*

There has always been a connection between religion and virginity when talking about the hymenoplasty. For instance, in Islam as well as in many other religions in the world, including Judaism, Hinduism and certain forms of Christianity, state of premarital female virginity has been associated with having an intact hymen (van Moorst et al., 2012, p. 94). Although, holy books such as the Quran do not mention the necessity of blood on the sheets after the first marital intercourse as

a proof of woman's purity and chastity, predominantly Muslim countries still consider blood as a true indicator of woman's virginity. Through practicing norms and traditions that restrain women's sexual freedom, Muslim societies throughout the world tend to preserve their honour and chastity (Abder Rahman, 2009). Countries like Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Afghanistan, and even parts of North America and Europe are still following the traditional script regarding female virginity. Kyrgyzstan along with other Central Asian countries is not an exception. Since the majority of the population (88,8%) in Kyrgyzstan profess Islam (Nationmaster, n.d.), the subject of premarital status of female virginity remains of an extreme importance by symbolizing 'purity' and 'chastity' of woman, her family and the entire kinship.

1.3. *Virginity and Hymen: is it the same thing?*

Hymen is a thin membrane at the opening of female vagina, exists only in women and has no anatomical function (Ghanim, 2015, p.39). The popular belief that all hymens bleed during first sexual intercourse is a prevailing myth that is actively supported and reproduced by the societies. The truth is that not all hymens bleed during the first sex; many hymens are elastic and do not tear during the first sexual penetration; some hymens get torn through injury, medical examination, masturbation, use of tampons or sport activities such as athletics (Amy, 2008; Cook & Dickens, 2009; van Moorst et al., 2012). The notion of female virginity goes interchangeably with integrity of female hymen that has to be torn and bleed during the first sexual intercourse. Moreover, the premarital sexual reputation of a young woman is not her private business, but rather a public matter. The wide-spread practice of showing blood-stained bed sheets after the first wedding night serves as a proof of bride's chastity (Handrahan, 2004; Werner, 2009; Zhanabayeva, 2018). Thus, in general, the female sexuality in Kyrgyz society functions as a regulated commodity (Ortner, 1996). It is regulated by family members and overall society through the mechanism of public shaming.

Significance of female virginity and notion of chastity have been discussed not only scientifically, but also anonymously on social media platforms such as public blogs on Instagram. In Kyrgyz society loss of female virginity is always associated with bleeding caused by the break of a hymen as a result of penis- vagina penetration. Throughout my thesis, I will be employing the concept

of virginity precisely referring to vaginal sex that is followed up by bleeding. Simply put: if you bleed during the first intercourse— you are virgin, if you do not – you are not virgin.

People call a young woman who did not have any sexual intercourse “devstvennica” which means virgin from Russian language. Interestingly, there is no popular word to describe virgin girl in Kyrgyz language. However, there is an opposite word to describe those, who already had premarital sex. It is more of a jargon or slang word “dyrka” which in direct translation from Russian language means hole. There is even a slang word widely used by the younger generation - ‘zashitsya’ that translates from Russian language “to be sewed up” when talking about the torn hymen. The reason I am providing these specific definitions is to show how majority in Kyrgyz society understand the concept of female virginity – it is something that has to be broken, torn, penetrated and bleed. After the penetration there is a hole. So, a woman is either virgin or a hole. Such a simplistic and somewhat fallacious understanding of female hymen and its construction speaks not only about lack of anatomical knowledge, but also of the prevailing stereotypical perception of bleeding hymen as a symbol of female virginity.

1.4. Research Objective

This study aims to explore experiences and perceptions of young women in Kyrgyzstan towards the hymen restoration surgery in Kyrgyzstan. Few previous studies that were conducted before have a connection to hymenoplasty, however they massively concentrate on bride-kidnapping practices, culture of dating and public shaming within Kyrgyz society. In my thesis, I will not spotlight the issue of bride-kidnapping, but rather concentrate on the phenomenon of hymenoplasty. There is no previous research done on hymenoplasty in Kyrgyzstan or in Central Asia. In Kyrgyz society, the procedure of hymenoplasty is not a subject of open discussions and definitely not a socially approved phenomenon. Also, there is no existing statistical data about the hymenoplasty and number of women undergoing this genital cosmetic surgery in Kyrgyzstan. However, based on the opinion of gynaecologists who perform the surgery, this surgical procedure is highly demanded in Kyrgyzstan: daily approximate number of potential clients to perform the surgery is from 5 to 7 in

one of the private medical clinics in Bishkek, capital city of Kyrgyzstan.¹ Therefore, my research seeks to address the issue that remains yet unexplored within Kyrgyz society. The primary goal of this study to examine the role hymen restoration surgery plays in lives of women in Kyrgyzstan: its impact on women's lives and their relationship with their families.

In my thesis I will argue that hymenoplasty is a complex phenomenon, that cannot be identified through the dualistic classification of resistance or subordination. Through applying Mahmood's concept of agency, I will argue that hymenoplasty in Kyrgyz society is neither conformity to socio-cultural norms nor resistance. Moreover, the research will compare and analyse perspectives of ordinary Kyrgyz women who seek to undergo the hymen restoration surgery and medical workers who perform the surgery and consult women. I dare say that hymenoplasty has a different meaning for Kyrgyz women depending on the intersection of various social categories they belong to and their situation.

1.5. Research Questions

In my thesis I will gather and analyse data based on the interviews with different women (doctor and patient perspectives), therefore in order to ease the reading process I will divide my informants into groups: 1) Kyrgyz women who planned to undergo hymenoplasty and women who already underwent the hymen restoration surgery; 2) medical workers such as gynaecologists who perform the hymenoplasty and psychologist-psychiatrist who consult women on the given issue in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

The questions I am interested to investigate:

- What are the experiences and perceptions of women in Kyrgyzstan towards hymenoplasty? What are the main reasons for hymenoplasty in Kyrgyzstan? How does hymenoplasty influence life of women who undergo the hymen restoration surgery?

¹ Personal communication with Elmira and Saikal. Information provided by the gynecologists working in both public and private hospitals in the city of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Posing above questions to women from two different groups, I intend to compare, contrast and analyse how these women see, perceive and experience hymen restoration procedure and its impact on their lives.

The structure of Thesis

Following this introduction, I will provide the methodology, ethical considerations and limitations of this research. Following the background section, I will present the relevant literature that has been already written on topics of virginity, bride-kidnapping and hymenoplasty worldwide and in Kyrgyzstan. Further, I will discuss my theoretical framework. In the following chapter I will present my findings and analysis, where I will divide all the data in two sub-chapters. First sub-chapter is quite long and will discuss the reasons and circumstances behind the hymenoplasty. The second sub-chapter is shorter and discusses the consequences and implications of the hymen restoration surgery. My fifth chapter is the final chapter which contains my conclusion and call for the further research.

2. Methodology

As the primary goal of this study was to explore the phenomenon of hymenoplasty in Kyrgyzstan and young women's experiences and perceptions of hymen restoration procedure, I employed an exploratory qualitative research method. This method is usually described being a "naturalistic, interpretive approach, concerned with exploring phenomena 'from the interior' with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena their social worlds" (Snape and Spencer, 2003; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013, p. 3).

The primary instrument for data collection will be semi-structured in-depth interviews since this particular method can provide an opportunity for more detailed exploration of respondent's personal perspectives and in-depth understanding of the personal context within which the research phenomenon is located (Snape and Spencer, 2003, p. 36). Moreover, in-depth interviews are indispensably helpful for understanding a delicate issue such as hymenoplasty. As for the sampling technique I employed a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. According to Ritchie and Lewis (2013) this sampling method allows to identify potential respondents through people who already have been interviewed, moreover it is well suited for smaller populations considering the sensitivity of the topic.

