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Public Shaming and Resistance in the Context of the Bride Kidnapping Phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan

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Submitted to the Department of Gender Studies, University of Utrecht in
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus Master's
Degree in Women's and Gender Studies

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the operation of public shaming and resistance in the context of the bride kidnapping phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan. The revived practice of bride kidnapping phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan causes debates in society. Although the discourse of bride kidnapping is represented in both the media and academia, the personal experiences of women go largely unnoticed. Women's refusal to accept the position of a kidnapped bride is perceived as a disputable choice that is socially punished by the practice of public shaming. This study explores the gender construction of kidnapped women and the reasons behind their position in the framework of bride kidnapping as both a practice, and a set of social norms.

The narratives and experiences of women are central to this study. By emphasizing women's voices, I explore the feeling of being publicly shamed deploying the concept of affect. While public shaming is a typical characteristic of the bride kidnapping phenomenon, women's resistance in this particular context as well as within culture generally is a completely new a potentially transformative form of social interaction.

This research aims to highlight the women's personal experiences. Resisting the phenomenon of bride kidnapping allows women to create alternative views on their stance with regard to the operation of normative social power. Through the affective approach I make visible women's experiences in the context of bride kidnapping in cultural and social discourse.

Introduction

This research approaches the revived so-called “tradition” of bride kidnapping in contemporary Kyrgyzstan from a feminist perspective, exploring female gender identity and representation framed by cultural and social norms within the context of the bride kidnapping phenomenon. Since there are very few studies and feminist interventions with regard to the subject of bride kidnapping, women’s voices are underrepresented in Academia. I will analyze the phenomenon by deploying the concept of affect. The prism of affect allows me to analyze the specific experiences of women who have perceived the phenomenon from two different subject positions, namely those of acceptance and resistance.

The introduction of this study focuses on existing academic literature published in the field of anthropology in order to demonstrate a cultural and social understanding of the phenomenon in the context of Kyrgyz culture. To understand the phenomenon of bride kidnapping, it is necessary to be sensitive towards the significance of the constructed female identity passed on through social, political and cultural metamorphoses and adapted to modern Kyrgyz society. Despite the fact that many women accept their position as kidnapped brides, some women choose to challenge the so-called tradition and its cultural legitimacy. Deploying the affective approach, the subsequent chapters provide an analysis of public shaming and resistance respectively. Under the guise of cultural values, women’s identities are constructed to serve certain functions in society, including the experience of being a kidnapped bride, which is discussed in the first chapter. Here I will demonstrate that deviating from social norms is often accompanied by public shaming and resistance. Public shaming and resistance are at the core of women’s experiences of choosing against the tradition.

The topic is brought into the academic arena in order to analyze and place the practice into feminist inquiry, as the practice takes a very controversial place in Kyrgyz culture. Those that participate in the practice of bride kidnapping justify it as a tradition. Kleinbach & Salimjanova (2007) explain that the phenomenon has come to be understood as a “fundamental Kyrgyz tradition, neither imposed nor transported but home grown” (p. 217). Bride kidnapping has come to be manipulated as an authentic Kyrgyz tradition in order to

strengthen a patriarchal regime on the cultural level, where a woman takes a lower position than a man. Whereas the tradition has been ended or outlined in a different way, culturally banned, and legally persecuted in other countries—such as neighboring Kazakhstan—(Werner, 2009), in the sovereign state of Kyrgyzstan bride kidnapping continues to significantly affect and explicitly limit both sexes/genders and females in particular, suppressing attempts towards independence and resistance.

Bride kidnapping is neither part of Kyrgyz tradition, nor is it part of the culture in the way in which it is currently positioned. The bride kidnapping phenomenon is still widely practiced in Kyrgyzstan to strengthen the patriarchal regime, explicitly limiting women's ability make their own choices. Women's refusal to accept the position of a kidnapped bride is perceived as a disputable choice that is socially punished by the practice of public shaming. At the same time, such a woman's further position in society is considered as a form of resistance, whether intended or not.

Judith Butler (1990) claims that the “repeated stylization of the body and a set of repeated acts with a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance” (p. 43). Repeated acts of suppression towards attempts at resistance and the deployment of public shaming as a social punishment for women's refusal to accept the position of a kidnapped bride together constitute the bride kidnapping phenomenon as a cultural norm. Thus, the research questions of this study are:

1. How do kidnapped women identify themselves in the framework of the bride kidnapping phenomenon?
2. What is the role of public shaming as a social norm in the acceptance of, and resistance towards, the so-called “bride kidnapping” tradition?

The thesis aims to answer these research questions, providing analyses from a feminist point of view. Women's voices are central to this study, researching the bride kidnapping practice through the narratives of kidnapped women who have been abducted for the sake of marriage.

Their experiences are analyzed in the context of bride kidnapping and power relations in Kyrgyz culture, with a focus on public shaming and resistance.

The Phenomenon of Bride Kidnapping

The practice of marriage by abduction has existed and continues to occur in different parts of the world for centuries: Southeast Asia, the Caucasus, Africa and Central Asia. Unlike other countries, including neighboring Central Asian states, the practice is still widely practiced in Kyrgyzstan (Werner, 2009) The practice of bride kidnapping is protected as a Kyrgyz tradition. Explicitly limiting women's personal freedom of choice, the practice exists to strengthen the strict patriarchal regime in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan can be considered as a shining example of a social panopticon—the model of a prison that does not need guards and power, because the prisoners themselves watch and control each other (Foucault, 1995). My deployment here of the notion of a social panopticon points towards a society of observers who care, not only about their own public image, but are also willing to judge every aspect of one another's life—what they say; what they do; who they marry; and so on. This disciplinary power is reflected in an everyday life in which everybody behaves in a certain way so as not to break the norms.

Upholding a certain understanding of cultural norms, this society of caretakers explicitly limits the actions of the two sexes, leaving little room for independence and resistance with regard to questions that tension individual lives, such as marital status, the selection of partners, and childbearing. This strict gender regime leaves almost no room for alternative choices. Often these restrictions reach the point of absurdity, affecting people's choices on different scales, varying from the selection of clothes, to interests and political views. For instance, news about interracial marriages or private candid photos of any given woman—both of which are considered as an abnormality—quickly become a sensation in the community and are widely discussed in social networks, and subsequently covered by local media channels.

Bride kidnapping is also known as “grab and run”. The term is the literal translation

of the so-called “*Kyz alakachuu*” tradition, occurring in Central Asia, but is also rapidly developing in Kyrgyzstan. Since marital status plays a crucial role in the placing of a woman in the social hierarchy, a man can abduct a woman for forced marriage without constitutional and legal consequences. Usually the man, assisted by a group of friends, grabs the girl or woman on the streets. He may, or may not, know her. With the help of friends he forcibly puts her in the car and takes her to his house, where wedding rituals are already prepared or can be prepared in a short period of time if the act of bride kidnapping is not planned. There are certain symbols that indicate that the marriage is valid: the woman has crossed the threshold of the man’s house; she wore a white head scarf; she stayed in his house for several hours—a period which may involve rape as well as psychological pressure. Nevertheless, in the eyes of society all of these signs mean that she is not a virgin anymore. If she escapes the house, she will face being rejected by both her family and community: she is dishonored herself, and has also dishonored Kyrgyz traditions. As marriage is considered a top priority, it is an honor to be perceived as a desirable wife. Following the aforementioned rituals, abducted women are pressured by society, family and relatives in conjunction with the “future groom’s” family to stay and agree to a marriage. As indicated by the interviews conducted in the course of this research, most women are not willing to resist or go to court because they do not want to attract even more public attention, condemnation, and hatred. In turn, protective bodies are more likely to stay away from family-related issues, justifying their lack of involvement by describing bride kidnapping as a cultural practice, and pointing towards formalities, such as an absence of witnesses who are willing to testify.

The phenomenon of bride kidnapping is described by many anthropologists (Borbieva, 2012; Handrahan, 2004; Werner, 2009) in the context of cultural patterns and social norms that are justified in Kyrgyz society, while the phenomenon is actively challenged in neighboring Central Asian countries. The “ancient tradition” still exists and the number of cases is in fact increasing, turning it into a phenomenon that prevails in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, supported by the Kyrgyz concept of public shaming—“*El emne*

deit?”

Within nomadic culture, the history of this so-called tradition has increased significantly during the XX century in Kyrgyzstan (Kleinbach & Ablezova & Aitieva, 2005) and was widely practiced and also punished before the establishment of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Revolution greatly changed Kyrgyzstan's economic, social, and cultural situation, including the marriage procedure for Kyrgyz people (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007). There were established legal codes, regulating and defining social justice and responsibility, whilst simultaneously emancipating women with a special focus on eradicating old local traditions. Specified with the complexity of national, cultural and social metamorphoses, the phenomenon of non-consensual bride kidnapping was revived in the nineties after the collapse of the Soviet Union, after the “Perestroika” period, and subsequently in contemporary Kyrgyzstan (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007). Going through different historical transformations, modern Kyrgyzstan is a jumble of dramatically confused and overlaid identities (Handrahan 2004)—a dynamic equally applicable to the dominant gender regimes, roles and identities. More than any other revived tradition, bride kidnapping seems to have become an act of primary significance, defining cultural identity and manhood (Handrahan, 2004). Increasingly, the frequent occurrences of this practice define, not only cultural identity and manhood, but also the patriarchal gender regime and the status of women in Kyrgyz society in particular. Women are considered public objects that can be moved, abandoned, and easily replaced, especially when it comes to the question of marriage. Being a public object, women are completely depersonalized; they are no longer counted and treated as persons with their own wishes and requirements.

To explain the gender identity of kidnapped women, firstly, I turn to Judith Butler's (1990) book *Gender Trouble*, which suggests different ways in which the category of gender is understood depending on how the power field is articulated. Her early work on gender as performance dispels the notion of socially constructed gender behavior and relations that very easily relate to Kyrgyz realities regarding gender and power articulation, in which the notion of being a woman is clearly defined. “Gender is a repeated stylization of the body; a

set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance” (Butler, 1990, p. 43). This study explores the gender construction of kidnapped women and the reasons behind their position in the framework of bride kidnapping as both a practice, and a set of social norms. In order to fully function in Kyrgyz society, an individual has to follow an unofficial set of regulations that explicitly limit both sexes and strengthen the existing patriarchal regime. These norms especially manipulate kidnapped women’s behavior, and how they ought to “perform” their stances—or not. After the woman is kidnapped, she is considered to be a “spoiled” object, which makes her more vulnerable and susceptible to public shaming. At the same time being part of the contemporary global village—in a world of extreme and rapidly developing informational highways, media, and technologies—women in Kyrgyzstan represent an intersection of ethnicity, religion, gender and sexual orientation. Although the construction of gender has been formulated and adapted to the contemporary world, there is also the possibility to reconstruct gender representation, as some of the research participants do, resisting and performing alternative views to dominant gender discourse.

Following Foucault’s theory on disciplinary power, the system of “*El emne deit?*”, which translates as “What will the people say?”, regulates people’s behavior whilst deploying a concept of surveillance. “*El emne deit?*” is a Kyrgyz representation and appropriation of the cultural and social prison that oppresses women not only psychologically, but often leads to the physical restriction of freedom, thereby producing a new form of public shaming framed by tradition and society, rather than one enforced by the state. Surveillance enforced through the practice of public shaming and the notion of “*El emne deit?*” is thus a linchpin that functions to take control over women’s psychological as well as physical freedom. It is a force shaped by society itself, paradoxically with minimal interference by governmental bodies and social justice institutions.

To introduce the experience of bride kidnapping I start with the story of Altynai, a 20-year-old ethnic Kyrgyz divorced woman. Altynai’s case is very typical of the experience of being an abducted bride. I highlight the nationality of the interviewee in order to

emphasize the fact that the practice of bride kidnapping is considered to be an authentic Kyrgyz “tradition”, meaning that it is first and foremost considered to be something that ethnic Kyrgyz women must honor. Being a kidnapped bride, former wife and, currently, a single mother, Altynai’s case represents a very typical story and gender identity in Kyrgyz society. She was married via the bride kidnapping custom aged 18 years old, while she was still attending high school. One year later she gave birth to her first child, and the following year she got divorced—as with her marriage, both of these subsequent events took place at the insistence of her husband.

