

UDC 94(477):316.346.2  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17721/1728-2640.2021.150.2>

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## A WOMAN'S BODY AND SEXUALITY IN TRADITIONAL UKRAINIAN CULTURE

*In this article our point of research will be the traditional rural beliefs of women and women's bodies, in order to examine how above all femininity has been constructed in a traditional Ukrainian way. We focussed on the period from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this time, Western Ukraine was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Eastern and Central Ukraine were part of the Russian Empire. We have used ethnographic interviews, and archived interview materials, but also included the study of contemporary sources. We use deconstruction and reconstruction as our main methodological approach. We found that strong the control of women's sexuality has been in the past. We see the compulsory heterosexuality that is being constantly presented by society as a strong reason for this. The heterosexual option is the only officially articulated way of living that is vocalized. It is an unchallenged way of living that is part of the Ukrainian cultural imaginary. The overall impression is that Traditional Ukraine was a society where a heterosexual matrix was so strong that it seems to overshadow all other possibilities of Women's life. The stronger these two power axes (the heterosexual matrix and the patriarchal domination) are, the more restrictions there seem to be on women's lives in such societies.*

**Key words:** woman's body, gender, sexuality, traditions, patriarchy, Ukraine, compulsory heterosexuality, intersectionality.

**Prelude.** In this article, we would like to emphasize some important matters concerning the understanding of a woman's body and sexuality in traditional Ukrainian culture. Under this objective we'll try to answer some principal questions: In Ukrainian traditional culture, to whom did the woman's body belong? With the aid of which control mechanisms over the woman's body and sexuality was the woman's subordination in society reinforced? How do the double moral standards and norms female behaviour reveal the patriarchal nature of Ukrainian culture? It's important to know for asking in the future if women's freedom has come to stay in contemporary Ukraine, or if it continues to be contested. If the latter is the case, that women's freedom continues to be contested, how can we understand that there still seem to be so many restrictions to women's lives?

**Research Methods. Theories and Methodologies.** The traditional ethnographic fieldwork in Ukraine was conducted by Dr. Ignatenko. She collected more than 300 responses to open-question in-depth interviews about women's bodies, sexuality, family life, relationships, childhood etc. This fieldwork was performed from 2003 to 2007, and in 2011 and 2013. The respondents were mainly peasant women from villages, because at the time we focussed on in the interviews, 90% of the Ukrainian population was rural and lived in villages<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Iryna Ignatenko has made several historical-ethnographic expeditions to the villages of northern and western Ukraine from 2003 to 2007, and 2011, organised by the Ukrainian State Science Center for Protecting Cultural Heritage from Technogenic Catastrophes. Also, in March 2007 Ignatenko was the curator of ethnographic practical training for ethnology graduates in the villages of Cherkasy oblast (central Ukraine) and in June 2012 she visited the villages of the Republic of Crimea, organised by the Faculty of History, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Finally, in June 2013 she was a participant of a historical-ethnographic expedition to villages in southern Ukraine, organised by the National Center of Folk Culture 'Ivan Honchar Museum'. During the fieldwork no instructions were given about whether or how to specify the details in the life story interviews; the respondents were free to be as descriptive or vague as they wished. The only questions asked were those that arose from the participant's stories. The participants could choose whatever area and event they wanted to disclose, and could do so at their own pace. The interviews comprised women from 60 to 90 years of

Older archival material from Ukrainian archives from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has also been included in the analyses.

This field ethnographic and historical archives materials has been included in the monograph Dr. Ignatenko (published in the Ukrainian language) called "Жіноче тіло у традиційній культурі українців (Woman's Body in Traditional Ukrainian Culture). This article in general based on this book.

The ethnographic, historical and folklore materials which were collected in this study need a theoretical framework if we are to understand the underpinning of cultural attitudes and social functions of the body, also from a cross-cultural perspective<sup>2</sup>.

We will use a constructionist approach in this article, which means that we understand femininity and masculinity to be socially constructed in specific ways in specific times as a result of repetition of certain behaviour [22]. Adrienne Rich and later especially Judith Butler have shown how the power regime of a hegemonic heterosexuality forms the content of what is being perceived as feminine and masculine [34, 23, 24]. This implies that it is not the biological body as such that will be in focus here, but the images and understandings of the biological body that are enacted in the minds of the Ukrainian people who have been interviewed. This can be understood as the Ukrainian cultural imaginary<sup>3</sup> of women's bodies and sexualities, e.g. those images, narratives, discourses and motives that are available in general in societies at a given time. They usually have a very strong attachment to the culture and society at large and are, furthermore, understood as 'natural' and are rarely questioned. They are in other words most often taken for granted.

age, drawn from peasant classes, who lived in the Ukrainian villages of western, central and southern parts of Ukraine. The interviews lasted on average two hours.

