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Power Imbalances and Gender Norms in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*

Introduction

Hegemonic gender norms are something we can see in every aspect of society. We often see them reflected back at us in horror films, in particular. This is intended to use our expectations of society to create a sense of horror in its viewers. By closely examining how these characters interact with each other and the world around them we are better able to understand the role these norms play. This also allows us to have a grasp on the messages these films are attempting to send us as viewers. One film that we can look at is *Midsommar* (2019) which follows an American couple who attempts to solve their relationship issues by taking an impromptu trip to a remote village in Sweden. Things quickly turn sinister when members of their traveling party start to disappear. By looking at this film through the lens of gender, we can begin to understand the messages being sent to us. In the film *Midsommar* (2019), director Ari Aster uses Dani, Christian, and the Harga to perpetuate and push against hegemonic gender norms.

Background

First released in 2019, *Midsommar* is a folk horror film that was written and directed by Ari Aster. Aster is an American film director best known for *Midsommar* and its predecessor *Hereditary* (2018). *Midsommar* follows Christian (Jack Reynor) and Dani (Florence Pugh), an American couple experiencing extreme tensions in their relationship. After the tragic

murder-suicide of Dani's parents and sister, they are invited to celebrate the midsummer holiday in rural Sweden with Christian's friends. Thinking this might be the thing to finally heal their relationship, Dani jumps at the opportunity. As time passes it becomes obvious that they have been lured into a cult called the Harga.

Overall, *Midsommar* received positive reviews from critics. In their review of the film, Laffley (2019) called it "...a terrifically juicy, apocalyptic cinematic sacrament that dances around a fruitless relationship in dizzying circles." But why is it that so many people feel connected to a movie that covers such dark topics? In an article on the movie, Katz, de Barros, and Morrison (2021) write, "*Midsommar* is largely a film about interpersonal dynamics, the turbulent relationship between Dani and Christian being a case in point. Due to its emphasis on interpersonal drama, the film has been described as relatable" (p. 2036). While there are many other horror elements that we see in *Midsommar*, it is the interpersonal relationships that grab and keep our attention. Aster even refers to the film as a "breakup opera" (Wilkinson, 2019).

In an interview, Aster stated that much of the inspiration for this movie came from Swedish traditions. Aster spent time looking into spiritual communities and spiritual movements as well as folklore and mythology (Wilkinson, 2019). The cult itself was named after "...a village in Swedish folklore where it's said on midsummer's eve children danced with the devil until only their skeletons remained" (Page, 2019). This is a reference to the scene in *Midsommar* where all the women dance till they drop and the last one standing is crowned the May Queen. Aster borrows ideas from ancient paganism, utilizing things like blood sacrifice, the "draugr" which is a zombie-like figure, and even a Viking execution known as the "blood eagle" (Page, 2019). These little details play a huge role in making the movie feel other to modern American viewers who have never seen things like this before.

Though there are still many slasher elements in *Midsommar*, they are not what makes it truly unsettling. It is for this reason that many critics consider it to be a part of the horror renaissance. Movies like this encourage viewers to approach horror films as critical thinkers instead of passengers (Ford, 2020). Almost every aspect of it pushes the audience to consider their actual life. Historically, horror movies have just been something for people to get their heart rate up a little bit and then move on with their lives. Instead, people walk away from *Midsommar* with “...nuanced, thoughtful...opinions that maintain even a full year out from the release of the movie itself” (Ford, 2020). It is the moments where it pushes against the normal horror script and we see aspects of real life on the screen that we truly find horror in *Midsommar*. There is nothing more terrifying than relating to a character who is doing something terrible.

With this context, we can begin to understand why some viewers find this film to be more disturbing than the slasher films that came before it. Traditional horror movies find much of their “horror” in things that are widely accepted as scary. No one is scared to talk about how murder is terrible or that we would be scared if we had a stalker but in most cases, this is something we will never experience in our life. *Midsommar* forces its viewers to confront the real things in our lives. In an article on why *Midsommar* is so scary Russell (2022) writes, “[*Midsommar*] is a rare horror movie that doesn't lurk in the shadows, but instead embraces the power of sunlight. There is nowhere to hide in the festival's perpetual daylight: Trauma must be confronted and inner selves beg to be revealed.” There is no removing yourself from this movie, especially when it comes to our main character, Dani. Throughout the movie, we are made to identify with her so it is much more horrifying when we see her begin to assimilate into the cult.

