

Psychological Aspects of Elopement: A Case in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Đenita Tuće*

Abstract

Despite the fact that an elopement becomes declining marriage practice in Bosnia, there are still a significant number of women who marry this way and who are able to share their knowledge on this cultural heritage. It is not call into question that elopement has a great sociological significance for young women. After elopement the marriage gains an achieved status and the girl gets stable position in the society as married women. However, the question posed in this paper is what does elopement imply from psychological point of view? Could it be considered as a sign of integrated ego-identity or does it just reflect youthful defiance and spirit of exploration. In addressing these questions, we relied on Erikson's work as a theoretical framework and discussed the relation of elopement and ego-identity within his psychosocial theory of development.

Keywords: Elopement; Ego-identity; Erikson's Psycho-social Theory of Development

* Corresponding author: Đenita Tuće, Senior Assistant; Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo; e-mail: djenita.tuce@gmail.com

Introduction

In general, the term *elopement* is used to refer to a marriage conducted in sudden and secretive manner, usually involving hurried flight away from one's home together with one's beloved with the intention of getting married. A Bosnian phrase for elopement is *ukrala se*. It is a long-standing practice in Bosnian culture, when a woman leaves her home without her parents' knowledge to live a life with her future husband. Elopement often occurs as a result of an impending pre-arranged marriage or in defiance to parents' disapproval of a girl's choice and decision to marry.

It is worth to notice that elopement is different from *bride abduction*, although studies often discuss these two phenomena together (Kudat 1974; after Doubt, 2012). Although, elopement occurs without knowledge or permission of girl's parents, it involves the consent of a young girl. Bride abduction, on the other hand, occurs when a girl unwillingly is kidnapped into marriage (Doubt, 2012). Elopement is also different from *traditional wedding ceremony*, which usually follows after a public period of engagement and after the parents' permission is received.

Although this custom is changing in Bosnia and is not as common as it was sixty years ago, there are still a significant number of young women who get married in such a way (Doubt, 2014). In the research conducted in 2013 by Mareco Index Bosnia, a survey research group in Sarajevo, the result showed 20.5% of 1.875 subjects reported marrying by elopement. Of the respondents, 6.8% married, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven, reported to have eloped to marry (Doubt, 2014). As it was pointed out by Doubt (2014), despite the fact that elopement is becoming declining marriage practice in Bosnia, there are still a significant number of women who are able to share their knowledge on this cultural heritage. It is a reason why it is important to study this custom today.

In the following lines, there is one story about elopement which happened in 2006. It is a story of the young woman's participation in a close friend's elopement.

The elopement story

The elopement happened in a town of middle Bosnia. Her girlfriend decided to elope and get married to a guy whom she was dating for four years and was already engaged to. Decision

for such sudden marriage occurred due to unplanned pregnancy, and the couple decided to do it secretly, because they were afraid of girl parents' reaction. His parents, on the other hand, were acquainted of the plan and he had their support to take the girl to live with them. At that time, the girl was 22 years old college student.

They arranged elopement in 15 days. Meanwhile, the girl lived with her parents. She attended college, hid the pregnancy and acted like it was all the usual. Her parents didn't suspect anything and had no idea what was about to happen. Several of her best friends, including our storyteller, knew about the plan. Although, she kept her girlfriend's secret and tried to be supportive during this "preparation period", she was also trying to convince her that it was not a way to get married and to encourage her to talk to her parents and tell them the truth. Her girlfriend was aware that her parents will be hurt, but still persisted in her decision to elope. She said that, despite the circumstances, she loved her boyfriend and really wanted to get married with him, but she just couldn't stand their disappointment and reaction, because they would think that this came too early.

Few days before the elopement, her girlfriend told her that there would be a modest wedding party in her future husband's house, just with a few relatives and the closest friends, and she asked her and other girlfriends to come. All of them accepted invitation, except her. She felt it would be wrong to celebrate this act in the groom's house, knowing that bride's parents were in the agony at the same time. "I wouldn't be able to look her parents in the eyes after that", she said. So, she didn't go, but she visited her girlfriend in her house just before she planned to go "on regular date" (as her parents thought). She gave her a hug and wished her all best in the future life.

Next day, she found out that there was a great party in the groom's house. There were musicians and nice food, and everybody had good time. Few hours after bride's arrival to the groom's house, they called her parents and told them that she had eloped. Just as it was expected, her parents were shocked. Her father was so angry and her mother was out of herself. She got so sick, so they had to give her a glass of water and a pill to calm down.

