

The Symbiotic Sisterhood: Analyzing Rituals of Shared Grief in “Midsommar”

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the portrayal of shared grief and communal healing in Ari Aster’s film “Midsommar”, focusing on the “Harga” community’s rituals through the lenses of Emile Durkheim’s functionalism and Ferdinand de Saussure’s visual-semiotic theory. The research investigates how these rituals foster a “symbiotic sisterhood” and facilitate the protagonist Dani’s transformation from isolation to belonging. Using qualitative visual-semiotic analysis, the study decodes the film’s symbolic imagery, communal ceremonies, and structured cultural practices. The findings reveal that the Harga’s ritualistic expressions of grief—such as the Attestupa and communal crying—serve not only as mechanisms for emotional release but also reinforce social cohesion, mirroring Durkheim’s theory of collective effervescence and organic solidarity. Dani’s participation in these rites catalyzes her psychological recovery from trauma, positioning the Harga women as a therapeutic support system. The study concludes that “Midsommar” subverts traditional Western notions of solitary mourning by presenting grief as a collective, functional force that forges identity, solidarity, and empowerment within a closed communal structure. This analysis contributes to broader discussions on how horror films visualize trauma, ritual, and gendered communal bonds in popular culture.

Keywords: *Rituals; Symbiotic Sisterhood; Midsommar; Film; Popular Culture.*

INTRODUCTION

Popular culture plays a significant role in shaping the worldview. People are continuously exposed to a variety of cultural influences due to the broad availability and consumption of media, including music, movies, television shows, social media, and video games. Their views, values, attitudes and behaviours may be greatly impacted by these influences (Mambetaliyevna, 2024). Popular culture serves as one of the most powerful and widespread storytellers because of how ubiquitous it is, offering symbolic resources that aid in understanding interpersonal connections and social interactions. The way we form our cultural identities and how we view different cultures and social groups are greatly influenced by popular culture. One means of disseminating popular culture is through the media. In today’s worldwide society, the media greatly influences how individuals view and portray culture.

Films are among the fastest mediums for cultural dissemination. Every year, the scale of the film business around the world grows rapidly. Films are divided into

various genres, including romance, horror, adventure, slice of life, and many more. One of the popular film genres is horror. In Horror, there are also sub genres, for example Supernatural, Psychological, Thriller, Found-Footage, Folk, even Horror Comedy.

“The horror film occupies in popular culture roughly comparable to that of horror literature” (Martin, 2019). They provide a secure and regulated space for individuals to explore and face their anxieties, and they have a psychological effect that elicits a spectrum of feelings in viewers and readers, from dread to relief. Through the years, horror films have undergone tremendous evolution, covering a variety of subgenres to suit a wide range of viewer interests.

“Midsommar”, a 2019 release of “highbrow horror” elicited enthusiastic reviews from both critics and audiences. It stars Florence Pugh, Jack Reynor, William Jackson Harper, and Will Poulter. The film delves into the culture of the fictional Hargreaves people and their midsummer festival in Sweden, with multiple anthropologists starring as key roles (Sutton, 2022). The film is known for its disturbing and visually striking depiction of a pagan cult in rural Sweden. The film centers on a group of college students who wind up in a terrible situation while attending a pagan festival in Sweden. This film is such a sophisticated, captivating piece of art because of a lot of things.

A remarkable feature of this film is how it depicts the idea of a “symbiotic sisterhood” among the “Hargreaves” community and how they deal with bereavement together. According to Megan Thomas in her article on the portrayal of grief in horror films (2020), “Midsommar” presents a communal mode of grieving that contrasts sharply with the Western ideal of solitary mourning (Thomas, 2020). This research also focuses on the concept of shared grief between Dani (the main character) with “Hargreaves” community. “Hargreaves” community’s unique rituals of shared grief and emotional expression offer a stark contrast to Dani’s isolated mourning at the beginning of the film. These rituals allow individuals to externalize their grief in a shared, almost therapeutic manner. This collective emotional experience creates a sense of belonging and catharsis for Dani.

