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***Unorthodox*. Maria Schrader. Produced by Anna Winger and Alexa Karolinski. 2020.
Germany/US, Subtitled. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix. 3 hours 33 minutes.**

Reviewed by Selin Taftaf¹

Directed by Maria Schrader, *Netflix's* remarkable series *Unorthodox* begins to open the door into the unfamiliar culture of the Satmar community, a fundamentalist and ultra-orthodox sect of Hasidic Jews, living in Williamsburg, New York. The series is an adaptation from Deborah Feldman's bestselling memoir, *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*. Neither the book nor the series is intended to be a sociological or an anthropological study that will bring a social scientific approach to the community's way of life. Instead, both pieces reflect subjective interpretations of this specific community culture. Further, the series has additions and modifications to what the book offers to its readers. Nevertheless, the series provides the audience with some insights regarding community practices. More importantly, the series is about a journey of self-discovery of a young Satmar woman who wishes to leave the community doctrine, that sets up rigid rules, to find her path. At first glance, the series may seem like a period drama about a conservative community. Yet, this young woman's emancipation journey is relatable for many others who suffer from rigid social norms in various cultures, and those who yearn for change. Throughout her journey, the cultural processes that produce femininity and what it means to be a woman are conspicuously deconstructed. This deconstruction takes the story to another level beyond is contextual authenticity. Apart from the story being thought-provoking and inspirational, the timing of the release has undoubtedly boosted its scope. Aired on March 26, 2020, the series could not have come at a better time than the COVID-19 pandemic when people are mostly staying home to limit social interaction and opting for online streaming platforms to watch movies and TV series.

The series cleverly blends time periods. Producers Anna Winger and Alexa Karolinski add a strong backstory to the current narrative so that the audience can bounce between the past, reflecting when Feldman herself was a community member, and the present, consisting of fictitious events. The backstory introduces the Satmar community culture, especially the rituals in marriage, and piques curiosity to "binge" on all four episodes in one sitting. Besides the fast-moving narrative, noteworthy acting, costumes, furniture, setting, and the unique Yiddish language draws audiences to the series.

The main character, Esther Shapiro, or Esty, starred by Shira Haas, is a 19-year-old young woman who seems to be nonconforming to the cultural and religious practices of the Satmar community. She escapes from her secretive community and starts a new life abroad due to the crisis with her husband. Esty's husband, Yanky Shapiro, is depicted by Amit Rahav. Yanky adheres to the community traditions and has a strong desire to start a family. Moishe Lefkovitch, portrayed by Jeff Wilbusch, is Yanky's tough cousin, an advocate of the community traditions, but

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also a rule breaker himself, addicted to gambling and using a smartphone. He helps Yanky find Esty once she flees abroad and tries to bring her back.

The plot centers around Esty and Yanky's arranged marriage. Yet, the series is far from being a relationship drama. Instead, it illustrates the gendered traditions and strict rules of the Satmar culture, that endorse patriarchal ideas. As shown in the series, the community tradition attributes women the characteristics of being obedient, nurturing, and sensitive and men the characteristics of being dominant, decisive, and independent. All members of the community are obliged to comply with certain restrictions. For example, members are not allowed to use technological devices like cell phones, and members are not allowed to attend public schooling but can only get Yiddish-oriented education. Satmar men and women have conservative clothing where men wear black coats, and on special occasions, a special fur hat called *shtreimel*, while women should dress modestly. On top of the Orthodox Jewish tradition that requires women to cover their hair in public, Satmar women completely shave their hair after getting married, donning wigs (Fenton & Rickman 2016). Compared to men, women are subjected to further etiquette within the enclave, which silences their voices (Kaufman 1995). These norms and practices are well-reflected in the series.

The Satmar lifestyle puts Esty under such pressure that she decides to escape from the community, leaving everything behind, and goes to Berlin in the first episode. She makes this decision when the crisis with Yanky has reached its peak. We learn the underlying reasons behind Esty's getaway in the later episodes. Yet, even before escaping the community, Esty does not feel fully aligned with the isolationist Satmar teaching. Unlike an average Satmar woman, she is interested in music, which is regarded as an immodest, or even a seductive interest by the tradition.

Unorthodox portrays marriage as a turning point in a woman's life in the Satmar sect. In a conversation with Esty, Esty's grandmother affirms that "Your marriage will mark the beginning of a new life." For women, this "new life" brings additional role expectations and new rules to be obeyed. Indeed, marriage transforms not only Esty's marital status but her appearance. Before marrying Yanky, Esty had long, uncovered hair, but afterward, she had her hair cut short and wears a wig. Moreover, once married, a woman is also expected to take on the role of mother and wife. Her duties extend to producing babies, serving the husband (including sexually), and maintaining the family dignity by being a caring mother and a loyal wife. Marriage makes the burden of traditional gender roles even more prevalent. As Esty hopelessly states, "My family just cares that I am a good wife and mother." This statement proves that patriarchal beliefs deem women important as long as they fulfill their social roles.

Reproduction is a key marital role, as highlighted in the series. Esty's aunt Malka suggests to Esty that she will have no influence over her marriage if she does not give her husband a baby. Accordingly, the baby is the "seal" of a marriage, and the woman is seen as defective if she fails to get pregnant. This dogmatic idea is mainstream in many other societies in the world. Regarding women as "baby machines" beyond their identities and personal freedoms just exacerbates traditional gender stereotypes. The series saliently reminds us of the persistence of such contexts where women are coerced to comply with restrictive social norms.

