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## **THE BARREN WOMAN AND THE ATTITUDE OF THE TRADITIONAL VILLAGE COMMUNITY TOWARDS HER**

(autobiographical testimonies from the villages of *Oreshe* and *Teovo* - Veles area and  
village of *Ilovica* - Strumica area)

*Abstract:* Autobiographical testimonies of barren women and members of their families were taken on the field research in the previously mentioned villages. Our aim is to try to establish the status of the woman in the traditional village community through the prism of the biographical method, or rather through their personal experiences, while especially keeping in mind the community's attitude about the woman as a basic factor in the reproduction of the community.

*Key words:* Autobiographical testimonies, barren women, field researches, Macedonia

According to the folk principles, the man, and especially the woman are expected to preserve the family and to create family successors. Fertility is one of the most important conditions for a man/woman to be accepted as a full member of the community in the traditional conditions of living. Accordingly, childlessness is considered a great deficiency in the traditional village community. The barren woman has to face many problems in such an environment. The woman is a major culprit for childlessness. Except for cases such as impotency where the problem of the man can clearly be seen, the woman is blamed in all other cases. She accepts medical testing and treatments whereas it is considered a great shame for the man to test his fertility.

*"Both my son and her were not checked. And they said - you should not go and embarrass yourself, there is nothing wrong with you. The channels of the bride are clogged."* (Zlata Deloska - Oreshe)

*"I would tell him - come on we'll go to a doctor. He would say - I am embarrassed, I am not going".* (Dosta Taseva - Ilovica)

There are cases when the women are not allowed to seek medical help as well.

*"Well, my mother-in-law did not tell me to go again. So it stayed like that. My man said - come on, do not go to such things. Mind your own business - he would say. He did not let me. I did not go".* (D.T. - Ilovica)

The testing of the male fertility performed by the women after they get engaged and before they get married is well-known in Ilovica. They need to have a sexual relationship with the young man before the wedding if they want to check the fertility of their future husband. The young girls are taught about the whole process by the older women: Let some seed drop from the man, that white stuff, into the water.

*"If the man is fertile it will fall to the bottom of the glass. That is how some checked the men".*

The fertility of the woman is checked the same way.

*"You will put some vaginal secretion in the water with the male cell. If both of them fall, and shove and move about - it is good. If they stay floating on the water surface, they call it deaf seed. Deaf - no fruit. That is how they checked the men".* (Stojna Panova - Ilovica)

However, even though this opportunity exists, the men rarely allow themselves to be tested, so the women had to perform those tests in a secret manner. That is why the barren woman has the same treatment in Ilovica as well. The family relationships in the childless families are very disrupted. The men physically abuse their women and, sometimes, they even throw them out of the house and return them to their parents. The other members of the husband's family condemn and humiliate the barren woman as well. The mother-in-law has the following comment about her barren daughter-in-law:

*"That bride you see over there, as soon as she comes, she lies down. While I clean up, tidy up. Sweep, tidy up, wash, prepare them some meat, make them some lunch, they wait on me for everything".* (Z.D. - Oreshe)

The barren women express their discontent with the attitude of the relatives from the husband's side in a much easier fashion.

*"There is this brother-in-law here that is good for nothing. Dog. He has eight kids. We don't go in there at all. He does not want you to exist at all. Everything is said as a joke. You are like this, you are like that, you are unfit. I have been through all kinds of trouble".* (Lena Milosheska - Oreshe)

In their biographical testimonies, they try to present their husbands in the best possible way.

*"It has been nice, neither have I been abused by my husband, nothing, neither have I had any children. Nor scolded nor beaten, nor persecuted, nor has he ever said anything about us not having any children". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

*"My man did not tell me to leave". (D.T. - Ilovica)*

The case of Dosta from Ilovica, whose husband was physically abusing her, beating her and was trying to drive her out of the house for a long time, is quite interesting. She did not dare to say all of that in her biographical testimony and, on the contrary, she tried to present him in the best possible way. His bad attitude could only be sensed while there were no concrete accusations. Her problem was how to get over his death. The barren woman considers her husband the only person that suffers the consequences of childlessness. The female subjugation to the male principle and authority in the traditional village community must be added here. Most often, we find out about the relationships between the man and the woman in the childless family from the environment - relatives or their friends.