This research uses Functionalism theory by Emile Durkheim (1893). Functionalism emphasizes the importance of social institutions and practices in maintaining societal cohesion and stability. According to Durkheim (1893), rituals are essential for promoting social integration because they serve to strengthen the collective conscience, the set of values and shared ideas that unite a group of people. In “Midsommar”, the “Hargreaves” customs, such as their joint celebrations and lamentations, are meant to strengthen their bonds as a community and as individuals. By ensuring that each person feels a part of the greater group, these rituals help to foster social cohesiveness. In “Midsommar”, the “Hargreaves” highly regimented rituals are performed on a regular basis, giving the community a sense of continuity and order. By symbolizing important life events and turning points, these rituals assist people in navigating their unique experiences within the framework of the community’s customs.

Therefore, from all these elaborations that related to The Symbiotic Sisterhood: Analyzing Rituals of Shared Grief in “Midsommar”, research questions are made as follow:

1. How does “Midsommar” portray the concept of shared grief through the rituals of the “Harga” community, and in what ways does this depiction reflect the idea of a symbiotic sisterhood?
2. How do the themes of trauma and recovery manifest through the interactions between Dani and the “Harga” community?

METHOD

This research use Visual-Semiotic Theory by Ferdinand de Saussure's to analyze “Midsommar”. Saussure's semiotic theory forms the basis for understanding how meaning is constructed through signs, and it significantly influences the field of visual semiotics. Saussure defined a sign as the combination of two elements, the signifier (the form the sign takes) and the signified (the concept it represents), and both components have connection to each other. As Saussure's notes “the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image” (Saussure, 1983). In visual semiotics, the signifier may take the form of colors, images, symbols, or composition, while the signified is the meaning or concept interpreted by the viewer.

Another important key concept in Saussure's theory is the contrast between language and parole. Language refers to an organized system of signals, similar to a language's grammar, whereas parole refers to specific expressions or applications of that system. This concept has been applied to visual communication, with visual language consisting of cultural rules and customs and visual parole referring to specific images or visual compositions (Chandler, 2017). The syntagmatic and associative (or paradigmatic) dimensions of signs also play a crucial role in visual semiotics. Syntagmatic relations refer to the linear or spatial arrangement of signs, such as the sequence of panels in a comic strip or the composition of elements in a photograph. Associative relations, on the other hand, involve the mental connections between signs, such as how a crown might evoke associations with power, monarchy, or luxury. These relationships help decode visual narratives and symbolic layers in art, media, and design (Rudloff & Kjaerboe, 2022).

Saussure's influence lives on in studies of branding, film, digital media, and even urban architecture, where pictures and symbols are decoded as components of broader sign systems. His approach emphasizes that visual meaning is not permanent or inherent but rather created through relationship differences and shared conventions. This perspective enables critical examinations of how power, ideology, and culture impact visual communication, making Saussure's work vital in the subject. Saussure's semiotic theory gives critical tools for deconstructing visual culture by exposing how signals function within hierarchical systems of meaning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Shared Grief and Symbiotic Sisterhood in “Midsommar”.

Perhaps the summertime blockbuster of 2019 is “Midsommar”. The visually beautiful daytime nightmare by writer-director Ari Aster follows four Americans as they travel to a pagan commune in rural Sweden to witness a summer solstice celebration complete with ceremonial human sacrifice. More than that, “Midsommar” offers a terrifying examination of bereavement, camaraderie, and mutually beneficial relationships through the customs of the imaginary Swedish hamlet of “Harga”. This film follows the main character, Dani, as she struggles to move past a profound personal tragedy and finds comfort in the customs and shared experiences of the “Harga” people.

The rituals of the “Harga” community play a crucial role in elucidating the shared mourning theme. Through the use of these rituals, people can undergo collective catharsis and process their grief together. This stands in sharp contrast to the lonely grieving process Dani goes through before moving into the commune. A poignant instance illustrating collective mourning is the *Attestupa* or the custom of senior members jumping to their deaths. Notwithstanding its brutality, this is a communal experience in which everyone in the town watches and shares in the grief. It underlines that grieving is a shared experience rather than a lonely burden. As Aster describes in an interview, *“the film depicts an unflinching look at how different cultures process grief and trauma through ritualistic practices”* (McDougall, 2019). Dani's shared grief in “Midsommar” plays a crucial role in her emotional journey. It begins with her overwhelming personal loss — her family's murder-suicide — which isolates her deeply. Her grief is usually portrayed as internal, but it shifts when she begins to connect with the “Harga” community and its rituals.



