

# ANALYZING CULTURAL TRAUMA Hasidic Community through the Lens of Netflix Film series: *Unorthodox*

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## ABSTRACT

*Unorthodox* is a Netflix film series that talks about the Hasidic Community. The drama series is based on Deborah Feldman's memoir *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*. It highlights the aftermath of the Holocaust and its impact on developing the ground rules of the Hasidic community. There are intersectional themes within the series. But this paper will focus on the origins of the community. Cultural lineage, its growth, strength, and weaknesses are viewed on the basis of emotional and spiritual bondage through distributed trauma. Within the structure of the film series, the after-effects of the Holocaust, leading to the existence of the Hasidic Community as it is today are analyzed. The psychological effects post-war, the beginning of a newer and stronger belief are all bound to this experience. An analysis on these grounds takes place based on the understanding of the Trauma theory within its primary text. The cultural significance of passing over a legacy based on the grounds of a shared (collective) traumatic experience is researched. In other words, it is a critical analysis of how much influence a severe historical trauma can have on its generations. Their lifestyle, traditions, rituals, and beliefs will be looked at from the perspective of Cathy Caruth's findings in trauma theory. The societal factors that influence and contribute to the Hasidic way of existence can also be studied through this paper.

**Keyword:** - Hasidic Jews, Trauma theory, Cathy Caruth, Deborah Feldman, *Unorthodox*

## 1. THESIS

The paper aims to analyze *Unorthodox* Netflix series culturally on the basis of Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory. By the end of this paper, the following questions will be answered:

1. How does trauma theory work in the existence of the Hasidic community? (Primary)
2. What cultural significance does the drama series (*Unorthodox*) highlight?
3. How does being non-secular or religious feel like an act of liberation? (Secularism is chaos according to the Hasidic community)
4. Does the Hasidic community consider themselves to be a part of the collective society?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Trauma is a long-lasting impression of a scarring memory. This is the simplest form of explaining this condition. But interestingly, this concept is capable of bringing larger discourses to the table that pertains to path-breaking - discoveries. One of which is what I am looking into- Cultural Trauma.

The Holocaust has left a deep impact on the Jewish community, that some of its direct survivors were urged to create a stronger close-knit community. Their faith in the religion was the only truth that they wished to stick on to. Hasidic community has its origins from this belief and that is what formed the basis of their culture. They focused on enlarging the community by isolating themselves from secular way of living. Even today, the Hasidic Jews feel

obliged to follow the principles laid on the same lines. Decades after the Holocaust incident, the community still swears by this belief of staying secluded. While the individuals within this group do feel proud in their stance taken, it is intriguing how such a culture is born out of traumatic experiences. The following generations though did not witness these features directly, but did imbibe it sub-consciously. The rituals, traditions, and cultural events practiced within the community still have its roots based on the foundation of trauma.

It is an obvious fact to understand how an individual would feel the need to respect the legacy of their ancestors' struggle. Here are some pointers that navigate us to a better understanding of how trauma works. Even if some of the memories are too harsh to recollect for a person, the idea of it still persists in the minds. Dissonant memory persists [8]. This memory is what contributes to the present civic identity of an individual. There could be every sense of mistrust, suspicion, harm/ anxiety in oneself once a feature of trauma is slapped on. In short, it possesses the person and not vice versa [9]. Psychic symptoms surface in order to reveal the outburst of such contained pressures. For example: when an interpersonal and/ or societal failure occurs [9].

Similarly, Zhukova [14] also puts forth a common analysis on how some individuals tend to direct their anger by blaming the public sphere such as the society. That is, their in-built growing unpleasant memories are poured out by placing a public sphere as the accused. This is probably done to direct their anger outwards instead of containing it within themselves. But certain other traumatic effects do not reveal itself in the public eye. It builds up more in the subconscious, passing on to the next generations. Moody and Prager rightfully points out these characteristics as to how a trauma develops, builds, and establishes its hold firmly. However, their research is done on the basis of racial oppression and slavery. These do not completely then support my focus on the Hasidic community and the version of their lived experiences. Zhukova on the other hand explains a mechanism on how there is a structured outlet for trauma. While its probability of a linear process is acknowledged, it does not suffice the complete nature of cultural trauma. Moreover, it talks about the cases of Belarus and Ukraine specifically. Hence an evident stream of research gaps within these three articles and my thesis is seen here.