*"My God, did sister Dosta get beat up during the first years when she was young. He beat her. No children, they persecuted her. They would put onions on the places where she was hit...your bones would hurt from that! They would put onions on her. They didn't go to sorceresses. Neither did they check their seed, neither did they go to a doctor. Stubborn man, stupid man! Well come on, make me one! If you don't plant in the field, will it sprout? He persecuted her. He persecuted her". (S.P. - Ilovica)*

As far as the relationships between the barren woman and her parents and relatives are concerned, one gets the impression that they avoid to take part in the problem because of the shame that she might be returned.

*"They would tell me - you arrange that with your hosts, with your husband. If he allows you, you will go seek help, if he doesn't, your life will be like that". (D.T. - Ilovica)*

*"But, what can she do. Where can she go, child! Where can you go, a young woman. We are not like that". (S.P. - Ilovica)*

It is interesting how some barren women have found a way to better their status in the family by controlling the relationships with their husbands. Lena from Oreshe would take the liberty to yell at her husband even in front of total strangers, to control his leaving with a rude attitude and a raised tone. Her husband accepted that peacefully, with no reaction. His authority as a man is clearly reduced. Bogdana from Teovo would consistently blame the relatives from her husband's side. This way, she was dividing up the guilt for their problem. Throughout the whole conversation, her husband would send out curses to his relatives who had performed a magic for sterility on them, giving full support to his wife.

This type of regulation of the family relationships is a reaction to the marginal status of the barren woman in the traditional village community.

However, the main decisions are made by the man in those cases as well. If he does not allow for some measures to be taken, then they will not be taken. The husband of Lena from Oreshe did not allow for the adoption of a child, even though they had planned it for a long time.

*"We had all the documents, we only needed to go and see how it goes. And that sister-in-law of his told him you will adopt Turkish-Christian bastards (children of a Turkish man and a Christian-Macedonian woman). He got embarrassed and since then...that is when we gave up. While I really wanted to adopt". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

There are even more rigorous and crueler men. Dosta from Ilovica is not allowed to seek any help of any kind. It is strongly forbidden to her to go to bath-house attendants, sorceresses, fortune tellers, monasteries, etc. That is why she secretly visits such places under the constant threat that she will be found out. Besides these extreme cases, the men usually participate in the attempts to get a child, or rather they accompany their wives when they go to fortune tellers and monasteries.

The childless families are sentenced to losing the family name. That brings about the problem of splitting the property and all of the material goods that belong to the family. There is a great uncertainty as to what will happen with all of the things they inherited or acquired during their life. They are afraid that their enemies, who most often are family members, will take over their property. This problem only increases the feeling of a lack of an aim in their lives.

*"Within four walls us two. Well that is sad. I have nobody to leave this to after my death. Now I tell myself, what was with me, why did I create anything when I didn't have anybody to leave it to. I wanted to, but I didn't give birth. It is nice, but we have no people. Who will fill this house, mice? I also don't know what we will do with this house. We also don't know what we will do. The people that don't like us will take it. They don't like us. I have not started a fight, but they certainly have their eyes set on you since you don't have any children. They keep saying - this will be ours, that will be ours". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

*"This bride has no children. Jambolii (shaggy woollen home-made blankets) and all kinds of other things were made for her, she did not give birth and now they just stand there. We have everything, even this house you see is old, but everything in it is in order! - Let's go build a house. Well why should I build a house. Who will sit in that house". (Z.D. - Oreshe)*

*"They were greedy for property before, dear, they had nowhere to go". (Bogdana Mircheva - Teovo)*

The biggest problem of the barren woman is the attitude of the environment towards her. Because of their deficiency, they submit to the superior attitude of the community. Such an attitude from both sides is understandable since the children are brought up and educated to understand the woman as the basic factor in the reproduction of the community. The barren women are faced with the threat of ostracism by the community. The villagers say that the barren women are humiliated by the whole village because there is nobody to take care of them.

*"They underestimate you. Fuck her, she is barren. Sterile. Childless. Who will care for her...Well, you are underestimated by everybody". (S.P. - Ilovica)*

The barren women have a great need to be accepted by the community.

*"I also wanted to be the same as the others, to also have grandchildren from sons and daughters. If I didn't have a son, I could have at least had daughters". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

Adoption is a way for some to bring themselves closer to the community.