Due to extremely high sensitivity of the topic and Covid19 pandemic, the number of potential interviewees was small. The initial pool of prospective informants consisted of 10 people overall, however only six out of ten have expressed their desire and consent to participate in the research. Interviewees were found, connected and contacted to me through my friends, colleagues, and my family. Five interviews were conducted online: via WhatsApp and Telegram audio calls. One interview was conducted face-to-face with a young Kyrgyzstani woman residing in Budapest (Aidana). Two interviews were conducted via WhatsApp audio call with young women who underwent hymenoplasty procedure in Kyrgyzstan (Diana and Bermet). Three interviews were conducted online with two gynaecologists (Elmira and Saikal) and one psychologist-psychiatrist (Elena) working in the city of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

In addition, I will use the anonymously shared posts on social media blogs connected to the topics of virginity and hymenoplasty in Kyrgyzstan. Due to high sensitivity of the topic and its being a taboo topic, women generally do not talk openly about it -neither within family, nor with their friends. With the development of Instagram since 2010 and its increased popularity, the youth in Kyrgyzstan became more and more active on this particular social

media platform. Following the recently created Instagram profile such as “babckii blog”² which was created as a platform for people’s anonymously shared stories, the topic of hymenoplasty has been receiving a great deal of attention within the past two-three years. Several stories were posted anonymously (supposedly by young women because they indicated their age and shared the details of their story) seeking for an advice regarding how and where to undergo the hymen restoration surgery in Bishkek. Another series of anonymous stories followed-up after receiving the hundreds of comments from the blog’s audience. Some authors would share their own experiences of how and where they underwent the hymen restoration surgery. Some would share the expected price and qualifications of the physician performing the surgery. And some others some would just recommend some tips: for example, the best time to undergo the surgery or warn about possible difficulties after the procedure. I do admit that using the anonymously shared posts on public Instagram blog cannot be considered as the most valid and well-grounded source of information, however, considering the sensitivity of the topic, lack of available information and open discussions about the topics of virginity and hymenoplasty, I employed some of the data from this social media platform.

2.1. *Position as a Researcher*

Although the topic of the study was very sensitive and private, representation of myself as a female student of Kyrgyz ethnicity pursuing her master’s degree in Gender Studies, born and raised in a traditional Kyrgyz family with conservative father helped me a lot in gaining the trust of my informants. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) “trustworthiness” is a measure of a qualitative study’s rigor. Positioning myself as both an insider and outsider (Abu-Lughod, 1989; Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Behar, 1996) by falling in a similar age category with two of my respondents, sharing similar socio-cultural background, eased the process of communication and data collection. My personal sensitivity towards this particular topic and desire to contribute to the researches related to my own culture have been incredibly motivating me throughout the research.

² There are few Instagram profiles that name themselves ‘women’s blog’ or ‘young mothers of Kyrgyzstan’ where different people can send their stories to the admin, and those stories would be shared anonymously. The audience of these social media profiles is quite large varying from ten thousand to few hundred thousand followers who can write and read the posted stories.

2.2. *Ethical Considerations*

Anonymity meaning that my research participants' identity and responses will not be identified was guaranteed to my informants. In qualitative research, anonymity can “facilitate disclosure of sensitive information while also protecting the privacy and safety interests” of research participants (Given, 2008). Moreover, the consent of the respondents to participate in this research was obtained. and all the names that were used in this thesis to refer to the respondents are not real.

2.3. *Limitations of the Research*

The findings of this research cannot be generalized to all Kyrgyz women since the sample used in this research is not representative of the entire population of the country. Such a small number of informants is due to extreme sensitivity of the topic: several young women whose contacts were shared to me by my close friends (through their recommendation) refused to participate after they found out about the nature of the research (related to academia). The small number of participants is also the result of the COVID19 pandemic that has cancelled all the planned fieldwork.

Another important aspect of limitation is the usage of language. All interviews were conducted in Russian language, with particular dialect and slang, therefore the translation that was used for this thesis might not convey all the information in its original and initial way. I do admit that the process of translation can alter the original use and, sometimes, the structure of the participant's use of language. Nevertheless, as a Native Russian speaker, I put my best efforts in translating the data as much accurate as I possibly could.

3. Literature Review

In this section I will discuss what has been already written on topics of virginity and hymenoplasty worldwide and in Kyrgyzstan. I will present interrelation of such concepts as patriarchy, sexuality, virginity and public shaming that operate within Kyrgyz society. how women embody the gendered expectations about their state of virginity

3.1. *Patriarchy and Hymenoplasty*

When discussing the role of patriarchy in reproducing gender inequality it is important to remember that patriarchy is not a fixed unitary concept that holds the same meaning and practices for all patriarchal societies (Kandiyoti, 1988). “Bargaining with Patriarchy” by Deniz Kandiyoti is one of the first ground-breaking articles illustrating the variety of patriarchal systems. The author compares and contrasts two systems of male dominance -each with its own peculiarities; moreover, he illustrates how women in two different societies employ their own strategies to deal with the patriarchal system. This is what author calls the “patriarchal bargain” and describes how the specificities of each systems form and construct women’s gendered subjectivity (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275)

The model of classic patriarchy described by author is more reminiscent of Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia. Men tend to have more economic and political power in comparison to women.(Borbieva, 2012, p. 151). However, Kyrgyz women do not simply deny or reject the norms they do not like, but they will try to find the ways to negotiate the constraints within the system. According to Kandiyoti, this system is quite similar to the adoption of veiling by the Irani younger women in exchange for the security, stability and respect. He calls it ‘female conservatism’ as a reaction to the breakdown of classic patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 283).

Cynthia Werner in her research (2009) has applied the theory of patriarchal bargain to the case of bride-kidnapping in Kazakhstan to depict how elder Kazakh women accept and comply with the tradition of abducting the bride. An explanation offered by the author illustrates that complicity with kidnapping is beneficial for elder women in Kazakh society. The reason is that with the arrival of the bride in the family elder women receive more power in the household, therefore despite understanding the negative aspect of kidnapping for younger women, elder women approve this so-called tradition, thereby maintaining the patriarchal bargain in their families (Werner, 2009).

This work is important to my research because it shows how patriarchy in Kyrgyz culture may be negotiated by elder women - usually mothers – in the family. Usually, in Kyrgyz family mother is considered responsible for all the actions and behaviour of her daughter(s). It is a straightforward duty of mother to explain her daughter that she should cherish her virginity and marry as a ‘good Kyrgyz girl’ in order not to bring a shame to her family (Baibolova 2019). If girl fails to comply with expectations regarding her state of virginity, the first and the foremost to be blamed and punished will be a girl’s mother.

As one of the respondents said:

“My dad would first kill my mother, then he would kill me if it turns out I am not a virgin. He says he will not handle such a disgrace and shame on his kinship” (Interview with Bermet).

This quote clearly illustrates that certain families can reach the most extreme level in their expectations from their own daughters in being virgin before the marriage. However, if mother manages to preserve her daughter’s virginity until the first wedding night, she will receive her husband’s recognition. Thus, she re-establishes her status within the family because she managed to raise a “proper dutiful daughter”, thereby gaining more power and respect from her husband and his entire kinship. I find this paradigmatic example of patriarchal bargain in case of Kyrgyz families and culture when it comes to young girls’ virginity. Through supporting the notion of ‘virginity matters’ applied to their daughters’ elder women, usually mothers, find their own ways to gain more power within the patriarchal structure of the family. In Kyrgyz society kinship ties play a crucial role when it comes to the formation of individuals socio-cultural lifestyle. Abu-Lughod in her ethnographic study of Bedouin society posits that a woman’s sexual misconduct can bring a lot of shame on her patrikin, thereby endangering her family’s authority and respectability in the eyes of the community. Therefore, fathers and elder brothers in the family are responsible for protecting female chastity because by doing so they protect their own honour, social status and authority (Abu-Lughod 1988). Similarly, to what author describes in her research, fathers and elder men in Kyrgyz society are always responsible for the honour of the family and entire kinship. The role of man in the family has always been of a higher value than that of woman. Man is a head of the family and he oversees making all the important decision within the family.

