

A Midsummer's Nightmare, a May-queen in Mayhem: Channeling Ari Aster's movie *Midsommar* from an Eco-Horror Perspective

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Abstract

As much as ecocriticism dwells in the forefront of attention in the present era, the subgenres of the same are similarly gaining prominence for its multiplicity and inclusivity of different aspects and issues. Eco-Horror is one such idea that strays away from and at the same time stays within the frame of ecocriticism by adding new elements of the gothic and the horror to its cradle. From representing explicit human fears at its peak to aligning human resemblance to the natural world, Eco-Horror let us visualize the necessity to acknowledge an ecosystem that can be a harbinger of both peace and destruction. This paper would be an attempt to analyse this very concept through the American film director Ari Aster's 2019 folk horror film, *Midsommar*. This horror masterpiece which deals with a group's disturbing encounter with a Pagan cult of Scandinavia in a midsummer celebration festival, not only portrays the gruesome bloodbath that occurs in the ritualistic celebration, but also interrogates into the question of identity, power and ecofemininity. The crowning of the "may-queen" which is central to the celebration is deeply ecological, and simultaneously political in terms of the woman protagonist and her voyage towards a self-awakening. She is ecologically conscious, and ecologically dangerous; there is a wilderness within her, a spark of power that reaches redemption in the bounty of nature no matter how deadly it becomes. The movie is an all powerful statement of a female's mingling with the ecosystem; a recitation of the horror that dwells among the trees, the sky, the river and the flowers. This paper intends to study this very site of power that resides both within the natural world and humans, but, within the realms of terror and horror.

Keywords: *Ecology, Horror, Power, Nature, Ecofeminism, Women*

Introduction :

There is a pattern that runs through the movie and the grotesqueness and gory cult fictionalization of the plot makes it more obvious as Aster's one of the most mind-boggling creation alongside *Hereditary* (2018). The viewers are already introduced to the emotional wreckage that the protagonist Dani (Florence Pugh) is going through; she is a psychology student, and her sister Terri (Kludia Csányi) is a bipolar to make matters worse. The other characters Christian (Jack Reynor), Josh (William Jackson Harper), Mark (Will Poulter) and Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren) appear to be a bunch of anthropology students which again signifies another angle that binds the plot to a very structured ecological framework. In a review by Richard Brody in *The New Yorker*, the critic comments on the Swedish cult of the film and their rigidity of living as a natural phenomenon involving an "essence of autonomy". The movie begins with still lifeless landscape covered in frost and snow, an air of silence accompanying the views with only a folk tune carrying off the shifts in scenes. The emotionally vulnerable Dani, who is struggling in her relationship with an equally emotionally distant Christian, is yet to receive the shock of her life. Her bipolar sister commits suicide in her home by using car exhaust, and in the process their parents also get killed. Dani's trauma is fuelled, as she is left orphaned only to lean onto Christian who treats her as an obligation. It is incredibly commendable how Aster will make a heroine out of this poor girl who is yet to get any kind of genuine sympathy and appreciation from Christian and his friends, the only circle of people with whom she is left now. The use of symbolism is very explicit in the story from the very beginning, which have many times even served as an act of foreshadowing. The sinister ecological connotations on display from the very beginning including the yellow floral wallpapers, the yellow floral bed-sheet and blanket in Dani's parents' room where they were lying as corpses is chilling, as we would later be familiarized with similar instances inside the Swedish Harga community. The yellowness even in death of Terri i.e. the yellow pipe through which she suffocates herself and the yellow top she wore while committing the act is significant too. An all-pervading natural insight to these gruesome acts has been brought about through the play of flora and fauna. Flowers which are often associated with fertility, innocence, and rebirth will be recurrent all over again. Later, Dani mourning their deaths in the arms of Christian equally comes off as a passive act, as we already witnessed his indifferent affection towards her through the phone-call and his little chit-chat with his friends. They were almost intimidating when they said, "You don't want her back" (07:22) and "She's abusing you" (08:25); But Dani seems otherwise genuine when she tells her friend that she always leans on him. The cycle of seasons is mirroring Dani in her every plight. The fierce snow-storm that creeps inside her parents' home and her confrontation with Christian after the homicide will eventually turn into a spring-summer reality,

once they enter the Harga community in the remotes of Halsingland. It is as if the sudden shifts are phases of Dani's soul that transformed from a dim, dull and remorseful period to a bright, optimistic and extraordinary future.