<sup>2</sup> The theoretical approaches have mainly been applied by Dr. Grahm and the analyses of the material is her main contribution to this article. However, both authors agree on the conclusions and analysis. Grahm has also worked to improve the language and structure of this text.

<sup>3</sup> For more about the concept the cultural imaginary see Graham, Dawson. *Soldier heroes: British adventure, empire, and the imagining of masculinities*, (Routledge, London, 1994).

Another part of the methodological and theoretical approach will be intersectionality<sup>4</sup>. With an intersectional perspective we will try to widen the scope and not only look at how gender is constructed, but also how it is intertwined with other social categories such as class, sexual preferences etc. which shape the power relations in society.

Feminism provides theories, languages and politics for making sense of gendered lives. While gender can be analyzed from various points of views and with differing assumptions, we argue in accordance with Ramazanoglu and Holland: 'that feminist knowledge of gender should include practical social investigation of gendered lives, experiences, relationships and inequalities' [33; p. 12]. We also agree with the idea that gender touches the hierarchical division between men and women that can be observed in both social institutions and social practices. At the same time as it is a socially structural phenomenon, it is also produced, negotiated and sustained at the level of everyday interaction. [29, p. 1-2].

**Short historical background.** Considering the disruptive nature of Ukraine and its history, it is useful to provide a short historical reminder of how the Ukraine territory and power relations have changed over the years.

*The mid 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century.* To study the view of female sexuality and physicality, the Ukrainian ethnography turns to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In various works of the scholars and ethnographers/collectors of the time, including Marko Hrushevsky and Zenon Kuzelia [4, 5], Khvedir Vovk [2, 14], Volodymyr Hnatiuk [3], Mykola Sumtsov [19], Pelageya Litvinova-Bartosh [15], Vasyl Kravchenko [13] and other, we find interesting and unique materials that allow us to reconstruct the world-view, folk beliefs, magic practices, etc., relating to female physiology and physicality/sensuality. In general, it is true that ethnographers of that period touched upon this subject only superficially – as a rule, in the context of other 'classical' themes, such as family wedding rituals and folk medicine.

*Soviet era (1917-1991).* During the Soviet era, when all of Ukraine ultimately came under the cultural influence of a Russian-dominated central power ruling in a way that made investigations of subjects related to female sexuality completely vanish from sight of the Ukrainian ethnology. The theme itself was considered as marginal and ultimately a non-academic subject for the seven decades of the USSR's existence, thus it was not developed in the Soviet academia [12, p. 9].

After the *Ukrainian Independence (1991)* and steady liberalisation of the academic field, the Ukrainian ethnologists began to turn their attention to the agenda of women's history and some aspects of sexuality. Some of the first to approach this subject matter in contemporary Ukrainian ethnology were Oksana Kis [11], Olena Boriak and Maria Mayerchuk [7, 14, 20], historians Volodymyr Masliychuk [16] and Kateryna Dysa [6], and folklorist Lesia Stavytska [18]. But the subject of the female body and sexuality never became a special focus for scholars. This prompted Iryna Ignatenko to study this subject in depth and in that exercise she published academic works, including

<sup>4</sup> For more information on intersectionality please see for instance Kimberle, Crenshaw 'Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', in *Identities: race, class, gender, and nationality*, eds. Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003), 175-200, or Nina Lykke, *Feminist studies: a guide to intersectional theory, methodology and writing*, (Routledge, New York, 2010).

the monograph (published in the Ukrainian language) called "Жіноче тіло у традиційній культурі українців (*Woman's Body in Traditional Ukrainian Culture*) (First printed 2013; revised 2014 and 2016). This book brought to light one of the most taboo spheres of Ukrainian traditional culture. Those include female physiology and reproductive health, peculiarities and hygiene of sexual relations in the peasant culture, contraceptive methods and termination of unwanted pregnancy, gynaecologically and sexually transmitted diseases and menopause.

**Basic part.** A Ukrainian woman's body was an object of a strict control by the rural community, from the very beginning of her puberty to the end of her reproductive period<sup>5</sup>. Like in many other European countries during this time, in connection to a woman's physiology severe regulations, restrictions and limitations had been applied [25, p. 57; 21, p. 27; 28, p. 90-133]. The traditional Ukrainian culture imposed strict rules upon everyone, particularly regulating the women's lifestyle. To be married was very important, especially for a woman. It gave many privileges and possibilities.

Let us consider additional aspects. Firstly, marriage was perceived as a necessary part of life. There was a model whereby everyone had to pass through the following stages in life: being born, getting married, giving birth to and raising children, and death. People who did not get married were seen as 'wrong', 'unnatural', 'abnormal', 'strange', and sometimes dangerous. It is important to note that single women were often accused of witchcraft [11, p. 140-152].

