

**The Norm of Preserving Virginity among Roma:
A Case Study in Bulgaria from a Roma Feminist Perspective**

By

Rayna Emilova

Submitted to

Central European University

Romani Studies Program

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements for international
interdisciplinary Romani Studies Postgraduate Specialization Program*

Supervisor: Sarah Werner Boada

Budapest, Hungary

2022

Copyright notice

I, the undersigned Rayna Emilova hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where proper acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or nondegree program, in English or in any other language. This is a true copy of the thesis, including the final version.

Date: 13th June 2021

Name: Rayna Emilova

Signature: Rayna Emilova

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to provide an intergenerational perspective on the virginity preservation among Roma in Kyustendil, Bulgaria. The study is created from the perspective of a Roma woman researcher, her mother, and grandmother, to oppose epistemic injustice by giving the word to Roma women in Bulgaria's contemporary city. My study investigated why virginity is preserved among Roma and what role community has in this intimate decision by combining different methods such as analyzing current literature and conducting a case study with an auto-ethnographical and intergenerational approach. Positionality, as well as the approach taken, matters when examining different Roma groups, based on this study. I criticize the anthropological method of “othering” Roma people and portraying them as primitive. This work suggests Roma customs and values to be researched from a variety of perspectives in order to broaden academic understanding.

Keywords: virginity preservation, Roma women. positionality, auto-ethnography, Roma traditions

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my English teachers and writing advisors – Viktoria Vajnai, Michael Kando, Katalin Miklosy, Maya J. Lo Bello, and Eszter Timar for always encouraging me and giving me the greatest advice possible.

I would like to thank my tutors, Lucija Balikic, Jéssica Nogueira Varela, and Sarah Werner Boada, who worked with me and helped me grow my knowledge and abilities.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my family and friends for their unfailing support and love during my hardest times.

This research is dedicated to Roma women, but especially to my mother and grandmother, two of the most remarkable women I have known.

Rayna Emilova

Table of Contents

Copyright notice	2
Abstract	3
Acknowledgements	4
Introduction	6
Definition of Virginity	8
Virginity preservation among the Roma in Kyustendil	9
Chapter 1 - Literature review	10
Chapter 2 - Methodology	13
Chapter 3 - Results and discussion	16
Conclusion	20
Reference list	21

Introduction

Even though virginity as a concept has been researched for centuries, the norm of preserving women's virginity that still prevails among Roma people in Kyustendil and elsewhere in Bulgaria (Sophia Zahova, 2016) has never been investigated independently. Arguably, some important research in Romani studies includes virginity among their findings (Kyuchukov, 2011; Zahova, 2016; Aleksandrova, 2019), but they do not give the complete picture and perspective of the Roma in respect to the virginity preservation standard. Indeed, the absence of a Roma woman researcher's perspective in Bulgarian Romani academic circles is a significant deficit. My research aims to give the perception of a Roma woman scholar based upon my own positionality as a member of Bulgaria's Roma community in order to contribute to this debate.

To study the preservation of virginity among the Roma in Kyustendil, I decided to use an auto-ethnographical approach. My research does not claim that it will give the "big picture" of the community's attitude but rather that it will give voice to my own family members, including my own viewpoint. My analysis relies on a qualitative case study conducted in Kyustendil, a small town in Southwestern Bulgaria with a population of 10,000 Roma. With this case study, my aim is to explore how the virginity norm is preserved by Roma women and what the role of the community in this intimate decision of preservation is. I believe that the Bulgarian Roma practice of preserving one's virginity should be examined from this "insider" perspective to extend the current knowledge about the issue and balance the epistemic injustice in the academic world.

Intending to explore the preservation of virginity between generations, I have collected data by interviewing my mother and grandmother in person. I conducted semi-structured interviews with them, although the process was not smooth. The findings confirmed my

expectation that preserving virginity is a way for mothers to protect their daughters from sexualization or harm caused by men, especially in cases when the girl is too young, as well as from elderly people who are interfering and affect her life. Besides, I demonstrate that virginity is not considered as part of Roma women's identity, unlike researchers such as Sophia Zahova claim (Zahova,2016). Additionally, virginity preservation among Roma depends on many factors such as age and financial independence, and it is not a constant cultural phenomenon.