Due to the sheer amount of Americans that travel abroad every year, experiencing a violent event while you are there is like getting hit by lightning (Zagorsky, 2019). This does not

stop many Americans from being afraid of this very thing. In a review of the film Brody (2019) argues that *Midsommar* perpetuates this very idea, writing, “In the end, the subject of [*Midsommar*] is as simple as it is regressive: lucky Americans, stay home.” Brody (2019) argues that throughout the film as we dive deeper and deeper and each character disappears, the audience begins to think to themselves that this could have been easily prevented. If they had just stayed home none of this would have ever happened. Though the Harga holds some blame, so do the American tourists. This falls in line with the idea that many American tourists are afraid to travel abroad because of violence that never really happens.

In an article on *Midsommar*, Phipps (2019) compares it to Aster’s previous film *Hereditary*. While *Hereditary* relies on supernatural elements to create a sense of horror *Midsommar* strips all of that away. He argues that audiences have been becoming more and more aware of how fragile our institutions are. We began to fear what new horror we would face if our government fell. *Midsommar* suggests that it is not a new horror at all. Instead, we are faced with the threat of going backward, reverting to a time when blood sacrifice was a common occurrence (Phipps, 2019). Again we see the idea that the real horror of the film lies in its realities. Audiences know it is unlikely they will ever take a trip to Sweden to be indoctrinated into a cult. They do fear the similarities between the cult and our everyday societies though.

Literature Review

Viewers all over the world have been moved by this film for many different reasons. Even though this is a fictional story, the closer we look the more similarities we can see between it and the world we live in today. Examining all these different aspects of the film will help us to gain insight into the messages *Midsommar* is sending us about our world.

Sutton (2022) discusses how our American friends are swept into a disconnected world when they reach the Hagra. Technology that we are used to seeing in everyday life is completely nonexistent in the Hagra community. We spend a large portion of the movie building our American characters up but the Hagra are always quite ambiguous to us. What we do see is what many Americans consider to be an unreachable dream. Sutton (2022) brings forward the idea that many people believe the rise of smartphones, social media, and the internet has led to a greater epidemic of loneliness. Ironically the internet has connected us to more information than we have ever had access to before but it has also disconnected us from the world around us. The lack of technology creates a sort of picture of a pre-digital world that many Americans are not used to seeing at all.

Sutton (2022) also points out how some of the imagery helps to create a sense of horror in *Midsommar*. Traditional horror movies utilize dark imagery to create the sense of horror that is expected from films in the genre. Sutton (2022) points out that darker imagery is only present in the scenes that take place in America. They also have a heavy emphasis on technology and stress the lack of communication. Things change though when we get to the Hagra's village. The second our characters are disconnected from the internet the imagery used throughout the film becomes light and airy.

We also see a reflection of the political climate in America within *Midsommar*. Wolfe (2021) argues that America's preoccupation with globalization and empire-building helps to build an aspect of horror in the film. All of the American visitors present as the heroes in a globalization situation. The Americans are so unfamiliar with their surroundings that they do not know where and when to look for danger. Wolfe (2021) writes "...danger is so unrecognizable to the characters that it exists undetected in broad daylight" (p. 213). They are tourists in the village

wandering around and ending up in all sorts of strange situations because of their ignorance. It is through each character's reaction to the Harga's culture that we begin to see the Harga as "villains" in the story.

In another realm, Katz, de Barros, and Morrison (2021) claim *Midsommar* uses ambiguous sex to blur the lines of consent. While it was highly received by most critics, there is one particular sex scene between Christian and a member of the Harga named Maja that many people consider to be a form of rape. In this scene, Christian is told he has been approved to mate with Maja. He is never really asked his opinion of the entire situation and when they do have sex, it is in front of many other women. Katz, de Barros, and Morrison (2021) point out that there is no one right way to interpret this scene. There are many different points of view that one could take, making it hard for people to come to a consensus all around. They argue that ambiguous sex scenes like the one between Christian and Maja can be problematic because they contribute to blurred lines when it comes to defining things like rape which may in turn perpetuate rape culture. They do believe it can create a space for viewers to discuss the definition of consent. Discussions like these are the first step in deconstructing the rape culture that these scenes have the potential to contribute to. In the end, it is best if we continue to examine depictions of consent and rape in the media to begin to better understand how they play a role in shaping our views in society.

These are aspects of *Midsommar* that play a huge role in how we view the film. So much of the climate of the world is reflected in horror films. While these articles provide useful commentary on how *Midsommar* connects with our society, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to how gender roles play a part in the film. By unpacking the dynamics between different characters we can examine some of the gender stereotypes that show up in the film.

This will allow us to understand how Dani, Christian, and the Harga are used to perpetuate and push against hegemonic gender norms.