Whilst I am conducting the interview, a pile of fresh laundry is awaiting its ironing in the background. From time to time, family members hail her to help with the household. She barely managed to find time in her busy schedule to tell me about her experience. Altynai relates:

I was expecting that one day I might be abducted to create a family. I imagined this moment before, thinking about circumstances, my reaction, the reaction of my family, and my future groom. My mother was kidnapped when she was 17; she has built the family. We were discussing bride kidnapping, the meaning of the tradition, what kind of household could I get into, how it could happen. There might be a hundred scenarios, and most of the time, girls are happy. My sisters and aunts said that there is nothing wrong with the tradition. Love comes in the marriage when people get to know each other better; when they share so much together. [This will happen] once you recognize that you will spend your whole life with a man, that you don’t have to look for the husband, make mistakes and jeopardize your honor.

Many girls might imagine their wedding ceremonies and future household. However, in addition, Kyrgyz girls also consider the option of being kidnapped since early childhood. This represents a classic mindset amongst young women in Kyrgyzstan who are taught to be a wife first, and construct their lives around this priority: not to walk with other men; not to

evoke doubts concerning their “honor”—including keeping their virginity; observing abstinence from sexual relationships before marriage; and learning how to keep a household from early childhood onwards.

The institution of marriage still underlies the cultural values and traditions in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. The role of women in this culture is quite clear and simultaneously very complex. The scholar Lori Handrahan (2004) classifies and defines the following correlation between the role of women in Kyrgyz culture and the reasons why the tradition of bride kidnapping has again become so important in Kyrgyzstan, explaining women are primarily seen as (1) Biological reproducers. (2) Ideological reproduction/transmitters of culture. (3) Both the focus and symbol in ideological discourses. (4) Participants in ethnic/economic/political and national struggles. (5) Symbolic of the family and power relations. In this system of classification, Handrahan connects bride kidnapping to the first two processes: the value of women as biological reproducers, and reproducers of ethnic boundaries. In other words, in addition to being a biological reproducer, women are held responsible for the observance of traditions. However, the process of bride abduction is represented in all categories as the practice emphasizes the traditional gender roles set in Kyrgyz society—the understanding of male masculinity through an act of violence, and the role of women as child-bearers. According to Handrahan’s classification, I conclude that public pressure and the inability to resist, substitutes Kyrgyz understandings of gender and its gender regime framed by cultural patterns, making women both hostages of tradition, as well as its transmitters, by transferring customary values from generation to generation.

Being partly or completely subjugated, women play a more crucial role than men in reproducing the practice of bride kidnapping as an ideological discourse. As a matter of fact, all interviewees stated that women regulate the majority of social and family connections regarding the issue of a marriage. Afterwards, they are also the first to engage in social labelling, stigmatization, and public pressure. After all, it is their primary responsibility to bring up children who strictly follow traditions and customs. The act of marriage is

accompanied by special rituals and symbols that indicate and demonstrate the position of women in the society, whilst simultaneously imposing new obligations upon her.

There also exist other terms defining the practice of bride kidnapping, such as the “bride theft tradition”. This term discloses yet another gender identity of kidnapped women, in which they alternatively serve as an element of trade and contractual relations, since relatively large amounts of money, livestock, and property are involved in the process. For instance, the groom’s family is obliged to put gold jewelry on the bride as a symbol of marriage; slaughter livestock as a sacrifice and subsequently as a treat for guests; and present the family of the kidnapped bride with gifts; a ritual meant to please new relatives. This custom is called *Kalym*. In turn, the bride’s party is obliged to prepare a dowry, jewelry, and full set of household accessories. One of the main reasons for a man to kidnap a bride is for financial gain. Accordingly, women themselves get transmitted as part of this trade and its associated contractual relations: they are a type of property that can be stolen. Another commonly used term is “bride capture”, positioning women as game trophies (Werner, 2009, p. 315). In this expression, women are identified as objects and indicators of men’s masculinity. While in many cases women are kidnapped because of their reproductive abilities, in other cases the act of “bride capture” serves to facilitate the courage and masculinity of the kidnapper—qualities that are of central value to the patriarchal gender regime of Kyrgyzstan.

In this study I will use the term “bride kidnapping”, as it sums up and demonstrates the different patterns and identifications of the kidnapped women I interviewed in the course of this research. As an insider, I observe 3 main scenarios for women being abducted, two of which are described by Handrahan (2004) in the research paper “Hunting for Women”. Before outlining these different scenarios, it is important to indicate where the research presented here departs from that of Handrahan. Whereas Handrahan emphasizes the different situation in the capital cities, I talked to girls of different educational and social backgrounds, arguing that the tradition might affect all kinds of women, regardless of their level of education and financial situation. It is crucial to highlight the role of the bride’s

family in each scenario, as they are the main agents in deciding women's destinies. Family members have the power to pre-arrange or cancel a non-consensual bride kidnapping, as well as to agree to the bride's abduction after it has taken place. They are also the ones who could decide to take an abducted woman back into the family, or to advocate for her rights, as abducted women rarely have the resources to protect themselves.

The first scenario takes place when young people want to get marry, but their parents and relatives strongly disagree with their choice of spouse. In this case a bride kidnapping can be staged with the mutual consent of the couple. Subsequently, according to tradition concepts of shame and honor, an abducted woman has no moral right to return home, and a woman's family is strongly discouraged to welcome their daughter back home after the abduction has taken place. This is one way for young people to get married against the will of their families.

The second scenario might occur to accelerate the process of marriage. In this case the young couple know each other prior to the abduction, however, the groom is not able to organize the wedding properly, respecting all Kyrgyz traditions, commonly due to financial reasons, pointing towards a poor family situation in the wider social context. In this situation the act of "traditional" bride kidnapping solves all of the groom's organizational problems, leaving no room to publicly shame his family. In many examples of this second scenario the women are unaware of their impending abduction, thus often experiencing physical and—at the very least—emotional trauma. Therefore, this scenario can be considered non-consensual bride abducting.

The third scenario refers to bride kidnapping in terms of theft; a situation in which a woman is literally and violently stolen. Usually, the women involved in these abductions have no knowledge of these plans whatsoever. They get stolen by strangers or people they have only seen once or twice, and as a rule the woman does not know her husband until the "theft" has taken place. In her research Lori Handrahan (2004) refers to theories of ethnicity and masculinities theories, exploring the male side of the phenomenon, concerning with the reasons that entice men to commit "theft". According to official statistics of appeals to the

police, this third scenario is the most often occurring unfolding of events. Handrahan describes a typical case in which the kidnapping involves a group of men, a car and vodka, searching out a woman that they know or deem attractive. “Sometimes kidnapping is done in daylight with the woman captured as she is walking down the street. Other times the kidnapping is planned at night and involves tricking the woman out of her house or yurt (tent)” (ibid., p. 209).

Bride Kidnapping in the Context of Cultural, Historical and Legal Issues

As the phenomenon of bride kidnapping is justified and protected as a part of Kyrgyz history and culture, I want to start with an analysis of ethnographic research on this topic. Bride kidnapping takes a very contradictory place in Kyrgyz history and culture, in which the concept of shaming plays a significant role. However, ethnographic research based on Kyrgyz folklore, literature and historical events proves that bride kidnapping does not belong to authentic Kyrgyz culture and traditions. Rather, it is justified and even welcomed as a part of cultural identity in the course of Kyrgyz nationalism. Critically assessing different types of sources, such as historical Kyrgyz literature and folklore, the ethnographic research and legal documentation of Soviet Union anthropologists Kleinbach and Salimjanova (2007) has revealed several findings that discredit the notion of non-consensual bride abducting as a tradition.

Bride kidnapping is falsely considered, and therefore justified as, an authentic Kyrgyz “tradition”. One of the sources Kleinbach and Salimjanova (2007) refer to is the Epic of Manas, which takes a central place in Kyrgyz history and culture (p. 219). The Epic of Manas is a written work based on the oral traditional and narrates the historical events starting from the seventeenth century, during which the national hero Manas led and protected the Kyrgyz people. Manas continues to be an important figure in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, and many strategic facilities such as airports, universities, and cultural units are named after him. People honor his memory and refer to the Epic as a form of wisdom passed down to them from the ancestors. Knowing the importance of the Epic, Kleinbach

and Salimjanova analyzed particularly the aspects of non-consensual bride kidnapping occurring in the text. According to their analysis, there are no precedents of non-consensual bride kidnapping in the Epic of Manas. Manas had two wives, the first of which was defeated in battle, whilst the second wife was transferred as a “prize”. The other historical sources cited by Kleinbach and Salimjanova equally do not include acts of bride kidnapping. F.A. Fiels’trup, an ethnographer who collected material in Kyrgyzstan in the 1920s, wrote: (1) In the old days, bride kidnapping occurred rarely; (2) bride kidnapping was punished with a fine, but the person knew about it and was prepared to pay; (3) the secret kidnapping of girls happened rarely. If it took place, the man was chased and the girl was taken away from him... There were no ceremonies or reconciliation between the parents of both sides (Fiels’trup as cited in Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007, p. 222). Similarly, the scholar J. Tatybekova states that there was no way to marry a girl other than with her parents’ consent, and any breaking of this tradition was severely punished (Tatybekova as cited in Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007, p. 223). Concluding, not only was it a difficult task to take away a girl without her consent, the fear of revenge also prevented men from doing so. Although the act of bride kidnapping has existed in Kyrgyz history, it was not approved by traditional customary law either before or during the Soviet period in the way that it is approved of and practiced today, neither socially, culturally, nor legally.

Today, bride-kidnapping is regulated by families and relatives. Once a woman is involved in the practice—in whatever form—there is no way back. Her consent to the event is simply assumed a priori. If she decides to abandon the defined path, she faces inevitable social stigma, public shaming and humiliation. Altynai continues:

I do not remember what I felt at that moment, obscurity, fear of the future, excitement. I was thinking about my father, what would I say to him, how would I justify myself. I felt ashamed, shame in front of [other] people. The next morning they would all know about the intimate relationship associated with me. Either I will be disgraced for the rest of my life and nobody would take me as a wife

again or I marry now. When we entered the house, I started to think about the groom: who is going to be my husband? At this point I realized that I had already agreed to get married, so I did not resist and scream, as other girls usually do. It was my life's path or a new step that I will make, one way or the other. I only asked to call my mother to talk to her in private. I was taken into the house and immediately was begged to stay in the role of *kelin* [a just-married woman]. There was a huge noise, and I began to understand that I simply did not have a choice, although I had no intention to fight either. Despite the fact that I quite easily accepted the situation, I went with tears in my eyes behind the curtains. My just-married husband came to me to stay the first night with me. It turned out to be a guy from another class whom I had met in the city quite often, but I did not really know him. I asked him to call my mom before he took any actions, but he did not listen to me. Right now I understand how that night he simply raped me, however, at that moment, I did not realize this. The rest of the night I thought about my parents. Do they know where I am, and what would I say them? I am a married woman and there is no way back. I cried because of resentment and physical pain. In the middle of the night one of the women came, gave me water, and said that I did everything right. I believed her, but I could not sleep. In the early morning my parents arrived. They got the message the same night, but all night long they had been preparing a dowry. I cannot blame them, it was the thing they were supposed to do. I finally had a chance to talk to my mother and she approved of the marriage. Our parents exchanged gifts and I stayed in the house. I felt abandoned, but accepted the thought of marriage. The only thing I worried about was unceasing physical pain and my final school exams.

As highlighted in this participant quote, for the men involved the act of bride kidnapping is not considered a form of rape or trauma, while for many women, in fact, it is. They realize this only after many months or even years of marriage. The day after her wedding night, the newly-wedded wife—*kelin*—is expected to do all the physical work related to the keeping

of the household. Later she is judged for her ability to do so.