Definition of Virginity

Virginity is an abstract cultural concept among social structures. The concept is defined by its loss after ‘having sex’ due to the heteronormative character that it has (Michael Barnett, Idalia Maciel, and Jenna Moore, 2021, 2143). In terms of gender differences, women are more likely to view virginity as a gift and preserve it, while most men consider being a virgin an embarrassing feature to try to remove (2021, 2153). The goal of giving this definition is to illustrate a broadening theoretical definition of virginity. After I put a conceptual framework on the term, I will give background information of how virginity is preserved among the Roma in Kyustendil, and what are the traditions associated with it.

Virginity preservation among the Roma in Kyustendil

Among the Roma people in the city of Kyustendil, located in southwestern Bulgaria, the practice of preserving women's virginity until marriage is an important part of the traditions. Iztok, which translates to "East" in English, is a Roma district with a population of over 10,000 people. This area is one of Bulgaria's most populous Roma communities. Even today, the tradition of preserving virginity has a stronghold in Iztok. Any couple who has had sexual relations is accorded the status of being married, whether this status has been legalized or not. Because of the fast change in social status that women assume upon losing their virginity, this custom may seem to be a form of initiation – transitioning into the social stage of being an adult.

The girl must prove her virginity, and virginity testing is a common practice. The test requires a blood stain after sexual intercourse. The mother-in-law must receive the white sheet with a stain of blood and show it to the relatives and guests (Branislava Bosnjak; Thomas Acton; 2013, 656). Only after that can the celebration begin, and the whole family organizes a big event with music to show, discreetly in a small basket, that the bride is a virgin. There are cases where a doctor is asked to evaluate the girl's status if there is no stain on the sheet. Years ago, the consequences of not preserving virginity before marriage would most probably be eviction by the mother-in-law and the husband of the bride¹. Nowadays the tradition is no longer explicit with the same value as years ago, however virginity remains important and preferable for reasons that I will discuss further in my work.

¹ According to my interview results

Chapter 1 - Literature review

According to Sophia Zahova, the practice of preserving virginity is not limited to Roma women. She does, however, highlight that while it is not solely a Romani norm, it is an important aspect of Roma identity (2016, 3). Yet, Zahova does not provide a more detailed explanation for her claim that the Roma virginity rule is considered by Roma communities as part of their culture. Additionally, Zahova emphasizes that child and early marriage is misunderstood as a part of the Romani tradition due to the marriage rule after loss of virginity (*Ibid.*). She concludes that even though virginity preservation before marriage still exists among the Roma it is slowly losing its meaning in some of the groups, especially when the girl is of higher age (*Ibid.*).

Three years later Marjo Aleksandrova underlines that the virginity requirement affects child and early marriage among Roma. Furthermore, she asserts that the consequences of this kind of marriage among the Roma community produce patriarchal communities, especially gender inequality, male dominance, and Roma women's silence (2019). As a conclusion of her work Aleksandrova presents Roma women as a victim of the child and early marriage due to the requirement of purity before marriage. (2019).

The educational status of Roma women according to both Zahova (2016) and Aleksandrova (2019) is affected by the virginity preservation of the Roma. Nonetheless, Hristo Kyuchukov is the one who dedicates separate research to investigate the influence of Romani traditions on education in Roma communities, especially on girls. He explains the norm surrounding virginity as one of the reasons for Roma girls' lack of education in Bulgaria (2011). All three researchers see the virginity norm as one of the factors for child and early marriage and lack of education among Roma people (Kyuchukov, 2011; Zahova, 2016; Aleksandrova,

2019). However, Zahova and Kyuchukov emphasize that the virginity practice is losing its significance among the Roma population, even though it still exists (2011, 2016).

