

Dani's Journey from Existential Despair to Communal Liberation in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*

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Abstract

This article examines Dani's psychological and existential journey in *Midsommar* as a search for meaning in the aftermath of catastrophic loss. Grounded in existential philosophy and psychological analysis, the study explores how fundamental human questions—identity, purpose, and belonging—emerge with particular intensity during trauma. Dani's initial sources of meaning, namely family and romantic companionship, collapse following the murder-suicide of her parents and sister and the emotional indifference of her partner Christian. This rupture produces a state comparable to the existential vacuum, marked by anxiety, isolation, and dependence. The article then analyses Dani's gradual incorporation into the Harga commune as a structured process of symbolic initiation comprising invitation, welcome, traumatic testing, communal training, ritual anointing, emotional assurance, and final union. Through synchronized mourning, ecstatic dance, fertility rites, mythic symbolism, and psychedelic experience, the community transforms private grief into collective expression, thereby offering Dani a framework of belonging that modern secular life had denied her. Particular attention is given to the film's portrayal of mass empathy, ritualized violence, and the dissolution of individual identity within communal consciousness. While Dani's coronation as May Queen and her concluding smile suggest existential, psychological, and quasi-religious liberation, the study argues that this resolution remains ethically ambiguous, as it requires submission to a morally troubling order sustained by sacrifice. The article concludes that the film presents both a critique of contemporary emotional alienation and a cautionary meditation on the human vulnerability to totalizing communities that promise unconditional meaning.

Keywords: Existential Angst; Search for Meaning; Communal Identity; Psychological Transformation, Liberation

Midsommar offers an immediate experience of horror for first-time viewers; however, its artistic and thematic complexity renders it highly amenable to diverse critical interpretations. The film is densely structured around ritual practices, cultic belief systems, and ethnographic motifs that evoke anthropological inquiry, while simultaneously functioning within the conventions of contemporary folk horror. Its narrative architecture is further enriched by the director's sophisticated use of cinematic techniques, including montage, visual foreshadowing, symbolic prefiguration, and meticulously composed modern cinematography. These formal strategies operate not merely as aesthetic embellishments but as integral components of meaning production, gradually disclosing narrative outcomes and psychological states through visual suggestion rather than explicit exposition. Consequently, the film sustains multiple layers of interpretation, inviting readings grounded in cultural studies, psychoanalysis, religious symbolism, and film theory.

A particularly notable achievement lies in Ari Aster's nuanced character construction, especially in the portrayal of Dani Ardor. Dani's trajectory may be understood as analogous to that of a bildungsroman character, undergoing a transformative journey shaped by existential crisis, psychological trauma, and quasi-spiritual initiation. Her progression from grief-stricken isolation to communal integration reflects a complex process of identity reconstitution rather than simple narrative resolution. Throughout

the film, her experiences function simultaneously as personal coping mechanisms and as ritualized stages of rebirth within the Harga community. This layered development, combining emotional vulnerability with symbolic metamorphosis, demonstrates Aster's capacity to fuse character psychology with broader thematic concerns about belonging, loss, and meaning. As a result, Dani emerges not merely as a victim within a horror narrative but as a figure whose evolution encapsulates existential, psychological, and spiritual dimensions, thereby reinforcing the film's status as a work of substantial analytical depth.

Critical responses to *Midsommar* frequently focus on the film's unsettling representation of sexuality and trauma, particularly the controversial ritual sex scene. The study "Ambiguous Sex in Critical Receptions to Ari Aster's *Midsommar*" examines how the scene destabilizes conventional notions of consent by situating intercourse within intoxication, ritual pressure, and communal control, enabling divergent interpretations that range from consensual participation to rape. This ambiguity, the authors argue, exposes tensions in contemporary Western understandings of sexual assault, especially regarding male victimhood and rape myths. Shifting from sexual ethics to psychological experience, Cicilia Bella's thesis "DaniArdor's Reactions toward her Trauma in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*" interprets the protagonist's behaviour as symptomatic of severe trauma following her family's death, emphasizing panic attacks, emotional dependency, and maladaptive

coping. Katarina Anggita's "Negotiation of the Abject through the Representation of the Monstrous-Feminine in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*," drawing on Barbara Creed and Julia Kristeva, presents Dani as embodying the monstrous-feminine. Through her interaction with the Harga commune, which represents a semiotic, nature-oriented order opposed to the rational Western Symbolic embodied by her boyfriend Christian, Dani negotiates abjection and ultimately integrates into a new communal identity grounded in shared affect and ritual.

Other scholars extend the analysis to ideological, feminist, and aesthetic dimensions. Monica Wolfe's "Mapping Imperialist Movement in Postmodern Horror Film *Midsommar*" reads the narrative as an allegory of globalization and American imperialism, contrasting a corrupt urban West with an idealized yet resistant pastoral Other, thereby destabilizing colonial binaries and exposing anxieties about Western dominance. Diana G. Schultz's "She is Finally Free: An Analysis of Women's Pathologized Oppression and Reclamation of the Abject in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Midsommar*" compares the film with *The Yellow Wallpaper* to argue that Dani's trajectory represents the reclamation of abject forces historically used to pathologize women, transforming them into sources of empowerment against patriarchal control. Spadoni's "*Midsommar*: Thing Theory" focuses on the transformation of bodies into symbolic objects within ritual systems, suggesting that Dani's grief becomes meaningful through incorporation into a

communal sacrificial economy. Complementing this material perspective, McManus's "Processing Trauma Sonically in Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019): Hauntology, Harmonic Signifiers, and Diegetic Vocality" emphasizes the auditory dimension of trauma, interpreting the communal mirroring of Dani's cries as a process that converts private anguish into shared, ritualized experience. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that *Midsommar* sustains multiple interpretive frameworks—sexual ethics, trauma psychology, feminist theory, imperial critique, material ontology, and sound studies—while persistently resisting any single, definitive reading.