Two days after, all brides' girlfriends, including our storyteller, went to visit her mother, to see how she was doing and to comfort her. They were being prepared to everything – to anger, to disappointment, to rejection. They knew that they were some kind of accomplices in that act. But, when they arrived, her mother welcomed them and was so happy that they came to visit her. Although, she was still sad because of everything, she thanked to those who have gone with her daughter to the groom's house. "I am so happy that she wasn't alone and that there was someone from her side of wedding guests", she said. Our storyteller remembered how frustrated she was by that statement, because, she was the only one who didn't go there and obviously the worst one in the eyes of her girlfriend's mother. The irony was that she decided not to go, precisely because of them and their sadness. But she didn't say anything. She just accepted that she was "the black sheep" in the group.

Today, her girlfriend lives in a happy marriage and has two beautiful sons. Her parents forgave her all very soon after everything happened. They have good relationship and visit each

other often. Her parents enjoy the company of their grandsons and the elopement has been re-told as the anecdote of their life.

This story is in line with many other elopement stories (for more examples see Doubt, 2012). There are a few main concepts, which are common to the most of them: *secrecy*, *shock* and *disappointment* of the girl's parents and their *acceptance* in the end. Also, what is obvious in most of such stories is that elopement results in a change of a girl's social position and has great sociological significance for young girl. As it was pointed out by Doubt (2012), in a short period after elopement, marriage gains achieved status and the girl gets a stable position in the society as married women.

Our question in this paper, however, is what psychological implications of elopement are? Is it just a behavior governed by external circumstances and social conditions or is it more than that? What does this act actually come to signify when it comes to personal characteristics of the women who marry this way? Could it be considered as a sign of formed ego-identity which is characterized by clear vision of one's own future, or it just reflects youthful defiance and spirit of exploration?

In attempt to address these questions, we are going to rely on Erikson's work as a theoretical framework and discuss the relation of elopement and ego-identity within his psychosocial theory of development. In the following lines, there is a brief overview of Erikson's work as an introduction to discussion of these relations.

Psychological aspects of elopement

Erikson's work, which was greatly influenced by Freud, is consistent with Freud's ideas about the structure and topography of personality (Hall, Lindsey & Campbell, 1997). Similarly to Freud, Erikson emphasized that personality develops in a predetermined order, and build upon each previous stage. However, while Freud was an id psychologist, Erikson was an ego psychologist and his main concern was development of the person within a social context (Leman, Bremner, Parke & Gauvain, 2012). According to Erikson (1980), the environment in which a child lives is crucial to providing growth, adjustment, self-awareness and identity.

Erikson (1968; after Leman et al., 2012) described development that occurs in eight stages throughout the lifespan. Each stage is

associated with a specific developmental task, from which then follows a developmental crisis (Leman et al., 2012). For Erikson (1980) these crises are psychosocial in nature because they involve psychological needs of the individual conflicting with the requirements of society. According to Erikson (1980) a crisis is crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential and can be resolved positively or negatively. In other words, each stage involves opportunities for positive ego development as well as deficits in one's character.

These stages represent a sequence of ego growth, occurring as the individual meets the challenges of different periods of life and resolves the conflicts that are dominant in those periods (Marcia, 1994). According to the theory, successful overcoming of each stage results in a healthy personality and achieving of personality strengths, which the ego can use to resolve current crises (Erikson, 1980). Failure to successfully overcome a stage, on the other hand, can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and therefore a more unhealthy personality and sense of self (Erikson, 1980). These stages, however, can be resolved successfully at a later time (Berk, 2006).

Among all stages, Erikson put the greatest deal of emphasis on the adolescent period, stressing it is a crucial stage for developing a person's identity (Berk, 2006). During adolescence, the most important developmental task is transition from childhood to adulthood. Children are becoming more independent, and begin to look at the future in terms of career, relationships, families, etc. At the same time, they want to belong to a society and fit in (Erikson, 1980).

This is a major stage in development where the adolescent, in order to integrate resolutions from all previous stages, will re-examine his identity and try to find out who exactly he or she is. During this period, adolescents explore possibilities and begin to form their own identity based upon the outcome of their explorations. According to Erikson (1980), what should happen at the end of this stage is a re-integrated sense of self, of what one wants to do or be. Failure to establish a sense of identity within society can lead to role confusion, involving the individuals not being sure about themselves or their place in society (Erikson, 1980).

Up to this stage development mostly depends upon how we resolve the crisis in previous stages. Speaking in terms of Erikson (1980), the preconditions of integrated sense of self and personal identity are positive resolutions of the previous crisis. These involve establishing *a sense of trust in others* in the first stage, *a sense of autonomy* in the second stage, *a sense of purpose and initiative* in the third stage and *a sense of competence* in the fourth stage (Erikson, 1980).