Secondly, marriage was a step towards increased social status: traditionally a person acquired independence, authority, and economic and property independence only after marriage. A woman who was not married did not enjoy authority, did not participate in community life and was called 'old girl' all her life. For example, she did not enter into the group of married women when preparing the rituals of a wedding or the birth of a child, where married women had the dominant role and importance. In addition, the rural community believed that these kinds of women brought bad luck, and tried to minimise the activity of the unmarried women in social life. It is also important to note that if a single woman lived with her parents she was not economic independent. After the death of the parents, she had to submit to the will of her brother. So, not having a husband was terrible [11, p. 140-152].

It is also important to note that the pride of being married can give women some tolerance for violence inflicted by the husband. The husband was allowed to punish his wife physically in the event of disobedience, betrayal, laziness or wastefulness. The everyday 'well-grounded' violence against a woman was tolerated by a normative social culture. The gender contradictions were primarily caused by the power of a man over a woman. Only in cases of severe domestic violence, often caused by alcoholism, did rural society tried to limit it [8, p. 56-65].

Applying Butler's theory of the compulsory hegemonic heterosexual matrix [24] we can see that the heterosexual matrix was very strong in the traditional Ukraine and the demands on women were particularly severe. This has a normative function in society. Removing or ridiculing all ways other than that of the heterosexual couple has had a very strong impact on Ukraine. This was done, as

<sup>5</sup> For more information please see works: Кісь О. Жінка в традиційній українській культурі (друга половина XIX – початок XX ст.). Львів, 2008; Ігнатенко І. Жіноче тіло у традиційній культурі українців. Харків, 2016.

mentioned above, by giving heterosexual couples advantages like increased social status. They also acquired independence, in the form of authority, and economic and property independence and they, moreover, got to become part of the rural society and were officially blessed by the church, as they were given access to legal sex [9; p. 64]. Thus, marriage between a man and a woman was seen as a necessary life step, which ideally everybody had to go through. This is a pattern that has been repeated on and on. A compulsory heteronormativity has in other words prevailed in the Ukrainian cultural imaginary for centuries.

*The specificity of selection of a marriage partner.* The start of wedding age in traditional Ukrainian society was from 14 to 18 years of age. 20 was the maximum. After 20, one lost one's chance to get married, and joined the category 'old girls' or 'old boys'. So, the former generation had only 3 to 4 years to solve their marriage strategies [11, p. 108; 9, p. 62].

Ukraine had an old tradition: a special meeting house for the young generation of marrying age to find a partner. Some empty house became the meeting house for a particular season, especially for winter, when the agricultural work was over. In the evening young people went to this house and spent time together. They sang songs and danced; the girls made handicrafts such as decorations for dresses. The girls could not make a marriage proposal to a boy, or by any direct activity show that she was interested in him. If a girl liked a boy she could try to catch his attention, but the only ways in which a girl could get a boy's attention were by being beautiful, wearing decorative dresses with adornments, dancing, singing sweetly or showing off her handicraft skills [19].

Old Ukrainian tradition allowed spending time together during the night, but not pre-marital sex. This is was illegal and if it happened, it was a big problem for the girl: her life was destroyed. A girl who lost her virginity and had a baby out of wedlock would suffer a terrible fate. Society would hold her solely responsible, and she suffered mockery, humiliation and physical abuse [11, p. 194-210].

According to popular beliefs, in the traditional Ukraine the bride had to demonstrate her virginity at the wedding ceremony. This intimate process was not just a private affair of the girl and her husband, but an object of the strict control of the community. The bride was supposed to be deflowered during a wedding ceremony in the *komora*, a nondomestic housekeeping premise (hence the designation of this ceremony, *komora*) where, together with the groom, she was accompanied by numerous relatives. Before their first night together the young couple were searched, so they could not hide somewhere in their clothing an item with which one of them could cut their skin and simulate a deflowering. The bride and groom stayed in the *komora* for no more than half an hour; afterwards, the bed sheet was taken out and showed to the wedding crowd. If blood marks were visible, there would be general joy, jubilation, and glorification of the honour of the bride and her family. If there was no blood, the bride and her relatives would be scolded, sneered at and humiliated, to show, in various ways, their contempt for her as a 'streetwalker' [15; p. 70-122; 9, p. 86-114].

Controlling women's sexuality and placing great value on women's virginity have been widespread phenomena in different cultures and religions worldwide [31]. In this case sexuality and virginity are constructed as matters for women to prove. It is only the women's virginity that is at stake here and not the men's virginity. And it is the woman who has to

prove her innocence, not the man. This shows values that are deeply rooted in a heterosexual patriarchal society, with a strong control of women's sexuality in the old Ukraine.