*"While I wanted it a lot. And not a baby, I did not want a baby! As the children went to school I wanted to mix with the women that went to a parents' meeting. That is the type I wanted. I did not want a baby. I wanted to mix with the women when they went to a parents' meeting". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

The superiority of even younger women that have given birth to children over the barren women can be seen in some situations. For example, in this one conversation about the customs surrounding birth where one barren woman was also present, her statements were very often corrected, and for those things she did not know comments such as these followed: she is older and still she doesn't know.

These women react to that attitude of the environment by presenting themselves as decent and correct. That way, the guilt is always transferred to the others.

*"I get along with all of them. No quarrel, no uproar, neither have I fought, nor have I made fun of anybody. We get along with all of these neighbors, except for that house down there. They just disgust me. They don't like us". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

They explain their disagreements with the others by saying that they do not have any protectors and those should be their children.

*"They have done us wrong, they have come to our home and hit us. Because we haven't had defense. Sons - no. Sons-in-law - no. Once these people came and they killed us under the balcony". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

The situation of the barren women that have adopted a child is somewhat different. They would usually take children from their closer relatives so that the property would still stay within the larger family.

*"Well, we arranged it with my sister-in-law. I told her - you give birth to it, maybe God will make it easy for you, and you will give it to us". (D.T. - Ilovica)*

*"I have taken one. I brought her up. She was not a year old. Her mother died and I took the child. And I brought her up, I married her here, I took her in with her husband so that she would stay here". (B.M. - Teovo)*

There is also the satisfaction of transferring the property to the child that was personally brought up by them.

*"See now...at this age if he was with them over there would he get that much property? Would his parents give him that much property. Well all of this is left to him. Who else would it be left to? I didn't have a child of my own and I consider him mine now! I did not give birth to him but I have raised him from nine months old and he carries our name. Whatever there is, from a spoon, to a plate, everything will be his". (D.T. - Ilovica)*

*"She has ten acres of land and they will belong to Zoran because he is her adopted son. He is registered as their child...He is someone else's child and she still loves him from the bottom of her heart. And now she will knit socks for the little girls, she will buy them things, she loves all of them like her own. She has already gotten used to that kind of life". (S.P. - Ilovica)*

The relationships between the man and the wife have been stabilizing in some families. After the adoption of a child, Dosta from Ilovica is no longer physically abused by her husband. Her cousin says - her husband also loved her after they took Zoran, because they took him from his family, from his sister. Dedo Stojko would beat her during the first years. That stopped after they took Zoran. (S.P. - Ilovica)

The adoption is done according to an agreement between the two families and care is also taken that the adoption is legally regulated. The adoption in Ilovica is regulated in the following manner: when the new parents go to pick up the child, they need to take new clothes which will be used to carry the child in the new home, while the

old clothes need to stay in the old home. Before they take the child, they weigh him on scales and take him to the new home before sunset so that he lives a long life. Then they serve dinner for the relatives and friends.

However, problems arise in those families as well. Since the village is a small, closed community where something rarely goes unnoticed, the adoption is well-known to everybody. For example, the adopted child of Dosta from Ilovica found out about the adoption from the villagers. That brought about a disruption in the relationships with the adopting parents. Since that moment on, the child calls them old-man and old-woman. The relationships with his biological parents, who are officially his relatives in this situation, get disrupted as well.

*"Nor mother...old-woman, old-woman, old-woman. Say mama! He doesn't call her mama. And he was this small, he had just been born when they took him. While he was younger...and now when he found out that he was at the place of a child - old-man, old-woman, old-man, old-woman. And he doesn't call his real mother "mama" either. He doesn't like that mother because she gave him away". (S.P. - Ilovica)*

Because of these conflicts in the family, the adopted child, who is a grown man now, loses the desire to have his own family under the principles of the community. The respect towards the children and the wife and the care for them is lacking.

*"He does not give his wife a penny, well she waits from her husband to bring her money. He drinks the money. That Dosta, the small girl - daddy bring some money, we need it too, I will buy me some pyjamas. And he keeps spending time at the grocery store. He will come from work and he will sit over there and will not help load things. Why should I help at the store, don't I have children at home to come to. Grandma Dosta can't scold him. Zoran is like that, everything with force, with shouting, with screaming". (S.P. - Ilovica)*

The adoption is also surrounded with pressure and criticism from the environment. Some have the following comments - how did that mother decide to give her child to you.