Although the practice of bride kidnapping is justified as an authentic cultural practice, the alleged tradition contradicts the Kyrgyz Constitution. It is prohibited by contemporary criminal law and the juridical system; contravenes international conventions, treaties and agreements; and violates basic human rights. In the Soviet Union the act of bride kidnapping is considered a serious crime based on old local traditions. Instances are categorized as (1) crimes committed against women's equality in marital relationships; (2) crimes committed against women's equality at work, her cultural and social life; (3) crimes committed against women's life, health, and honor/dignity; and (4) other crimes committed based on the old local traditions (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007, p. 226). Within the social justice system of independent Kyrgyzstan, Article 155 regulates forced marriages and states the following: "forcing a woman to marry or to continue a marriage or kidnapping her in order to marry without her consent" is subject to punishment by fine or imprisonment (Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2016, article 154).

Yet, according to the official numbers provided by the Statistic Committee, 12,000 Kyrgyz girls are abducted for marriage each year. Two-third of these marriages are forced marriages, including rape and psychological trauma (National Statistic Committee of Kyrgyz Republic, 2016). However, these statistics are extremely unreliable due to the prevailing cultural justification ubiquitously deployed in Kyrgyzstan. Hence, the official statistic data provided by the government is unlikely to reflect the real extent of the practice. For instance, only two kidnapped women out of ten whom I interviewed for this research appealed to law enforcement agencies. Of these, no cases were brought to court due, in some instances to the negligence of the police, whilst in others this was due to the nominal reconciliation of the parties. In reality, not many families dare to speak about the problems of such marriages, let alone publicly advocating for women's rights within the family, primarily to avoid public shaming. Considering those few cases that do make it to court, cultural justification often entices the legal system to defer prosecution, and men are rarely punished for their acts. There are registered cases that were covered by international media

in which courts tackle sheep theft yet ignore bride kidnapping cases. Moreover, local authorities sometimes pressure a family not to press charges. (Eurasianet, 2012).

The practice of bride kidnapping is one of the most controversial practices in Kyrgyz history and culture, and occupies a highly problematic position in the contemporary secular state of Kyrgyzstan. After many years of complex social and political changes the practice has revived, and is now perceived and protected as an authentic Kyrgyz custom, affecting the lives of thousands of young women in various ways. Although the practice is illegal according to the Kyrgyz Constitution, it is justified as a cultural practice by the patriarchal gender regime, leaving almost no room for women to resist and make alternative choices. When deviating from cultural norms that explicitly limit both gender/sexes, a woman is threatened with the loss of all social ties, stigmatization, and public shaming. This research studies the culturally informed self-identification of kidnaped women in the context of non-consensual bride kidnapping, with a particular focus on the articulation of social norms and public shaming in Kyrgyz society.

Methodology

This thesis employs qualitative, deep semi-structured interviews with respondents qualified for this study as its main research methodology. The data presented in the thesis are analyzed based on the experiences of kidnapped women through the form of storytelling. The theoretical framework, discussion, and analytical sections are interconnected and presented together with my interviewees' narrations. The research participants are ten women from Kyrgyzstan, who have all experienced various scenarios of bride kidnapping, varying from accepting their abduction as part of tradition, to resistance and the resultant public shaming. There is a general belief that only women of Kyrgyz origin are at risk of becoming the subject of bride kidnapping. However, some of the interviewees are not of ethnic Kyrgyz origin—an important observation in light of cultural essentialist justifications of the phenomenon as an authentic Kyrgyz tradition. In the case of bride kidnapping, the national origins of the practice does not play a significant role, whereas the social construction of female identity does.

All interviews were held in Kyrgyz and Russian languages. The aim of the interviews was to collect specific data for the thesis, and to understand and analyze their specific experiences. The interviewees are between 16 and 25 years of age, coming from both rural and urban areas. There are only two cities—both with a population of over 1 million people—that have a developed infrastructure and can be identified as urban areas in Kyrgyzstan: the capital city of Bishkek, and Osh. It is a well-known fact that citizens living in urban areas in Kyrgyzstan are generally considered to be less conservative, more educated, and less pedantic in the observance of traditions, whilst in the five other regions of Kyrgyzstan people live in small villages, and are mainly engaged in farming and agriculture. It is believed to be easier—both culturally and physically—to engage in acts of bride kidnapping in rural areas. However, as the experiences of my interviewees indicate, in reality the area in which one lives makes no difference, and women can become subjected to bride kidnapping in rural as well as in urban areas.

While describing Kyrgyz traditional wedding ceremonies and bride kidnapping

rituals, I will refer to the interviewees as “young woman”, since the marriageable age for women is 16 years of age. Although the marriageable age considered appropriate can be different in urban areas, in the context of bride abduction the marriageable age for women from remote areas is the same as for women from urban areas. The narratives obtained through the interviews exhibit the unique experiences of young women subjected to a widely deployed form of culturally justified violence, representing an intersection of ethnicity, religion, gender or/and sexual orientation in cultural and social contexts in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. These voices formulate and produce a picture of the bride kidnapping phenomenon within situated cultural patterns and social features.

From the very beginning of this research project, I have possessed an intimate familiarity with the phenomenon in general, as well as with its more technical details and cultural patterns. As a young Kyrgyz woman coming from this particular culture, I have witnessed the violence to which women are subjected. Every new case of bride kidnapping strengthens the patriarchal regime, and jeopardizes the rights of other women. Following ethical research standards, I approached the interviewees extremely carefully, thinking I was talking to victims. However, to my surprise these women’s stories, aspirations, and perception of the phenomenon were very diverse. Some women were subjected to various kinds of assaults and attacks without being able to exercise any form of agency and power, whilst others viewed their abduction as a form of social inclusion and even a kind of empowerment within the existing social hierarchy. Yet others resist and advocate for their rights, subverting dominant discourses. Although my empirical studies support the argument that the act of bride kidnapping targets all young women in Kyrgyzstan, regardless of their social and financial situation, or level of education, it is important to highlight that the phenomenon takes many different forms, and impact abducted women in myriad ways. I analyze interviewees’ stories and experiences through the prism of social involvement and cultural context, employing a feminist methodological approach aiming to represent their stories yet one that stays critically conscious of my own positionality throughout.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of two chapters and an introduction. The introductory part includes a description of my methodology as well as a subchapter on the historical, cultural and legal aspects of the practice of bride kidnapping in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. I explain the origins of the phenomenon in the folklore of Kyrgyz culture and its subsequent adaptation as a phenomenon in society. To explain the cultural and actual phenomenon of bride kidnapping, I start with the story of one of my interviewees, who explains her decision as well as the motives behind the phenomenon in great detail. With the support of academic literature, I highlight the fact that bride kidnapping is in fact not an authentic Kyrgyz tradition, but has rather been positioned as such by patriarchal forces within society.

Since women's voices are of central importance to this study, I explore women's specific experiences of being kidnapped brides and its effects on their lives, emphasizing social interactions, as well as emotional and physical involvements. The ability to affect, and to be affected by, the bride kidnapping experience brought me to study public shaming and resistance. The first chapter is dedicated to the subject of public shaming, analyzing its role in Kyrgyz culture and its functioning in the context of social, normative power. The first chapter includes the narrative stories of my interviewees in order to come to an understanding of how public shaming operates, and is experienced, both emotionally and physically, in the context of the bride kidnapping phenomenon. The theoretical framework against which these narratives are analyzed is informed by the work of feminist scholars such as Sara Ahmed (2015) and Ann Cvetkovich (2012).

The second chapter is devoted to the experience of resistance in the context of social relations, highlighting its impact upon the relation between the individual and wider society. In this discussion the chapter connects the personal experiences of the interviewees, depicting a new cultural phenomenon that I will refer to as forced acceptance. The chapter is supported by the theoretical framework that helps to analyze the connection between the role of resistance as an embedded cultural phenomenon, and specific individual experiences in the context of bride kidnapping.

Chapter Conclusion

One of the main goals of this thesis is to approach the phenomenon of bride kidnapping from a feminist perspective. Although the phenomenon has been discussed in an academic context by anthropologists and sociologists, I specifically focus on women's experiences in the context of bride kidnapping, making their voices central to this research.

Before going into the discussion of women's experiences, I explored the cultural, historical and legal aspects of bride kidnapping. This introductory chapter thus demonstrates the cultural value and historical role of bride kidnapping since its resurgence in the late twentieth century and how it has adapted to the reality of contemporary Kyrgyzstan. The act of bride kidnapping operates as a social norm, due to the valuable role of the institution of marriage in Kyrgyz society. Despite the fact that the phenomenon is justified as an authentic Kyrgyz tradition, several scholars (Borbieva, 2012; Handrahan, 2004; Werner, 2009) have demonstrated that the bride kidnapping phenomenon has grown and adapted to modern Kyrgyz society, rather than being an ancient tradition. Before homing in on the feminist analysis of bride kidnapping, the aim of this chapter has been to provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon and its position in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. The motive behind my choice to explore bride kidnapping is to highlight women's emotional and bodily experiences of the phenomenon, which have generally gone unnoticed in present academic discourse.

Deploying the concept of surveillance in the form of the notion of "*El emne deit?*"—translated as "What will the people say?"—women are subjected to severe forms of social control, and regulated by cultural values. While some women amongst my interviewees perceive the act of bride kidnapping as a positive step within the cultural hierarchy, other women choose to diverge from social norms. Within this framework, the next two chapters are focused on women's experiences of public shaming and resistance through a feminist analysis based on affect theory.

CHAPTER I

Get Some Shame!

Public shaming is a central element of Kyrgyz culture. In every aspect of life there is a set of defined norms people should follow: upbringing in compliance with Kyrgyz traditions; education; fixed wages; the availability of property; etc. This set of cultural norms I define as “basic morality”—a set of shared, unwritten rules that people have been taught since childhood, at home, at schools, and at universities, the workings of which are closely connected to patriarchy and the institutions of marriage and family. In the course of time, this basic morality has become deeply rooted within the collective consciousness, so that it has come to be internalized.

To address the problem of the strict cultural norms in Kyrgyz society, I want to start with a discussion of the TEDxYouth conference, which took place on the 4th of June 2016 at the UNICEF office in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The conference was held under the mottoes Eldin Baldary, which translates as “other people’s children”, and El emne deit?, literally meaning “What will the people say?”. The importance of this conference lies in the fact that UNICEF is the first organization to formally acknowledge the problem of public shaming in Kyrgyz culture, including very specific cultural elements that further fuel these mechanisms of shaming.

This year’s themes “Eldin baldary” and “El emne deit?” have touched many young people, because the problem has now for the first time, been outlined on a national scale. “Eldin baldary/others people’s children” and subsequently “El emne deit?/What will the people say?” are cultural tropes that seem to be very successful in many different areas of life, and are combined in the frameworks of culture and traditions. Significantly, these expressions are used to put children under emotional pressure, measuring their behavior against the mythical achievements of other people’s children as a way to build up their morality, and to teach them to distinguish between good and evil, and between life “as it should be” and ways of life that must be avoided in Kyrgyz society. Comparing children to those of others emphasizes the importance of public approval.

The conference has played a crucial role in the creation of a discourse on narratives of public shaming that currently govern the cultural behavior of young people. The constructed values of honor and dignity, combined with the ever present threat of public shaming, both display and influence their ability to make choices: what to say; where to live; whom to live with; and where to work. Stepping outside of the constructed cultural ideal leads to stigmatization and loss of social connections. Shaming generally starts at the kitchen table, amongst family members, friends and acquaintances, and is handed down by word of mouth. Never before has the issue of public shaming been brought into the open, allowing the youth to express their insecurities concerning demanding high cultural and social standards.

“El emne deit?/What will the people say?” is another crucial aspect of basic morality in Kyrgyz families; it is part of the culture and a great tool with which to manipulate gender representations. All social behavior tends to be modified in order to avoid being shamed in front of other people. Generally, this applies to women in particular: they should behave in certain ways to avoid being shamed in front of other people—most notably the general public. This understanding is often used as a benchmark by which to preserve traditions as well as the honor and dignity of the family within the framework of these traditions. Every aspect of vital activities are paraded before the community, relatives, friends, and acquaintances in order to gain public approval. After hearing the confessions of respected speakers at the TEDxYouth conference, hundreds of young people have been continuing to express their insecurities and anxieties, posting coming out stories, sharing the ways in which they were affected and changed their behavior, lives and ways of thinking so as not to be shamed in the face of those whose lives are dominated by the narrative of *“El emne deit?”*. The conference has helped to bring to light the scale of public shaming in Kyrgyz culture.