This study seeks to examine whether Dani ultimately attains the fulfillment she appears to pursue throughout her trajectory in *Midsommar*. To this end, the analysis traces the critical junctures of her journey, subjecting each phase to systematic examination in order to identify the various responses she encounters to her existential distress and to evaluate the extent to which these responses address her psychological, liberative and ontological needs. By situating her experiences within relevant theoretical frameworks, the study aims to assess how successive encounters – with personal relationships, traumatic memory, and the ritual structure of the Harga community – functions as provisional solutions to her crisis of meaning, and whether these solutions provide genuine resolution or merely temporary accommodation.

Accordingly, the investigation is guided by three principal research questions. First, to what extent does Dani exhibit an urgent and sustained search for existential meaning in the aftermath of her traumatic loss? Second, what forms of explanation, belonging, or consolation does she adopt at different stages of the narrative as potential answers to this quest? Third, does her final integration into the Harga community constitute an ultimate and liberating resolution to her search for meaning? Through addressing these questions, the study aims to clarify whether Dani's transformation signifies authentic existential fulfillment.

Human existence has long been marked by a persistent search for meaning, a concern addressed across philosophy, psychology, and theology and articulated with particular depth in existentialism through thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Existential thought emphasizes that human beings are not defined by a predetermined essence but must create meaning through free choice and responsible action, a condition that produces both the possibility of authentic existence and the burden of anxiety. This quest for meaning is not merely abstract but emerges vividly in lived experiences of suffering, loss, alienation, and uncertainty, which often precipitate crises of identity and purpose in literary and cinematic narratives. Existential psychology translates these philosophical insights into a clinical framework, interpreting psychological distress as a response to fundamental human

dilemmas such as death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness, rather than solely as pathology, and highlighting phenomena such as the existential vacuum, a painful sense of purposelessness that can follow trauma or disconnection from meaningful relationships and values. Therapeutic approaches therefore aim not to eliminate anxiety but to help individuals confront their condition, assume responsibility, and construct purposeful lives through commitments, relationships, creativity, or belief systems. Theological perspectives further interpret the search for meaning as a spiritual journey toward liberation or transcendence, often conceived as a movement from egocentric existence toward alignment with ultimate reality, a transformation described by John Hick as a shift from self-centeredness to reality-centred living that integrates personal change with ethical engagement and communal belonging. Taken together, these philosophical, psychological, and theological frameworks portray meaning-seeking as a defining human activity involving the negotiation of freedom and responsibility, isolation and connection, despair and hope. Applied to *Midsommar*, this integrated perspective illuminates Dani's trajectory as an existential passage from grief-stricken alienation toward a form of symbolic belonging within the Harga community, a transformation that may be interpreted either as authentic liberation through emotional recognition and communal integration or as an ambiguous psychological refuge from trauma, thereby underscoring the existential insight that human beings are driven by a profound need for meaning, identity, and connection.

The first part of the discussion examines Dani's existential anguish in *Midsommar* through a network of symbolic expressions, particularly vocal and affective gestures such as screams, cries, ritual mourning, sexual groaning, horns, and smiles. These elements are interpreted as outward manifestations of her inner crisis and her search for meaning. The film's rich symbolic texture, especially its use of ritual actions and visual prefiguration, foregrounds communal life as a counterpoint to Dani's isolation. The tapestries that decorate the Harga environment, depicting collective rituals and shared joy without emphasis on individual identity, reinforce the primacy of group belonging. Dani's observation that the place feels "like another world" (00:47:23) signals her perception of an alternative social order defined by unity and emotional reciprocity. Within this symbolic universe, actions such as screaming or smiling function not merely as personal expressions but as markers of psychological transition and character development, charting Dani's movement from alienation toward possible integration.

A central symbolic motif is the scream, broadly defined as a high-pitched vocalization of extreme emotion or pain. The study subsumes various sonic phenomena under this category, including the cry of a child, ritual lamentation, sexual vocalization, ceremonial music, processional instruments, tragic horns, communal breathing exercises, and traditional songs. The film itself opens with a ritual chant or subdued form of screaming (00:00:35) accompanying a dark visual landscape, suggestive of the silent

inner suffering that characterizes human existence. This motif intensifies in the montage depicting the murder-suicide of Dani's parents and sister, where her anguished cry: "No no no..." (00:11:22) is layered with emergency sirens and dramatic scoring, amplifying the sense of helplessness and irreversible loss. This moment constitutes the first in a series of screams that punctuate Dani's journey, symbolizing not only grief but also profound loneliness and social disconnection. Although the film offers limited information about her prior familial relationships, the tragedy effectively removes her primary source of belonging, leaving her existentially unmoored.