Gradually, the tradition of public scrutiny of the bride's virginity disappeared, but it continued almost until the 1950s. [1, p. 120]. Today contemporary Ukrainians condemn the old traditional ritual of *komora*.

*Childbirth and contraceptives.* To follow the important stages in a woman's physiology it is necessary to consider her sexual life, pregnancy and childbirth.

In traditional Ukrainian society, the use of contraceptives and abortions – in spite of the relevant known techniques – was considered inadmissible and sinful. Following popular views, a woman was supposed to give birth to all the children she conceived. Any contraception or terminations of pregnancy were strictly condemned by society [17; 9, p. 144-164].

Just as in other parts of Europe, taboos have traditionally been imposed on new mothers, who were considered dirty, in connection with postnatal purification, within 40 days of delivery. In general, menstruating woman were also considered dirty, and various taboos were imposed, relating to religion, rituals, social activities, housekeeping, and sex life. For example, a woman having her period could not visit a woman who had just given birth to a child, as it could badly affect the newborn, according to popular beliefs [9, p. 49-55]. As in most other parts of Europe, these beliefs now belong to the past.

A couple's sexual life was subject to regulations as well. During certain periods, sex was considered forbidden. These periods were primarily the periods of fasting (one or several days), holidays and ritual act eves, and memorial days. Such prohibitions were mainly associated with the representation of sex as a 'dirty affair' [9, p. 116-117]. Based on this representation, menopause was seen as a woman's return to a state of purity, thus supposing to eliminate her sex life [9, p. 181-182].

All of these examples show how strong the control of women's sexuality has been in the past.

**Conclusion.** To sum up, a picture of the traditional Ukraine has been described where women seem to have been subordinated in many different ways in society. In particular, women's sexuality appears to have been under strict control. The interviews present an image of a society with a very strong heterosexual desire. For example, such as that a woman is not expected to openly show her interest in a man, but may only carry out passive courtship, by trying to get the man's attention by showing her handicraft skills, by singing or by her beauty. Being married and having a husband saw so attractive to some women that they rather tolerate being beaten by their husbands than losing their status as married woman.

The overall impression is that Traditional Ukraine was a society where a heterosexual matrix was so strong that it seems to overshadow all other possibilities of Women's life. The stronger these two power axes (the heterosexual matrix and the patriarchal domination) are, the more restrictions there seem to be on women's lives in such societies.

#### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Alma Persson, Head of Unit for Gender Studies, Linköping University, Sweden, for her support of our co-authorship of this article, for her valuable comments on our work in progress and for her financial support of the proofreading.

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Надійшла до редколегії 21.07.21

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### ЖІНОЧЕ ТІЛО ТА СЕКСУАЛЬНІСТЬ В УКРАЇНСЬКІЙ ТРАДИЦІЙНІЙ КУЛЬТУРІ

*Приділено увагу деяким аспектам дослідженню жіночої тілесності та сексуальності в українській традиційній культурі.*

*Хронологічні межі охоплюють середину XIX – початок XX ст. – час, коли українські етнічні межі входили до складу Російської та Австро-Угорської імперій.*

*Джерелами статті, насамперед стали опубліковані та архівні матеріали розвідок тогочасних етнографів; сучасні польові експедиційні матеріали, під час здобуття яких були використані методи опитування й інтерв'ю старожилів.*

*Методологічно стаття написана у феміністській парадигмі.*

*З'ясовано, що у традиційному українському суспільстві існувала єдина правильна модель: гетеросексуальність через обов'язкове укладання шлюбу та дітонародження. Незаміжні жінки, або мати-одиначки поза шлюбом, не брали участі в житті громади, не користувалися авторитетом й загалом були ізольованими, маргінальними особами в соціумі.*

*До того ж, жінки традиційного суспільства були заручницями своєї фізіології, яку невідомо і прискіпливо контролювало суспільство – від розквіту до згасання фізіологічних функцій. Зокрема, це стосувалося першого статевого акту, який за тогочасними правилами мав відбутися після весілля, під час першої шлюбної ночі. За відсутності "доказів", молода жінка зазнавала знущань, осуду та знеславлення.*

*Відхиленням від норми, девіантною поведінкою жіноцтва вважалося будь-яке регулювання вагітності, адже суспільна мораль визначала материнство як одне з головних призначень жінки. Інші способи реалізації жінок поза шлюбом і материнством, у тогочасному суспільстві взагалі не розглядалися.*

*Ключові слова: тілесність, сексуальність, традиції, патріархат, примусова гетеросексуальність, Україна.*