Methodology :

Barbara Creed theorizes in her seminal work *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, the role and representation of females in horror films. Creed's seven archetypes of monstrous women i.e. archaic mother, monstrous womb, vampire, witch, possessed body, monstrous mother and castrator, has been duly studied in order to bring forth an argument regarding the role of Dani, the central female character of *Midsommar*. These archetypes can be inserted significantly into the purely matriarchal space of Harga where the female empowerment and female emotional sensibility coexists. The element of horror, gore and grotesqueness mildly nourishes its way through more emotional themes of love, sacrifice and empathy. Dani hasn't recovered; the trauma of separation and death still haunts her. When the mysterious Swedish friend of Christian, Pelle, confronts her and expresses sorry about her family tragedy, she immediately withdraws and hyperventilates. Pelle, in a way, opens a gateway for her to escape this worldliness, this attachment by letting her step into a merciless but structured world of Harga. Her journey to Harga is important as it promises her a new world full of autonomy and spiritual awakening with nature. She will finally see the manipulative and emotionally abusive Christian and would gift him the most "lavish garish vindication". Creed's theory of the "monstrous feminine" is applicable here in the sense that Dani, the protagonist, emerges as a full female consciousness amidst the bounty of nature, subverts typical feminine stereotypes, and usurps as an ecologically monstrous women defying and leaving behind her trauma. As a whole, *Midsommar* becomes an elevation of nature, the monstrous, the feminine and the horror, and Creed's theoretical method of looking at women in the visual arts as part of a larger body of archetypes becomes a cherry on top to further substantiate Aster's folk-horror masterpiece.

Discussion :

The cinematography absolutely changes in a blink of an eye once they start for Halsingland. From the previous dark and terrifying bedlam of an atmosphere to pleasingly eye-catching greenery brings change of mood and vibe altogether. Now, their first association with Harga community, especially Dani, is extremely eco-centric and mystical at the same time. They were offered hallucinogenic mushrooms which served its immediate effect upon the group. Dani hesitatingly felt obliged to "take" them because she feared that Christian's friends might judge her. The mushroom tea is Dani's first taste of nature outside of her previous catastrophic world and her first feeling of "oneness". She suddenly felt a rage, an

all-powerful fit of emotional gravity that made her hysterical for a few moments. She could see the trees breathing, alive with their veins, and even encountered her sister's visage in the mirror of a wooden chamber. The whole distorted moment led her to travel through the forest where she came across a vision of her dead family again. This particular scene asserts the power and dominance that the Harga space is thrusting upon Dani which will subsequently lead her to one kind of redemption. Harga is enclosed and sheltered by the bounty of nature, but is ready to provide a limitless space to Dani her secluded spirit. They felt no sense of time in Harga i.e. it's a never ending stretch of daylight signifying positivity and hope. This heaven-like abode is not for all though; it is a harbinger of doom for everyone else but Dani. Yellow flowers make a return to the scene as Dani uncovers patches of them that lead to the interior entrance of Harga. The colour is symbolical as it is embedded with Dani's past, and seems like it has followed her to this new Swedish shelter. There is a different kind of energy she feels, as if she has jumped from one dimension to another. The flowers guiding their paths are quite ironical; some will meet their end while Dani would revive. This cult of a community has a female-oriented authority with their women being involved in every task and action. Dani saw a new family rising in front of her eyes, and she is mesmerized by their vitality. The old woman from the community shouts, "Spirits! Back to the dead!" and inaugurates the nine-day sacrificial midsummer festival. Harga appears to be a metaphorical site of sacrifice, as it seems that Dani's relationship with Christian shall be compromised for the sake of another birth i.e. Maja (Isabelle Grill) and her desire to get impregnated by Christian. This delicate looking red-haired girl, who had just got the "license" to indulge in carnal pleasure, as told by Pelle, appears as a "monstrous female" who will assert her dominance over Christian no matter what. She flirts with him and resorts to use spells in the form of love-potions to bewitch him. Her power is bigger than Christian and Dani, and she overpowers and succeeds in driving him to have sex with her. She isn't interested in him, but in what might come from him. She harbours fierce power in the form of spells and potions and is determined and devoted towards attaining motherhood. Dani seems futile in front of her because she is confused and bewildered; in the meantime, Maja is stubborn and knows her destination.