Going back to Aleksandrova, I will focus on her argument that Roma women have “fewer rights and less freedom than women in general” just because of their different customs. She also argues that Roma women’s rights to education, health and equality must be protected and not destabilized because of traditions (2019, 64). Relying on Sara Farris’s concept of “femonationalism” (2017), I argue that this claim to advocate for a “strong protection of Roma women’s rights” is used to justify racist and xenophobic ideas. The main reason for using feminism as a tool is to support the vision of Western society as a civilized and modern one in contrast to different minority groups or people from so-called Third World countries presented as sexist and dangerous for women’s prosperity (*Ibid.*). Therefore, while reading studies in relation to Roma as a minority group distinct from majority society, the importance of who writes the arguments should be considered. In much research the Roma people are presented as the “others”. Alexandra Oprea questions the objectiveness of the light in which Roma people are represented in the media in Romania. She argues that the media shows specific events such as the arranged marriage of Ana Maria Cioba, a Roma girl from Romania, to explicitly portray the Romani community as primitive and spectacular (2005, 136).

Moreover, Oprea emphasizes the role of intersectionality when studying issues in relation to Roma women (134). Intersectionality as a concept was first suggested by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 to show that the legal system in the USA does not consider that race and gender overlap and the experience of black women in workplaces is different from those of the white since, in addition to their different races their gender also influences their position in society (1989). Hence, contemplating virginity as a part of Romani traditions, the intersectionality perspective is vital, due to the connection between gender, race, traditions, and discrimination among Roma communities in Bulgaria and elsewhere.

In addition to intersectionality, an important concept for understanding virginity preservation is the term “performativity” as conceptualized by Judith Butler (1990). According to Butler, gender is a social construct which means that it depends on how a person acts in the cultural environment. Furthermore, the acting is related not only to the characteristics of the personal identity but is also connected to the social settings that contribute to the creation of that identity (*Ibid.*). Thus, preservation of virginity is a way of performing in front of the community. As I already explained, for Roma it is a form of initiation - rapid change of social status when they are getting married. The loss of virginity is used as a form of transition into the world of adults. Then, the process is performance. It is not just about virginity; it is about gender roles and social approval. In the next chapter, I will explain how the methodology that I have chosen contributes to my research, emphasizing the fact that my approach is autoethnographically and intergenerationally constructed.

Chapter 2 - Methodology

In the discussion on virginity preservation and transmission among Roma people in Bulgaria, the Romani women's perspective seems invisible. Even more, the issue is mostly presented as a reason for child and early marriage among Roma. To recognize that all knowledge is situated and reclaim representation as epistemic justice in all knowledge production on Romani women, my study is auto-ethnographical. Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research in which the author of the text uses their reflection and writing to describe personal experience in order to broaden social, political or cultural understandings. (Garance Maréchal, 2015). Whereas autoethnography is typically used in motherhood studies from the perspective of the mother (Fiona Joy Green, 2011; Amber Kinser, 2008; Sonia Donnellan, 2008), in my study I use the method from a daughter's and granddaughter's perspective to explore not only my own thoughts about the preservation of virginity but also those of my family. Moreover, my paper presents an intergenerational perspective to show the changes that have taken place between three different generations of Roma women.

To examine these changes, I combine different methods, namely collecting the research literature on the topic, preparing an intergenerational case study, and conducting interviews as a part of this case study. I critically review the existent Romani studies literature on virginity and examine how non-Roma and Roma male researchers have conceptualized this practice and the image of Roma women and families. My research is qualitative firstly because of the delicacy of the topic, and secondly because of the task of getting an in-depth study of the subject.

I interviewed my mother and grandmother in Kyustendil, Bulgaria to find out how they perceive virginity. I chose to interview my own family, because the topic is delicate, and it is difficult to find people who are willing to talk about it honestly. However, before choosing to interview my mother and grandmother I asked another Roma family from Kyustendil but the

daughter did not accept being interviewed. The questions that I asked in my interviews were “Tell me about your story”, “How did you meet your future husband?”, “What was your wedding like?”, “What would have happened if you had not been a virgin?” “Does this define you?”. With the help of these questions, I observed closely their real opinion towards virginity. Because this is a personal topic, I made sure that the people participating in my interviews were comfortable with sharing their own story. The interviews are not anonymous, but they were aware of it and agreed to this.