There are terms used for the barren women in the traditional village community which have a negative and underestimating meaning. The terms "shchirinki" and "shchirakici" are used in Oreshe, "shtirakvici" in Teovo and "bezchedna", "jalova" and "shtirica" in Ilovica (all of them meaning barren, childless, sterile, unfertile, etc.). Some informers, especially the women, say that even though those terms exist, they never use them. The barren women explain their problem in different ways.

Almost all of the women that have had medical examinations have gotten an answer that they have "clogged channels".

*"They said that my channels are clogged, but they were unclogging them at the hospital over there and I still did not give birth". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

It is interesting how they connect the menstruation with fertility, even though it is not taken as a condition when getting married. There are many cases when the girl gets her first menstruation after she gets married. (T, O)

*"This bride of mine that came from the village did not have much of a menstruation, now she has more, then when she was young, she did not have it. That is why she did not give birth. She was clogged as a girl". (Z.D. - Oreshe)*

*"While my menstruation was coming regularly..." (D.T. - Ilovica)*

Some connect the infertility with the immoral behavior of the barren women. The mother-in-law has the following explanation for the problem of her barren daughter-in-law - *"Now a child is born, it isn't ten years old, eight years old, and, forgive me for the expression, it fucks. How can it be healthy. How can that child develop. And those children now have no children. Well they can't. They are too young!" (Z.D. - Oreshe)*

The sickness in youth which is very often connected with a magical effect is also taken as a reason for infertility. Dosta from Ilovica was sick from "zena" which means that some close friend of hers hid the pregnancy from her. Today, the "zena" is considered as one of the possibilities for her problem.

*"But those old grandmothers said - that zena that gets in you does not come out. Something must happen. I stayed alive, so I don't have children". (D.T. - Ilovica)*

However, the main and most recurring reason for childlessness is black magic. Such sorceries are performed by either some bad women in the village or some close relatives who were greedy for property. They make sorceries for infertility so that there are no direct heirs of the property of the childless family and they can receive a greater share. Those people that make sorceries, even though they are unknown since there is no way to reveal them, are still hated and publicly condemned.

The infertility sorceries are most often performed for the wedding. In Ilovica, sorceries were performed on the earth from the footprint of the bride.

*"When the bride starts walking, when she leaves her yard to go to the church, they will take from the footprints in the sand and they will take it where they want to, they know. So she can have no kids, so she can have no happiness. Some do that. Whoever is capable of doing such a thing, does it". (S.P. - Ilovica)*

In Teovo, the bride and groom carry open padlocks to the wedding in order to protect themselves and they lock them right after the wedding. The sorceries which cause infertility with the women are in most cases connected with padlocks or keys in order to lock the fertility of the woman. In Oreshe, they say that such women sorceresses take earth from an unknown grave - so that as the grave is unknown, the woman will never have children, happiness etc. They would throw a padlock in an unknown well - when the padlock unlocks, that is when the woman should have children.

Bogdana from Teovo found the sorcery in her own home.

*"At the doorstep and a plate this big in front of the doorstep, but between the doorstep and the plate this much empty space with earth. As I was sweeping I saw two locked padlocks with their backs turned to each other. The padlocks were of the same size. They were kind of smaller, not big. And locked, turned, back to back and nailed down. We found them and we smashed them. Nothing. It was too late". (B.M. - Teovo)*

Through the discovering of the magic as something evil, an emotional support that the problem will be resolved is gained from the others. And if the problem is not resolved, then the culprit is someone that wishes bad things for the victim. Those culprits are most often family members from the husband's side.

*"My nephew from my mother's sister made a lot of problems for me and I haven't talked to him for twenty years and I don't want to see him. We went to this one man over at Krivogashtani. And the man told me - put a scarf to stand a while on an alder and then wear it. He took the scarf and he burned it, my cousin. And when we went to the man again he said that I won't get pregnant, and that the man that had seen the scarf had taken it and burned it. And we had not fought. He did it out of malice. I told him, and he didn't admit it, no, no, no, no. But it is him. And now we don't like each other". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

The magic is corresponding to the negative accent to the close people and it disrupts the established communication nets. The magic is a means for transfer or reduction of the personal guilt and responsibility in front of the group. It is a go-between between the individual person and his surrounding and the group (relatives, neighbors, etc.). The larger part of the autobiographies mark the woman as a victim and have a drive of protecting the victim. It is a type of female communication where relations of empathy and solidarity are created and all of that is a result of a social-sexual marginality.