Aster incredibly depicts many of the different plotlines of the movie by the use of traditional art inscriptions. We are allowed to see the community's entanglement with the natural forces of the sun, the moon, the animals, the flowers, the seasons and the circle of life, love and death through many paintings. Maja's making of the love potion is not shown, but depicted in the canvas art. As Creed's one of the monstrous feminine archetypes i.e. "witch", she arises as someone who knows and is intellectual enough to turn the tables to her own side, thus empowering the concept of the witch in light of a powerful female autonomy.

Again, in the distant clearing stands the yellow pyramid shaped temple which will eventually be the ultimate dead end for many characters. The yellow-coloured triangular temple is the marker of death that stands far away and is waiting for its final ignition. The community is quite structured in its divisions of spaces and regulations. There is a kitchen, a guest house, a church to keep the secret scriptures, stables, poultry and other chambers per se. The runic guest house is a big communal room for the visitors to stay, full of art inscriptions and engravings on the wood. Aster portrays almost the entire plot through the traditional paintings on the tapestry, but one has to have a very keen eye to figure it out. It is important how Pelle, the Swedish native, explains the community's affinity with the cycle of seasons that is responsible for sealing their fate in the long run. He says:

We think of life like the seasons. You are a child until you are sixteen, and that is the Spring. At some point we all do our Pilgrimage, and that's between seventeen and thirty-two. That's Summer. Then, from thirty-three to fifty-two, you are of working age: Fall. And finally from fifty-three to seventy-two, you become a mentor. (*Midsommar* 46:48-47:06)

One must already feel how every action from Christian's side is already propagating a push towards Dani's liberation. She will become the nature itself, and would take a toll on Christian for good. The scene where he brings a piece of cake for Dani, between them stands a group of females from the community nurturing a baby. The rebirth is closer it seems. An avid watcher can never disregard the *Attestupa* ceremony that comes off as one of the horrendous part regarding the practices of the Harga community. The ceremony of two elders voluntarily ending their life by jumping off a cliff while everyone witnesses and mourns is definitely something exotic that keeps the "outsiders" on edge. They protested but also submitted as they couldn't overpower the community's charm and "otherness" on being one of a kind. Dani feels numb witnessing two deaths but somehow adapts and merges. Awareness rises on her side; she feels the reality that the spiritual nature of Harga is making her sense; she runs and cries again. Pelle explains that the community is his family and after his parents died, he always felt "held" by them. This seems feasible in part of Dani too, as she dreams about her dead parents and the elderly couple from *Attestupa* ritual as similar nuances of her life. The community can be objectified as a portal for her to embrace a new side by leaving the past; this is constantly manifested through her dreams and flashbacks where she meets the ghosts from her past.

Harga seems to have an otherworldly affinity with nature; in fact, the people actually preserve themselves as "back to nature" descendants. The place and its scenic environment not only mesmerize the audience from an artistic side, but the rituals, the liberal sexual

conceptions and their concern for the flora and fauna itself augments the argument. The painting enumerating maypole competition is full of homosexual vividness, an all-female bonding to revitalize oneself to the fullest. The ash of the dead is put into the root of the fallen ancestral tree, and Mark was severely rebuked for pissing over it:

Your little f*cking American friend! He has pissed on the *Rotvalta!*
(*Midsommar* 1:20:14-1:20:17)