To conduct the interviews I went to Bulgaria, because of my preference to talk with my family members in person. Furthermore, they would not answer my questions online. My earliest assumption that talking with my family would be easy did not turn out to be the case. Firstly, my mother and grandmother refused to talk, because they expressed their insecurities about being the “right” people that should talk about this topic. I promised them that I would not include thoughts that they did not want to share in a scientific paper with, in their eyes, outsiders and they agreed to talk with me, however without recording. Therefore, I had to take notes of everything while I was talking to them. Also, my grandmother refused to give the interview without my mother being in the room. It seems she feared saying something personal that I could not understand. Furthermore, due to her hard life, my grandmother refused to share many things because of the memories and traumas from her past. At the time when the interviews had been conducted my mother said to me *“Rayne, why you do not ask someone with better understanding of our tradition? What I know? I will say something wrong...”*. She thought and still thinks that her understanding and reflection of Roma traditions, such as virginity preservation, are not of sufficient quality to be part of scientific work. Leaning on Oyeronke Oyewumi’s work about Eurocentric knowledge production (2002), I connect my mother’s fear of not being good enough with the common perception about who is right to create knowledge and who is not. Oyewumi questions the epistemic environment that

surrounds our society. She argues that European science should not be considered as the only one because it creates epistemic injustice (2002). Thus, I believe, my mother feels not legitimate to talk due to expected racism which is possible to appear. Apparently, my positionality played a negative role during my research. I faced many obstacles when trying to collect data for my research. Additionally, they wanted the conversation to be between the three of us, which led to different results from what I had expected. Hence, my expectations that conducting two semi-structured interviews with my family would be a comfortable and smooth process were not met at the end of the data collection.

Chapter 3 - Results and discussion

Throughout my interviews I realized that the need to give a voice to my family was even greater than I thought. They both felt illegitimate in the role of discussing the issue of virginity preservation, even though they have experienced this tradition. As a Romani scholar, I stand behind the need for epistemic justice in the academic field. I am confident that my mother and grandmother's opinions are real knowledge that must be published as such. My idea of creating this analysis is an act of epistemic justice. Giving my own feminist perspective as a Roma woman I argue that knowledge is a subjective concept and should not be belittled or rejected because otherwise we live in a world dictated by Eurocentric vision that does not work for everyone as Oyewumi emphasize (2002).

As mentioned above, Zahova underlines that protecting girls' virginity is part of Roma identity even though it is not only a Roma tradition (2016,3). When asking the question "Does virginity define you as a Roma in any way", my mother answered with "What? This is weird. I have not heard that before" and then she asked me about my opinion. Something that is characterized by its loss cannot be part of human identity, I suppose, but identity is a complex issue and for every person construction of identity can be unique. Still, I rely on Farris's work about femonationalism (2017). Classifying virginity as part of Roma identity is a way to present them as traditional conservatives where women need salvation from the sexist rules of the way they are placed. Similar to Farris's study wherein the French political system bans women from wearing hijab in public in order to "protect them" (*Ibid.*), in Bulgaria researchers describe virginity preservation as problematic to create the image of primitive Roma that do not allow women 's place in society to improve. Furthermore, this is an implication of a Western white view about virginity preservation that does not apply to Roma people. Similarly to Yoruba

Families who, as Oyewumi describes, do not fit the Western European nuclear type of family structure (Oyewumi, 2002).

It could be said that Roma people need a different approach to analyzing social values. The coloniality of knowledge (Oyewumi, 2000) forces a specific paradigm for research. According to Oyewumi (*Ibid.*), Eurocentrism creates the idea that everything outside western Europe is primitive, unscientific and in need of improvement. My family does not consider the virginity requirement to be a harmful custom for women. My mother emphasized that virginity preservation is not only a form of protection from the community's judgment, but more importantly, a way of protecting a girl against male attempts to take advantage of her if they know she is not a virgin.

My mother: - "If a man knows that a girl is no longer a virgin, he can harm her, even try to rape her. "

Me: - "Why do you think it is like that?"