Mayer, in his article, reveals as to how the generational gaps among the Jewish community can answer a lot of questions. His research leads to another probable reason for religion to be held very closely by both the orthodox and non-orthodox Jewish followers. The age/ generation gap within a Jewish family is usually in different variants. Hence, a lack of respect might persist among them, leading to possible chances of dishonoring the community- set guidelines. In this place, the power of religion and faith is used as a tool of control. Important teachings of kinship, brotherhood, harmony within like-minded individuals are preached along the growing days. During this process, there is a tendency to naturally forfeit the idea of secularism, thereby choosing to live only within the community. 'Torah' is considered the corpus of Jewish law [5]. The laws in this corpus are not rigid entirely. But it forces a person to assume one too many identities for the self or so it happens to be in that order. Heilman takes interest in social ambivalence, which refers to a blend of hostility and rapport built in the very structures of social relations [5]. He tests this theory on Orthodox Jews, and concludes that it has three major characteristics to show. They are force, inherent, and confusion. This quite sums up the state of representation of the Hasidic community as well.

Along the same lines, Nicole Krauss points out on what exactly the survivors take home from the traumatic experience. It is not just a mere memory but the foundation of a second life ahead. Krauss' article substantiates Cathy Caruth's findings in trauma theory. Her reference on how survival becomes larger than life is what is elaborated in the article. Another interesting reference, taken from Milan Kundera's novel "Ignorance", is about nostalgia and pain of absence. This could be directly relative to the generations living in the respect of a legacy of which they have no actual physical experience. This lack of knowledge grows in a form of "pain of absence", both in realizing there are no ancestral remains and in relating to the current culture and traditions.

I analyze cultural trauma through the lens of the Netflix film series "Unorthodox". This series is based on the memoir of Deborah Feldman's *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*. Filming books can be complicated as too much of it can destroy the essence of the subject, and less of it does not convey the wholesome process required. A first-person involvement seems to be lacking in this case as numerous drafts are revised to fit in the aesthetic purity of a film [4]. When trying to decipher history from visuals, there are numerous conflicts that arise based on its authenticity. But visuals encourage a much more broadening sense of critiquing prospects [13]. Taking pointers from Elliot and Stottard, I look into aspects of how far Deborah Feldman's memoir connects with the film series. Her direct involvement is present throughout the production. The narrative part occurs when her role is paralleled with the introduction of another character in the series version. Hence, based on Elliot and Stottard's findings, that is where my research gap lies.

### 3. TRAUMA THEORY

Trauma is an emotion that cannot be merely put within a conceptual framework. It is a detailed study wherein determiners and indicators to understand the sentiment vary with the event experienced. Different experiences lead to different ways of reacting. There is no one standard form of the outlet of these reactions. But the process in which it is labeled as a traumatic experience does intersect at some points. These junctures are what Cathy Caruth takes as her primary study to analyze this emotion, called trauma. Caruth jots down the commonalities among different traumatic experiences of individuals to understand their origins. This paper will focus only on historical trauma and its related inferences.

The foremost understanding of Caruth's trauma theory is that trauma not only affects a single individual. It can also be developed among a collective conscious, leading to generations following the same effects. For a victim who has experienced an incident first-hand, the event's fear is passed on to the next generation. The second-generation take it upon themselves to imagine how it would have affected if they had not survived the event. Consequently, the third generation has an inbuilt fear of the unknown or impending danger that could affect their family. There forms a system of fear through generations. It also builds up genuine respect for the brave ancestors who have faced and survived unimaginable conditions. Now, imagine this being in among a close-knit community who share a common source of fear. That is how a community or a society can be affected collectively with/without their realization.

Another part of the trauma can also come from denial. It may be in terms of an identity crisis or covering up the fatalities of the event. It vastly contributes to the suppressing of trauma. But it also means that it would then lead to a repressive habit that will eventually blow out. For example, any country's history probably defines the lines of being victimized under a higher rule. Every reader of such a record will regard their own country with the utmost respect. An individual would probably cover up the experience or get acquainted with a group of like-minded people to reveal their side of affairs. In any way, the reactions would be from a state of a traumatic outburst.

The reactions bring in another story of what exactly trauma expects a person to do. According to Caruth, trauma does not seek revenge. It demands to be listened to and noticed. Seeking revenge to satisfy the trauma within the conscious of an individual is a misunderstanding of the emotion. The action does not matter here. Acknowledgment of an emotion present and answering its doubts is the right way to deal with it. The pop-culture notion of how a painful trauma needs to be satisfied with the same kind of effect on another thing or individual is misleading in many ways. Caruth brings in an example for this statement as well; the Freudian theory on nightmares. It denotes a wake-up call to listen to what the trauma intends to convey to the individual. There are various ways to answer it, including revenge. But resorting to it as the only form of justifying the event that has passed cannot make the trauma go away.

#### **4. HASIDIC COMMUNITY**

Judaism is a religion that consists of different sects. There is orthodox, unorthodox, and ultra-orthodox too. The livelihood of each sect varies vividly among each other. The Hasidic Jews are often regarded as the ultra-orthodox community. It is widely practiced in countries like the US and UK. The community, however, stays secluded within the large secular crowd to remain true to its roots. Their way of life stands out from the rest of the communities since most of the outsiders do not understand the reasons for their seclusion.