3.2. *Uyat and its Operation Within Society*

However, another significant aspect in understanding the reasons of Kyrgyz women in undergoing hymenoplasty is closely connected not only to the patriarchal structure of the society, but an operation of notion *uyat* within Kyrgyz society. *Uyat* from Kyrgyz language means shame. Since early childhood, both boys and girls in Kyrgyz families are raised through the prism of public shaming. If you do something unacceptable, you will be always compared to *eldin baldary* which in Kyrgyz language means ‘children of other people’. Here the notion of *uyat* is used as a primary tool to make you feel ashamed and realize your own ‘wrongdoings’. Several Kyrgyz authors have raised this interesting cultural phenomenon in their dissertations. Zhanabayeva Nurzat (2018) and Sataeva Begimai (2017) employed and elaborated on the culture of (public)shaming in Kyrgyz culture through exploring dating culture in Kyrgyz urban society and the well-known tradition of bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan. Bride-kidnapping is closely connected to the phenomenon of hymen restoration, because the number of women who decide to undergo hymenoplasty after being abducted has significantly increased in the last 10 years.³ The culture of public shame and stigmatization are so strong in Central Asian countries that people would do their best to follow the sociocultural script in order not to get ashamed or stigmatized. Using public shaming through the popular Kyrgyz phrase as *uyat bolot* benefits the existing gender inequality system and control of women’s behaviour in a way desired by the society, not woman herself. Moreover, this phrase that can stop almost any misbehaviour and end any argument when elders talk to younger people. If you deviate from the socio-cultural script, the punishment awaits for your deviant behaviour (Borbieva, 2012; Sataeva, 2017; Zhanabayeva, 2018).

In order to better understand the operation of public shaming mechanism in Kyrgyz society, it is utterly necessary to bring in Michel Foucault concept of power and theory of panopticon. As Foucault puts in his book *Discipline and Punish* the power lies within surveillance and control. His theory is built on Jeremy Bentham’s idea of the panopticon model of prison (Foucault, 1975). Due its circular structure, the prisoners believe in being constantly surveilled and watched by prison warden. Foucault develops this idea to show how the power dynamics of surveillance can apply not only to prisons but also to society in general. Applying this theory to the context of Kyrgyzstan, it can be said that Kyrgyz women constantly develop the fear of being watched by others (society, neighbours, relatives, parents), therefore

³ No official statistics available. Information is provided through personal communication by medical workers (Personal communication with Elmira, Saikal and Elena)

they try to follow certain socio-cultural norms regarding their sexual life (Sataeva, 2017; Werner, 2009). Thus, the public shaming framed by society and its traditions operates both physically and psychologically to control and regulate women sexual behavior. As Baibolova (2019) similarly discusses in her research on bride-kidnapping, it is not a government and social justice institutions that guide and control people's behavior, but fear of public opinion and condemnation.

3.3. Existing Research on Hymenoplasty and Bride-Kidnapping

There are several studies and researches done on subjects of hymenoplasty and importance of virginity in different countries such as Iran, Turkey and Egypt. One of the most ground-breaking studies on hymenoplasty was done by researcher Azal Ahmadi in Iran. In his research Ahmadi explores hymenoplasty in Tehran through conducting in-depth interviews with women who underwent the hymen restoration procedure. Hymenoplasty is defined by author as an extraordinarily 'unique and pragmatic form of resistance' performed by women (Ahmadi, 2016, pp. 233–234). According to the author, through this procedure Tehrani women "...collectively resist stoic gendered categorizations, which the prevailing medical and sociocultural discourses proclaim as natural in the construction of a woman's feminine identity" (Ahmadi, 2016, p. 222).

Similar research about the hymenoplasty dilemma in Iran was carried out by Marzieh Kaivanara. According to the author, gender in Iran is considered a "fixed and unquestionable attribute of personhood". Through using an anthropological approach and applying it into gender roles, Kaiyanara explores how Iranian girls "find their means -through the surgical reconstruction of their hymen – to negotiate between dominant models of gender and their own subjective experiences"(Kaivanara, 2016, p. 71). The findings of both Kaivanara and Ahmadi are indispensable in my research because they draw attention to the similar phenomenon happening in Kyrgyzstan. The notion and understanding of gender have a "fixed" character, and the gendered embodiment plays a major role in shaping and constructing the social and cultural norms within the society. Not only premarital sex is strongly discouraged, but it also has a double-standard restrictiveness which applies only to women in Kyrgyz culture.

As mentioned earlier, due to sensitivity of the topic there is no research done on hymenoplasty in Kyrgyzstan, however several researches were conducted about the widespread practice of bride-kidnapping. Importance of virginity, bride-kidnapping and hymenoplasty are

interconnected to each other, therefore in this part I include researches done on bride-kidnapping practices in Kyrgyzstan. Several authors have written about bride-kidnapping practice as perpetuating the gender inequality and serving an oppressive mechanism to assert men's power over women (Amsler and Klienbach 1999; Kleinbach and Salimjanova 2007; Werner 2009). The so-called tradition of *ala kachuu* can be traced in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries long time before the Soviet period. According to the definition in the Kyrgyz dictionary by Karataev and Eraliev, translated by Kleinbach and Salimjanova (2007):

“Kyz ala kachuu— ‘Bride kidnapping’—is getting married by abducting a young woman. There are three different kinds of custom: the first kind of bride kidnapping is abducting a woman without her consent and with the protest of her parents. The second kind of bride kidnapping is abducting a woman with her consent, but against her parents’ agreement. The third one is the false bride kidnapping, when the parents of both sides agree to the wedding party, but for the avoidance of spending much money, the young man kidnaps his future wife” (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007, p. 218)

Several researches have been recently conducted on bride-kidnapping and gendered construction of women in Kyrgyzstan (Sataeva, 2017; Zhanabayeva, 2018). Authors describe the culture of shame, which is believed to be worse than death in certain cases. Women are stigmatized as ‘second-hand’ or ‘others’ in case they deviate from the cultural norms towards their premarital state of virginity in Kyrgyz society, therefore shame operates as the main instrument of oppression. In her research Zhanabayeva explores the culture of dating and premarital sexual activity of Kyrgyz youth. She talks a bit about hymenoplasty by saying that women undergo the procedure to “secure themselves from possible negative implications in their private lives” and to have better chances to get married (Zhanabayeva, 2018, pp. 40–41).

Unlike the previous authors, Noor O'Neill Borbieva in her ethnographic fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan explores the discourses of emotion and social change and argues against the one-directional function of bride-kidnapping. Borbieva sees the practice of bride-kidnapping not through the lens of straightforward processes of domination and binary theorization of power, but more of a self being an active agent of change. This is similar to what Foucault refers as a ‘biopower’, the powerful mechanism and system of social control in modern society (Foucault, 1977). Borbieva speaks of kidnapping as the actions of subjects in a cultural context that continually forms them (Borbieva, 2012, p. 152). Her alternative view of bride-kidnapping and the power dynamics within the practice are built on Foucauldian concept of power and its more

subtle and diffused ways of operation (ibid., p.151). Her main argument challenges the dominant discourses of marriage and bride-kidnapping by bringing an example of arranged and consensual bride abductions. She argues that bride-kidnapping practice is still widely employed and approved by men and women of different ages due to its well-functioning in both socio-economic and romantic aspects.

“[...] Kidnapping is widely tolerated because it can be used to affirm the desires of young people and new discourses about romantic love and free choice, just as easily as it can be used to enforce the dominant discourses” (Borbieva,2012, p.161-162).

For Borbieva, bride-kidnapping tradition can be better understood from inside and it is not always about manifestation of male domination. Concept of biopower helps to see how individuals are implicated in their own oppression as they take part in daily bodily practices that turns bodies into the site of subjugation.

Similar to Borbieva's vision of bride-kidnapping, Zhanabayeva argues about the complex operation of concept *uyat* in Kyrgyz society. The author sees concept of shame not only as being repressive mechanism of controlling gender performance of women, but also in highlighting the role of women within the given context and women's ability to find the creative ways of operating in the given reality (Zhanabayeva, 2018, p. 4).

4. Theoretical Framework: Power, Agency, Intersectionality

4.1. *Kyrgyz Society Through the Prism of Biopower*

Foucault's concept of biopower plays crucial role in explaining the modern forms of governance and different modes of subjectification, especially when it comes to understanding the sexuality. Contrary to the prevailing vision of power as being possessed and exercised by dominant group over subordinate group of individuals, he refers to power as 'productive', 'positive', coming "from below" and operating in multiple directions (Foucault, 1977). Foucault argues against the view that power is juridical, negative, and creates prohibitions. On the contrary, power should be understood as a positive element that creates our structures and discourses, which constructs and shape ourselves and self- understanding (Phelan, 1990, p. 424). Foucauldian concept of power is important in my thesis since it allows to see how power operates beyond its dualistic theorization, in more subtle and dispersed ways. Through bringing the concepts of biopower and panopticon described earlier (in the literature review section), I intend to analyse how Kyrgyz people get engaged in self-discipline and surveillance by subjugating themselves within their own society through the daily habitual practices and socio-cultural norms.