Kyrgyz culture is a culture of guilt, the force of which drives the performance of public shaming. This mechanism is especially meant to shame women, as they play crucial roles in Kyrgyz society as reproducers of both children and culture. There are various forms of public shaming in Kyrgyz culture—physical, emotional, and public—all of which explicitly limit both gender/sexes, but especially women, in their choices. *“Uyat!”*— *“Shame on you!”*—is a

commonly heard expression, and most women coming from this culture have experienced the effects of public shaming at least once in their lives. Young Kyrgyz women have continued to run flash mobs offline as well as on social media in which they resist and post private photos to challenge the cultural legitimacy of social norms such as the blaming of women who elicit the anger and censure of the public. A shining example of one such protest is that of 20-year-old Aliya Shagieva whose openly shared breastfeeding photo and the subsequent accusations that she has “shamed her family” have been circulated internationally. Shagieva is now facing criticism and is being shamed for her “unconventional” behavior (DailyMail, 2017).

According to basic moral standards, the identity of the average Kyrgyz girl is constructed based on qualities such as modesty, obedience, hospitality, virginity, being married (at the age of 22 or earlier), being able to bear responsibility for the whole household, being educated, and having her own income and affluent wedding. Should she fail to meet these standards, she is threatened with public shaming and becomes subjected to social pressure. Thus, honor and dignity are constructed as social measures of the individual’s suitability, whilst public shaming is a tool of social punishment.

The concept of public shaming has close proximity to the panopticon, described by Michel Foucault (1997, p. 197). People scrutinize each other’s lives—what they say, what they do, what they choose, who they love, how they love, and other meaningful aspects of life. Stepping outside of this narrowly defined morale and making the conscious choice for other values generally leads to complete social exclusion, loss of connections, stigmatization and, in some cases, physical and mental violence. Surveillance through public shaming and the notion of “*El emne deit?*” is a tool used to take control over women’s lives and their psychological, as well as their physical freedom, paradoxically enforced by society itself, with minimal interference of government and social justice institutions. Such operations of socially normative power through public shaming lie at the core of this study.

Although measuring the impact and consequences of different forms of public shaming is highly subjective in nature, I claim that public shaming related to the institution of marriage and any potential resistance towards it, is one of the most prejudicial kinds of shaming in Kyrgyz

society. Being married is considered one of a woman's most important social duties, whether the marriage is conducted via bride kidnapping or not. For women, deviation from this norm is socially punishable via public shaming.

In the context of bride kidnapping, a woman can find herself subject to public shaming for challenging normative social power in two cases: (1) she is shamed for not being married—in which case bride kidnapping can occur as a solution or consequence; or (2) she is shamed for refusing to get married whilst being kidnapped. One of the symbols of refusal to be a wife that may effect the public shaming of a woman is a daring to cross the threshold of the abductor's house; she dares to leave after she was dragged into the house. When a woman is kidnapped for marriage and enters the groom's house, she is automatically considered married and a part of the family—she is also no longer considered to be a virgin. Crossing the threshold of the abductor's house is a physical action, and refusing to stay with the groom's family or to accept the status of wife is considered inappropriate. Through this action, the woman immediately becomes a public object—the performative protagonist for public shaming, judgment and the exercising of power relations, in which the woman takes a very low position. As discussed in the introduction, the private lives of women are strictly controlled by society. Despite that fact that there is room to question other forms of public shaming, the personal experience of being publicly shamed as a kidnapped bride—as articulated by the research participants—indicates that such experiences often go completely unnoticed, yet are also the most violating. In a wider social context, public shaming is considered a performance, with no understanding of women's personal experiences. It is therefore not considered a social problem. There are no women who speak publicly and proudly about their experiences of being kidnapped, and there are no specific associations and movements who can help to expose this suffering. As my own experiences and research show, neither media nor public activists stand for the rights of abducted women—they are simply not the ones “whose feelings count” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p.29)

Further analyzing this particular form of public shaming and resistance, I refer to Sara Ahmed (2015), who has built a theoretical framework in order to examine how power works through affect, working “to shape individual and social bodies” (p. 5). Indeed, public shaming

affects women in different ways that will be discussed further in this chapter. However, women that are publicly shamed also have an ability to affect society, challenging power relations and a woman's position in the social hierarchy. From the perspective of affect theory, emotions can be materialized in different ways, for example as “a site of political resistance”, and “can mobilize movements for liberations”, whereas in Kyrgyz society, emotions usually serve as “a primary site of control” (Boler, 2009, p. 13). For example, there are emotions that women are not allowed, or are precisely obliged, to express, such as obedience and respect for traditions.

The phenomenon of bride kidnapping affects women in different ways, varying from psychological and physical trauma, to strengthening their position in the social hierarchy. In this study I do not approach kidnapped women as the victims, however, I do approach women who go through public shaming after declining the new status of “*Kelin*”—newly-wedded wife in this way. In fact, public shaming in Kyrgyz society is a set of deliberate actions directed against women with the purpose of causing different forms of harm that negatively affect their personhood. Therefore, public shaming is an inherently gendered crime.

The subject of shaming is a well-researched topic in the context of feminist affect studies. Different feminist scholars such as Sara Ahmed (2015), Ann Cvetkovich (2012), Kristyn Gorton (2007), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002) have brought the nature of emotions and affect into theoretical concepts. In the course of this thesis, I will explore “the way in which feeling is negotiated in the public sphere and experienced through the body” (Gorton, 2007, p. 334). Public shaming is a particular performance of “the abducted woman” that affects all social actors in Kyrgyz society and constitutes a new form of social interaction, changing the position of women in Kyrgyz society.

The Operation of Shame as a Normative Social Power

To explain the circulation of public shaming and power relations in the context of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyz culture, I refer to the concept of power relations as explained by Michel Foucault (1997). According to Foucault, disciplinary power refers to visible and invisible mechanisms that work to discipline people to behave in a certain way (1997, p. 24). Eventually,

people will discipline themselves based on the knowledge they derive from these power structures. At the same time, Foucault explains that disciplinary power and power relations are established on the basis of structural, hierarchical origins (ibid.).

Appropriating the concept of disciplinary power in the context of Kyrgyz society, I would conclude that it is highly structuralized and hierarchized based on its culture and traditions. The source of knowledge production in Kyrgyz society is a culture that is used to discipline people to behave in a certain way according to these traditions. Thereby culture and traditions form power relations that include a particular positioning of gender. Whilst one of the roles ascribed to women is to preserve and transmit traditions, it is the role of the wider community to monitor their enactment. Thus, power relations are formed in a system in which women simultaneously take the foundational, and lowest, position in this hierarchy. Since both Kyrgyz culture and power relations are based on the institutions of marriage and family, it is deemed menacing when a woman questions these institutions, outlining her position as an individual rather than a mere component of a wider society. Challenging her position within society via resisting being a kidnapped bride, a woman can disrupt this hierarchy, thereby challenging the whole cultural structure of society.

While public shaming performs several roles in Kyrgyz society, one of its main functions is to enact a performative punishment of the refusal to accept non-consensual abduction. The performance of public shaming is inseparable from power relations, in which public shaming is deployed by some as a tool for the regulation and punishment of others, resulting in the oppression of both the individual and the individual's right to be different.

Together, public shaming and normative social power constitute the concept of affect in the context of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyz society. Based on the literature review of research papers written by Sara Ahmed (2015), Ann Cvetkovich (2012), Kristyn Gorton (2007), Pedwell & Whitehead (2012), I define affect as a public state based on the specific combination of emotional and bodily experiences of certain individuals, constituting further social connections within wider society. I discuss the topic of affect in the context of bride kidnapping because it provides an important mechanism through which to highlight a fundamental discourse in Kyrgyz

society that establishes particular social connections between the community, which follows certain cultural norms, on the one hand, and women who stepped outside of this narrowly defined path on the other. Being a public discourse as well as something that is based on a very personal experience, affect speaks for the individual (Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012). It makes an individual a public object—a person to which a specified action or emotion is directed. Being a public object, the individual evokes certain feelings, and thereby affects society, urging others to develop a certain attitude towards the individual. In this way, affect shapes the social meaning attributed to kidnapped women. Scholars Carolyn Pedwell and Ann Whitehead in their joint research work on *Affecting Feminism* (2012) write:

At both an individual and cultural level, emotions “are crucial to the very constitution of the psychic and social as objects”; affect is not “in”, or indeed “outside of” the individual or the social, but the very circulation of emotion allows different objects or bodies to take shape for us (Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012, p. 124).

As discussed in the introduction, the institution of marriage, and family values, occupy a central place in Kyrgyz culture and are regulated and governed by society in compliance with specific traditions. Women’s private lives and emotions are the subject which is controlled by the society, and therefore women and their emotions are carefully monitored. In other words, women are not allowed to experience emotions that exceed the possibilities allowed by tradition: in this case, they are not allowed to object to being a kidnapped wife, because this would create a new discourse that would affect the established social order.

As a result, on a cultural level kidnapped women are subjected to public shaming. Public shaming is a performance with its own protagonists and viewers—the judges, endowed with the constructed power of being right—the “righteous” people. As a collective, these people have the credibility to be considered “right”, and this is precisely why the phrase “*El emne deit?*” (What will the people say?) has so much power to manipulate individuals, and especially women. The cultural legitimacy of the community is unquestionable, since the collective is considered the last

and highest authority. Mistakes, which are considered to constitute inappropriate behavior according Kyrgyz culture, are often exhibited in the public arena, as they are considered to be the “producers of what is right”—the collective carriers of authentic values and traditions. As individuals they might have other views, but as a collective they are expected to play a certain role and to act as both the judges and executors of punishments, that is to say, to produce and enact the public performance of shaming.

I found the story of Janyl in the local media. Her actions have evoked a heated discussion in her community, and her story was covered by the media at a national level. Janyl’s experience is a very typical one for a Kyrgyz woman, and she articulates an uncommon unpredictable reaction to her abduction—albeit with quite predictable consequences. Janyl is a 27-year-old ethnic Kyrgyz woman who was kidnapped for a forced marriage. She resisted by refusing to stay with the family of her abductor, and subsequently leaving their house. By this action she immediately became a public object—a person subjected to a specified attitude of oppression, and one who is discussed in the local media. She now wishes to work as a literature teacher, but she hesitates to apply, feeling that—at the age of 27—she might be too old. Explained from the angle of affect theory, this presents a shining example in which experienced emotions constitute affect. Affect refers to the sociological expression of feelings, but is also rooted in biological, bodily response to emotional feelings, and eventually may effect changes in physical behavior and self-perception. Janyl has lived through the brutal experience of being both kidnapped and subsequently publicly shamed for taking a stand and exercising her own free will:

When I was 20 years old, I was kidnapped. During that day, friends of my family came to visit us with their elder son. My parents asked me to show him around; he had never visited this region. “Granddaughter, it is impolite. Your fathers served together in the army; [and yet] the boy has never visited [any of] these places, [and] they rarely come to visit us. What will they think about our hospitality? Walk with him a little.” When we left, a car pulled up. In the car, he said that this was a bride kidnapping, and we will get married soon. [He told me that] today in the house of my uncle, relatives will organize

the bride's send off, and the next day we will go to his village. I started screaming and demanding to be released. I hit the car windows and tried to open the door. My attempts were useless. While his friend was driving, he held me. They both were laughing and making jokes, saying what a spirited wife he got. It deeply touched me, and I started to resist more and more, basically fighting with him. When we arrived at my uncle's house, I demanded him to let me go. Nobody listened to me. They had a celebration. The women started to say: "The girl should respect the national traditions. If you refuse now, you curse yourself and your family. You will not be able to get married anymore. A normal Kyrgyz girl can be happy only if she becomes a wife and mother. What will the people say? Nobody will talk to you anymore, you will be abandoned by all with whom you have ever been acquainted." After several hours of fighting, they called my parents and asked them to put pressure on me and pacify me. When my mother heard about my behavior, she tried to persuade me to stay. I did not even want to listen to her. I screamed that I would not stay here and [that I would] go to the police. My parents took the kidnappers' side. My mother said: "You could go if you decide so, but [then] you do not belong to our clan anymore." She knew my character and was scared that I might go to the police. She imagined that friends of the family might be imprisoned and be put under investigation. Everyone would turn away from us. There was no talk about the marriage anymore. They were not [even] afraid of the investigation, but of the fact that everybody would know about the scandal, or that it might go viral. I left with the thought that this nightmare was over. However, it was only the beginning of a real nightmare."