Hegemonic Gender Norms and American Relationships

Through Dani and Christian's relationship as well as Christian's relationship with his friends, Aster perpetuates many hegemonic gender norms. One of the first examples of this that we see in *Midsommar* is Christian's annoyance at Dani for her worry over her sister's cryptic email. After Dani receives a scary email from her sister who has known mental health issues she is understandably freaked out. As most people would do in this situation she reaches out to her significant other for comfort. Instead of receiving any comfort, Christian tells her she is overreacting. He assures her this is probably like all the other times she has freaked out over her sister's strange messages. He pushes the blame back onto Dani for "letting" her sister take advantage of her even though she has no control over her sister's bipolar disorder.

This introduces Dani and Christian's relationship with a clear power dynamic. Christian holds all the power because of his disinterest in Dani's problems. Dani is left to scramble for his attention while he spends all his time trying to distract himself from the fact that he is in a relationship at all. After her phone conversation with Christian about her anxiety over her sister's email we see Dani speak to a female friend on the phone. Dani confides that she feels like she is too much for Christian. She feels she leans on him too much and this is going to scare him away. Of course, leaning on your partner is something normal and expected in a healthy relationship. Especially when one is going through a stressful situation, a balanced relationship would have a significant other provide support to the affected partner. Christian instead leans into the power imbalance we see perpetuated in so many straight relationships. The man is often seen as disinterested and burdened by the woman's "hysterical" nature. Dani is overreacting and it's

dragging Christian down. Over dinner, Christian's friends spend the entire meal trying to convince him to leave his "stupid relationship" (Aster, 2019, 7:14). When Dani ends up calling during the meal to inform Christian that her entire family is dead Christian's friends tell him that her attempt to contact him is "literally abuse" (Aster, 2019, 8:30).

Over and over we see the idea that Dani is overbearing and hysterical. After she finds out that Christian was planning to go to Sweden for a month and a half and hadn't even mentioned it to her, she very calmly asks him about it. Immediately Christian reacts as though he is being attacked. He is not interested in having a conversation with her. In this interaction, it is Dani's job to smooth over their relationship even though it is Christian who is making waves. It comes off in a way that Christian truly believes it is Dani's fault for even bringing it up in the first place. When he does apologize it is clear he does not mean it at all and this is just something he says to get Dani to shut up. Dani points out that he does not seem very sorry and again Christian acts like he is being personally attacked.. In the end, it is Dani who sincerely apologizes even though she did not do anything wrong.

Traditionally, men are not supposed to feel any emotions. They are not supposed to take orders from women. Women are supposed to be nurturing, babying their partners in every aspect of their lives. Men are not supposed to be questioned. When they are questioned men are often taught to get defensive. They cannot take responsibility for their mistakes because that would be admitting they were wrong and that is unacceptable. The damage control he does is often disguised as accidental or out of his control. When Christian informs his friends that he has invited Dani on their trip to Sweden he makes it clear that it is just because she has been having a rough time recently. He also confidently announces that she probably will not go. He seems to indicate that she should know that she is not welcome even though they all tell her otherwise

multiple times. It is her job to read between the lines and see that all the men see her as a burden to be managed, not an actual friend or partner.

In another instance, Christian forgets Dani's birthday and has to be reminded by his friend Pelle who, interestingly enough, is the only Swedish member of Christian's friend group. When he finally wishes Dani a happy birthday he has a myriad of excuses as to why it is acceptable for him to have forgotten it in the first place. It is not his fault because he was confused by the drugs or the sun or the new environment. He was distracted so it just slipped his mind, no big deal.

Dani is ultimately an outsider in Christian's friend group, even after they arrive in Sweden. She is often pressured into things she does not feel comfortable doing because that is what Christian's friends want to do. When they first arrive in Sweden they are offered edibles by Pelle's brother. When Dani asks to find her footing first before taking any drugs, Christian's friend Mark becomes upset because he does not want to take them at different times. Dani ends up agreeing to take them anyway just to smooth this conflict over.

The longer she is in Sweden the more of an outsider she becomes in Christian's group of friends. After witnessing the deaths of two members of the Harga in a ceremony where they are sacrificed at the end of their lives, Dani is distraught. She struggles to understand what she has just seen. Once again Christian fails to feel any desire to comfort her. Instead, he tells her to "take some time to yourself" (Aster, 2019, 1:06:10). He then goes off to inquire if there is some way for him to do his thesis on the Harga. This comes off like he has other, much more important things to do than worry about his girlfriend. Yet again, Dani is being hysterical and overreacting over something that does not matter at all. Later when Dani comes to Christian upset because

another visitor has left the village without his fiancée he barely even spares her a moment before going right back into gathering information for his thesis.