4.2. *Kyrgyz Women as an Agency*

In order to analyse experiences and perceptions of young women who underwent hymenoplasty, I will apply Saba Mahmood's theoretical framework of agency. Mahmood (2005) questions the poststructuralist feminist theories that define human agency based on the dualistic model of subordination and subversion. She employs Foucauldian concept of power and argues against analysis of human actions solely through the prism of oppression or resistance. According to Mahmood, agency does not have to be on the opposite sides because there is always a room for negotiation between two poles. Also, the author believes that norms can be inhabited and performed, searched, consumed and aspired (Mahmood, 2005, p.193).

"what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only

from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agential capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15)

Individual choices are not completely autonomous, as Mahmood argues, decisions and choices are made with influences by the present societal conditions. Thus, choices are the way individuals express themselves while managing the societal expectations. Choices that even seem as they are going against the societal conditions are complicated because the choices are the result of the societal current conditions. Thus, Mahmood’s argument allows us to think of human agency in a new creative way that goes beyond the notion of resistance or subordination. Drawing from Mahmood’s theory of agency, I argue that the decisions of young women in Kyrgyzstan to undergo the hymen restoration surgery do not solely indicate their compliance or resistance with the gendered expectations and socio-cultural norms in terms of their sexual life and choices. Focusing on how female agency is exercised by the conscious subject through applying the bodily practice of hymenoplasty will illustrate the productivity of the power.

4.3. *Intersectionality of Social Categories*

The concept of intersectionality emerged in 1980s and was introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) to address the ways in which Black women were subordinated. For Crenshaw, it is the fixed mutually exclusive categorizations of race and gender that put black women on the margins (Nash, 2008). Nowadays, theory of intersectionality has become one of the major analytical tools used by feminist scholars to discuss and scrutinize subjects’ experience of identity and oppression (McCall, 2005). According to Robinson , intersectionality is a form of gender theorizing that “compels a recognition of how gendered bodies also inhabit other categories of difference, opening new and important pathways into gender theorizing that took seriously the impact of other forms of difference on power outcomes” (Risman et al., 2018, p. 70) So, not only intersectionality sheds a light on various forms of oppression that overlap and reinforce each other, but it also more depicts how multiple systems of power affect different individuals within their social settings (Cho et al., 2013). This thesis will employ the theory of intersectionality in order to demonstrate the variety of reasons,

circumstances, and implications that define and construct the meaning of hymenoplasty for women in Kyrgyz society.

5. Findings and Analysis

This chapter will present the findings and analysis based on the interviews with

- 1) ordinary young women who underwent the hymenoplasty;
- 2) medical workers such as gynaecologists and psychologist-psychiatrist who perform the surgery and consult women on the given issue.

In the first sub-chapter, I will discuss the reasons and circumstances that affected women's decision to undergo the hymen restoration surgery. In the second part I will compare and analyse the consequences and long-term ramifications of the procedure on lives of women who underwent the hymenoplasty based on the perspectives of medical workers and ordinary women.

5.1. *Behind the Curtains: Reasons and Circumstances for Hymenoplasty*

Understanding the reasons and circumstances is important in order to see what the actual factors and motives of women are to reconstruct their hymen. In order to understand the hymenoplasty, one should first of all understand the diversity of perspectives and underlying reasons for this procedure. Factors and circumstances pushing women to seek for the restoration of their virginity through surgical operation are different based on intersection of multiple social categories they belong to. Therefore, it is inaccurate to categorize all women undergoing this procedure into one particular group. In the following sub-chapter chapter, I will present and analyse various reasons that are central to the decision of women to undergo the hymenoplasty. Based on the findings of this research, I will divide reasons for hymenoplasty in Kyrgyzstan into three major groups: healing trauma as a result of rape and sexual assault; consensual premarital sex; spicing up marriage.

5.1.1. Healing Trauma in Case of Forced Sexual Intercourse

According to the media, news, and anonymous reports published on social media platforms such as public and personal blogs⁴, a lot of young underage girls experience involuntary sexual assaults such as rape, fingering and other forms of sexual violence. One of most common forms of sexual assault in Kyrgyzstan is rape, and quite often it is initiated by close family members or relatives.

My father-in-law told me he will give me a ride. When I noticed that we are moving in a completely different direction, I asked him where he is driving. He told me he forgot his wallet back home and needs to stop by. I did not say a word because I could not even imagine what happens further... We arrived at the abandoned ruined house and he raped me right inside of the car. Then he told me if I tell anyone he will kill me and my mother. And since that I never told anyone about what happened in the car – I feel so ashamed. Two years later I moved out from the village and started a new life in the city.⁵

My father used to finger me when I was little. At that time, I did not understand what he was doing, but now I realize and feel so disgusted by what he did. Now he behaves like nothing happened. For me it is a nightmare that I cannot and do not want to talk about.⁶

These two stories have been posted on one of the most popular public blogs on Instagram. A lot of similar stories quite often get published on various social media blogs. As authors indicate (anonymously) in their posts they are afraid to talk about the things that happened to them to their parents and anyone else. Being raped or sexually harassed by your family member is beyond imaginable feeling of shame. Therefore, almost no one goes to report to police. Usually girls feel guilty and deeply ashamed for any sexual misbehaviour that happened to them. As it was mentioned earlier by Ahmed (2012) this is the common way of treating woman as “if something happened then she failed to prevent it”. Overburdened by their own fear of social condemnation and stigma, girls leave the sexual assault as if nothing happened.

⁴ It is quite common to post your stories anonymously and read stories of others in public blogs such as “Babckii Blog” which means “women’s blog” or another popular blog on Instagram “Molodye mamochki KG” which means “young mothers of Kyrgyzstan”. The first blog has more than 300 000 followers and the second one around 150 000 followers. In comparison to the overall population of Kyrgyzstan, which is 6,5 millions it is nearly 8% of the entire population sharing their stories on this posts on social media platforms.

⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAApEAVpTW4/>

⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBLdJydJwig/>

In order to understand why sexually assaulted girls, remain silent and do not report (based on what the informants shared) it is important to understand the structure of Kyrgyz society. Based on such factors as coming from rural/urban areas of the country, socio-economic standing of your family, level of education and religiosity families across the country raise their children in a different way. One of the most common features that is deeply embedded almost in every Kyrgyz family is *uyat bolot!* Which as I already discussed above means “Such a shame!”. When the children grow up constantly hearing the same condemnation for any minor misbehaviour, they develop the fear of committing any wrongdoing. Often, Kyrgyz children and teenagers would hide certain bad things that happened to them from parents and other elder members of family. Girls in traditional Kyrgyz family are not allowed openly talk about sex and sex related topics, not allowed to watch kissing scenes in the movies, not allowed to leave home alone in the evening, not allowed to wear short and vulgar clothing, and definitely are not provided any basic information regarding their genitals and sexuality by their mothers – they do not have a proper knowledge about sex and how it happens, therefore when it actually happens, they feel intimidated.

The most commonly known reasons pushing young women for the hymenoplasty according to the gynaecologists working in the public and private hospitals of Bishkek, are various forms of sexual assaults - mostly rape (in certain cases even by close family members and relatives), and sometimes various sport accidents such as gymnastics or athletics⁷. In this cases hymenoplasty can be justified and not considered as an immoral or deviant act by family members or society.

As shared by Saikal who works in a private clinic of Bishkek if it is plausible to resolve the situation without involving the head of the family, women within the family (usually mother and daughter) keep everything between each other, and then young woman undergoes the hymenoplasty secretly. In cases when the father of household knows about his daughter’s undeliberate loss of virginity (for example rape or during sport activities) he might give his approval and permission for the hymen restoration procedure. An important note here is that no one else should know or find out about it. Everything related to the procedure of hymenorrhaphy should be kept strictly within a family. Otherwise, it will be “shame and disgrace for the entire family, particularly it will reflect on the status of parents, and father of the family in particular”. Thus, hymen reconstruction in case of involuntary virginity loss

⁷ Interview with Elmira, April 16, 2020; Interview with Saikal, May 1, 2020.

serves as part of rehabilitation and disguises lost virginity (Cook & Dickens, 2009), moreover it might help not only woman, but her family members to restore the “lost dignity and honour”.