In the case of Janyl—as in other cases when a woman may choose to refuse her bridal kidnapping—both the threat of public shaming and public shaming itself are used as a punishment for challenging the power structures and openly “dishonoring” established traditions. Her family is afraid to be part of Janyl's “crime” of questioning established power structures, and therefore they exclude her from their social circle, denouncing her right to belong by announcing[: “You do not belong to our clan anymore.” Simultaneously, the people in Janyl's

social circle are also afraid to be excluded, expressing their concerns in the following words: “everyone would turn away from us”; “everybody will know about the scandal”. They are frightened to be publicly punished for Janyl’s contested choice. In order to avoid this, public punishment in the form of shaming is projected upon her as if she were merely an independent individual no longer attached to the family unit.

Janyl describes her experience of being publicly ashamed as a “nightmare”. The American Psychiatric Association (2000) defines a nightmare as “an unpleasant dream that can cause strong emotional response from the mind, typically fear, but also despair, anxiety and great sadness. The dream may contain situations of discomfort, psychological or physical terror or panic”. This is the perfect metaphor to explain the affective workings of public shaming in Kyrgyz society. Public shaming is not a corporal punishment. Yet, although it seems to be purely psychological, public shaming also affects the individual on a physical and mental level, making the individual change their behavior. For example, as Janyl explains later in the interview, she hesitates to apply for a job, because she has been made to feel as if she is not capable of doing so, as well as being made to feel old at the age of 27. Therefore she cannot bring herself to apply for a job, and is physically unable to speak up for herself.

Following Ann Cvetkovich’s (2012) statement on “depression as a cultural and social phenomenon rather than a medical disease” (p. 3), I agree with her suggestion that cultural criticism, in combination with individual experiences, creates public feelings, which are from the point of “personal” should go to the “political” (ibid.). It means that emotion is no longer personal, but has become political. The problem of public shaming as well as the problem of bride kidnapping are perceived as the private problems of particular individuals, instead of being considered a social or cultural problem. The established power relations between “the righteous people” on the one hand (i.e. society as a collective), and publicly shamed women in the context of bride kidnapping on the other, concur with Kyrgyz cultural notions. As with Janyl, many women do not understand why they become a target of “the righteous people”. At the same time, nobody pays attention to the personal experiences of publicly shamed women. Usually, those belonging to the righteous collective do not care about the publicly shamed woman, because she

is depersonalized: she has become a public object on which normative social power can be exercised. Therefore, these personal experiences do not become transferred to the political realm, and never result in the problem being publically addressed.

While considering the relation between the personal and the political, in the chapter “Some WHYs and why mes?” Denise Riley (2005) refers to the symbols related to the public expression of feelings, asking the question Why? Considering the question of the individual’s basic morality, when it comes to the question of a woman’s private life in either the phenomenon of bride kidnapping or public shaming, Kyrgyz society takes on the moral responsibility of exercising social justice: “I must be a part of social justice”—in this case, public shaming. In contrast, when it comes to the individual experience of being abducted and publicly shamed, the position of “the righteous people” becomes instead the assertion that “I am not responsible for this”. Referring to the work of scholar Lauren Berlant (1977), Gorton (2007) explains acts of public shaming as a “defensive response by people who identify with privilege, yet fear they will be exposed as immoral by their tacit sanctions of a particular structural violence that benefits them” (p. 333). As a privileged section of Kyrgyz culture, those finding themselves on the “right” side of social justice eliminate any potential threat to their power structures—in this case, the women who challenge it. With regard to the emotion experienced by the individual subjected to public shaming, Gorton (2007) argues that questions such as “why?” and “why me?” allow their speaker to replace a narrative of responsibility with one of destiny and bad fortune, rather than questioning or criticizing the cultural legitimacy of the situation (p. 337). The abducted women in Kyrgyz society do not replace the responsibility of being publicly shamed. Rather, they internalize its basic morality—their feelings of responsibility are rooted in their gender representation, and an innate sense of guilt. From early childhood onwards, most girls are encouraged to take personal responsibility and thus eventually to blame themselves for any perceived failing, merely because they are female. The individual’s moral responsibility for the experience of being publicly shamed is thus not replaced with a narrative of bad fortune, although it does not fuel cultural criticism either.

Unlike most girls, Janyl refused to be an abducted bride. As a result she faced aggression from all parties involved in the act, including her own family:

I am an expelled girl. I immediately went to my parents' house; [they told me that] it was not my home anymore. I was raised with the belief that a girl is just a guest in her parents' house. Eventually, she will get married and go to another family. Now I do not belong to any family. [I am] clan-less, family-less, homeless, as I was called later. I went home tired and broken down, but I was happy that I could resist and [that] in the end, I had been able to get out. I did not want to get married. I had plans to move to Bishkek—the capital city—and enter the university. I wanted to be a teacher.

When I came back, my mother slapped me in the face. I could hardly stand on my feet and keep my balance. I cried, not because of the pain, but because of the family's attitude towards me. My mother started to scream at me. "What will the people say about our family? How will we look in the eyes of our relatives, neighbors, and friends? Nobody is going to marry you. You have two sisters, have you thought about them?" She was screaming for several hours, slapping me in the face. I decided to move to the city. For the first several days I would stay with friends, and after [that I] found a job and rented a room. I felt the guilt and responsibility for what happened to my family, but decided to go away and forget about my past. It seemed to be the best way to resolve the situation.

Public shaming functions as a performative punishment, resulting in the total exclusion of the individual from their social circles. As discussed in this chapter, family connections and clan relations are foundational for all social relations. A collectivist way of life is an intrinsic part of Kyrgyz culture, in which a group of closely connected people has more value than an individual. This can be explained historically (Farrington, 2005, p. 173), as people used to live in tribes and built their livelihoods in groups. Excluding an individual from the tribe or group, simply meant they ceased to exist. Nowadays, an individual gets excluded on the level of social and family

connections, and thus becomes subject to the social stigma of being expelled for disobeying socio-cultural traditions. That is why Janyl's family was afraid to be seen as partners in her refusal of the bride kidnapping, since they—as a family unit—could easily be expelled from their wider community.

Since public shaming is a social punishment, rumors about Janyl's refusal of her bride kidnapping spread very quickly. A crowd of “righteous” people was immediately mobilized to execute her punishment:

The next day I went outside to the store. Apparently everybody knew about the situation. Neighbors were staring at me. The guys whistled after me, they called me a whore. While I was standing in line, women from the village started to ask me to return to the family of the “groom”. They recommended me to apologize and ask that family to take me back. When I was on my way home, one of the children threw mud at me and ran away. It was kind of the new entertainment among teenagers. We have only one central street. It felt as if I walked along the road of judgment, where everybody has to pass a sentence. When I came back it felt as if a bucket of mud was poured over me. At night someone threw a stone at my window.

Secondly, public shaming has a public function in the upbringing of other women, clearly showing to its audience the consequences of making contested choices—in this case, the consequences of refusing to be a kidnapped bride. It is used, not only to punish the individual through social exclusion, but also to demonstrate what will happen when a woman breaks the rules related to the preservation of, and adherence to, traditions and authentic values. Eventually, the woman who has broken these shared norms becomes a performative object of undesirable behavior.

Another interesting aspect here is the significant role of public spaces in the constituting of sites of public shaming and critical engagement—most cases of bride kidnapping tend to occur in public spaces. Generally, there is only one central road leading to the shops and

administrative centers in most settlements, surrounded by outlying houses. Thus, whenever girls and women take to the road on their own business, this is considered a kind of public performance, enacted before this collective of “righteous” people:

After one day of being released from the act of bride kidnapping, I felt the hatred, aggression and the desire to tear me to pieces. I did not understand why, for what reasons? My mother said that she warned me about the consequences. Nobody can just break the rules and culture of wisdom that has been established for centuries without being punished. I was a symbol of a bad example for other girls. People had full power over me. They could publicly humiliate me and actually do to me whatever they wanted.

Most interviewees in the context of this study, including Janyl, define the experience of being publicly shamed as a negative one, including descriptions of the negative emotions they have felt. This explains why women themselves tend to advocate for patriarchal discourse in Kyrgyz society, and is also the reason why bride kidnapping garners such great support from many women: being affected by public shaming, many women like Janyl would not go through it again, thus avoiding the risk of social punishment.

Affect theory, as deployed by many scholars, such as Boler (2009), Gorton (2007), and Sedgwick (2002), explores the connection between the nature of emotions and bodily experiences. In Kyrgyz communities this constitutes representations of personality within the social hierarchy. As Sara Ahmed (2015) states:

emotions are not simply “I” or “we have”. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the “I” and the “we” are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others (Ahmed, 2015, p. 5).

While bride kidnapping is considered a norm, refusal to remain in the position of an abducted wife is considered a crime and a breaking with “tradition”—an act which is severely punishable

by society. Public shaming is not identified as a harmful action against personal security and privacy, neither by society, nor by the victim. Public shaming is protected as a necessary measure. While there are different forms of public shaming, “*El emne deit?*” (What will the people say?) is a narrative that is protected and maintained as a shaming mechanism that is enacted for the greater good. In this sense, a woman who is subjected to this discourse is no longer considered a woman or a human, but rather becomes a symbol of evil and, subsequently, an object for public execution.

Shame and Self-Conscious Emotions

Individual experiences of public shaming are formulated based on both internal and external emotions that are inherently and inescapably entangled. Just like any emotion in the framework of affect, it has an ability to affect and to be affected. When a woman refuses to be a kidnapped bride, she is shamed and excluded from her social circle as a punishment for challenging normative social power. This is a conscious decision on the part of the “righteous”. However, such a woman may ultimately be responsible for reproducing her own exclusion. This is the most clear example of an emotional circle in which the social relations of both the “righteous” and the publicly shamed person are further affected. However, being “depersonalized” publicly shamed woman formulate her social relations with the “righteous” people. By experiencing different set of emotions she recreates her personality within the society. Since the voice of these women is so pivotal to this study, I am particularly interested in this emotional circle and its effect on the publicly shamed individual.

Feeling ashamed is a very diverse emotion, made more complex by the operation of normative social power and the threat of physical danger. Surprisingly, my analysis of the interviews shows that the physical and emotional experience of being publicly shamed is not an emotion in itself, but rather represents a combination of emotions that constitute social connections, and racially configures bodies. There are different emotions involved, which are substituted by the experience of being publicly shamed. Several of the interviewees repeat the

same experienced emotions: guilt, fear, self-loathing, and self-isolation. These particular feelings are also articulated by Janyl:

I could feel that shame devouring me from the within. It is a feeling of guilt, self-loathing and fear. From a girl full of life, I have turned into a depressed person who is fearful of everything. I was afraid to go outside of the house further than a few meters. I was afraid of people, even of my own family members. I could not sleep at night, I was suffering from nightmares. At that moment, it seemed to me there were only two possible options: apologize and ask the family of the groom to take me back, or to commit suicide. Suicide seemed a more suitable option for me. The entire following year I spent in my room, not talking to anyone. I could not recognize what was happening to me. The only thing I was able to do was cry. I completely lost my sense of time. I was thinking that people would forget about me after a while. But no, they did not. The more I was staying at home, the more things I heard about myself. I deactivated all social media pages, [yet] my mother and my sister brought new rumors.