Dani is viewed by all the American men in *Midsommar* as just something they need to deal with. None of them respect her as anything other than Christian's girlfriend. We rarely see any of them even speak to her. If they do, it is always because Christian has prompted them to. To them, she is not an equal at all. She is a trophy for Christian to cart around and show off to other people. She does not have value outside her relationship with Christian and they refuse to acknowledge her in any other context. In this behavior, we see so many hegemonic gender norms that run rampant in our society. Men are often viewed as being above women intellectually. They have much better things to do than stoop to discussing their important thoughts with the likes of a woman. To the American men in *Midsommar*, Dani is not even a person.

Hegemonic Gender Norms and the Harga

In *Midsommar*, the Harga functions to push against gender norms as we see them presented by the American characters. Up until we set foot in the Harga village, it is the men who are making all of Dani's decisions for her. Christian and his friends are always pushing Dani to do and say things that they want her to do. This idea starts to unravel though as we begin to see how the Harga interact with each other. When we first meet the Harga it becomes clear to us as viewers that they do not have one leader. Though there are men in power, there are also women who have just as much if not more power. In almost all cases when it comes to Harga rituals, it is led by one of the women elders. A lot of the big decision-making we see is left up to one of the female elders. At one point in the film, we see one of the Harga sacred texts disappear. This triggers many different events but one of them is to see how the Harga functions in a crisis. Finding the book is a job left to the men. They question the remaining Americans about their

mysteriously missing friends and their connection to the missing book. The women are nowhere to be found in this situation which may lead some to believe that they hold less power than the men but this is not the case. As viewers, we are questioning if the sacred text has even gone missing at all. We know, though Dani and Christian do not, that the foreign visitors who have mysteriously disappeared are part of the elaborate blood sacrifice the Harga have been working towards since the start of the midsummer holiday. By making both Dani and Christian believe that this sacred text has gone missing it makes it much easier to separate Christian from Dani. When Christian is called to meet with Siv, the matriarch of the Harga, it becomes much more apparent she had made plans for him without his knowledge.

For the entire movie, a Harga member named Maja is quite interested in Christian, making advances on her and even at one point cooking her pubic hair into his food. In this meeting, Siv tells Christian that he has been approved to mate with Maja. Though it is presented like he has an option, it seems implied that Christian will be expected to have sex with Maja. In this instance, the women of the Harga manipulated the situation so that Christian felt that he was in charge but it is not the case at all. The sacred text only ever went missing because Maja was attracted to Christian. The women of the Harga used his distress over the disappearance of his friends and the missing text to convince him to have sex with her.

This is a completely different power dynamic than we are used to seeing between our American characters. Usually, we expect Dani to look for cues from Christian or his friends as to what to do and say. Every decision she makes is in some way led by a man, even down to when she decided to come to Sweden in the first place. The Harga do not need the input of any men to make a choice. Oftentimes the women will decide and inform the men of the consequence of

their choice. Whether that is that they need to hide their sacred books or kill one of the American tourists, it appears that throughout a lot of *Midsommar*, the Harga men are just following orders.

Maja and Christian's relationship is the complete opposite of Dani and Christian's relationship. When it comes to Dani, Christian is always in charge. He tells her how and when to think and what she is allowed to do about those thoughts. With Maja, Christian is always the victim of the power imbalance. She does not ever ask for his input and only ever considers what she wants from him. Christian is the passenger in that relationship in the same way that Dani is a passenger in her relationship with Christian. Up until they reached the Harga, it has always been that men hold the power in relationships. Dani had been left scrambling to backtrack and fix things between her and Christian even after experiencing one of the most traumatic things that a person can. Christian is made out to be doing a nice thing by staying with his crazy dramatic girlfriend while she grieves the loss of her parents and "psychotic" sister. From the eyes of Christian and the other American men in the movie, it is Dani who is weak for not being able to support herself. From the eyes of the Harga, Christian is often the one who is out of his element. He is unsure about Maja's advances and receives no support from the people around him. Even his friends seem uninterested in Maja's increasingly strange advances. When he would attempt to confide in someone about his discomfort most of the time he would be brushed off, much like Dani was when she attempted to confide in Christian in many different circumstances.

His relationship with Maja also marks him as an outsider to the Harga in the same way Dani is an outsider to Christian's friend group. He is approved to mate with Maja because he is considered "new" blood. His only real use is to to the genetic diversity of the Harga and avoid too much inbreeding in the cult. To the Harga, Christian is more breeding stock than person

which is a common ideology when it comes to women in American culture. By reversing it, the Harga reject the hegemonic gender norm that women are breeding stock.