Historically speaking, The Hasidic Jews regard themselves to be the heirs of the ancestors directly affected by the Holocaust. Revisiting the reasons behind Holocaust answers a big deal of the existence of Hasidic Jews today. As Laurence Rees explains in his book, 'The Holocaust: A New History,' some of the most prominent reasons why the Holocaust occurred were- growing communism due to Jews, Germany's humiliation of loss in the world war; thereby looking for someone to take the blame for, and the Jewish slowly breaking down monarchical ways of ruling. In brief, the Germans felt threatened by the advancements of the Jews in such a short period. This was the situation in the early 1920s. Adolf Hitler, who inherently disliked the Jews, took advantage of this German nationalism. The following events leading to the Holocaust was mass genocide. Hitler's theory on not sparing even the Jewish children was due to the avenging possibilities in the future. According to Rees, if the war was won, there would have been complete extinction of the Jews. The loss in the war made Hitler restrict his actions within boundaries, and hence some victims survived.

Fortunately for the Jewish survivors, their faith in bonds was more vital than ever. The collective consciousness of gratitude was what motivated them to build a close-knit community. Their seclusion from other communities was a sign of building strength to face any form of danger together. They created it, believing that an event like the Holocaust will not be allowed to happen again in the future. Thus lay the foundation of the Hasidic Community. Their culture does not represent weakness as how most people perceive it. It is, in fact, one of the most robust cultures of harmony in existence.

## 5. UNORTHODOX SERIES

The memoirs of Deborah Feldman were the trauma through which she traveled and survived. She was a woman who felt that the culture of the orthodox Jewish community was restricting her idea of freedom. The individual struggles in such a community feature in the memoir and its Netflix series.

Keeping aside the drama part of the series, it answers many questions surrounding the close-knit community. The food, clothing, rituals, and prayers are all portrayed with a well-researched background. Since the plot conveys an individual's journey, there are few downsides in the community's honest religious portrayal. Although it did not intend to mock the religion, it did contribute to the possibility of it. Hence, to understand the plot in terms of historical trauma, unnecessary plot phases are organically removed.

Focusing on how trauma contributes to the plot, the lead, Esther (played by Shira Haas), brings in significant indicators for it. She was a person who was faithful to all the practices within the community. She understood, respected, and rejoiced over every phase experienced. Her mother was an ousted individual from the community as she refused to stick to the ideals served to her. Her father was a drunkard because of that, failing the first initial connection that the Hasidic Jews swore by- family. Esther found it liberating when she left the boundaries set within her marriage. Even though she was far from marriage pressures, she did not leave her faith in the culture. The respect for her ancestors and their struggles were not once questioned or mocked by her. Because that was the only truth, she was holding on to and convinced of. This is where the nature of historical trauma comes into play.

Her inhibition towards Berlin City, owing to its history, gives us an indicator of the trauma. Exploring the town, like any other tourist, was not an easy option for her. It could weaken her, prompting her to run back to the community for shelter. But the personal sense of freedom is what motivated her not to do so. Towards the end, although her hurdles are over, she still believes in the Hasidic culture. She is proud of her roots but chose to break free from the religious bounds that pressured her identity.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Unorthodox Netflix series is a drama that is closest in representing an honest portrayal of the Hasidic community. Although it does have its cons, the series has been widely appreciated by the Jewish. The history is acknowledged, the harmony is neatly portrayed, and culture does not seem to be labeled as a monotonous approach. These three factors hold an incredible amount of significance in the Hasidic community as well. Taking the series as a primary source was to ensure that the community's relative understanding is more comfortable to process with specific visuals in mind. The reason why a community prioritizes marriage as the holiest event in their lives and how cultural trauma plays a relevant role for the same is an interesting concept. Visualizing such a process could be done by reading. Getting a little sense of how it functions by watching a clip or two will be much easier to understand critically. Hence, the series was chosen as a propeller to elaborate on this thinking.

This paper's cultural trauma highlights the historical relevance of how a community is built upon such a foundation. From Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma and the history of the Holocaust, quite a few inferences are found. Trauma is a process of recollecting the experienced event over and over again. It seeks answers as to how such an incident that was unprepared for was survived in the first place. Trauma remembers only the after-effects of the experience and not at the time of the incident as such. It is a moment that you stop breathing for a while, a death-driving moment, as Caruth emphasizes. To know the answers to the event, one revisits the moment and wishes to forget its impact. This leaves a very complex condition, thereby resulting in trauma. Considering that a group experiences this collective impact and comes together, it is only natural for them to feel grateful for their existence. The Hasidic community grew out of this base, and so follows a culture that satisfies this ideology.

Some other aspects that have scope for analysis through this paper are nationalism, freedom, feminism, religion, and imagined identities.

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