Notion of woman’s chastity in determining and maintaining the social status and honour of the family has been socio-culturally constructed in Kyrgyz society quite for a long time. I find it quite similar to what Abu-Lughod describes in her *Fieldwork of a Dutiful Daughter* about the ‘ideology of honour and modesty’ which serves as the basis of a system of morality in Arab cultures (Abu-Lughod, 1988, p.149). This analysis contributes to understanding of why and how the notion of honour and chastity are deeply attached to women’s bodies and it relates to Kyrgyz culture as well.

5.1.2. Forced Sexual Intercourse: Cases of Bride-Kidnapping

Another form of involuntary sexual intercourse that became a reason for young Kyrgyz women to undergo hymenoplasty is well-known practice of bride-kidnapping. This is a non-consensual bride-kidnapping, a form of domestic violence in Kyrgyz society which has neither legal basis nor religious acceptance based on Islamic law of Sharia (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007; Werner, 2009). However, despite the existing evidence discrediting the common belief that non-consensual form of bride kidnapping is a Kyrgyz tradition, Kyrgyz people would still prefer consider it as a long time existing and respectful tradition (UN Women Country Office in the Kyrgyz Republic, 2017). According to the 2016 United Nations Population Fund in Kyrgyz Republic data, it says that 6% of married girls and women over the age of 15 were kidnapped against their own will for the purpose of marriage in Kyrgyzstan.

In my research I will only employ an example of non-consensual bride-kidnapping which means that woman was abducted against her will, knowledge and consent. In most of such cases an abducted woman refuses to stay in kidnapper’s family and to marry him, however the prospective groom might rape a kidnapped bride in order to make her stay. After losing her virginity and despite having hatred towards her abductor, most of the victims would choose to stay. In case if woman decides to leave the family of kidnapper, her parents and relatives knowing that she spent a night in this family’s house might decide not to accept her back presuming she already lost her chastity during that night. Stigmatization and public shaming play a decisive role in affecting woman’s decision to stay, and it is very rare that women decide to leave her abductor after she was deflowered by him (Cook & Dickens, 2009, pp. 217–218). However, in case if abducted bride decides to leave, she fully understands her limited chances

to get married again. Therefore, in this situation hymenoplasty serves as an empowering tool to allow woman a right for having a chance she was violently deprived of.

One of my respondents, Elmira, who works in a public polyclinic in Bishkek, shared a story of one of her patients Alina.

“Alina was abducted and raped by Akyl, the guy she knew and had warm friendly feelings towards. However, Alina left Akyl’s family on the very first night with no hesitations. According to Alina, Akyl abducted her because he actually loved her and believed she would choose to stay with him after being kidnapped, moreover he believed it would result in break-up with her boyfriend. Akyl’s plan did not come true. Alina left. She was afraid to tell her parents the truth since they were very conservative and would not accept her refusal. Alina did not report to police, to her parents, not even to her boyfriend. Seven months after the incident, her boyfriend proposed her, and she agreed to marry him. A day or two before the wedding night, Alina underwent the hymen restoration surgery.”

Elmira’s detailed presentation of Alina’s story speaks about the possible close relationship between the patient and herself. It is not clear whether they have been in close relationship before or developed this bond later on. But it clearly illustrates Elmira’s perception of the procedure and the kind justifying tone she uses when telling Alina’s story. Elmira told me that the Alina is happily married after all and it is the most important thing for woman at the end. Elmira’s vision of happy marriage as an ultimate goal and the biggest achievement of woman demonstrates the strength of the family values and importance of marriage in Kyrgyz culture. Elmira spoke positively about hymenoplasty in case of forced premarital sexual intercourse and emphasized her own perspective that every woman who was deprived of her virginity by force, deserves another chance. During the interview, Elmira did not say it is good or bad for a woman to marry non-virgin, however she mentioned it is not the way Kyrgyz society expects its women to be. More importantly, by “sewing up” Alina’s hymen and keeping her secret, Elmira believes that this procedure saved Alina’s future life and marriage. The institution of marriage is still considered as the foremost important institution of cultural values in Kyrgyz Republic. The role of woman in the socio-cultural settings is quite clear, but at the same time very complex (Sataeva, 2017). According to the analysis by Lori Handrahan (2004) women in Kyrgyz culture are primarily seen as biological reproducers and also responsible for the reproduction of traditions in culture, thereby they emphasize the traditional gender roles structure in Kyrgyz society. This framework helps to comprehend how women embody their

gendered roles in becoming both the ‘hostage of tradition’ (Sataeva, 2017) and at the same time being the loyal transmitters of those traditions.

5.1.3. Reconstructing Virginity: Consensual Premarital Sex

According to my respondents and anonymously shared posts on Instagram blog consensual premarital sex is another common reason of why women decide to undergo the hymen restoration procedure. Through using fake accounts (thus remaining anonymous) women more openly engage in talks about their sexual life and preferences on social media platforms. They refer to the bigger audience of public blogs and ask other women’s and men’s opinion regarding their particular situation. Most of the times, women claim they lost their virginity before getting married and it was by accident or they got fooled by men, who wanted to have sex only. According to Diana and Bermet’s stories, male partners during the dating period would usually promise they will eventually marry their female partners. Men will assure their girlfriends that wedding is an “inevitable ending of their beautiful relationship”⁸, therefore there is no need to wait until the wedding night to have sex. Paradoxically, a little time after sex happens between two, men would initiate the breakup and claim that she did not pass the test:

He said he knows that I am a virgin. He assured me that he will be my first and last. Indeed, we’ve been dating for a year, and I thought it was enough to start having sex in our relationship. I actually believed he was planning to marry me after all. However, he disappeared after couple of months since we started having sex. He told me he does not want to have a clueless non-virgin wife. I could not understand why he did it, because he knew he was my first, but he just did what other guys do – deceived to get sex and then ran away. (Personal communication with Diana)

According to what Diana shared, she was deceived and disoriented by her ex-boyfriend in order to incline her to sex. She loved and trusted him, but at the end he deflowered her and just ran away. Considering her background, socio-economic status of her family and geographical region she comes from (Northern part of Kyrgyzstan which is considered as less conservative), Diana said she was able to overcome the trauma of being “fooled and betrayed” by her ex-boyfriend. Diana’s story illustrates the existing double-standards on having a premarital sex for men and women in Kyrgyz society. It is permissible for men to be actively engaged in sexual relationship before getting married, but on the contrary women are strongly

⁸ Interview with Diana, April 28, 2020.

discouraged to be sexually active prior marriage (Zhanabayeva, 2018). The false promises about marriage used by guy to gain her trust indicate an importance of family institutions and the possible ways to assure woman to have sex in a relationship. By claiming that the “guy did what other guys do” meaning having sex with his girlfriend while dating, Diana depicts the paradoxical modern reality of dating in Kyrgyz society, that combines both the need to have sex while dating and abstain from sex in relationship before getting married. Continuation of Diana’s story:

I actually enjoyed my sexual life. Why men can have a lot of sex before getting married and we cannot? I wish it would be less of taboo and more of joy and pleasure when it comes to sex, but unfortunately our mentality is not ready for that yet. I wish I could be born somewhere in America or Europe. There you will never be judged for being non-virgin and enjoying sex... So yes, when my parents found a proper groom, I just sewed myself up and happily married this guy. He is a good guy and is wealthy, so now I can afford not working and just be home and do whatever I want... Cannot complain – I am happy and have everything I want. He cherishes me as an apple of his eye because he thinks he married virgin. I will never tell him the truth, why to ruin my happy marriage? And yes, returning to your question – Hymenoplasty became my ticket for the happy future. (Personal communication with Diana)

What can be traced from the interview with Diana, is that not every reason for hymenoplasty is connected to healing the traumatic experience. Diana admits she does not regret about her first premarital intercourse despite the fact guy broke up with her. Diana underwent the hymenoplasty and did not tell anyone. Moreover, she admits that her current husband will never find out about her actual first sexual relationship. Diana believes it can destroy her happy marriage, where she has everything she wants. An important factor is that Diana believes that her husband’s attitude to her is a result of Diana’s virginal status when they got married.