All of these emotions are constructed under the effect of the social interactions taking place within the Kyrgyz community. These emotions also define the emotional stages of the experience of being publicly shamed. First, the individual feels guilt—responsibility for the violation of a strictly regulated basic morality. Under the pressure of external emotions directed toward the publicly shamed woman, she feels fear—she feels threatened by the “righteous”. This basically creates an affect that works further upon social interactions and supports established disciplinary power: the woman disciplines herself to behave in a certain way. For example, as Janyl describes, she is “afraid of people, afraid to go out”. Through the experience of fear and guilt, Janyl was disciplining herself to conform to the operation of social normative power again. The next stage is self-loathing—hatred directed towards herself. This self-loathing is the product of social exclusion. Eventually, self-loathing leads to conscious self-isolation, which is precisely what performative public punishment is aimed at, since this means that the woman is no longer a

threat to the established order. In this case Janyl and the other interviewees were disciplined by people perceived as “righteous”, but they also disciplined themselves not to further-challenge power structures. Eventually, going through such combination of emotions and their affective qualities, a woman “will be more likely to accept the accusation as correct” (Gorton, 2007, p. 340). At one point the affective emotions of self-loathing and self-isolation led to the intention of committing suicide. This explanation highlights how public shaming affects both the “righteous” people and the punished individual alike, coercing them into an interaction that adheres to normative disciplinary power as framed within Kyrgyz culture.

Although Gorton (2007) understands shame as “positive and productive, even or especially when it feels bad” (p. 341), I do not find anything positive in public shaming. In general, public shaming affirms the social values attached to the bride kidnapping phenomenon in Kyrgyz society. The performance of shame shows what people are striving for, and for what values public shaming is enacted. In Kyrgyz culture, these are articulated very clearly and explicitly: support the patriarchal regime in diverse ways. Any expression of public shaming exposes the intolerance toward making contested choices, and a failure of the social justice system as an establishment intended to protect citizens. Conducting academic in-depth interviews and engaging in very personal conversations with the interviewees, I do not find anything “positive and productive, even or especially when it feels bad” within these women’s experiences of shame.

Public shaming facilitates what I would say are purely negative emotions, creating a vicious circle that defines future social interactions. Based on the reaction of the wider community, Janyl developed feelings of depression, guilt, fear and self-loathing, which is projected as “normal behavior” in her future social interactions. She does not expect to have a proper attitude towards herself anymore, neither from family, nor from other acquaintances.

The Embodiment of Public Shaming

In addition to the combination of emotions and their effect within society, public shaming has a physical component as well. Affect theory, in agreement with the interviews conducted in the

course of this study, states that every emotion—and particularly in the context of public shaming—has a bodily response. Hence, public shaming not only affects the construction of social relations, but also specific kinds of embodiment that are projected upon women's bodies. At first sight, emotions and affect seem to be very irrational and, therefore, unmeasurable. However, as proven by scholars such as Cvetkovich (2012) and Ahmed (2015), emotions and affect have scientifically proven consequences in terms of embodiment.

Referring to Probyn (2005), Gorton (2007) explains the role of emotions and their bodily responses, highlighting how they affect physical behavior. He states: “Drawing attention to her physical reaction, Probyn reminds us of the way in which the body participates in and acts out emotion. Our feelings are not just registered in our conscious awareness but are felt and enacted by our bodies” (Gorton, 2007, p. 342). Feelings not only entice an individual to behave in a certain way, but are also bodily presence. What makes the embodiment of public shaming credible, is the fact that the responses of the body cannot be “faked and controlled” (Gorton, 2007, p. 342). The person who experiences public shaming is not able to control her feelings and their subsequent physical consequences. As explained by the author, and recalling my own experiences, I understand that such feelings such as blushing, shivering, an inability to breath, for example, appear automatically, on the level of reflexes. Therefore, with regard to bodily responses, the embodiment of feelings in the context of public shaming is the credible source to outline the affect. Sara Ahmed (2015) states: “Emotion is a feeling of bodily change. Emotions do not involve processes of thought, attribution or evaluation: we feel fear for example, because our heart is racing, our skin is sweating” (p. 27). Emotion serves as a mediator between body and mind, arising as the bodily manifestation of actions in the body.

In addition to the ability to affect and to be affected, the experience of being publicly shamed has the capacity to affect the subject at a physical level, evoking responses in the body. While interviewing Janyl, I could clearly understand her confusion about my request to describe her physical reaction to shaming. Nevertheless, Janyl described the physical reaction of her body, using metaphors to describe the feelings she experienced, allowing her to outline her embodiment of being shamed:

It felt like a hundred slaps in the face. A burning sensation on the face, complete loss of space and your body in this space, like I cannot keep my balance. I am falling, I am not allowed to exist. There is a pain in the chest, the chest is contracting and you are not able to say even a word to justify yourself, you are not able to breath. It is a burning sensation in the stomach. My body contracted and I felt myself to be so small. It is like a cramp that fetters you and burns from within. Sometimes I wake up at night with a burning sensation in the body. I remember the street in my hometown, the way home and I cry.

Janyl describes the embodiment of shame in several statements, namely as (1) slaps in the face; (2) burning sensation on the face; (3) an inability to keep her balance; (4) pain in the chest; (5) a burning sensation in the stomach; and (6) the inability to talk and breath. Public shaming thus has power to involuntarily block the body. The fact that my interviewees describe the experience of being publicly shamed as much more traumatic than the actual experience of the physical kidnapping itself, points towards the far-reaching, long-term effects of this violent discourse at both an emotional and physical level.

Chapter Conclusion

Among different forms of public shaming, I explore the particular case of public shaming in the context of a refusal to get married and to accept the position of a kidnapped bride. Despite the fact that performative public shaming is a common feature of Kyrgyz culture—especially in the context of bride kidnapping—the society do not think about the actual person who is forced to undergo such experience. Women are generally subjected to public shaming because a refusal to be a kidnapped bride is considered an act of openly questioning social normative power. Since a woman takes the lowest position in the social and cultural hierarchy, her choosing against established traditions is perceived as a threat to the operation of this power structure. As a result, public shaming serves two functions: as social punishment for the challenging of social

normative power; and as the enactment of a public performance to demonstrate this punishment in order to discourage others from challenging these power relations.

Although the discourse of bride kidnaping is represented in both the media and academia, the personal experiences of women go largely unnoticed. In making a socially contested choice, a woman constitutes the special form of relation between herself as an individual or public object on the one hand, and the community or general public on the other, who have culturally been attributed with the power to judge. This specific social connection constitutes an affect in the context of bride kidnaping that allows to explore (1) public expressions of feeling; (2) bodily responses; and (3) physical behavioral change. In this chapter, an analysis of these aspects has been applied to the personal experiences of women, as well as to those of the wider community. In other words, every unit in this social interaction has the ability to affect and to be affected.

By emphasizing women's voices, I explored the feeling of being publicly shamed as an emotion. The results show that public shaming is a very diverse combination of emotions based on guilt, fear, and self-loathing. Moreover, public shaming affects bodily responses, such as blushing, shivering, and an inability to breath. Notwithstanding the fact that my interviewees describe the experience of being publicly shamed as negative, Ann Cvetkovich (2015) and Boler (2009) identify this experience as a positive one, contributing on a macro level to the emergence of alternative voices and realities that may have the power to change the current established order of things.

CHAPTER II

The Concept of Resistance in the Context of Bride Kidnapping

Since gender representation and sexuality are regulated by specific Kyrgyz cultural norms, the concept of resistance in this context implies an individual's deviation from these standards, and the basic morality discussed earlier in the introduction and first chapter of this thesis, both of which are deeply incorporated in everyday life. This situation has its roots in historical nomadic collective and post-collective ways of life, in which people were mostly engaged in cattle breeding and lived in communities or clans. Both before and after gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, people worked to create and strengthen family connections and networks in order to survive and live through the radical social reorganizations and harsh political and economic crises (Farrington, 2005). Any form of resistance against established norms that covered not, only the realm of cultural specificity, but also applied to financial sustainability, was strictly condemned. This applies—and continues to apply—to women in particular, since one of the primary roles of women is to function as an object of transfer in financially profitable arranged marriages. Therefore, women's resistance in particular is harshly restrained in Kyrgyz culture.

Women's resistance is represented in Kyrgyz classic literature written by the famous Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov, who narrates women's sexual lives and controversial choices in the book *Jamilya* (1958). As evident in the story as well as from my personal experiences, however, resistance is still a very rare occurrence in many different areas of women's lives, especially in the act of bride kidnapping. As Foucault said (1990): "Where there is power, there is resistance". In Kyrgyz culture resistance is always accompanied by public shaming, since public shaming is the accepted form of punishment for resistance. However, in the context of Kyrgyz culture and due to women's upbringing, which is founded on patriarchal values, it is hard to define whether their acts of resistance must be considered conscious or unintentional. This begs the question: What actions and thoughts are understood as forms of resistance by women themselves, and at what point might they realize that they abjure cultural norms? Women's

refusal to be a kidnapped bride represents a clear act of resistance, not only in the context of bride-kidnapping, but against the whole of Kyrgyz culture. The refusal to be a kidnapped bride creates agency for resistance, as women that resist the “tradition” of bride kidnapping question cultural norms—whether they do so intentionally or not.

The concept of resistance in this thesis as well as public shaming is analyzed through the prism of affect for several reasons. Culture represents a strong central discourse in the discussion of resistance and power in Kyrgyz society. There are special rituals to make a kidnapped woman stay with the family to which she has been brought. First, she is subjected to psychological pressure, and threatened with public shaming. Second, she is forcibly held in the house, sometimes involving rape. To resist the act of bride kidnapping in the context of Kyrgyz culture, a woman thus has to confront both physical and psychological social pressures. This creates affect with regard to women’s bodily experiences, as well as social normative power. All of these factors and “emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 3). Talking about the affective approach to phenomena, Sara Ahmed (2015) argues that “emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices” (p. 8). In the context of Kyrgyz society resistance is considered to signal a problem of the individual, who is stepping outside of cultural norms. However, the practice of resistance and the emotions particular to that individual are strongly related to the cultural practice of suppressing oppositional voices. Despite the fact that experiences of resistance might be very private, cultural practice has a profound influence on their construction.

Resistance as a Form of Social Interaction

Resistance is a new rare form of social interaction for women in Kyrgyz society. There are two elements that create the interaction: the woman, and the crowd—in the sense of the community, or the general public. Ahmed (2015) discusses the idea that in interactions such as these, “the crowd becomes like the individual, the one who ‘has feelings’” (p. 11). Driven by shared cultural values, such as preserving Kyrgyz traditions, people quickly mobilize into a single unit. In the case of bride kidnapping, the crowd has feelings of power—the power to oppress or suppress

resistance. What is even more important in this situation, is the fact that the crowd sees a resisting woman as an individual, and not as a public object, as it occurs in the process of public shaming. This represents a moment with potential transformative power, as the individual is now recognized to exist within a social imagery that tends to see only the collective.

The scholar Maria Hynes (2013) provides an interesting analysis of this specific social bond. She argues that an affective approach highlights the relations between the “bodily potential” of the resisting individual on the one hand, and the “conscious perceptions” of the other social actors on the other. (p.559) In the context of bride kidnapping, by taking up a position of resistance, a woman positions herself not as a public object, but as an individual within society. Resistance thus demonstrates an ability to survive after making a contested choice, such as refusing marriage, and after being publicly shamed, or socially punished. Resistance is a rebuff to external factors, such as public pressure, and demonstrates an ability to eventually function in society whilst going through such a “negative experience”. At the same time, the crowd is able to develop “conscious perceptions”, forcing the “righteous” to establish a dialogue between the crowd and the individual woman.

In the context of her research, Hynes also writes the following:

I argue that an affective approach to resistance would pay attention to those barely perceptible transitions in power and mobilizations of bodily potential that operate below the conscious perceptions and subjective emotions of social actors. These affective transitions constitute a new site at which both power and resistance operate (Hynes, 2013, p. 559).

In this sense, power regulation is the main force that causes the state of affective resistance to circulate in the context of emotions and embodiment simultaneously. A woman’s resistance in Kyrgyz society is “consciously perceived” to suppress it, based on the subjective emotions of social actors. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the act of resistance challenges power

relations in which women are considered public objects, and therefore “conscious perception”, leading to the suppressing of resistance, is based on “subjective emotions” of fear of challenging normative social power. Bride kidnapping, as well as resistance towards it, constitute “affective transitions” in which resistance changes the social normative power and questions the position of woman within it. The resisting woman takes on a new social role, thus challenging her social construction as a mere object.