The discussion further contrasts these expressions of anguish with the symbolic function of the smile, which is treated as an indicator of psychological state rather than mere facial gesture. Dani's repeated but incomplete smiles throughout the narrative signal dissatisfaction and an unfulfilled search for meaning, whereas her final, fully realized smile suggests the attainment of existential resolution. From an existentialist perspective, her earlier screams embody anxiety, absurdity, and the desperate quest for purpose, resonating with Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of existential dissatisfaction. Conversely, the empathetic wailing of the Harga community during ritual mourning may be interpreted as a communal response that offers belonging and emotional mirroring, aligning with Martin Buber's emphasis on relational existence and the liberating potential of genuine companionship. Thus, screams in

the film function ambiguously both as symptoms of existential distress and as pathways toward its resolution, while the collective expression of grief suggests that Dani's search for meaning finds its provisional answer in communal participation rather than individual autonomy

Dani's journey in *Midsommar* can be interpreted as a conscious or unconscious search for existential meaning, initially grounded in her familial relationships. Her parents and sister functioned as stabilizing sources of identity within an otherwise alienating world; their sudden loss leaves her emotionally down and desperate for attachment. In the aftermath, Christian becomes her sole remaining anchor, though the relationship is fraught with tension and asymmetry. Christian perceives Dani's grief-driven dependency as burdensome, particularly after she discovers that he had planned a trip to Sweden without informing her. Episodes of memory-triggered distress recur throughout this phase: when Pelle sympathetically recounts his own parental loss, Dani retreats to a bathroom to cry privately (00:23:09), releasing another anguished scream. This moment, echoed later in the airplane lavatory, functions as a cathartic attempt to purge overwhelming grief, paralleling the communal emotional release practiced by the Harga. Her facial expressions during these interactions convey profound depression and confusion, suggesting a state of existential absurdity in which conventional sources of meaning fail to provide consolation.

Following the loss of her family, Dani seeks purpose in her relationship with Christian, yet her efforts repeatedly expose the inadequacy of this substitute. Her forced smile among Christian's friends (00:13:47–00:13:52) becomes a strained performance that collapses into artificiality, symbolizing her unsuccessful attempt to assimilate into a social environment that does not reciprocate her emotional needs. Christian's behaviour – forgetting her birthday, prioritizing his academic ambitions, appropriating Josh's thesis idea, and engaging in ritualized intercourse with another woman – reveals a pattern of self-interest and emotional detachment. Pelle's pointed question, "Do you feel held by him?" (01:11:22), crystallizes the imbalance, implying that Christian provides neither security nor recognition. Dani's dependence is further emphasized in moments such as resting her head on his lap (00:11:22) and her anxious reassurance during their early phone conversation ("Very lucky to have you, I love you," (00:05:50)), where she suppresses her own distress to comfort him. Even when she is crowned May Queen, her instinct is to seek his approval, which he fails to provide (01:42:22–01:46:37). These cumulative disappointments suggest that Christian cannot serve as a meaningful foundation for her existence, and his eventual ritual death becomes narratively linked to her movement toward an alternative form of belonging.

The symbolic significance of Christian's name further invites interpretation, as it evokes institutional religion – a domain traditionally associated with offering ultimate meaning and

consolation. In this reading, Dani's reliance on Christian parallels the human tendency to seek existential answers in religious structures; however, his emotional indifference and moral failures imply that such reliance may be misplaced or insufficient, recalling existential critiques such as Jean-Paul Sartre's declaration of the absence of divine guarantees. Christian's inability to acknowledge Dani's suffering, coupled with his reluctance to end the relationship honestly, underscores his inadequacy as both partner and symbolic saviour. Secondary characters reinforce this perspective: Josh and Mark regard Dani as a burdensome presence, while the engaged couple from London – Connie and Simon – highlight the stagnation of Dani and Christian's undefined relationship ("How long are you two together? ... three and a half years... four years and two weeks," (00:43:53)). Dani's enthusiastic response to their engagement (00:44:44) reveals her awareness that her own relationship lacks formal commitment or identity. Collectively, these dynamics demonstrate that neither romantic attachment nor quasi-religious dependence on Christian provides the existential fulfillment Dani seeks, thereby intensifying her vulnerability to the alternative community that ultimately absorbs her.

Within *Midsommar*, the recurrent motif of sleeping pills and other intoxicants further illuminates Dani's fragile psychological state and her attempts to cope with overwhelming trauma. Dani resorts to such medication at moments of acute distress: she obtains sleeping pills from Josh after witnessing the shocking suicide ritual

(01:14:23) and again following Mark's disappearance (01:31:30), while an earlier scene already establishes her reliance on them when she is troubled by doubts about her relationship with Christian (00:06:32). These episodes suggest a pattern in which pharmacological sedation becomes a means of suspending consciousness when reality becomes intolerable. The pills do not resolve her anguish but temporarily mute it, allowing her to withdraw from a world that offers no immediate consolation. Her self-soothing repetition – “you're okay, you're okay” (00:32:10) – reveals both her awareness of emotional instability and her desire to maintain composure without confronting the underlying causes of her suffering. In this sense, the medication functions as a symbolic strategy of avoidance, an attempt to escape rather than process existential pain. The film contrasts Dani's private use of sedatives with the broader culture of intoxicants among the visiting group and the Harga community, thereby expanding the motif from individual coping mechanism to collective practice. Mark's casual consumption of drugs reflects a hedonistic impulse to trivialize the seriousness of what he perceives as an exotic “once-in-a-lifetime” experience, culminating in his act of sacrilege – urinating on the ancestral tree – which provokes communal outrage and ultimately contributes to his fate. By contrast, the Harga employ intoxicants within a ritual framework: during the final sacrificial ceremony, Ingemar and Ulf are administered a preparation derived from the yew tree so that they will feel neither pain nor fear as they face death (02:18:14). In both cases, substances serve to alter perception

and diminish the impact of suffering, yet their meanings diverge sharply as the one expresses irreverent escapism while the other expresses ritualized transcendence. Dani's usage occupies an intermediate position: unlike Mark, she does not seek pleasure, and unlike the Harga, she lacks a communal structure that imbues her suffering with meaning.