On the one hand, it might seem that Diana has failed to meet the gendered expectations of her family and society by having premarital sexual life. On the other hand, by reconstructing her hymen she reappeared as virgin and got happily married. It is difficult to identify Diana with either of the two existing categories in Kyrgyz society: “good Kyrgyz daughter” and “failed Kyrgyz daughter” who brings shame to her family and kinship. By re-virginating herself through the hymenoplasty, Diana managed to go beyond the existing categorization of women in Kyrgyz society appearing either as deviant or non-deviant. By employing her own body and reconstructing the hymen through surgery Diana consciously made her own decision regarding her future.

Next conversation that I had was with Elena, who works as psychologist-psychiatrist in private psychiatric clinic of Bishkek. According to Elena, there are a lot of cases when young girls and women deliberately engage in sexual relationship with their partners. However, an important feature of girls, says Elena, to create an image of the guy as of an initiator of the sexual relationship. “Girls quite rarely tell they had sex because they wanted. Instead they say it was the guy who asked for sex”. Elena’s perception of girls, who are actively engaged in sexual relationship with their partners is of creating an image of either passively obeying girlfriend, who agrees with what her boyfriend suggest; or the opposite pragmatic and rational woman with her own plans for her future:

“Sometimes girls want to get pregnant and thus keep a guy in order to get married as soon as possible. And it is absolutely normal because this is what society wants them at the end” (Personal communication with Elena)

An interesting point to compare and contrast the perspectives of young women who underwent the hymen restoration surgery and psychiatrist, who consults women, is that these two different types of women have a different image of girls, engaging in premarital sex by their own consent. If young women like Diana say they were deceived and inclined to start having a sexual relationship; the psychiatrist holds an opposite view by describing women as sneaky and pragmatic in planning their future life. Overall, in Kyrgyz society it is quite rare to hear a story that would stress woman’s initiative in having premarital sex. Based on multiple posts shared on Instagram blogs as well young women mostly seem to tell how tricked and disoriented they were by their male partners.⁹ Taking position of deceived and subordinate might be understood as result of an existing gendered structure in Kyrgyz society and particularly woman’s subordinate position within the societal structure. Admitting any initiative or affiliation with sexual actions, topics and even words is straightforwardly interpreted by society as an inappropriate act for woman who lacks moral principles and behavior. The topic of sex is still considered a taboo discussion for women and emphasizes the strength of public shaming for failing to be a “good dutiful daughter”. Moreover, unlike men in Kyrgyz society, women, indeed, experience a double-pressure due to their gendered and sexual identity, and their position within the society.

As discussed by Zhanabayeva in her study of dating culture in Kyrgyzstan: “the traditional dating and sexual scripts prescribe men more active roles than to women – they are expected to be

⁹ Based on the multiple posts anonymously shared on Instagram blog “Babckii blog”

the initiators of the relationships and sex”, “whereas women are often portrayed as being desired but not desiring relationships and sex, having weaker sexual drives in comparison to men ones pushing those to the next level of intimacy” (Zhanabayeva, 2018, p. 7) Thus, the possible explanation of young women’s attitude towards an idea of being the one who desired sex, might be connected to the existence of highly-gendered scripts of dating.

Not only marriage might serve as a final goal for both men and women in having premarital sexual relationship. Consensual premarital sex might happen not only because young women get deceived by their partners, but also because women want to experience a sexual pleasure and joy, “be in trend” and be able to have chit chats about sex with their friends. Living in 21st century where sex is considered an inevitable part of almost all relationship, at least this is the “westernized” lifestyle that Kyrgyz youth gets to see on TV, Internet, social media. Sex became another fashionable domain of talks and conversations. As shared by Aidana and Diana:

Modern guys love experienced girls. It is no trendier to be shy and not experienced. Come on, this is the 21st century – not a stone age! (Personal communication with Aidana)

It is so easy nowadays. If you want to have sex – go and do it. After all, just sew yourself up and get married! Easy, right?! (Personal communication with Diana)

These perspectives may sound as a rebellion against existing patriarchal norms constraining female sexuality, however they can also be considered as obedience and compliance with the male dominated system. Kyrgyz women who undergo hymenoplasty either fall in both categories simultaneously or they do not fit in either one. It is quite similar to what has been found in previous studies on hymenoplasty by researchers Ahmadi and Kaivanara: “women position themselves between two seemingly incompatible social roles: the deviant, socially prohibited role of a sexually liberated young woman who freely expresses her sexuality prior to marriage, and the normal, socially expected role of the chaste young woman who presents herself as a virgin bride”(Ahmadi, 2016, p. 233)

That is how some women in Kyrgyz society exercise their own agency by deliberately choosing an exploratory sexual lifestyle and fulfilling their sexual desires, but later on through undergoing hymen reconstruction surgery before getting married these women manage to meet the socio-cultural gendered expectations of their families and society. This is a power interplay within the patriarchal system that remains invisible for men but empowering for women.

All the narratives about sex predominantly have a taboo character in Kyrgyz society, but nevertheless young people find ways to discuss and get engaged not only in conversation, but in actual sexual relationship with their partners. According to the UN Women report the awareness of young girls about their sexual and reproductive choices varies depending on where they come from geographically. For example, those originated from urban areas of bigger cities such as Bishkek would have more open discussions with their mothers, but young girls and women from rural parts would mostly not have any discussions with their mothers about sex related topics.¹⁰ Unlike most of their male counterparts it is not a thing for Kyrgyz women to talk openly about sex. Overall, an upbringing of children in Kyrgyz society is not only strongly gendered and influenced by conservative views regarding love, sex and romance, but it also depends on the regional division within the country. In Kyrgyzstan there is a strong division into North and South which is called regionalism (Anderson 1999). While Northern part is considered more liberal and progressive, the Southern part is seen as more conservative, strict, male dominated in all spheres of life and has a higher level of gender inequality (Zhanabayeva, 2018)

Right now, I am dating another guy, we are in love and recently he proposed. He is from very affluent family in Jalalabad¹¹. His family is very religious and still supports conservative views about every aspect of our relationship. If his family would find out that I am not virgin, they would definitely not allow him to marry me. Therefore, my jene¹² recommended me one physician in private clinic. She told me that her close friend underwent hymenoplasty at this place couple of days before wedding night and her husband never found out. She calmed me down and said: As long as you bleed, no one cares. So, I did it, and do not regret. (Personal communication with Bermet)

Bermet is of the young Kyrgyz girls who admits she did not deeply embed the imposed norms regarding her sexual life and choices. Throughout our conversation, she admitted her own consent and desire to have premarital sex. However, she still decided to undergo hymenoplasty because she was afraid to tell the truth to her groom. The main reason was that his family was from Southern part of Kyrgyzstan and it is much more conservative and traditional. Moreover, Bermet mentioned that her husband and all his family members regularly visit the mosque and do fast every year. Bermet, admits that her family is a complete opposite

¹⁰ UN Women Country Office in the Kyrgyz Republic, "Professional and Marriage Choices of Youth in Kyrgyzstan," 27–28.

¹¹ It is one of the southern regions within the country

¹² Jene from Kyrgyz means sister-in-law when referring to your brother's wife

of her husband's family since her own family are *gorodskiye* meaning from the city (from Bishkek). That's why factors of religiosity and conservatism of his family has actually influenced her decision to undergo the hymen restoration. Otherwise, Bermet says, his family would simply reject her in case she would not bleed during the first night. By the means of hymenoplasty, Bermet believes she was able to secure her chances to be accepted by her groom's family.

Building on Kandiyoti's notion of patriarchy, I believe that patriarchy should not be viewed as a fixed concept with the fixed meaning. Even in the context of one country the level of patriarchy might vary, and certain traditions or norms not be the same. Moreover, according to Kandiyoti (1988) women in every patriarchal society might employ different strategies to deal with the patriarchal system. In Bermet's situation, knowing the particular features of the Southern region of Kyrgyzstan and the extent of the patriarchal structure in the region, she was guided not only by her gendered identity, but also by the factor of geographical location and level of religiosity of her groom. The patriarchal structure of the Southern region where Bermet's husband comes from can be analysed through the invisible, but powerful system of social control and regulation, which Foucault refers to as "biopower". Indeed, no physical coercion or power was applied to Bermet to make her undergo the hymen restoration surgery, however the fear of non-conforming to the socio-cultural gendered expectation itself operated on women's bodies. The regulation takes place through the self-disciplinary practices. (Foucault, 1977)

It is important to see how the intersection of gender, level of religiosity, and geographical location come across to shape Bermet's decision in undergoing hymen restoration procedure. Bermet's formation of self is a conscious process that took place through her bodily procedures. Through hymenoplasty, Bermet exercised her own agency by arranging two points of extreme: she is neither deviant, nor compliant. Her personal capability to act, feel, and reflect within the particular social settings constitutes her own form of agency (Mahmood, 2005)

5.1.4. Hymenoplasty to Spice up the Relationship in Marriage

Young women coming from traditional conservative families are not the only ones to undergo hymenoplasty procedure in order to re-virginate themselves once again. According to the perspectives of medical workers Elena and Saikal, there are Kyrgyz women who use hymen restoration as a gift to their male partners.