Marya Hynes (2013) observes that there are two ways to analyze resistance, and that correspondingly two models of resistance exist: First of all, there is resistance that takes place on a macro-political level. This type of resistance is highly visible, describing phenomena in which collective powers oppose power structures. The second model is micro-political in nature, also known as “everyday resistance”. However, it is difficult to give an exact definition of the type of resistance enacted in the context of bride kidnapping. Despite that fact that the phenomenon of bride kidnapping is rapidly increasing (National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyz Republic, 2016), every woman goes through the experience individually, overcoming the daily struggles associated with her particular choice. Women usually live through these struggles of resistance alone, without any form of solidarity. Yet, her resistance has the potential to affect and change the power relations in Kyrgyz culture on a fundamental level. By resisting, she is challenging the position of women within the social hierarchy generally.

According to affect theory, emotions can be materialized in different ways, and may serve as “a site of political resistance” with an ability to “mobilize movements for liberations” (Boler, 2009, p. 13). However, it is important to note that, despite the radical social reorganization and metamorphoses society in general has experienced over the years, Kyrgyz women never went through a stage of macro-political resistance in the wake of international women’s movements, such as the mobilization of the suffragettes in England at the turn of the twentieth century. With the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1920, women’s rights became fixed in law—a move that also regulated cultural norms. As discussed in the introductory chapter, articles in the criminal code outlaw the practice of bride kidnapping. As a result of this top-down approach, women have never fought for their rights on a macro-political level.

Women's resistance in Kyrgyz society is thus a very personal and specific experience. On a worldwide macro-political level, manifestations of the international feminist movements, such as V-Day and the Women's March Global, are becoming more influential, acquiring the power to affect both the public and political arenas. Although women's resistance and its affect is thus increasingly recognized and accepted as a worldwide social force, in Kyrgyz culture women's resistance is still not welcomed. Moreover, these kind of struggles are unfairly criticized as irrelevant compared to "more scaled troubles", such as preserving highly valued moral principles and authentic values. Therefore, there are no communal strategies created for—or by—women.

Another important question highlighted by Marya Hynes (2013) is "whether the actor's intention to resist is a crucial feature of determining action as resistance" (p. 560). Hynes concludes that the intention is indeed crucial to the act of resistance, because it also touches a concern of recognition of the act. However, many women who made the decision to refuse and resist bride kidnapping did so in a split second, without considering the consequences. According to the interviewees, most Kyrgyz women who were abducted against their will had no conscious intentions to resist. Paradoxically, I consider their resistance against bride kidnapping a form of intentional resistance, since "emotions cannot be controlled or faked" (Gorton, 2007, p. 342). The decision to resist has been made based on women's refusal to be a kidnapped bride.

What makes the phenomenon of bride kidnapping more controversial is its potentially positive role in some women's lives. For some women, it can serve the purpose to further social and economic empowerment within the community, and some accept it as their "destiny" and "determined path" with no attempt at resistance, whilst others refuse to stay with the families of their abductors, and engage in unwilling reluctant expressions of resistance. In most cases, resistance in the case of bride kidnapping occurs without a conscious intention to resist. Moreover, most women try to hide their resistance.

It is difficult to identify where exactly the conscious resistance began in the story of Janyl. She mainly wanted to protect herself, and maintain her daily routine, meaning she just wanted to get on with her business, without necessarily wanting to resist the established order. Therefore, she had no intention "to go public" and actively take up a position of resistance. Yet,

her refusal to be a kidnapped bride determined her path. During our discussion on the subject of public shaming, Janyl repetitively states: “I did not understand why, for what reasons?” She continues:

I did not have the intention to get married, nor to resist. All I wanted was just to escape, escape the house of my potential groom, escape the public shaming, escape my life in the village, and move to another place. I had a feeling that I might be kidnapped, as that often happens in the village, but I knew for sure that I was not going to stay. I told my mother once, [and] she just laughed at me, saying that I was just being childish. Yes, I was screaming at my mother, I was screaming at my relatives, because I wanted to be heard.

Like many women, Janyl was told about the fact that she might be kidnapped one day for the sake of marriage. She did not want to get married, but she also had no desire to resist cultural norms. Her desire was simply to avoid conflict, and publicity in particular, until she could safely escape the community she lived in. Yet, her act of resistance established a new form of social interaction for Janyl in both physical and emotional ways. As she was already concerned about the bride kidnapping, Janyl made her decision to resist the non-consensual bride abduction prior to the event. She acted instinctively to the situation. Therefore, Janyl’s resistance can be considered as conscious, albeit without the explicit intentions to do so. A woman’s resistance in the context of bride kidnapping can thus be conscious without her necessarily aiming to affect, and to be affected by, society in this particular way, by presenting herself as deviating from cultural norms. In other words, through her act of resistance, Janyl affects and has been affected. This affective transformation started with her bride kidnapping experience, simultaneously extending into further social interactions in the same context, both bodily and emotionally.

Referring to the work of Spinoza, Sara Ahmed (2015) argues that emotions shape what bodies can do, as it is through “the modifications of the body by which the power of action on the body is increased or diminished” (p. 5). Therefore, it might not be the act of resistance itself—which gives rise to a new social reality—that is important per se, but rather the ways in which resistance affects the one who resists, as well as society, and the relations between the

individual and that society. In the way it occurs in Kyrgyz culture, this particular form of conscious resistance without explicit intention contributes to the development of alternative views and voices of women with a stance that transform public discourse. I cannot call this stance active, yet it allows them to “modify the body by which the power of action is increased” (ibid.). Although none of my interviewees identify themselves as feminists, feminism remains a dominant framework for women’s resistance. Janyl notes:

I do not know if I can call myself a fighter or a “resistor”. I am not fighting, I am not the one who initiated the battle, although people do say so. I did not feel like a human rights activist or a feminist, or how do you call such people? To be honest, I also had different thoughts: to go back to the family of abductor, to become a hooker, as many people called me, or to commit suicide, as many people wished I did. In the beginning I was so confident, I knew that I was doing everything right, although at one point I felt so alone against the whole world, or rather, the whole world was against me. I was thinking, maybe the fault lies within me. It is impossible to be right, when so many people tell you that you are not. I was trying to join the crisis center, to find the same cases [meaning she wanted to find women who had lived through the same experience], but they told me that they had more serious cases of women with physical injuries and no home to live, so basically they did not have time for me, since no physical damage was done.

Janyl has affected society to make them perceive her alternative voice through her act of resistance against the norms. She also has been affected in return, in the form of the influences upon her body. Societal pressure made her consider several options that would have significantly diminished, or destroyed, the power of her initial actions against her will: (1) accept her situation as a kidnapped bride; (2) become a prostitute; (3) or commit suicide. Societal pressure has exerted great influence on Janyl, as it made her feel as if the whole world was against her, thereby suppressing her point of view, which is undeniably different, but not necessarily wrong. I believe that in the subjective reality of every individual there are

no “good” or “bad” actions, there are just the actions in themselves, which cause further consequences and subsequently further transform social interactions. Yet, according to Kyrgyz culture “bad” and “good” are clearly defined, as well as “right” and “wrong” points of view. To a certain extent, the authorities do not truly understand the effects bride kidnapping may have on the individual, providing aid only for women who have visible, physical injuries, whereas women are also affected within the very structures of their subjecthood. The government only treats the symptoms and effects of the phenomenon, and not the causes or social/cultural structures that cause the phenomenon to happen and to be relatively accepted in the first place.

While there is a form of empowerment and solidarity amongst women that does concur with Kyrgyz cultural standards, women who resist are usually abandoned by their social circles, including by women who went through the same experience. As an effect of public shaming, self-isolation may also occur in the context of resistance. When social interaction amongst women themselves is concerned, lack of solidarity goes even deeper, and women are reluctant towards acknowledging each other’s needs. Janyl relates:

Now I am getting back my life. Honestly, I am happy that I have not done silly things and have not got back to my “groom”, I don’t even remember his name. I see other girls, I see their suffering. I don’t feel pity for them, they chose it themselves. There is always a way out, even though it may cost you a lot. The only feeling I have is anger, anger towards this society, anger towards my family for letting me down. I could have never imagined that people could be so cruel towards a situation they are not even involved in. I just don’t understand why they interfere with my life, and why I have to protect myself. I don’t know if I would help a girl in the same situation. I think I would just give the advice not to stop believing in the validity of your own decision. This is a very personal experience, I would not tell [other people] about it, you know, in the way I am telling it [to you] now. I would not shout about my experience. Well, I still feel ashamed. No, I feel shame for the society I live in and belong to. I feel shame

for their actions. I wish I would see the situation reversed. I want them to go through the public shaming for their actions, not as a crowd, but individually, each of them. Yes, I would like to test them, [to see] how strong they are individually.

Janyl feels angry with the people, with the crowd, even though in her opinion they are not involved in her personal situation. However, women's private issues, especially her sexual life, are both public and political matters in the context of Kyrgyz culture. Women's choices in the context of bride kidnapping have the ability to affect both society and normative social power, and therefore women's acts of resistance have the power to affect everybody—which is precisely what makes it political. Their resistance has the potential to transform social structures, and especially women's place within it. However, while Janyl is able to affect society, she does not consider making her personal experience of resistance public. She is not willing to speak up publicly, or to make political her experience of being affected both bodily and emotionally. Janyl would not tell anyone about what she has gone through, and she would not support other women in similar situations.

Many women define as negative their interaction with society when it strays outside of cultural norms and takes the form of resistance and public shaming. Ann Cvetkovich (2009) explains women often experience such interactions as “failure” (p. 6). However, she also argues that this “failure” turns out to be positive: “While her failure could be the source of misery and humiliation, and while it does deliver precisely this, it also leads to a kind of ecstatic exposure of the contradictions of a society obsessed with meaningless competition” (ibid.). Janyl's interaction with the crowd in the form of resistance explicitly exposes the values and function of power relations in Kyrgyz society. Observing the situation from a broader angle, her experience of resisting as well as the social attacks that she has suffered help to outline the existing contradictions inherent to the bride kidnapping phenomenon. Whether intentionally or not, Janyl has contributed to the process of cultural and social change, thereby strengthening the position of resistant women in a strictly patriarchal community.

Forced Acceptance

As discussed in the introductory chapter, one of the main principles of Kyrgyz culture is “*El emne deit?*”, translated as “What will the people say?”. This question represents the power relations in society, drawing attention to the forces of normative social power, hierarchy, and punishment that are brought to bear against those who choose against socially accepted behavioral norms. The question “*El emne deit?*” highlights the dominant cultural social structure in Kyrgyz society. Despite the fact that Kyrgyzstan is officially a democratic, secular state, in everyday life people still preserve a collectivist way of life as it was established in past centuries. Omitting the political definitions of the social structure in Kyrgyzstan, I would characterize the contemporary way of life as a collectivist one in which people live up to established expectations in groups and clans. In other words, social interactions are regulated by long-preserved cultural principles.

To provide an analysis of forced acceptance in the context of the phenomenon of bride kidnapping, I refer to the book *Norms and Gender Discrimination in the Arab World* (2015) by scholar Adel S Abadeer. The author provides an analysis of authoritarian cultural systems that I find very similar to the Kyrgyz system. Although Kyrgyzstan is officially a democratic state, on a cultural level, the gender regime and women’s role within it are strictly regulated. Abadeer notes: “In authoritarian systems with strict hierarchy of identity and roles, each role-image contains the expectation of subordination to higher roles and authority over lower roles” (2015, p.19). This model can be easily applied to Kyrgyz society, in which women take a lower position.

The concept of “*El emne deit?*” in combination with the culturally established, collectivist way of life “highlight[s] the value of public image, that is shared by the people in a given group in a given society” (Abadeer, 2015, p. 23). Due to the collectivist way of life, normative social power and the actions that result from it in the form of public shaming are regulated by the crowd, reproducing the model of Foucault’s panopticon. Therefore, it is very important to conform to standards and to adjust to the “public image”, so as not to fall under the (unofficial) jurisdiction of the crowd. Abadeer writes: “The influence of the public image

on behavior is more robust in collectivist societies where people are taught and expected to behave in certain ways to preserve such an image” (ibid.). In fact, the crowd has a great power to manipulate people’s behavior in the name of preserving the cultural and social order of things.