Taken together, these instances underscore the existential dimension of Dani's predicament. Intoxicants offer only a provisional reprieve from the harsh awakening of grief, anxiety, and isolation; they cannot address the deeper crisis of meaning that permeates her existence. Existential anguish, as portrayed in the film, penetrates body, mind, and affect, rendering ordinary coping mechanisms inadequate and unpredictable in their outcomes. Dani's reliance on pills therefore signals not weakness but the intensity of her distress and her desperate need for relief in the absence of supportive relationships. Ultimately, the narrative juxtaposes these temporary escapes with the more radical transformation she later undergoes within the Harga community, suggesting that while sedation can dull pain, it cannot provide the enduring sense of belonging and purpose she seeks.

In *Midsommar*, Ari Aster foreshadows Dani's eventual attraction to communal belonging even before her formal integration into the Harga society. After experiencing the hallucinatory vision of 'breathing trees,' she wanders through the landscape and encounters a group of villagers sitting together,

singing and laughing; however, she interprets their laughter as mockery directed at her (00:31:15). This misreading reveals the depth of her psychological distress: unable to trust her perceptions or regulate her emotions, she construes ordinary social interaction as a personal affront. Her attempt to flee from grief and traumatic memory renders both nature and human companionship sources of anxiety rather than comfort. Such alienation exemplifies an advanced stage of existential crisis in which the individual cannot find equilibrium within the self, the environment, or interpersonal relationships, resulting in confusion, hyper-vigilance, and emotional instability.

The film subsequently introduces the cohesive cultural life of the Harga through music, dance, and ritualized performance, presented as primordial forms of communal interaction. The villagers welcome their guests with pipe music (00:35:24) and accompany processions with drums (00:38:38), while the elaborate dance competition that culminates in the selection of the May Queen embodies collective participation and joy. Dani's brief smile during her first encounter with the village and its customs (00:35:45) functions as a subtle prefiguration of her future role within this society. The procession leads to a ceremonial platform where Siv proclaims the Midsummer feast (00:40:30), followed by shared consumption of ritual beverages, communal breathing exercises, and rehearsals of ceremonial practices (00:51:26). Notably, every activity – work, worship, sustenance, and

celebration – is performed collectively under the guidance of elders, emphasizing the absence of individualism and the centrality of shared identity. Through these scenes, the film contrasts Dani's prior isolation with a social structure that appears to offer emotional mirroring, stability, and purpose.

Symbolic artifacts further reinforce this communal orientation, particularly the prominence of drawings, runic inscriptions, and tapestries that function as visual repositories of myth, ritual knowledge, and cultural memory. The community's reliance on such images – most notably the revered drawings of Ruben – underscores the transmission of tradition across generations. Within this context, Pelle's birthday gift of Dani's portrait assumes special significance. Rather than idealizing her, he depicts her realistically as half-crying, confused, and sorrowful, accurately capturing her psychological condition as one suspended between trauma and the search for meaning. This act of recognition contrasts sharply with the emotional neglect she experiences elsewhere, suggesting the possibility of being truly 'seen' within the community. Consequently, Dani's movement toward a new phase of existence begins not with dramatic conversion but with subtle experiences of acknowledgment, participation, and symbolic inclusion, indicating that her perceived liberation emerges from the promise of belonging rather than from the resolution of her inner turmoil.

In *Midsommar*, the recurring cry of the child functions as a poignant parallel to Dani's own suppressed anguish. The infant's incessant night-time crying symbolically externalizes Dani's inner turmoil and unresolved grief, particularly her loss of the familial bonds that once grounded her existence. Having previously derived meaning from her parents and sister, she now confronts an emotional void, and the child's distress becomes an auditory reminder of that absence. The communal caregiving structure of the Harga – where the child is tended collectively rather than by biological parents – contrasts sharply with Dani's experience of irreversible familial loss while simultaneously offering a model of substitute belonging. Observing the baby and its caretakers, Dani encounters a form of social support that she herself lacks, suggesting the possibility of emotional containment within the group. Her tender interaction with the child during breakfast (00:54:36) further indicates displacement: she appears to project onto the infant her longing for her deceased sister and the nurturing environment she once possessed. Through this vocal motif, Ari Aster underscores both deprivation and potential restoration – the child embodies the warmth Dani has lost while also prefiguring the communal matrix that might replace it.

The ritual suicide of the elders intensifies the film's exploration of shared suffering through collective vocal expression. When the male elder survives his fall but lies incapacitated, his agonized screams are immediately echoed by the community, who

wail in unison until his death is completed by a ritual hammer blow (01:03:38). This synchronized lament transforms individual pain into communal experience, dramatizing an ethic of radical empathy in which no member suffers alone. For Dani, who witnesses the event with horror, the spectacle resonates with her own traumatic memories, culminating in her own anguished scream near the tepee (01:06:32). The director's strategic use of silence amplifies the shock, allowing her reaction to carry the emotional weight of the scene. Subsequent nightmare imagery (01:16:13), in which the dead elders appear as substitutes for her parents with her sister positioned between them, reveals the extent to which the ritual has reactivated unresolved grief. The dream also depicts her companions abandoning her, underscoring her fear of isolation and her desperate need for relational security, particularly from Christian. At this juncture, Dani appears trapped in an existential impasse – compelled to continue living while deprived of the relationships that once provided meaning.

