

Death, Grief, and Cultural Meaning in Haryanvi Folk Songs

Niketa Malik¹ and Prof (Dr.) Geeta Phogat²

¹Research Scholar, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Sonapat, Haryana

E-mail: niketamalik08@gmail.com

²Professor, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Khanpur Kalan, Sonapat, Haryana

Abstract

Death is one of the most universal yet culturally mediated human experiences, and societies across the world have developed diverse rituals and practices to understand, negotiate, and cope with the reality of loss. Death rituals not only mark the departure of an individual but also reflect collective beliefs concerning life, spirituality, grief, and social relationships. Within Haryanvi culture, death folk songs constitute an integral part of these ritual practices, functioning as cultural archives that preserve emotional expressions and collective meanings. This paper examines selected Haryanvi death songs as cultural texts through the lens of Clifford Geertz's interpretive cultural theory to understand how meanings surrounding death are symbolically constructed within folk traditions.

Through an interpretative analysis of selected songs, the paper explores how death is represented through symbolic expressions of spirituality, grief, social relationships, and communal practices. The study argues that these songs function beyond expressions of bereavement and emerge as cultural systems that preserve collective beliefs, shape emotional experiences, and provide meaningful ways of understanding mortality. The findings suggest that Haryanvi folk traditions transform individual experiences of loss into culturally shared narratives that sustain both emotional and social continuity.

Keywords

Haryanvi Folk Songs,
Death Rituals,
Clifford Geertz,
Interpretative Cultural Theory,
Gendered Grief,
Collective Healing

Introduction

Folk literature constitutes an essential part of the cultural heritage of a society, preserving the collective experiences, beliefs, emotions, and traditions of people across generations. Transmitted orally from one generation to another, it reflects the social and cultural realities of communities and provides valuable insight into their worldview. Folk songs, as an important component of folklore, record various aspects of human life, including birth, marriage, festivals, agricultural activities, seasons, and religious practices. (Kumar). Along with celebrating joy and social harmony, folk songs also become a medium through which communities express sorrow, grief, and existential concerns.

Among the many experiences that shape human existence, death remains one of the most universal yet culturally interpreted realities. In their study, Banhishikha Ghosh and Athira B. K. discuss how death rituals function not merely as ceremonial acts but as systems of cultural expression through which communities negotiate grief, identity, and social values. Death, therefore, is not understood simply as a biological event; rather, it embodies social obligations, emotional experiences, and cultural meanings embedded within a community's worldview. Ritual practices associated with death often function as symbolic forms that facilitate emotional healing and preserve collective cultural memory.

The study further observes that within Indian traditions, death is frequently perceived as a spiritual transition rather than the absolute end of life. Hindu philosophical thought associates death with concepts such as karma, rebirth, liberation, and union with the Divine. The ultimate goal of human life is often understood as attaining moksha, where the soul is released from the cycle of worldly existence. Death rituals in Hindu communities are deeply embedded in symbolic practices that shape the understanding of a good death and reinforce collective beliefs regarding mortality. Such practices help individuals and communities process grief and establish

continuity between life, death, and spiritual existence.

Haryana possesses a rich tradition of folk songs that portray the lived experiences and cultural values of its people. Existing scholarship on Haryanvi folklore has largely focused on marriage songs, seasonal songs, ritual songs, women's songs, and broader cultural practices. However, songs associated with death and mourning have received comparatively less scholarly attention. Death songs occupy a significant place in Haryanvi folk traditions because they reveal cultural attitudes toward mortality, divine will, family relationships, and emotional expression. The songs associated with the death of husbands, wives, sons, daughters, and elderly individuals articulate both personal grief and collective cultural consciousness. These songs suggest that death is not merely experienced as an individual loss but as a communal event in which relatives and society participate through rituals, lamentations, and devotional performances.

In Haryanvi culture, death songs also perform an important social and emotional function. Through collective singing and ritual participation, grief becomes shared rather than isolated. Lament songs and devotional songs sung during mourning often serve as mechanisms of emotional release and communal healing. Different responses toward different kinds of deaths can also be observed within these traditions. The death of a young son or spouse evokes intense expressions of sorrow, whereas the death of an elderly person is often accompanied by devotional songs that suggest acceptance and completion of life's journey. Thus, these songs preserve cultural values and provide symbolic frameworks through which communities interpret loss and mortality.

Theoretical Framework

The present study employs Clifford Geertz's Interpretative Cultural Theory as a framework for analysing selected Haryanvi death songs. Geertz transformed the understanding of culture by moving beyond material and behavioural explanations and emphasising the symbolic

dimensions of human life. According to him, culture is not simply a collection of customs, rituals, or traditions; rather, it consists of systems of meanings through which people understand and organise their experiences.

Geertz defines culture in one of his most frequently cited statements:

”Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, and I take culture to be those webs.” (5)

This statement suggests that human beings create networks of meanings that shape their understanding of reality. These meanings become embedded in social practices, rituals, beliefs, symbols, and narratives. Therefore, the task of the researcher is not merely to describe social behaviour but to interpret the meanings attached to it. Geertz argues that culture should be approached as a text that can be read and interpreted.

To explain this process, Geertz introduces the concept of thick description. He writes:

”What the ethnographer is in fact faced with... is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another.” (10)

The idea of thick description emphasises understanding the deeper meanings embedded in cultural practices rather than limiting analysis to surface observations. A simple description merely explains what people do, whereas a thick description seeks to explain what those actions signify within a particular cultural setting.