The place is an endless search of possibilities for Dani who is struggling to overcome a hysterical episode of death and decay from her past. Harga offers opportunity to the different but the willing ones. The inbred Ruben (Levente Puczko-Smith) is solely responsible in crafting the runic language and the secrets of the community, which however ended up Josh in the death pit as he crossed the threshold to violate the guidelines protecting the communal origins. The priest calls Ruben different and not normal which makes him "open" and unbiased to all sorts of actions. In a similar manner, the place wants Dani, her emotions, and her past, and shoves sympathy to her in supernatural ways and eventually waits for her verdict. The eco-consciousness in her is alive; it is just dwindling inside her to nourish her more into maturity. The sexual power is alive too, as we see it getting bloomed in part of Maja who made a pie following the love-spell ingredients which includes pubic hair and menstrual blood. The grotesqueness of the scene when Christian finds the hair in his pie is one kind of a beginning of separation both for Dani and Maja. Maja would distance herself from everything to gain motherhood, while Dani would slide away from the shackles of unrequited-love.

One after another the elimination of the outsiders results in Dani and Christian sinking deep into the hypnotizing nature of Harga. After almost every other character gets killed secretly, Dani is given community clothes i.e. pure white frock sealed with floral embroidery. This marks the beginning of her assemblage into the deep recess of Harga's nature. The yellow energy drink was offered to her before the maypole dancing competition i.e. a competition of females. The scene where she looks at her feet and sees them getting camouflaged with the grass is metaphorical. This signifies her transformation into a full-fledged Harga figure even before she realizes. Her union with nature is invincible as she's a force herself to be reckoned with. The maypole itself is significant in resembling the penis, and as such the females would dance around it showing excessive energy and stamina until they fall. This again takes us back to Creed's archetype of the "castrator" where women will ultimately castrate or demolish the men and will reign supreme independently. One old woman (Anki Larsson) announces the origin of the dance:

It was here long ago that the Black One lured the youths of Harga to the grass and seduced them into dance. Once they began, they couldn't stop, and they danced themselves to death. Now, in life-holding defiance of the Black One, we dance until we fall. (*Midsommar* 1:38:40-1:39:02)

Two simultaneous acts with two different after-effects happen, as Dani dances to her fullest and Christian gets lured by Maja. The May-queen competition comes as a climax for the whole movie, where Dani seems to be in her full potential by absorbing all the collective energy, she could maintain. She becomes the may-queen amidst all mayhem; she is adorned with overarching blossoms; she was on the side of the crowd of Harga whereas Christian stands alone facing them. She is ready to castrate Christian to emerge as a mother nature's empowering daughter. The rhetoric of that scene is extremely well executed as it shows Dani's final amalgamation with nature. She has found her "place" away from the passive and superficial Christian. The ecology seems to reverberate with her, telling her to be a part of this new-found land. Time and again her past flashes back, as even after the competition she visualizes her mother in the crowd drifting away without greeting her. Dani stands now in a pedestal higher than others; the crowd carries her away from a bleak and hallucinating Christian who is perplexed and has lost his purpose. It is striking how the audience is allowed to see a visage of Dani's sister formed by the trees, as she is seen getting carried away by the crowd. The past will perhaps stay, but will definitely be more tolerable now. Dani's crowning as the may-queen subjects her to a more spiritual bond with the nature of Harga. She can see the food, the flowers, the trees and the ground pulsating with life. She is now the force of nature. She sits, everyone sits; she eats, everyone eats. She is the enigma, as one of the members says, "The Queen must ride alone!" (1:54:40), when Dani asks if Christian can accompany her to bless the land. The traditional folk rituals in part do the job of comprehending the much spiritual and pagan lifestyle of Harga. The ritual of the may-queen blessing the land is itself communicative of the matriarchal freedom of Harga, where female bonding, connection with Mother Nature and shared empathy is valued over everything else. Men from inside the community are only on the side-lines, watching their women illuminating the way; while men from outside are being watched carefully, and are just scapegoats to fulfil Harga's cult needs. The may-queen going off in a pretty chariot full of embellished flowers and creepers to bless the land is a sight of power and benevolence. On the other hand, Christian will transgress to his ultimate doom as he walks over the yellow flower path that leads to Maja. She lures him to satisfy her sexual desire through which she will attain the blessing of motherhood. Christian changes into the traditional Harga clothing in almost a state of trance, and is provided smoke by two elders for vitality. The sexual act of Maja and Christian is the final blow that liberates

Dani from all worldly misfortunes. She witnesses the mating ritual through the keyhole where he and Maja indulge sexually surrounded by naked women of different ages.

