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**Esty Shapiro: A Protagonist Who Refuses to Go Home**

The critic Pauline Kael was renowned for including the audience in her reviews when she covered films for the New Yorker. *Unorthodox*, a limited series of four episodes on Netflix loosely based on a memoir of a woman who left the Satmar community in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, directed by actor-filmmaker Maria Schrader, cannot be written up by any discerning critic of today without noting the audience reaction as well. Indeed, the reaction has been so strong to the mini-series that aired March 26, 2020, that the audience response needs to be dealt with first. The Satmar community has claimed its representation made by a film crew in Germany is inaccurate. Yet many women, triggered by what they saw in the show, said on social media speaking out against their own community that the representation writes large what happened to them in private. This was the topic explored on the podcast Intimate Judaism, on Sunday, April 26 2020, in which the hosts aired a live international Zoom panel discussion on intimacy and authenticity in the series. Mental health workers, a sex therapist and a sexual violence advisor, one of whom runs seminars for sexual relations counselors for brides and grooms in Hasidic culture, discussed how the series approximated what they had heard from clients themselves, even if the end of how the woman escaped the sexual oppression and made it with a hot German guy after being institutionally raped by her community was unrealistic.

The official Netflix site, accessed April 30, 2020, describes the show simply as “A woman flees an arranged marriage in Brooklyn to start a new life abroad, then her past catches up to her.” The show is billed as a drama, of one season, which got a 94 percent rating with Rotten Tomatoes; 96 percent overall liked the show.
Deborah Feldman, on whose 2012 autobiography *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*, the series was based, was directly involved with the production.¹

Shirra Haas, an Israeli actress, plays the part of the 19-year-old woman who was “different” to the point where she contracted vaginismus—e.g. her body would not perform as she experienced so much pain at sexual intercourse. Yet the knowledge that she did not stop pressure consistently put upon her by her husband, by her mother in law who prevailed upon her to not let the family down, for her son must be made to feel like a king—ad nauseum, until the 19-year-old woman sneaks off, runs away, and goes all the way to Berlin initially seeking her mother and her lost German citizenship but where she hooks up (literally) with a group of music students from a classical academy, to which she applies and magically gets in, at the end, on one of the coveted scholarships, even though she is hounded and bullied by her husband and the men in the community who come after her as she is pregnant, and actually expect her to come back. One of the ring leaders evenkidnaps her in a van to take her off to a deserted playground where he dramatically produces a gun, not to kill her, as both the main character and the audience think, but to give her an out to shoot herself. The story is told in flashbacks, with much of the past coming out in chunks as the viewer is way ahead, and needs to get caught up along the way.

What makes the series worth watching is the lyrical poetic way in which the story unfolds, as well as the sensitivity that exudes between the supportive characters because the young woman, Esty, clearly could not have pulled this off all by herself. An example of the poetry is the first shot of the first episode. In the background shot of the series, we see a woman standing her back to us, looking out at a lake in which she is half immersed but fully clothed. An interesting, unexplained image. But when the episode starts, we are suddenly plunged outside onto a dingy drab street, listening to ominous music play as a camera slowly pans up a pole, climbing a phallic symbol of patriarchy, reaching the outside of a window on the second floor. We flash inside that window to the back of a head of a woman looking out at the drab street, the window not even decorated with curtains. The contrast between the color of the first shot which is a still and these two shots creates dissonance, sounding a peal of the dissonant
restlessness of deprivation. Only slowly does any movement occur which shows the motion is starting. This is a repressed, slow clenching of a cup in a hand, then a quick raising of the cup to her face to drink, fast, then a slamming it back down, as if she had drunk in nurturance and she had found true resolve. Then she bolts off camera, to the right. She rinses the cup, shakes the towel dry, gets her cash and belongings together, all the while the ominous music is building, straining. She wraps a precious photo along with her cash in a sweater, kisses the Mezuzah on the door, and walks off, down the whole flight of long stairs. Traffic sounds merge with the ominous music as she passes a window; then the sounds of children mix in as she opens a door to a corridor which she walks down to where people are gathered. Their chatter chimes in as she walks towards a pillar, on the other side of which, the people congregate. Suspense builds in the sound as she crosses the room alone, against a backdrop in which all people in Orthodox garb are talking. She is almost at the door, to the light when she is stopped by two women guarding it, or so it seems… Eventually, Esty managed to escape the Haredi community and embarked upon the stages of becoming a hero in the Joseph Campbell cycle, albeit adapted to women’s lives and hence to feminism. She leaves the known, for the unknown, and along the way finds many mentors, overcoming obstacles and meeting many challenges. And although she discovers the elixir of achieving recognition for self-actualization, she refuses to come back, unless coming back to herself and to her mother and her mother’s lover where she learns the truth about how she was taken from her mother (and not abandoned) can be said to be her new home. She comes of age and does not return to her community of origin, even though the community and even the husband whom she rejects in spite of his offer of jewelry and dramatic gesture of cutting his hair as he at last himself pursues her.
See interviews with her, explaining the Satmar community of Holocaust survivors in which she was raised such as https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvxzIXSApywон DW, a German television broadcast in 2016 accessed on May 1, 2020.