The May Queen dance sequence marks a decisive transition from alienation to provisional inclusion. As Dani participates in the ritual competition, her demeanour shifts from anxiety to exhilaration; under the influence of hallucinogens and collective energy, she even speaks the Harga language, signaling deep immersion in the group's symbolic order. Her momentary confusion arises only when she seeks validation from Christian and encounters emotional indifference, after which she relinquishes her attachment to him and

yields fully to the communal experience. The coronation functions as an initiation rite, formally integrating her into the Harga and enabling temporary amnesia regarding prior suffering. More broadly, the film constructs a sustained contrast between Western individualism and Harga collectivism: child-rearing, education, sexuality, spirituality, and daily life are organized communally rather than around personal autonomy. The companionship of Dani with Christian, Josh, and Mark – marked by detachment and self-interest – is juxtaposed with Pelle, Ingemar, and their kin, whose relationships are structured around interdependence. Even the visual motif of the vehicle turning upside down during the journey to the village (00:24:30) symbolically signals a reversal of Dani's existential orientation, inaugurating a paradigm shift from isolated selfhood toward communal identity. Through these layered contrasts, the film portrays Dani's search for meaning as a passage from solitary suffering to a form of belonging that, while potentially liberating, remains deeply ambivalent.

In *Midsommar*, companionship within the Harga community is portrayed as organic, collective, and fundamentally detached from conventional notions of nuclear family. Biological parenthood and siblinghood are subordinated to communal belonging: children are conceived through astrologically sanctioned unions approved by elders and rose collectively, reinforcing the idea that all members constitute a single extended family. Consequently, individual gain or loss carries little significance apart from the welfare of the

whole. This collectivist ethos also underlies the covert strategy through which outsiders are recruited as sacrificial participants in the Midsummer rites. Pelle's role in bringing his American companions to the village – an act for which he is later praised – demonstrates the primacy of communal loyalty over personal attachment. He exhibits no remorse for deceiving friends whose deaths become necessary for ritual completion, because his primary allegiance is to the Harga rather than to the comparatively superficial bonds of Western friendship. In this moral framework, communal continuity outweighs individual relationships, and sacrifice is construed not as betrayal but as service to the collective.

By contrast, the friendships among Christian, Mark, and Josh exemplify an individualistic and instrumental model of social relations. Their interactions are shaped by self-interest rather than empathy, and Dani's emotional dependency is viewed as an encumbrance rather than a legitimate response to trauma. In *Midsommar*, Mark's remark – “you could make that girl pregnant right now” (00:08:12) – reveals a reductive view of intimacy in which sexuality is treated as a purely biological act devoid of emotional responsibility or relational depth. His irritation at Christian's continued attachment to Dani further underscores a utilitarian conception of companionship grounded in personal convenience rather than mutual care. In sharp contrast, sexual relations within the Harga community are subordinated to collective objectives: unions are arranged for reproductive suitability, and

offspring are raised communally rather than within exclusive family units. Although individual pair-bonding is minimized, this system paradoxically embodies a broader form of commitment and continuity, as sexuality is integrated into the social and spiritual life of the commune rather than isolated as private gratification. Mark and Josh repeatedly imply that Christian's concern for Dani restricts his personal freedom, while their crude comparisons reduce her attachment to something trivial or transactional. Dani's nightmare further exposes her perception of their true disposition: she imagines herself abandoned in an alien environment, surrounded by the corpses of her parents, symbolizing both the irreplaceable significance of family and the emotional insufficiency of her companions. Tensions among the men regarding academic competition reinforce this utilitarian orientation. Josh's primary motivation for visiting the village is to gather material for his doctoral research, and he resents Christian's attempt to appropriate his topic, while Mark's irreverent behaviour, culminating in acts of sacrilege, reveals his inability to respect the community he exploits as spectacle. These dynamics illustrate a social order in which relationships are valued chiefly for their personal utility, echoing existential insights such as Jean-Paul Sartre's notion that 'the other' can become a source of conflict and alienation.

Opposed to this individualistic paradigm, the Harga embody a relational model closer to what Martin Buber conceptualizes as the 'I-Thou' relationship, grounded in mutual presence and shared

existence rather than objectification. Within the commune, resources, responsibilities, and emotional life are collectively distributed; each member fulfills a defined role, ensuring that no one remains isolated or purposeless. This contrast is particularly evident in attitudes toward parental loss. Dani's bereavement precipitates a profound existential crisis because her identity was anchored in her nuclear family, whereas Pelle's similar loss does not destabilize him, as he continues to experience belonging within the communal structure. His statement, "I had a family... a real family" (01:11:22), underscores the distinction between biological kinship and socially constructed solidarity. Through this juxtaposition, the film presents communal life as an alternative to the fragmentation of modern individualism, suggesting that Dani's attraction to the Harga arises not merely from manipulation but from a genuine yearning for the stable, encompassing network of relationships that her previous environment failed to provide.