[...] There are not many of them...of course...but still some women even after being married for twenty years want to bring some innovations in their sexual lives. I do not judge their behaviour. They can do what they want as long as they feel comfortable doing that [...] (Personal communication with Elena)

According to my informants, through recreating hymen these already married women intend to diversify and breath a new life into their sexual lives. Similar pattern among affluent women undergoing hymenoplasty can be found in Middle East and Egypt. As discussed by Ahmadi (2014) and Ghanim (2015) it happens quite often that married women seek for the hymen restoration surgery in order to please their husbands and diversify their sexual life. Although there is no any database or research on this particular topic, and hymenoplasty for the purpose of enlivening sexual life does not seem to be popular in Kyrgyzstan, the procedure is still demanded among affluent Kyrgyz women. It cannot be generalized to the (Information can base on personal communication with Elena, who has more than 15 years of work experience as psychologist-psychiatrist and working with women regarding this particular question).

Saikal, who performs the hymen restoration surgery for more than 14 years in the city of Bishkek, says she might have met only about ten to fifteen women who underwent hymen reconstructing surgery for the purpose of ‘spicing up’ the marriage. As Saikal shared in her interview:

“We do not ask questions when married women come to reconstruct their hymen. Those women might be either too bored or too rich or too crazy to do that. You know that 150\$ is a solid amount of money for our country – it was my monthly salary back in hospital. So, just imagine spending money on this type of procedure to please your husband?! It sounds crazy, but rich people are crazy in their own way. And at the end of the day it is every woman’s business. I am making money and doing my job. She is making her marriage better. Why not?”

Saikal works as operating physician-gynecologist in one of the private cosmetic surgery clinics in Bishkek. Previously she worked in the public hospital only as a gynecologist, but due to the low salary and immense volume of work, she left the hospital and slightly changed the direction of her work. When I asked Saikal, why they do not question married women and if they actually would question unmarried women who come to undergo the hymen restoration , she answered: “it is necessary to know the reasons of why young girls come to sew themselves up. It is understandable if she is already married – she can do whatever she wants with her body. But young unmarried girls are a different case”.

It is quite interesting to see difference in Saikal's attitude when speaking about the patients who seek the same surgery but are of different marital statuses. The possible explanation is the importance of social status in Kyrgyz society that is usually measured through the marital status of woman. In Kyrgyz society age is a crucial factor in everyday life - older people should always be treated with greater respect (Borbieva, 2012). Also, there is a difference in social status of Kyrgyz women based on their marital status. Married woman always stands higher in Kyrgyz societal hierarchy than single or divorced women (Werner, 2009; Zhanabayeva, 2018)

Besides marital status, another important factor mentioned by Saikal is economic standing of woman. Based on what the Elena shared:

“only quite affluent and desperately bored women will go for that, since this is something that brings sexual pleasure to their male partners and they want to do anything possible in order to please their men. I knew a woman who did the hymen restoration surgery (at my colleague's) several times to please her man. She wanted him to stop cheating on her or something like that. Probably she was no longer sexually attractive for him after she gave a birth to 3 kids”

Unlike Saikal, Elena believes that hymenoplasty does not provide a solution for the problems in sexual life of women. She named it as “temporary solution from the outside”, however the real work should be done from inside:

[...] when both of them know she is not virgin, but both of them want her to undergo the hymen restoration to make her virgin again - it is a psychological issue [...]

In Kyrgyz society, there is a common belief that men are more inclined to cheat, and this is because of men's nature. This is another peculiarity of the heteronormative patriarchal society by putting men's sexual freedom and choices in a higher position than that of woman, thus imposing limitations on woman's sexual life. However, as seen from the information shared above, by reconstructing their hymen married women do not fit in either category: nor compliance or resistance. On the one hand, the group of married women who would like to re-virginate themselves once again can be seen as reproducing the patriarchal order twice as much by bringing sexual pleasure to men. Question of woman's feelings and pleasure remains unexplored and ignored. Is there a pleasure for women in this procedure? What are the consequences of the procedure for women's health? Why to “please man” by such means?

On the other hand, if following the concept of agency by Mahmood, women can be seen as practicing their own agency by trying to “spice up” their sexual life through becoming ‘virgin’ once again. In this case hymenoplasty helps women to regain the love and restore harmony in their marriage relationship.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that it is important not to generalize these findings to all Kyrgyz women since all women are different and have their own reasons and social conditions for undergoing hymenoplasty. In this subchapter I provided multiple reasons and circumstances that affect young women’s decision to undergo the hymenoplasty. Women in Kyrgyz society are a lively representation of overlapping social categories such as social class, economic position, level of religiosity, geographical region they come from, relationship within the family and education. Depending on where woman comes from and where she was raised (city or village), what social class she belongs to (economic status of her family), religion, education and many other factors, hymenoplasty has a different meaning and reasons underlying her decision.

All of the factors mentioned above have one common thing: they all operate within a society that is constructed as a self-surveilling ‘panopticon’ that creates the norms and regulates an imposed order. Kyrgyz society is sort of a self-monitoring and surveilling institution, that not only imposes the socially constructed bodily practices on its members, but individuals themselves are constantly engaged and reproducing these practices and habits. Therefore, Foucault’s concept of biopower plays an important role in understanding how human beings are implicated in their own oppression through taking part in daily bodily routines of both observing others and being watched.

5.2. *Consequences and Ramifications of Hymenoplasty on Women’s Lives*

In this section, I will discuss possible implications of hymenoplasty, and the impact hymen restoration procedure has on women’s lives and their intrafamily relationship: including both own family and family-in-law members. I will compare and analyse perspectives of medical workers and those of ordinary women who underwent the hymenoplasty.

As a Kyrgyz woman raised in quite conservative family, I was also quite curious if woman’s state of virginity which is symbolized through an intact hymen is an actual working scheme of having ‘happy marriage’. Therefore, I accessed the latest official

statistics of marriages and divorces in Kyrgyzstan. Overall, in 2019 there were 49,4 thousand marriages registered within the registry offices. The same year around 11 thousand divorces were registered, meaning that almost every fifth marriage in Kyrgyz Republic ended up with a divorce. While in rural areas there are 154 divorces accounted for 1000 marriages, in urban settlements this number is twice as much.¹³

The number of the divorces is not that high, however for the country where virginity is highly valued and is considered as “guarantee of woman’s happiness” - it is a lot. Understanding the institution of marriage is not as simple as presented, taught and embodied in young girls’ minds, I asked my informants few questions about how hymenoplasty has affected and changed their further lives and intrafamily relationship.

Bermet and Diana, young women who underwent the procedure, claimed it was a good decision to do so.