The next stage of psychosocial development, Erikson (1980) characterized as the initial stage of being an adult and called it *intimacy vs. isolation*, according to main developmental task which is related to forming intimate, loving relationships with other people. Successful resolution of this crisis leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation. But, as in all previous stages, the positive resolution of this crisis has developmental forerunner at the previous one. It means, that precondition of being able to accomplish intimacy with others is integrated sense of self and personal identity (Erikson, 1980).

While elopements of Bosnian women occur within traditional, patriarchic social structures, they defy parental

authority over a young person's decision to marriage (Doubt, 2012). In that sense, although these women seem sensitive to external circumstances and social conditions, they have made their own decision based upon internalized, self-constructed values. Taking that into account, it seems justified to assume that there is a positive relation between elopement and ego-identity.

There are few reasons for such assumptions. First, decision to elope indicates that unmarried girl, in her attempt to successful transition to adulthood, re-examines her identity and tries to adopt new role as an adult woman, so she could fit in the society. By undergoing elopement, she demonstrates a clear vision into her own future and enough courage to bring it into action. Both of that indicate the integrated sense of personal identity. On the other hand, the elopement by itself shows that girl is willing to form intimate, loving relationship with her future husband, which also, according to Erikson (1980), wouldn't be possible without stable and integrated ego-identity. As it was pointed out by Erikson (1980), without stable identity, it is difficult to achieve intimacy with other person. It requires that person in a certain way

renounces oneself. So, in order “not to lose oneself”, the person must have a deep inner security and be able to return to oneself after having been close with other person (Erikson, 1980). In this regard, genuine and stable binding with others might be considered as a result of verification of strong self-determination and integrated identity.

Individuals, who don't have a strong identity, are afraid of intimacy, of losing their autonomy and of drowning their own self into others. Faced with these fears, they can either isolate themselves of others or look for the intimacy through repetition of trials and errors (Erikson, 1980). In these circumstances, many of them enter into marriage, hoping that, by finding each other, they will find themselves. Unfortunately, common outcome for the couples who married while still quite young and immature is divorce (Leman et al., 2012).

In that sense, it is reasonable to take into consideration the maturity of Bosnian women who eloped, since the most of them were quite young when they got into marriage (see Doubt, 2012). Since the adolescence is a period of exploration of different possibilities, it can be argued whether this decision was a

reflection of maturity and clear vision of the future, or it just reflected youthful rebellion and spirit of exploration. In other words, it may be call into question whether elopement really implies strong ego-identity or, on the contrary, only one of the attempts of forming one, or what Marcia (1994) called *identity moratorium*. In this respect, it is important to emphasize that Erikson (1980) considered that achieved identity of an individual, does not remain his permanent achievement and that process of identity formation continues through the person's life. As he pointed out, identity can be in some later stages, weakened or strengthened, as well as changed (Erikson, 1980). In that sense, the possibility that elopement gave the young women an achieved ego-identity is not questionable. As it was pointed out by Doubt (2014), most of these women reported that they felt stronger and more self-confident, after this act. But, what makes elopement more than just a phase of exploration in order to form ego-identity is *commitment*, which is clearly highlighted in the narratives of elopements by Bosnian women (see Doubt, 2012). This virtue is, according to Erikson (1980), the main achievement in this stage of development and the most important sign of formed identity.

When there is a lack of commitment, as Erikson (1980) pointed out, the young person, although sexually mature, cannot become neither spouse, nor parent. This is in line with Marcia's (1994) definition of final identity status, which he called *identity achievement*. This identity status represents both a high degree of exploration and a high degree of commitment. According to Marcia (1994), at this identity status adolescents will experiment with many different beliefs and values, and analyze their pathway in life, but they will be able to prioritize what is important to them and will sort through many possibilities of who they want to be. Marcia (1994) also pointed out that in order to fully achieve this type of identity, the young person must feel positive and confident about his/her decisions and values. *Identity moratorium*, on the other hand, refers to the identity status which represents high degree of exploration but a low degree of commitment. At this status, adolescents are in the midst of an identity crisis which has required them to explore and experiment with different values, beliefs and goals. However, they have not made any final decisions about which beliefs and values are most important to them, and which principles should guide their lives. In other

words, they have not been committed to a particular identity yet (Marcia, 1994).

Conclusion

A crucial feature of elopement is that the young woman autonomously chooses to elope and form loving, intimate relationship with her future husband. The old values and ascribed roles are seriously examined and new alternatives are explored. The young woman chooses the future and makes a commitment, even as she is determined by social condition and her past. Taking into account all of these, as well as the analysis based on Erikson's theory, it seems justified to advocate the assumption that decision to elope implies more than just a reflection of youthful rebellion and spirit of exploration and could be considered as a sign of formed ego identity. Of course, these assumptions would be worth verifying through empirical research at some point in the future.

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