Figure 1. [Dani's scene breaks down in tears]

Another poignant scene is when Dani discovers her boyfriend's infidelity and breaks down in tears. The “Harga” women's huddle up around her, echoing her sobs and feeling her anguish together. This scenario serves as both a visual and aural depiction of shared loss, in which each person's suffering is taken in and mirrored by the community. Rebecca Williams stated that *“The communal crying ritual in “Midsommar” functions as a therapeutic release, turning personal agony into a shared emotional*

experience” (Williams, 2020). Her crying, emotional vulnerability, and eventual acceptance of her loss are symbolic acts of shared mourning.



Figure 2. [Dani's scene breaks down in tears]

A transformation from alienation to belonging can be observed in Dani's assimilation into the “*Harga*”. Dani is hugged and led through the customs and ceremonies of the commune by the “*Harga*” women's, especially with Pelle. This integration represents a kind of supportive and symbiotic sisterhood where Dani's vulnerability is greeted with group support. When the “*Harga*” women accepted Dani, she underwent a significant metamorphosis, going from being a bereaved outsider to an essential member of a caring sisterhood (Smith, 2019).



Figure 3. [Dani's become May Queen]

Dani's journey comes to a head when she is crowned the May Queen, a position that represents rebirth and rejuvenation. This ritual is a celebration of the community as well as a moment of personal achievement. One could see Dani's promotion to May Queen as the pinnacle of acceptance into the sisterhood, where her sorrow is channelled into a source of group power. In this sense, “*Midsommar*” illustrates the mutually beneficial link between the individual and the community, in which one's own recovery promotes the wellbeing of all (Thompson, 2021). Within the community, grief becomes a communal experience rather than solely an individual one. The “*Harga's*” rituals, like the May Queen selection and the communal ceremonies, serve as collective rites of mourning and rebirth. Dani's participation in these rituals allows her to share her grief openly with others, transforming her personal

trauma into a collective experience. This sharing fosters a sense of belonging and understanding she lacked in her previous life and relationship (Sonat, 2025).

The functioning of the “*Harga*” community in “Midsommar” can be examined through the functionalist theory of Emile Durkheim (1893), with a focus on the concepts of symbiotic sisterhood and shared mourning. According to functionalism, social norms and institutions have certain purposes that support societal cohesiveness and stability. This theoretical framework can be used to analyze the rites and conventions of the “*Harga*” community in “Midsommar”. Durkheim argued that rituals are integral to social cohesion, providing a sense of solidarity and collective identity. The rituals of grief in the “*Harga*” community serve functional purposes that resonate with Durkheim's theory. Grief rituals among the “*Harga*”, like the Attestupa and group weeping, help to reintegrate newcomers into the group. Through the shared emotional experiences these rituals foster, social ties and solidarity are reinforced. According to Durkheim (1912) theory, rituals serve to strengthen collective consciousness and make people feel a part of a greater social totality. In “Midsommar”, Dani's involvement in these customs signifies her transition from an outsider to a member of the community at large.

Durkheim (1912) said that *“the function of mourning rites is not to purge painful feelings or comfort them. Their function is to bring the woman out of her isolation and to make the woman in her grief feel that she is not alone, but that she is with other women who are also attached to her at the same time as she is attached to them”* (Durkheim, 1912). Durkheim developed the theory of collective effervescence, in which rituals heighten emotional fervour and a sense of communal cohesion. In “Midsommar”, this idea is embodied in the group rituals, especially the May Queen ceremony. Collective effervescence, when shared emotions and experiences promote social cohesion and solidarity among the “*Harga*”, as exemplified by the community's celebration and support for Dani as the May Queen. Within the community, the “*Harga*” women play certain tasks that are essential to its operation. From assisting Dani with customs to engaging in group events, every woman contributes to preserving the social harmony and order within the society. Durkheim (1893) also stated that social duties are intertwined and create a coherent framework that guarantees the stability and continuation of society. The “*Harga*” women's symbiotic sisterhood is reminiscent of Durkheim's idea of organic solidarity, in which people's roles and relationships are predicated on interdependence and mutual assistance. Social roles and relationships have a crucial part in promoting social integration and stability within the “*Harga*” community, as seen by Dani's journey from seclusion to acceptance within this sisterhood.

The themes of trauma and recovery through Dani's interactions with the “*Harga*” community.