We also see this dynamic play out in the interactions between Dani and Pelle, the Swedish member of Christian's friend group. Out of all of Christian's friends, Pelle is the only one to pay any attention to Dani. The rest of the Americans only ever acknowledge Dani when they are prompted to or when they believe she is being an inconvenience to them personally. With Pelle, he often goes out of his way to check in on Dani and how she is doing. When Dani comes over to see Christian before leaving for Sweden all of Christian's friends pointedly ignore her presence after giving a mandatory greeting. Mark even leaves the room under the guise of having Christian look over a paragraph of his work. Pelle pulls Dani aside and asks how she is doing after the loss of her family. He tells her he is sorry and offers support that not even Christian has offered her before. In Sweden, Pelle is the only person to remember Dani's birthday, even drawing her a picture as a gift. He is the only one to comfort her after the death of the two elder Harga members in the first ritual when Dani is distraught. She had attempted to reach out to Christian and had been pushed off completely. Pelle finds her and manages to convince her to calm down by again offering support the Christian refused to give. He takes time to explain the Harga's customs to her, going into detail about how the May Queen is important to their culture. When Dani is reduced to a burden that the American characters have to bear, Pelle is there to see Dani for who she truly is: a human being.

In the sense of gender roles, this pushes back on the idea that men hold all the power in the relationship. Dani and Pelle's friendship is very balanced with both parties giving as much as they receive. In the case of Christian and Maja, Christian is the one who is giving more. If there

is a power imbalance among the Harga it falls in favor of the women which is a strong contrast to the gender roles we are used to in American society.

Dani's Rejection of American Gender Norms

Ultimately, Dani's acceptance of the Harga and subsequent decision to have Christian killed pushes against the hegemonic gender norms originally presented in the film. It is quite clear that the Harga functions differently than the American society we are used to and at first, even Dani thinks this is quite strange. Slowly though, Dani begins to find acceptance among the community members that she had always been looking for from Christian. The first time we see this happen is after Christian has blown Dani off again in favor of going to speak to someone about his thesis. This is a turning point where Dani is beginning to question her relationship and a member of the Harga finds her and invites her to join them in their work. As they work together on completely mundane tasks Dani finds a sense of belonging in the community that she had never felt before. In all other aspects of her life she has been an outsider but, for the first time she feels like she has a purpose. Directly following this event is the first time we see her push against the power Christian holds over her. After it appears that Simon has left his fiancée Connie behind Christian attempts to defend Simon saying it was probably a misunderstanding. Dani, fed up with being dismissed, tells Christian "I could see you possibly doing that" (Aster, 2019, 1:26:39). In the past we have only ever seen her try to smooth things over with Christian, being the peacemaker that is always expected of a woman. She begins to spend more time with these women, making her first female friend since she spoke to an unknown woman on the phone at the beginning of the movie.

While Christian is still very much considered an outsider to the Harga, Dani is welcomed into the group activities, including the dancing competition they use to crown their May Queen.

Dani wins this dancing competition to fully cement herself as part of the group in the eyes of the Harga with one woman even declaring “You are the family now!...Like sisters” (Aster, 2019, 1:52:32-1:52:40). As May Queen she is one of the most important members of the community and holds quite a lot of power. This is something that she has never experienced in her relationship with Christian. Though she is skeptical of this she slowly falls into her role.

Christian, on the other hand, begins to slip from his precarious position in the Harga. Though Dani still feels somewhat of a responsibility to him the turning point for her is when she returns from the trip to bless the crops and she discovers Christian has committed the ultimate betrayal by “mating” with Maja. In her absolute horror, she finds comfort in other women validating her distress. In all other situations in the film Dani has been written off as hysterical or crazy. Here, the Harga sits with her pain and feels it with her. Outside of her friendship with Pelle, she has never been acknowledged like this before. When Dani is offered the choice between having Christian or a random member of the Harga that she does not know killed, Dani chooses to save the member of the Harga. In this choice, she decides that she is a member of the Harga and rejects the traditional American gender roles that are present in our society.

Conclusion

Traditional gender norms that we see in our everyday lives rely on power dynamics where a man is seen as more trustworthy than a woman. Through Dani and Christian’s relationship as well as Christian’s relationship with his friends, Aster is able to establish this power dynamic between the American characters in *Midsommar*. We also see this same power dynamic rejected by the Swedish cult the Harga. As we make our way through the film we begin to see the threads of these gender norms unravel. By the end of the movie, we move to accept the

Harga's more flexible gender norms through Dani's rejection of Christian and the subsequent rejection of the gender norms he has been so closely associated with throughout the film.

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