[...] on my own example I realized that it is better to marry as virgin. If you married him as non-virgin, he will take back the kalym he gave to you, moreover he will mention it every time even when you have the small fight. Trust me he will. Kyrgyz men are too cocky to admit they are wrong, so they will use even the tiniest of your flaws to prove they are right. So, if you want to save your nerve cells but you are not virgin anymore, sew yourself up and marry him as virgin [...] (Personal communication, Diana)

[...] He was married before me, and she was not virgin. On the contrary I married him as ‘virgin’ and obviously I had a lot of bleed, so he keeps saying all the time how lucky and happy he is. His family respects and loves me very much. Even though I do not know how to cook properly or clean the house, his mother is always kind and says I am a good daughter and proper wife for her son unlike his ex-wife, who was not virgin. My mother in-law thinks it is quite obvious that the first marriage did not work out – it is because his ex-wife was impure[...] I think in my case, I was lucky because he never found out, and his family really loves me for that a lot. Moreover, now I get everything I ask: expensive shoes, bags, money –he is ready to give me the entire universe[...] (Personal communication, Bermet)

Based on the information shared by two informants who underwent the hymen restoration surgery before getting married, it can be seen that both of them are happily married. In Bermet’s story, the relationship with husband’s family members seems to be deeply affected by her virginal status resulting in ‘love and respect’ and positive comparison with his ex-wife,

¹³ <http://www.stat.kg/ru/news/braki-i-razvody-v-kyrgyzstane-v-2019-godu/>

who failed to conform their expectations. As explained earlier, Kyrgyz woman's identity is constructed through various factors besides an integrity of her hymen. One of the important qualities of 'good Kyrgyz daughter' is an ability to cook, clean and take care of household. In case of Bernmet even that does not seem to be as important as an intact bleeding hymen she proved to have during the first wedding night. Blood served as an important indicator symbolizing the integrity of the hymen, thus proving woman's virginity.

In case of Diana, based on her story her relationship with husband could end up much worse if only she would tell him the truth about the hymenoplasty. By emphasizing the 'cockiness' of Kyrgyz men and how they do not like to be 'wrong', Diana highlights the need of getting married as virgin so that your husband would not be able to use your state of hymen as your own 'flaw' against you. Moreover, Diana believes it is better to stay mental stable and be 'sewed up' rather than lose nerve cells. A brief mentioning of 'kalym' which means a dowry, but to be paid to bride's father seems to play an important place when talking about the price of the kalym. So, if the bride turns out to be non-virgin or simply saying not bleeding during the first sexual intercourse there is also a possibility for the groom's family to demand the money back. Indeed, the value and significance put on the female hymen is so big and involves not only social, cultural and psychological factors, but also economic factor.

5.2.1. Ambiguity of Perspectives: Women and Medical Workers

The opinion of young women showed the full support of hymenoplasty and emphasized its positive impact on women's lives in many of its aspects. However, in order to have a bigger picture it was important to compare them the perspectives of medical workers. Both Elmira and Saikal had expressed their opinion as being supportive of the procedure because it helps women to get better chances for marriage. However, none of them mentioned possible health complications after the surgical procedure. As it was discussed in previous researches, hymenoplasty in certain cases might lead to health complication such as heavy bleeding, infectious diseases and psychological problems (Leye, 2018; Wynn, 2016). According to Elena, psychologist-psychotherapist:

"hymenoplasty does not guarantee the happy life after the marriage. And it does not mean that husband will respect and love you more. It is simply boosting the man's ego when he penetrates a girl and she is virgin. That's all. But for example, if you do not know how to cook the way he wants or get along with his mother, I do not think that

the factor of your hymen integrity will play a significant role. People get divorced because they realize they do not fit each other, and hymen has nothing to do with.”

In the analysis of Elena’s view of hymenoplasty I would like to highlight the contrast arising not between ordinary women and gynaecologists, but between medical workers themselves. Comparing the perspectives of Elena (psychologist) and Elmira and Saikal (gynaecologists), it can be seen that hymenoplasty is seen differently by these women. Psychologically speaking Elena finds the hymen restoration ‘helpless’ while Elmira and Saikal believe the surgery provides women an opportunity for better marriage. The psychologist believes that trauma should be worked out and solved on a level of psychic rather than being fixed physically. Elena believes it is not a root of the problem, therefore by not eradicating the roots soon or later women will come back from gynaecologists to her office. As she explicitly says: “People do not marry the hymen, for God’s sake!”

An idea of happy life and marriage through the symbol of intact hymen that must bleed is a result of socio-cultural embodiment of virginity and sexuality in Kyrgyz society. This idea is deeply rooted in the minds of young girls and is constantly reproduced by women, who are simultaneously the reproducers and hostages of the socio-cultural norms and traditions. The notion of public shaming, *uyat*, serves as a powerful mechanism to maintain adherence of women to existing social norms regarding their sexuality and state of virginity before getting married. However, not all the women choose to abstain from engaging in premarital sex. And their choice is shaped by multiplicity of the reasons and the unique experiences of young women, who find themselves on intersection various social categories such as gender, religion, socio-economic status, sexuality and geographical background in the context of contemporary Kyrgyz society. When women deviate from the socio-cultural norms in remaining virgin before getting married, they find their own creative ways and explore their gendered position as a lived experience through. Kyrgyz women, seeking for hymenoplasty surgery, find their agency in their ability to act based on their own lived experiences and complex specificity of the cultural context they come from.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis I explored the perspectives and experiences of women towards the hymenoplasty surgical procedure in Kyrgyzstan. Certainly, woman's status as *devstvennica* (a virgin female) is problematically equated with the state of her hymen and bleeding during the first sexual intercourse. Although women's sexual choices appear to be constrained and limited by the existing socio-cultural norms operating within the society, this does not automatically imply that women are passively accepting the imposed restrictions. Through applying the theory of biopower and panopticon (Foucault), I analysed the way Kyrgyz society operates as a self-surveillant mechanism by employing the concept of public shaming to regulate the bodily practises and behaviour of women.

Throughout the thesis I argued that by undergoing hymen restoration procedure Kyrgyz women are neither resisting nor perpetuating their subordinated position within social hierarchy. Through applying Mahmood's concept of agency and women as of a conscious subject in a given socio-cultural settings, I analyzed how young women in Kyrgyzstan exercise their own agency by the means of hymenoplasty to negotiate the existing patriarchal structures. In some cases, Kyrgyz women lead the two-fold game by exploring forbidden sexual life before getting married and afterwards they undergo the reconstruction of the hymen. In other cases, by means of hymenoplasty women recover from the earlier experienced trauma of being sexual abused or raped thereby rebuilding their social status and honor of the family. In some other cases, the hymen restoration procedure serves as an instrument to strengthen marriage through enlivening the sexual relationship between spouses. Theory of intersectionality plays an important role in determining the reasons and meaning of hymenoplasty for Kyrgyz women who find themselves at the intersection of the multiple social categories such as gender, religion, education, socio-economic position and geographical region. Hymenoplasty in Kyrgyz society is more than solely conformity or resistance - it is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond two poles and has different meaning for different women in Kyrgyzstan.

Limitations and Call for further research

Further research could be done by expanding the number of potential informants and having more voices of actual women who underwent the hymen restoration surgery. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, my research fieldwork was cancelled, and I was not able to travel back to Kyrgyzstan in order to reach out to a bigger number of respondents as it was

initially planned. Moreover, it would be interesting to exploring the influence of Western discourses on young women's perceptions and attitudes towards virginity and sexuality.

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Glossary

Uyat – local concept of shame from Kyrgyz language

Devstvennica – meaning a female virgin

Instagram – is a photo and video-sharing social networking service owned by Facebook

Zashitsya – local slang which means to undergo hymenoplasty. The term is mostly used in informal conversations.

Appendices

Informants

Aidana – young Kyrgyz woman, 27 y.o., who currently lives and works abroad. Aidana's first sexual intercourse happened during her studies abroad. When she came back to Kyrgyzstan and started dating a Kyrgyz guy, she told him she was not a virgin. In the beginning Aidana wanted to undergo hymenoplasty, however, later on she changed her mind and just decided to tell him the truth. Her boyfriend did not accept the fact she was not virgin and changed his mind to marry her.

Diana – young Kyrgyz woman, 28 y.o., currently married. Diana underwent hymenoplasty because she was earlier engaged in premarital sexual relationship with her ex-boyfriend who did not marry her in the end. No one including her husband ever found out that she underwent the hymen restoration surgery

Bermet – young Kyrgyz woman 25 y.o., underwent hymenoplasty before getting married. Bermet admits she had an active sexual life, however there was a need in hymenoplasty since her parents wanted her to marry a guy who was from traditional family.

Elmira – gynecologist-physician, who works in public and private clinics in Bishkek. Elmira has an experience of performing hymen restoration surgeries.

Saikal – gynecologist-physician, who currently works in private clinic of Bishkek and also has an experience with performing hymenoplasty.

Elena – psychologist and psychiatrist in private and public clinic. Elena does not perform hymenoplasty, but works with women who have trauma connected to virginity (rape, sexual accidents, hymenoplasty and etc)