*"Oh my god, why does that young woman, that bride suffer. Somebody has made a magic. And you don't know who has made it". (S.P. - Ilovica)*

Through the magic, the individual integrates in the group which imposes on her certain values and a conformist behavior and increases the hope for resolution of the problem through an irrational control of the situation.

The barren women seek help of any kind as long as they think that they can do something that will help them give birth. Parallel to the medical examinations, they go to sorceresses, bath-house attendants, holy places, curative waters, monasteries, fortune tellers, etc. They went to bath-house attendants who rubbed, massaged and warmed up their stomach. A rubbed woman is not allowed to work for one to two weeks after the rubbing. The women from Oreshe and Teovo went to the St. Dimitrija monastery in Veles. They would circle the monastery three times with a red and white thread. The man would hold the thread, while the woman would circle. Then they plait the thread in a braid which should be carried around the waist. Some carry it for a year, while others for forty days. If the woman gets pregnant, she puts the braid on the baby, after it is born. The next day, they go to the water which is behind the monastery, "the water that sprinkles".

*"When we arrived, it was full of people. Whoever got in and walked under that water got sprinkled. If you walk by the water and it spills on you like a water mill, you will get salvation from it. And all of the people that were passing were already soaking wet. I passed, and it didn't sprinkle on me. I had a magic on me. And it sprinkled on all of the others. It didn't sprinkle on me". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

If they have promised and they do get a "salvation", then they take an animal sacrifice. In Oreshe, they go to the water called "Zmeica" or "Zmejovica" (belonging to a dragon) which has many legends associated to it about some dragon. Since the water was very curative, they went to that water on Duovden and they washed their face and breasts. Very often, the barren women seek help from the famous psychics all over Macedonia who have the capability to see the reason for the infertility and to find the cure. They got the following type of answers from them: You have five gifts from God. You will not receive all of them because of your enemies.

*"They went to women who tell fortunes by looking at icons and candles and who can hear the saints.*

*You will light three candles, and you have put three icons on the table; you will leave as much money as you have. You will take candles, they will light them for you; if the flame on the candles extinguishes, you will not give birth, if it does not extinguish, you will give birth". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

The women from Oreshe went to sorceresses who would prepare them different teas.

*"Well, whatever they will give me, I will drink. They will make this liquid with these pieces floating inside and you will drink it". (L.M. - Oreshe)*

In Oreshe, they would take dry droppings from the cows, they would boil them and they would put the woman on the steam so that she gives birth.

*"I have put our bride. I have put her on a dill broom, on fresh milk, cow droppings, nothing helped". (Z.D. - Oreshe)*

When it is thundering, the woman needs to be soiled with earth in order for her to get children. (O) When the first hail falls, the woman should eat three pieces of hail. (O)

In Ilovica, the women would go sleep over at the monasteries or the churches where they would leave money and a bunch of gifts. For the holiday St. Forty, they went to the stone called Benlitash. They would leave "uncountable" money there and they would slip through the stone three times. Women that could not give birth, women whose children did not live and women that wanted to get engaged "so that she takes the one she wants and is happy" (S.P. - Ilovica) went there. They do not take an animal sacrifice to the stone, but they carry round flat loaves which they give to the people present. They went to sorceresses who practiced sorcery with water, salt and sweet basil. (I)

*"With water, salt, she will drink from that water, they will put some sweet basil. They will put three branches of sweet basil in the water. If the branches gather round and they touch each other, the women will give birth. She will say your name and take something from you, some thread or something and she will mumble incantations and so on". (S.P. - Ilovica)*

*Informers:*

Milosheska Lena, born in 1931 in Oreshe, married in Oreshe.

Zlata Deloska, born in 1928 in Oreshe, married in Oreshe.

Bogdana Mircheva, born in 1916 in Teovo, married in Teovo.

Dosta Taseva, born in 1929 in Shushica, married in Ilovica.

Stojna Panova, born in 1933 in Ilovica, married in Ilovica.