In “Midsommar”, Dani Ardour's character is tremendously influenced by the tragedy she has experienced, especially the death of her family. This trauma is a major factor in her emotional condition and how she interacts with the “*Harga*” community. Through the “*Harga*” community rituals, Dani's journey in the film could be

understood as a process of facing and integrating her trauma. These rituals act as a coping strategy for Dani and as a driving force behind her mental development. For instance, the “*Harga*’s” community activities offer Dani a structured framework within which to process her grief, albeit in ways that are very disturbing and unorthodox (McDougall, 2019). During her intense sense of loss and loneliness, Dani finds a sense of kinship in the “*Harga*” community. Dani first finds comfort and a nurturing atmosphere in the community lifestyle of the “*Harga*”, which is defined by shared beliefs and customs. But as Dani gets more immersed in the society, she starts to see the darker sides of their customs and how they take advantage of her weakness (Marriott, 2019).

Heller-Nicholas (2020) argues that Dani’s integration into the “*Harga*” community symbolizes a complex negotiation between trauma and acceptance within the communal framework. Dani’s notions of loss and identity are challenged by the rituals, which also provide her with a way towards recovery. For instance, Dani is forced to face her dread of death and mortality in a frightening yet transformational way during the *Attestupa* ceremony, where elders voluntarily sacrifice themselves. Dani’s journey involves repressing negative feelings, seeking approval from others, and ultimately reclaiming her power and agency. Christian’s emotional unavailability contributes to the strain in his relationship with Dani and for that, she blames herself for the problems in their relationship, showing internalized guilt and self-blame (Schultz, 2020). Goldman (2019) stated that “*In the village of “Harga”, Dani begins to release her pain, gaining the support of a community who welcomes her trauma*”. The secluded and ritualistic environment of “*Harga*” serves as a catalyst for Dani’s emotional healing and growth.

The communal support and acceptance she receive in this environment provide a space for Dani to explore her trauma, confront her inner struggles, and ultimately find a sense of liberation. The communal setting of “*Harga*” provides Dani with a sense of belonging and acceptance, contrasting with the isolation and repression she experienced in her previous environment (Goldstein, 2020). The community’s response to Dani’s trauma reflects a collective understanding of pain and a willingness to support her in her healing process.

Even if it is extreme, this collective empathy shows the potential advantages of sharing emotional experiences. The film illustrates how individual sorrow is turned into a shared experience through group activities and collective grieving customs. This procedure enhances the links of the community among the members, especially the women, and offers the bereaved person a deep sense of empathy and support. The way these issues are portrayed encourages viewers to consider the nature of loss, community, and the strong bonds that may form between people who have gone through similar circumstances (Goldstein, 2020). Dani’s recovery from trauma is facilitated by shared grief through the community’s rituals, which give her an outlet, acceptance, and ultimately, psychological liberation. She moves from isolated suffering to collective renewal, embracing her trauma as part of a larger, regenerative cycle (Sonat, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Through the prism of Emile Durkheim's functionalist theory, Ari Aster's "Midsommar" explains the complexity of interpersonal relationships and the symbiotic relationship between brotherhood and community. The film depicts rituals as an important mechanism for maintaining social harmony and stability, in line with Durkheim's assertion that collective identities are strengthened, and individuals are integrated through collective practices. The "Harga" community's rituals, such as the Anttestupa and group weeping, demonstrate how grief is worked with by shared experiences, turning personal sadness into group catharsis. In addition to offering emotional release, these rituals help people integrate into the community, which promotes a feeling of camaraderie and group exuberance. This is consistent with Durkheim's theory that rituals fortify social ties and reinforce collective consciousness.

This film also shows the "Harga" women as a symbiotic sisterhood, demonstrating functional interdependence. Durkheim's theory of organic solidarity is illustrated by the ways in which each woman's position within the society contributes to its overall stability and continuation. Dani's transformation from a recluse to the May Queen serves as a powerful example of how the "Harga" society's social structure and nurturing ties promote both individual and group healing. Dani finds that the "Harga's" community and compassionate grieving process stands in stark contrast to Christian's emotionally detached demeanour. Dani experiences a kind of catharsis through the community's rituals, which enables her to face her trauma in a way she was unable to in her prior setting. Important events, like the May Queen ritual and the last act of release in which she selects Christian as the sacrifice, represent her empowerment and rebirth and enable her to relinquish her agency and the weight of guilt.

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