In *Midsommar*, Dani's movement toward communal belonging unfolds through a sequence of quasi-ritual stages that resemble a process of initiation into a closed religious order: invitation, welcome, initiation, training, anointing, assurance, and ultimate union. As the Harga community admits outsiders only by deliberate choice, Dani's presence is implicitly orchestrated by Pelle, who selects Christian, Mark, and Josh as sacrificial participants while ensuring that Dani accompanies them – thus constituting the stage of invitation. Upon arrival, she receives a

markedly different reception from the others: while the men are treated as ordinary guests, Dani is embraced by an elder in a gesture paralleling Pelle's homecoming and is explicitly greeted with "Welcome home" (00:37:01), signaling symbolic inclusion. The initiation phase occurs when she witnesses the ritual suicide of the elders; despite her horror, she does not flee, thereby passing an implicit test of endurance. She is subsequently integrated into communal life through practical training, such as assisting women in the kitchen, followed by ritual anointing during the dance festival, where hallucinatory immersion enables her to understand and even speak the Harga language. Her coronation as May Queen, accompanied by the whispered assurance "You are the family now" (01:52:45), formalizes her new status. Emotional assurance is provided when the women collectively mirror her distress after she witnesses Christian's sexual rite with Maja, transforming her private grief into shared catharsis. The final stage – the ultimate union – is symbolized by her serene smile during the burning of the temple, suggesting that her existential anguish has been subsumed within communal identity.

The Harga conception of community extends beyond human society to encompass the natural and spiritual orders, reinforcing Dani's transformation as an ecological as well as social integration. Her visions of breathing trees and vegetation sprouting through her body (00:30:30), repeated during the dance sequence when she feels her feet merging with the grass (01:38:18), evoke a dissolution of

boundaries between self and environment. The accompanying myth that the girls are “lured to the grass” (01:38:28) underscores this symbolic return to nature. The community’s subsistence practices – centered on linen, agriculture, meat, fish, flowers, and grains – further indicate an intimate relationship with the vegetal world. Animal symbolism is equally significant: the presence of livestock during ceremonies and the ritual killing of the bear, regarded as a destructive force whose immolation ensures prosperity, demonstrate a belief in reciprocal exchange between humans and animals. Spiritual continuity is maintained through a cyclical worldview of birth, death, and rebirth, whereby ancestral presence persists across generations. Sacred objects such as the ancestral tree embody this connection, functioning as focal points of collective memory and identity.

To preserve communal coherence, the Harga employ both physical and psychological mechanisms that regulate social life and transmit tradition. Geographic seclusion limits external influence, while strict rules govern reproduction, lineage, and mating compatibility; outsiders are admitted only under controlled conditions, and incest is prohibited. Life is structured into age-based roles (0–18, 19–36, 37–54, and 55–72) ensuring that each individual contributes meaningfully at every stage of existence. Private ownership is absent: work, meals, sleep, worship, and celebration are shared activities, reinforcing collective identity over personal autonomy. Dani’s inclusion in communal tasks,

particularly in the kitchen, exemplifies this integration. Leadership and functional roles – Sivas spiritual authority, Maja as reproductive figure, Dani as May Queen – are performed with ritual solemnity, while an implicit educational system socializes children through direct participation. Young members observe even the most disturbing rites, such as the preparation of the bear carcass for the final sacrifice, receiving instruction from elders on the technical and symbolic aspects of the act. Visual media – tapestries, runic symbols, and ceremonial costumes – pervade the environment, narrating myths and practices that ensure cultural continuity. Through these interlocking structures, the film presents the Harga as a self-sustaining total community into which Dani is gradually absorbed, completing her transition from isolated grief to a condition of collective belonging that appears, at least from her perspective, as liberation.

In *Midsommar*, the psychological mechanisms that sustain communal consciousness are deeply embedded in religiously inflected ritual practice. Myths are not merely preserved but repeatedly re-enacted in a mystagogical mode, so that participants experience them as living realities rather than inherited stories. Visual media – runic inscriptions, symbolic paintings, tapestries, and particularly Ruben's inspired drawings – function not as literal representations but as polyvalent signs open to interpretation, allowing each performance to generate fresh meaning instead of mechanical repetition. Ritual observances are executed with an

intensity that treats them as singular, unrepeatabe events. During the attestupa suicide rite, Siv reassures the horrified guests that what they witness is coherent within the community's cosmology, thereby reframing terror as sacred necessity. Similarly, the mistress of ceremonies overseeing the dance festival emphasizes scrupulous adherence to ritual details, underscoring that communal stability depends upon the perfection of performance. The insemination ceremony of Maja exemplifies the most elaborate form of psychological community building: conducted in the presence of a chorus of women, accompanied by maternal lullaby and collective mimicry of Maja's cries, the act transforms sexual union into a communal sacrament. Conception occurs not for individual fulfillment but for the perpetuation of the Harga lineage, dissolving personal boundaries in favour of collective purpose.

The film's most powerful expression of communal empathy emerges in the mirroring of Dani's grief. After witnessing Christian's ritual intercourse, Dani collapses into hysterical sobbing, yet the surrounding women immediately assume her posture and vocalize her anguish in unison, converting solitary trauma into shared catharsis. This sequence reconfigures the modern 'scream queen' trope by transforming the scream from spectacle into solidarity; Dani's multi-layered emotional performance becomes the medium through which she is absorbed into communal identity. The earlier assurance "You are the family now" (01:52:45) proves authentic as the group refuses to let her

suffer alone, in stark contrast to the hollow consolations she received after her parents' death. Pelle's testimony—"I had a family here... a real family" (01:12:48) – articulates the ideological core of this belonging, explaining his emotional stability after bereavement and his desire to bring Dani to Sweden: "I am very, very glad you are coming... it's very good you're coming" (22:19). Dani's attentive gaze during this conversation signals nascent hope, a readiness to accept the promise of unconditional embrace. The communal validation she receives as May Queen ultimately empowers her final judgment against Christian, marking the culmination of her search for meaning. Through these psychologically charged rituals of empathy, reproduction, and mythic re-enactment, the Harga community offers Dani not mere consolation but a totalizing framework in which her fractured self is reconstituted as part of an enduring collective.