While some women choose against bride kidnapping and go through the stages of resistance and public shaming, other women are forced to accept the situation in order to comply with the expected public image. With the emergence of repeated acts of resistance against the phenomenon of bride kidnapping, forced acceptance is yet another aspect of the interaction between the crowd on the one hand, and women on the other—one that is worthy of careful consideration. Forced acceptance is an imposed assent to the act of bride kidnapping in which a woman is forced to modify her personal beliefs, adapting to the power relations of a particular society instead. Many of the interviewees for this study said that they were forced to accept the situation of being a kidnapped bride—to stay in the new family and to subsequently go through with the marriage, instead of saying no and resisting.

Asel is a 26-year-old woman who was kidnapped and subsequently married. She is one of the interviewees who I initially thought had agreed to be a kidnapped bride. During the interview, however, she said that it was never her personal choice, but rather she was unable to refuse or resist. She succumbed to the pressure and was therefore forced to accept being a (kidnapped) bride without further resistance. Despite her ambitions and education, which could have enabled her to advocate for her rights—as it did for other interviewees—Asel was unable resist the act of kidnapping and the resultant marriage. She was manipulated via her personal situation, such as her father’s health condition and the public image of her family:

When I was kidnapped, I was studying to complete an MA in sociology. Unexpectedly, my father fell ill, he went through surgery. While he was in the hospital, my little sister was kidnaped for the marriage. In all this turmoil, Arsen called, he is a friend of my brother. He said that we needed to meet urgently. He took me to the house of his parents. They were preparing for the bride’s arrival. It seemed

ridiculously stupid to me, I decided to leave this place immediately. Women dragged me into the house. First, they were trying to convince me to stay in the house in a “good way”: “I got married this way. We inherited this tradition. You should respect seniors. Think about your happiness”, and other standard phrases. Such arguments could not persuade me. After that, they switched to threats: “Do you think we are not good enough to you? Who do you think you are, what a disrespect! You are probably not a virgin, so you are afraid everyone will know about this.” At that moment I imagined what people would say about me and my family if I were to leave the house. My dad was ill, it could affect his health, all my relatives were at home, they would never forgive me. Taking into consideration all the pros and cons, I made the decision to get married. Nowadays I am married to Arsen, but the only thing that keeps us together is our baby. We live in the apartment that was given to us by my parents. I am the only one who earns money, and I make all the decisions. My husband prefers lying on the sofa and watching TV all day long. I have never loved him, moreover, I have no respect for him.

I define Asel’s experience as a form of forced acceptance. As Abadeer (2015) writes, there are two ways to force “members of a lower status such as women” to accept imposed norms, namely reward and punishment (p. 28). In the context of bride kidnapping, I would also add the use of threats. Asel was clearly manipulated via public values, such as her own reputation and that of her family, respect for the traditions, and the status of shamed woman. When Asel was brought to the house of her kidnapper, the people there started to convince her to accept the situation by pointing towards the rewards, promising her a “good and happy life” and other benefits associated with respecting the traditions. When she refused the reward scheme and its related benefits, Asel was threatened with the consequences of her choice, such as public shaming for not being a virgin, which could worsen the situation for her family. “The low tolerance for deviance in collectivist societies, [is] accompanied by harsh punishment” (Abadeer, 2015, p. 28). In the context of bride kidnapping, harsh punishment would be the

public shaming of Asel and her family, which would jeopardize her continued existence within her community.

Scholar Kubler Ross describes the stage of acceptance as following:

People can in some ways come to terms with the reality of their situation and the inevitability of what is happening to them. People have a sense of being fully in touch with their feelings about the situation, their hopes and fears, their anxieties. They are prepared (Ross as cited in Cameron & Green, 1979, p. 29).

In this particular case, Asel had been forced to deal with her feelings, fears, and anxieties whilst under extreme societal pressure. To force Asel to accept the bride kidnapping, the crowd blamed her for the violation of cultural norms, deploying narratives of reward, threat and punishment to influence her decision-making. Abadeer (2015) provides the following analysis of the individual's experience of potentially violating social norms: "Violating the norm will cause an internal feeling of guilt, shame, and forced acceptance" (p. 36). As Abadeer describes, the decision to violate social norms is a hard one, especially when an individual is threatened with a social punishment, such as public shaming. Experiencing emotions such as guilt and shame, Asel was forced to accept her position as a kidnapped bride.

Everybody, especially women, know what would happen if they violate cultural norms such as bride kidnapping: it will be punished with public shaming. At the same time, the strict patriarchal regime will be challenged because reluctant brides "violate collective norms and rules, which elevates the level of collective anxiety about the cultural harmony and orders. In response the society must retaliate against the individualists who violate the collective norms" (Abadeer 2015, p. 28). As demonstrated in previous chapters, society will definitely "retaliate" as an effect of such "collective anxiety about cultural harmony". Abadeer suggests externally imposed norms lead to forced acceptance, here performed as an essential norm. The position of resistance is thus more costly than accepting the social rewards.

Based on the interviews conducted in the course of this research, I cannot agree with

Abadeer's statement, since with forced marriage come further responsibilities associated with Kyrgyz traditions, such as financial, physical, and emotional service towards one's husband and his family. Analyzing the option of succumbing to a forced acceptance of bride kidnapping, to me resistance appears the less costly option—especially so considering the rewards that were offered to Asel. Being a kidnapped bride and a wife, she definitely fits the ideal public image of Kyrgyz society: she is a married woman, who has a baby. However, regarding her personal, financial, and emotional wellbeing, as Asel told me, she is unsatisfied, since she supports the family herself and has no love or respect for her husband. Forcing a woman to accept both the act of bride kidnapping and her future life in this (significantly less than idyllic) position is a very convenient way for society at large to present the phenomenon as both a norm and a woman's conscious choice to be part of the "tradition". The bride kidnapping phenomenon is already normalized and universalized in Kyrgyz culture. In order to suppress emergent acts of resistance by women, forced acceptance and the coercion of women to accept the bride kidnapping is further presented as an essential norm.

As Abadeer (2015) suggests, women in the Arab world are told that they are treated with respect. The same is true in relation to the bride kidnapping phenomenon and women's role in it. To mask the process of forced acceptance and demonstrate forced acceptance as a woman's own conscious choice, women in Kyrgyz society are "informed that they are treated with respect". Since marriage plays such a crucial role within Kyrgyz culture, women who are kidnapped are told that they are "chosen", because only "good" women are eligible to be taken into the family. According to the social hierarchy in Kyrgyzstan, married women have more power than single women. From the point of view of Kyrgyz culture, forced acceptance seems to be natural for women, because in some respects it strengthens a woman's position in the social hierarchy. However, in reality this merely serves as a manipulative agenda intended to strengthen the patriarchal regime, since in most cases women have only two options, namely either to accept (under extreme duress) the reality of bride kidnapping, or to receive social punishment in the form of public shaming for failing to do so.

Chapter Conclusion

While public shaming is a typical characteristic of the bride kidnapping phenomenon, women's resistance in this particular context as well as within culture generally is a completely new a potentially transformative form of social interaction. Due to historical and cultural factors, women's resistance is still severely suppressed. Since resistance is a very rare display in Kyrgyz society, it was complicated to clearly define this phenomenon. In the context of bride kidnapping, resistance can be defined as a combination of women's actions and desires to survive within society after their refusal to be a kidnapped bride. There are several factors that constitute the agency of resistance: a physical and mental refusal to be a kidnapped bride in accordance with Kyrgyz traditions; women's social interaction while going through the experience of public shaming following their resistance; and subsequent social viability in the role of a publicly shamed and resistant woman. However, most women resist without having any intention to do so—an act that nonetheless constitutes the agency of resistance.

As well as public shaming, resistance is an affective process that affects a resistant woman as well as society on a much deeper level than public shaming does. While public shaming serves as a social punishment for the threat of challenging operational power in Kyrgyz society, resistance changes the social structure of this particular community. Public shaming makes a woman a public object, depersonalizing her identity in relation to society. Conversely, resistance reforms and reinforces women's positions in the social hierarchy.

Resistance in Kyrgyz society is a solitary fight. While married women create a special bond to support each other within the culture of marriage, the women among my interviewees, who have refused to be kidnapped brides, prefer to hide their experiences, thereby foreclosing any possibility to create solidarity or political resistance.

During this study, I discovered another category of women who neither resist nor accept the role of kidnapped bride. Many of my interviewees have repeated the same phrase: “forced to accept”. Forced acceptance thus represents another way in which women are controlled and manipulated by cultural values such as “*El emne deit?*” (What will the people say?). In fact, this

question includes a reminder of the power relations within society as well as the threat of social punishment. In this regard, while being a kidnapped bride, a woman is threatened with public shaming and judged by society—the “righteous”. This provides a very convenient mechanism by which the crowd can deny the possibility that a woman may resist or resent her situation, instead falsely portraying forced acceptance as a conscious choice.

Conclusion

Since my childhood I have witnessed the phenomenon of bride kidnapping in my community. However, whilst everybody else was busy with the ritual preparations, I was thinking about the woman who had become a kidnapped bride. Nobody paid attention to her personal experience of going through the bride kidnapping. The phenomenon left me with questions, for example: how does she perceive herself as a kidnapped bride and what is the role of public shaming in her making the decision to either stay or resist bride kidnapping? Employing an approach and theoretical framework based on affect theory and the works of Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and Ann Cvetkovich, I approach these questions from a feminist perspective, focusing exclusively on the experience of the women themselves and listening to their stories.

In this context, I interviewed ten women qualified for this study to understand the phenomenon through the operation of public shaming and resistance. I began this research paper with a general explanation of the bride kidnapping phenomenon through the specific narrative of one of the interviewees. The work of other sociologists and anthropologists as well as the women's own experiences have helped me to introduce and (re)construct knowledge about the phenomenon of bride kidnapping from a woman's point of view. Proceeding, I have explored the subject of public shaming as a disciplinary tool that severely affects women on both an emotional and bodily level. In the second and last chapter I have researched the affective power of women's resistance towards their position as kidnapped brides, arguing that such acts have the power to transform social interactions—even if they are not conducted with that intention. The work of other sociologists and anthropologists as well as women's own narratives have helped me to introduce and reconstruct knowledge about the phenomenon of bride kidnapping from women's point of view.

The results of this study provide an understanding of the following things. Firstly, bride kidnapping is a complex phenomenon that has various facets. Initially, I approached my interviewees as if they were victims of violence in the form of bride kidnapping, yet for some women it was a way to strengthen their position within the social hierarchy. Whilst, other women

have chosen to resist, causing them to become subject to public shaming. Secondly, the research helped me to focus exclusively on women's voices in relation to the power relations in Kyrgyz society. Based on the cultural principle "*El emne deit?*" ("What will the people say?"), I have highlighted the mass identity of the crowd—or the "righteous"—within Kyrgyz society, a group dynamic that possesses the operational power in Kyrgyz culture. In this regard, this research has helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the forms of social interaction between individual women, and wider societal forces—the crowd. By refusing to be a kidnapped bride and thus challenging power relations, a woman has the ability to affect society by questioning women's position in the social hierarchy. In turn, such a woman is also affected, by going through the experience of public shaming as a form of social punishment.

Since the institution of marriage possesses high cultural value, the refusal to be a kidnapped bride and to go through with the marriage is considered to be a highly questionable choice. Yet, women resist the pressure of the crowd both in order to challenge cultural norms, and to continue to sustain a position within their society. Although most of the interviewees define the experience of resistance as a negative one, this act also permits a woman to reconstruct her identity within society. However, the position of a resisting woman is not always an intentional choice, nor is the acceptance of the position of a kidnapped bride. During my interviews, I discovered another concept in the context of bride kidnapping, called forced acceptance. Forced acceptance is an affect-laden, unnatural assent to the role of kidnapped bride.

This study provides an analysis of how women affect, and are affected by, Kyrgyz society in the process of resisting the bride kidnapping phenomenon. In this regard, any woman choosing against bride kidnapping is either punished through public shaming, or forced to accept her position. Resisting the phenomenon of bride kidnapping allows women to create alternative views on their stance with regard to the operation of normative social power.

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