My mother: - "Because they start to see her as a sex object who is easy to have.

I could observe that my mother thought virginity preservation was a way of providing security for women. As I already explained, the loss of virginity is a fast process of status changing from a girl to a woman. Therefore, loss of virginity requires marriage with the aim of protection, however, if there is decision of the girl not to get married, she is often sexualized from the men in the community according to my findings. Here I present my grandmother's opinion about that:

Me - "Tell me grandmother, what do you think about that?"

My grandmother: - „That is what men are like. "

Indeed, the issue that women are often sexualized and abused by men is not just among Roma groups and as Virginie Despentès explains, sexual violence is a problem that the whole world faces (2010, 34-35). We live in a society where women are accused of intemperance.

Wearing a short skirt, going to concerts alone is viewed as a reason to be sexually assaulted. Hence, women often feel responsible for how men perceive them (2010).

Still, my grandmother insisted that a change in the importance of the norm exists:

“Young people do not care that much anymore. But look if the couple is too young and there is no money their parents get involved and often mess with the girl.”²

Therefore, age is also an important factor when discussing virginity preservation according to my results. The more mature a couple is, the greater the woman’s role in choosing whether to follow the norm or not. My mother and grandmother felt uncomfortable discussing my own point of view on virginity preservation because they perceive me as a mature person and authority. However, they shared that in the case of a younger girl, for example a 16-year-old, they thought that preserving virginity was preferable. I analyze that a younger girl is more vulnerable than an older one because of lack of financial independence and experience. Hence, she needs more protection, both from men that can sexualized or try to harm her if choosing not to get married, and adults who may intervene and affect her life if she chooses to marry.

Virginity is not enacted and performed in the same way among Roma, due to external factors, such as age, but also because women have their own agency. Truly, sexuality and gender roles are performed (Butler,1990) in most cases in patriarchal ways, putting the woman in a defenseless position (Crenshaw, 1989; Despentès, 2010). However, there is always the potential for interrupting repeated actions. (Butler,1990) As Despentès argues, sometimes the unexpected has to be done, which in her case was to move on with her life in the same way after a rape that she had not expected (2010). In the Roma women case that might be choosing to liberate from social norms that seemed personally oppressive to them. Yet, people are

² My grandmother’s words

different in relations with traditions. Something that I may consider oppressive or outdated, for another is a different perception of the world. Indeed, we are both equally right.³

Undeniably, virginity preservation still exists among Roma in Kyustendil and many of the rituals in relation to virginity to this day are implemented. Nonetheless, the presentation of the tradition as a harmful practice and the cause of early and child marriage (Zahova, 2016; Aleksandrova, 2019), or lack of education (Kyuchukov, 2011), or as a violation of women's rights (Aleksandrova, 2019) is more racist than objective. Portraying communities as illiterate and uncivilized because of their traditions is purely and simply a method for controlling the weaker, in this case the Roma. Furthermore, the existing research does not consider intersectionality when discussing Roma women's lives, namely, that ethnic-based discrimination also affects their position in society (Crenshaw, 1989; Oprea 2005). Discrimination against Roma also must be considered when talking about for example lack education or human rights violations.

³ This part of my thesis is extremely influenced by my tutor Sarah Boada. She helped me take a deeper look at my finding to create this part.

Conclusion

This paper endeavored to present an intergenerational perspective on virginity preservation among Roma in Kyustendil, Bulgaria. The paper was written from the position of a Roma woman researcher and her mother and grandmother to balance the epistemic injustice by giving the word to Roma women from the current city in Bulgaria. Using a combination of different methods such as reviewing the existing literature and conducting a case study with an auto-ethnographical and intergenerational approach, my research explored why the virginity norm is preserved among Roma and what is the role of community in this intimate decision of preservation.

Throughout this research, I discovered that virginity preservation, although it still exists among Roma people, is not regarded as part of Roma identity, as Zahova (2016) for instance claimed, but rather as a way to protect girls from men's oppression and judgment from the community elderly. I do not claim that this research serves as a representation of every Roma person from my community, but I consider that my position as “insider” is a way of extending the Romani studies field by telling a personal story.