In *Midsommar*, Dani's academic inclination toward psychology reflects her deeper existential compulsion to understand suffering, identity, and the possibility of meaning after catastrophic loss. Overwhelmed by trauma, she relies on external supports – medication, relationships, and intellectual inquiry – yet none provides lasting stability. Within the Harga commune, however, psychological cohesion is engineered through ritualized collective altered states: chanting, performative mourning, invocations, and psychedelic participation dissolve individual consciousness into communal experience. The mass lamentation during the attestupa

suicide (01:03:20) transcends empathetic expression and approaches orchestrated hysteria, as the group vocalizes pain in unison until individuality disappears. A similar trance-like state governs the climactic temple immolation, where participants appear possessed by a shared emotional current. These spectacles function as powerful bonding mechanisms, generating affective attachment through synchronized suffering and ecstasy. Dani's final, fully embodied smile suggests that she has internalized this emotional economy; her anguish is no longer solitary but absorbed into collective meaning. Hallucinatory visions reinforce this transition: she perceives her deceased mother during her May Queen elevation (02:22:21) and glimpses her sister's image embedded within the trees (01:49:36). Though plausibly drug-induced, these apparitions symbolically signal the substitution of lost biological family with communal belonging.

Dani's progressive openness to the commune is visually marked by her attentive observation and affective response to its environment. The blooming flush on her cheeks, her spontaneous laughter, and her fascination with the white-clad figures, animals, instruments, and pastoral landscape indicate an emergent sense of safety absent in her American life. Nature itself appears animated in her perception: flowers seem to smile, pathways carpeted with blossoms guide her forward, and vegetal imagery envelops her body, suggesting that the environment participates in welcoming her. This aestheticized communion between human and natural

spheres implies that Dani is not merely entering a social group but being reintegrated into an organic totality. The commune thus represents the healing community she lacked – one that promises care, reciprocity, and constant presence. Her election as May Queen crystallizes this integration, transforming her from observer to symbolic centre of the ritual order and reorienting her identity away from grief toward communal affirmation.

The film further clarifies Dani's transformation by juxtaposing her trajectory with the divergent fates of other characters, each pursuing meaning through incompatible frameworks. Ylva and Laborer complete the Harga life cycle through ritual suicide, attaining honour within their cosmology. By contrast, the visiting outsiders meet violent deaths tied to their own deficiencies: Josh's intellectual ambition culminates in transgression when he illicitly photographs sacred texts; Mark's irreverence toward ritual symbols alienates both hosts and companions; Simon and Connie attempt escape, embodying refusal rather than adaptation; Christian's emotional indifference leaves him incapable of authentic connection. Even voluntary sacrifices such as Ulf and Inmar's complicate the narrative of devotion, as Inmar's agonized cries during immolation cast doubt on the authenticity of his consent. Pelle alone emerges as a fulfilled mediator, successfully delivering both sacrificial victims and the May Queen while articulating the stability granted by communal belonging. Dani's concluding smile – serene, expansive, and

absolute – signals the resolution of her existential quest: she has found recognition, empathy, and purpose within the Harga collective, exchanging isolated suffering for a shared identity that, however unsettling, provides the meaning she sought.

In *Midsommar*, Dani's final transformation may be read as a form of liberation at the existential level, insofar as she moves from radical isolation to a condition of situated meaning. At the beginning, she inhabits a world defined by absurd loss, emotional neglect, and the absence of authentic reciprocity; her existence is contingent upon indifferent relationships that neither recognize nor sustain her being. Within the Harga commune, however, suffering is neither privatized nor dismissed but ritualized and shared, thereby converting anguish into significance. The coronation as May Queen places Dani at the symbolic centre of the communal cosmos, granting her a role that transcends the contingency of personal tragedy. Her final smile, therefore, does not merely express relief but signifies the resolution of existential homelessness: she now belongs to an ordered world that interprets life, death, and suffering within a coherent framework. What had been meaningless catastrophe is absorbed into ritual purpose, allowing her to affirm existence rather than endure it.

Psychologically, Dani's liberation lies in the dissolution of solitary trauma through collective empathy. Throughout the narrative, her grief manifests as panic attacks, dissociation, and dependence on pharmacological support, symptoms of a psyche

unable to metabolize loss alone. The Harga practices of synchronized emotion – crying, chanting, ecstatic dancing, and shared hallucination – function as therapeutic mechanisms that externalize and distribute inner pain. The scene in which the women mirror her sobbing epitomizes this process: her private breakdown becomes communal catharsis, and the burden of suffering is literally carried by many bodies rather than one. Such experiences reconfigure her identity from that of an abandoned individual to a member of an affective organism in which emotions circulate collectively. By the conclusion, her composure amid the temple burning suggests not numbness but integration; she has internalized the community's emotional logic and no longer confronts trauma in isolation. In this sense, the commune offers not clinical healing but a psychologically total environment in which distress is normalized, ritualized, and ultimately rendered bearable.