The communal sharing and partaking heighten here, where two different reactions avail at the same time. The naked women share Maja's pain by mimicking her moans and outside, Dani wails with wrath and pain after finding out Christian's betrayal only in turn to get mobbed by another group of women mimicking her cries. Sandra Huber in her article "Blood and Tears and Potions and Flame: Excesses of Transformation in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*", talks about this particular mime scene which stands out from the rest of the movie. She expresses that Harga women mirrored Dani's rage and helped her to conjure it up and push it away into exteriority. One can observe all these women as part of one single "possessed body" which again, adheres to Barbara Creed's archetype of monstrous women. The scene inside contrasts the scene outside i.e. a final battle between Dani and Christian will prevail. Dani releases her anger and the women from the community shares it along with her. The females here with their overarching influence and strength come straight into the limelight. As Maja is contented in achieving a hope for motherhood, Dani is relieved from a great burden of being dependent and docile. The final rite for the nine-day sacrificial midsummer ceremony nears completion with Christian coming back to his senses and realizing that all his friends have been murdered. The gruesome deaths and the preserving of the corpses in the most atrocious way reflect Harga's consumption of a particular pattern of thinking and behaviour. It was later revealed that Christian, Mark, Josh and others are the "new-bloods" who are supposed to be the human sacrifices that Pelle brought from outside. Dani's ultimate form is seen as a lush overgrowth of flowers which is campy and grotesque; she is unfeeling and cold and is engulfed by her natural instincts as a whole. She is an expanse larger than her surroundings and the structures around her. She looks larger than life and almost mythical; her pain is allowed to get shared and is given a room to flower. Her attire resembles the shape of a pyramid i.e. an entire structure that she will perhaps be a part of now. The final powerful predicament comes with Dani's decision of choosing none other than Christian as the ninth and the last sacrifice instead of one random community folk. She locked his fate and released herself from her disrupted past. Christian is stuffed into the bear that we previously saw captured in a cage, and it also immediately takes us back to the painting in Dani's home which resembled a bear being tamed by a crowned nymph-like female. He meets his end in that distant yellow triangular temple where the priest says,

Mighty and dreadful beast. With you, we purge our most unholy affects. We banish you now to the deepest recesses, where you may reflect on your wickedness. (*Midsommar* 2:17:23-2:17:35)

Conclusion :

The temple as a funeral pyre with Christian and his friends inside appears to be the final purgation and exorcism of all the bonds that was tied to Dani. As it burns, the Harga community cries, wails, beat their chests and again participates in a collective agony. Dani screams and cries too but recovers, and immediately drops a sinister smile drenched in outrageous blossoms as the screen slowly cuts to black. YouTube channel *BabyBerg* in her analysis video of *Midsommar* titled “Midsommar: Womanhood and the Monstrous Feminine” brings about the concept of a cult that is built upon “landscape, isolation, and skewed moral beliefs”. The pagan cult of Harga similarly entrusts upon spirituality and nature, and one can examine the community as a celebration of womanhood in general. Dani suffered grief alone in isolation in the patriarchal world of Christian, but now in Harga she shares her sorrow and feels enlightened. Her vengeance is poetic. Her journey went through loss and a search, then a descent and finally ended in a complete metamorphosis. She finally understood the connection between nature and womanhood by going through an explicitly terrifying stage of shock, horror and dejection. Ari Aster picked up the theme of “emotional burden” of women folk and made it the centre of the movie through which the whole two-and-a-half-hour tour of the cult of Harga was witnessed. The killing spree, the bizarre rituals, the grotesque figures, the jumpscars, the suspense and the psychedelic moments are beautifully pinned in *Midsommar* over the more delicate surface of matriarchy, sex, Mother Nature and empathy.

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