However, my positionality did not make it easy for me to conduct this research. Quite on the contrary, I have struggled even more than I would have had I adopted an outsider's perspective. My family experienced discomfort talking about virginity because virginity is used to justify racism against Roma (e.g., Aleksandrova, 2019). Nevertheless, this research suggests that when studying different Roma groups, positionality matters, and so does too the approach that one takes. I criticize the anthropological approach of “othering” Roma people and presenting them as a primitive culture (Elena Marušiakova and Veselin Popov, 2000). I wish for further research to explore Roma traditions and values from many angles in order to diversify points of view in academia.

Reference list

- Aleksandrova, Marjo. 2019. "Roma women's views on factors influencing the process of child marriage. A Qualitative Study in Bulgaria" MA thesis., Diaconia University of Applied Sciences.
- Barnett, Michael, Idalia Maciel, and Jenna Moore. 2021. "'Coming Out' as a Virgin (or Not):
- Bošnjak, Branislava, and Thomas Acton. "Virginity and Early Marriage Customs in Relation to Children's Rights among Chergashe Roma from Serbia and Bosnia." *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 17, no. 5-6, Aug. 2013, pp. 646–667, 10.1080/13642987.2013.831697. Accessed 6 June. 2022.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity." *Feminist Review*, no. 38: 113. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395391>.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle Williams. 1989. "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law." *Harvard Law Review* 101 (7): 1331. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341398>.
- Donnellan, Sonia. 2008. "Working with Ambivalence and Loss: Artworks That Explore an Aspect of the Mother/Adolescent Daughter Relationship." *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, December. <https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/18039>.
- Farris, Sara R. 2017. *In the Name of Women's Rights : The Rise of Femonationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fiona Joy Green. 2011. *Practicing Feminist Mothering*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Pub.
- Kinser, A. 2008. "Mothering Feminist Daughters in Postfeminist Times." Undefined. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Mothering-Feminist-Daughters-in-Postfeminist-Times-Kinser/f01ca8c26f771a7d6f815801421f06907c44ac84>.
- Kyuchukov, Hristo. 2011. "Roma girls: between traditional values and educational aspirations", *Intercultural Education* 22, no.1 (March): 97-104. [Full article: Roma girls: between traditional values and educational aspirations \(tandfonline.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1080/13600541.2011.580142) (Accessed 6/6/22)
- Marechal, Garance. 2015. "Autoethnography." *Academia.edu*. 2015. <https://www.academia.edu/843133/Autoethnography>.
- Marušiakova, Elena, and Veselin Popov. 2000. "The Bulgarian Gypsies – Searching Their Place in the Society." *Balkanologie. Revue d'Études Pluridisciplinaires* 4 (Vol. IV, n° 2). <https://doi.org/10.4000/balkanologie.323>.
- Oprea, Alexandra. "The Arranged Marriage of Ana Maria Cioaba, Intra-Community Oppression and Romani Feminist Ideals." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, May 2005, pp. 133–148, 10.1177/1350506805051234. Accessed 6 June. 2022.

- Oyewumi, Oyeronke. 2002. "CONCEPTUALIZING GENDER: THE EURO- CENTRIC FOUNDATIONS of FEMINIST CON- CEPTS and the CHALLENGE of AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGIES." *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 2 (1): 1530–5686. https://www.usherbrooke.ca/philosophie/fileadmin/sites/philosophie/espace-etudiant/Feminisme_et_philosophie/Oyewumi_2002_Conceptualizing_Gender._The_Eurocentric_Foundations_Of_Feminist_Concepts_A
- The Disclosure of Virginité Status Scale." *Sexuality & Culture* 25 (6): 2142–57. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-021-09869-y>.
- Virginie Despentes. 2010. *King Kong Theory*. New York: The Feminist Press At The City University Of New York.
- Zahova, Sophia. 2016. "Research on the social norms which prevent Roma girls from access to education: Summary". UNICEF: Bulgaria.