Religiously, Dani's journey culminates in a form of initiation into a sacred order that unites human, natural, and spiritual realms. The rituals she undergoes – witnessing sacrifice, participating in fertility rites, embodying the May Queen, and presiding over the final offering – mirror the structure of a mystery religion in which revelation is experiential rather than doctrinal. Through these rites, she encounters a worldview that interprets death as renewal, sexuality as sacrament, and suffering as necessary offering for communal continuity. Her participation in the final sacrifice constitutes both judgment and consecration: by choosing

Christian as the victim, she symbolically severs her attachment to the alienating past and affirms allegiance to the new sacred community. The serene expression that closes the film thus signifies a state of religious assurance – an acceptance that she is now embedded within a cosmic cycle that promises continuity beyond individual loss. Dani emerges not merely as a survivor but as an initiated figure whose existential despair, psychological fragmentation, and spiritual dislocation have been subsumed into a totalizing communal faith that offers, at least from her perspective, liberation.

Conclusion

In *Midsommar*, the narrative ultimately situates Dani's journey within the universal human confrontation with fundamental existential questions – “Who am I?”, “Why am I?”, and “What is the meaning of my life?”– questions that surface with particular intensity during phases of crisis. While many attempt to evade such inquiries through relentless activity, ideological certainty, or emotional numbing, existentialist thought maintains that these questions are inescapable and constitutive of human liberation. Dani's trajectory exemplifies this inevitability. The catastrophic loss of her parents and sister destroys her primary structures of meaning and thrusts her into what existential psychology would term a vacuum of significance. Neither medication nor social support mitigates her isolation, and the emotional indifference of her partner Christian deepens her alienation. The film thereby

addresses the first research concern: how radical loss precipitates existential angst by dismantling the relational foundations through which individuals ordinarily construct identity and purpose.

The second concern – how individuals attempt to reconstruct meaning – emerges through Dani’s successive attachments. Initially, family provides her with existential grounding, yet even prior to the tragedy these relationships are strained and asymmetrical. The annihilation of her family thus removes not only emotional support but the symbolic framework through which she understood herself. Romantic companionship becomes her next recourse, but Christian’s emotional withdrawal and utilitarian attitude toward the relationship render this path equally barren. His inability to reciprocate empathy transforms companionship into another site of absurdity rather than resolution. These failures corroborate existentialist claims that no external structure – whether familial or romantic – can permanently secure meaning, leaving the individual perpetually vulnerable to disillusionment and ‘continuous dissatisfaction.’

The third research question – whether communal belonging can resolve existential despair – is explored through Dani’s gradual incorporation into the Harga society. The film carefully stages this process as a ritual sequence: invitation, welcome (“Welcome home,” 37:01), initiation through witnessing the attestupa suicides, practical training within women’s communal labour, anointing during the ecstatic dance, assurance of belonging (“You are the

family now,” 01:52:45), and ultimate union symbolized by her serene smile during the temple immolation. Each stage compels Dani to confront confusion, horror, and disorientation, functioning paradoxically as therapeutic exposure to trauma. Her speaking in the Swedish dialect during the dance frenzy and the collective mourning enacted by the women at her moment of greatest distress demonstrate the absorption of her individuality into a shared emotional matrix. Ari Aster thus frames the commune as a total environment that supplies ritual, empathy, and cosmological coherence where secular modern life has failed to do so.

Nevertheless, the final research issue – whether Dani’s transformation constitutes genuine liberation or a problematic surrender – remains deliberately ambiguous. The closing image suggests serenity, implying that she has found a provisional meaning adequate to her present condition; yet from a strict existentialist perspective, such fulfillment cannot be definitive, as human existence is condemned to on-going questioning and reinterpretation. Dani’s victory may therefore be both authentic and precarious: she escapes isolation by entering a community that validates her suffering, but at the cost of subsuming individual autonomy within a collective order sustained by morally troubling practices. The film concludes as though Dani has achieved the tranquility she sought, yet existential philosophy would caution that this resolution is contingent rather than final. Her smile signifies not the end of the quest for meaning but the completion of one phase in

an on-going journey, affirming that while communities, rituals, and beliefs can temporarily anchor human existence, the burden of meaning ultimately persists.

A study of *Midsommar* from an existential, psychological, and religious perspective necessarily encounters certain limitations that invite further scholarly exploration. The present analysis foregrounds Dani's subjective experience and symbolic transformation, yet the film's ethnographic, anthropological, and cinematic dimensions – such as visual semiotics, sound design, folk traditions, and the politics of cultural representation – remain only partially addressed. Future research could profitably examine the narrative through comparative lenses, for instance by situating the Harga commune alongside real-world intentional communities, new religious movements, or theories of ritual violence and social cohesion. Interdisciplinary approaches integrating trauma studies, gender studies, and postcolonial critique may also yield richer insights, particularly regarding power, consent, and the ethics of communal conformity. Moreover, audience reception studies could investigate why viewers diverge so sharply in interpreting Dani's ending as liberation, indoctrination, or tragedy. Such inquiries would expand the scope beyond individual psychology to broader questions about modern alienation and the human desire for belonging.

At a societal level, the film offers a cautionary yet instructive moral: the deep human need for empathy, recognition,

and community can render individuals vulnerable to systems that promise unconditional belonging while demanding profound personal surrender. Dani's journey underscores the consequences of emotional neglect in contemporary individualistic cultures, where private suffering often goes unshared and un-ritualized. The narrative suggests that authentic communities – familial, social, or spiritual – must provide spaces for collective care without erasing moral agency or critical reflection. In this sense, the story calls attention to the urgent social responsibility of cultivating compassionate support networks that neither abandon individuals to isolation nor absorb them into coercive collectives. The enduring significance of the film thus lies in its reminder that the quest for meaning is universal, but the forms of belonging we embrace in response to that quest carry ethical implications not only for individuals but for the moral fabric of society itself.

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