The reason why the child is extremely sacred in this community is explained through the Jewish suffering in the Holocaust. Originated in Hungary, Satmar Jews are mainly the survivors of the Holocaust. Once they escaped, they were settled in New York following the Second World War, where they established their community (Feldman 2010). Accordingly, to compensate for the Holocaust losses, they put family and reproduction at the center of their practices, imposing upon women the caregiver duty.

Traditional rules and rituals also apply for menstruation and sexual relations. Before marriage, Esty gets training from a woman, who appears to be a sexual intercourse specialist with Hasidic principles. The specialist teaches Esty the tips and tricks on how to behave in bed and accomplish her duties as a wife where “men are givers, women are receivers.” When a woman is in her menstrual period, she is regarded as “dirty.” Once the period ends, to be able to sleep together with her husband, she needs to clean herself by performing *mikvah*, a special bathing ritual for women. This idea demonstrates the stigmatization of a woman’s body. In the community tradition, even biologically natural body processes like menstruation and pregnancy are subjected to strict rules. Furthermore, despite being “the receiver”, the “success” of sexual intercourse, which is equivalent to man’s satisfaction, is loaded on the woman. Elderly community members also have a right to criticize the woman in case of any “disappointment”. A woman’s satisfaction or preferences in sexual relations is, thus, off-topic, as portrayed in the series. The following dialogue between Esty and Yanky’s mother, Miriam, illustrates this tradition:

“Miriam: You have to make him feel –
 Esty: Like a king. I know. A man should feel like a king in bed.
 Miriam: My Yanky should always feel like a king.
 Esty: Does that make me a queen?” (Episode 3, 5:24-5:39)

The norms of the Satmar community are highly masculinized, with the woman assuming inferior status. Such community traditions and teachings engender a contradiction about women’s position: Women have the critical role of familial caregiving but are also seen as inferior to men. This seems to create a double burden on Satmar women – they should comply with the gender roles but should refrain from demonstrating feminine behaviors and attracting attention. Furthermore, women’s norm restrictions provide them with minimal opportunity in the public sphere. As Hartmann (1976) argues, women’s lower participation levels in public domain activities result from patriarchal barriers imposed by men. This theory applies to the Satmar Jews, as gender roles appear to be an inherent element of the community tradition where men assert their superiority over women through this patriarchal mechanism and male privilege. As the community tradition allows no proper education or resources through which women can diversify their options and make their ways, they find themselves trapped within the system.

Another theme that was deftly depicted is courage. It surely takes courage to step out of Williamsburg and flee to Berlin. Once Esty comes out of her shell, she gets into a different world where she gradually accommodates herself to new experiences. Esty slowly sheds her timidity in her life in Berlin, especially in the third and fourth episodes. Although she has taken a significant step towards overcoming the social norms that trap her as seen in the first episode, she has grown stronger, has opened herself more to others, and adapted to the Western lifestyle shown in later episodes. The series points out that each individual inherently has their means to change and sets Esty as an example to encourage many women. Interestingly, Deborah Feldman also appears in Episode 4 for a couple of seconds, where Esty goes into a cosmetics shop to purchase a lipstick, most probably for the first time in her life. She starts to challenge the masculine norms of her community traditions, reconstructing herself through such acts as wearing makeup or dressing up. She notices, in this new society, that different sexual orientations and relations do exist, and she begins to embrace diversity.

The final scene of the series offers clues that Esty is prepared for the new beyond the boundaries of the Satmar, as the compass gifted her by her grandmother, Babby, has finally started

showing the right directions. Yet, Moishe reminds Esty that they will come back for the baby, indicating that the community does not readily consent to any membership withdrawal and will chase after her. It is here that the producers end the series. We, the audience, are left to our imagination of how Esty will manage her new life and whether she will be able to successfully disengage from the Satmar Hasidism and enjoy a new future.

Some have criticized *Unorthodox*, charging that it twists some traditions for popularity. The critiques mostly argue that Hasidism does not bound people to live within the community forever, nor does not necessarily require women to cut their hair short, indicating that it depends on personal choice. The producers seemingly embrace the criticisms. In a conversation at *Forward* (2020), producer Karolinski asserted that series is not a documentary, that is based on accurate representations of reality, but just a story about the experiences of a Satmar woman. Furthermore, the producers also cooperated with a Yiddish translator and consultant to display the community traditions as properly as possible. The series substantially contributes to the feminist literature as it follows a critical approach towards women's position in this reclusive Hasidic sect, which is poorly addressed by the scholars so far from an insider's viewpoint (Wodzinski 2013). It even goes beyond the practices of this specific community and makes the audience question whether, or to what extent, women are free in their decisions and choices in a broader sense. The lasting dichotomy between tradition and modernity is well-presented such that it guides the audience not only in unfolding the gender relations within the Satmar tradition but also within their social norms.

Unorthodox reveals how gender roles are constructed within societies and how people are bounded by these norms. This striking reality has reached many through *Netflix* and ignited the debates about the persistence of gender inequalities, and ongoing patriarchal structures where women have either no or minimal voice over their lifestyles and futures. Art and media can produce a broad impact, raising public awareness regarding women's empowerment and emancipation struggles. They can also help make untold stories to be heard, challenge public misperceptions, and overcome cultural stereotypes that prescribe the norms for how women and men should behave. Alternately, media representations may have the power to further engender toxic masculinity practices that suppress not only women but general gender diversity. As a result, discrimination towards disadvantaged groups may exacerbate. Nevertheless, this miniseries is worth seeing as it shows ideas about overcoming stereotypical beliefs and exploring new horizons. This story may inspire others to find their way and contributes to the idea of the empowerment of women.

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