Another important observation by Geertz explains the relationship between symbols and social life:

”Sacred symbols function to synthesise a people's ethos—the tone, character and quality of their life.” (89)

This perspective becomes particularly relevant to the present study because Haryanvi death songs

function as symbolic expressions of collective consciousness. The songs associated with death in Haryana reveal specific cultural attitudes toward mortality and grief.

Thus, Geertz's Interpretative Cultural Theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding how cultural meanings surrounding death are embedded within Haryanvi folk traditions. By employing the method of thick description, the present study seeks to uncover the symbolic structures and cultural values that shape representations of death and mourning in selected Haryanvi folk songs.

Scope and Methodological Approach

The present study adopts a qualitative textual approach for the analysis of selected Haryanvi death songs and narratives. The primary material for the study has been taken from Dr Ramphal Chahal's हरियाणवीसंस्कृतिकीजीवंतपरम्पराएँ, particularly the chapter dealing with death, mourning practices, and related folk traditions. Along with the folk songs, the study also draws upon the explanatory discussions and cultural observations provided in the text. The selected material has been examined in relation to themes of death, grief, spirituality, and social relationships within Haryanvi culture. The scope of the study remains limited to the selected songs, narratives, and cultural interpretations associated with death and mourning practices.

Cultural Constructions of Death and Spiritual Transcendence

A folk narrative associated with Lord Krishna's selection of Kurukshetra as the battlefield illustrates this understanding of mortality. After the death of a young son, a farmer consoles his wife by saying (Chahal 30):

जैसेफसलहमबोतेहैंऔरकाटतेहैं,

वैसेहीभगवानभीअपनीउगाईहुईफसलकोवापसबुलालेताहै

|(Chahal 30)

Transliteration:

Jaise fasal hum bote hain aur kaatte hain, vaise hi Bhagwan bhi apnī ugāī huī fasal ko vāpas bulā letā hai.

Translation:

"Just as we sow crops and harvest them ourselves, God also calls back His own crop."

The metaphor of crops and harvest emerges from an agrarian social world where cultivation forms an essential part of everyday life. Sowing and harvesting are repetitive and natural processes familiar to the collective experience of rural communities. Human life is therefore interpreted through a symbolic language already embedded within the cultural environment. Individuals are represented as creations of God whose existence, like crops, follows a natural cycle of emergence and return.

The symbolic significance of the metaphor becomes clearer when examined through Geertz's understanding of culture. Geertz observes:

"Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (5)

The metaphor performs an important cultural function because it transforms death from an unpredictable rupture into a meaningful process. Instead of perceiving death as arbitrary destruction, the narrative frames it as a return to the creator, implying completion and continuity. Through this symbolic understanding, mortality becomes integrated into a larger divine rhythm governing human existence.

The songs further deepen this philosophical understanding by emphasising detachment from worldly existence and acceptance of life's impermanence. A recurring idea appears in the following lines:

आएकार्हरषनहीं, गएकाशोकनहीं(30)

Transliteration:

Aaye ka harsh nahin, gaye ka shok nahin.

Translation:

"There is no joy in arrival and no sorrow in departure."

The line establishes a symbolic balance between arrival and departure and places life and death within the same cyclical movement. The words *aaye* (arrival) and *gaye* (departure) extend beyond birth and death and symbolise the broader rhythm of existence itself. Relationships emerge and dissolve, possessions are acquired and relinquished, and individuals themselves move through temporary stages of existence.

The parallel structure of the line creates a symmetry that resists privileging one experience over another. Birth is not excessively celebrated, nor is death represented as an absolute catastrophe. Instead, both become part of a larger continuum that discourages excessive attachment to temporary realities. The song, therefore, shifts attention away from isolated emotional events toward a philosophical understanding of life as transient and cyclical.

The movement toward detachment becomes more explicit in another excerpt:

इसदेहकोनेहरेनहीं, लक्ष्मीकोहेरेनहीं(30)

Transliteration:

Is deh ko nehare nahin, Lakshmi ko here nahin.

Translation:

"There is no attachment to the body and no desire for wealth."

The line questions two central foundations upon which human identity is often constructed: the body and material prosperity. The body ordinarily functions as the centre of selfhood, while wealth frequently determines social value and status. By denying attachment to both, the song exposes the

temporary nature of identities that individuals often consider permanent.

The reference to *Lakshmi* carries deeper symbolic significance. Lakshmi does not merely represent economic wealth but also embodies desires, aspirations, and worldly attachments. Through these familiar cultural symbols rooted in everyday life, the song suggests that individuals often become imprisoned within material pursuits while overlooking the impermanent nature of existence itself.

The idea of detachment expands further in another significant expression:

हारीनहींजीती, नहींवर्णनहींजातहै(Chahal 30)

Transliteration:

Haari nahin jeeti, nahin varna nahin jaat hai.

Translation:

"There is neither defeat nor victory, neither caste nor social identity."

The movement here shifts from personal detachment toward social detachment. Human life is ordinarily structured through categories such as success and failure, caste and status, hierarchy and social distinction. These categories organise relationships and shape individual identity. However, within the context of death, such distinctions lose their authority.

The symbolic rejection of caste carries particular significance within the rural social environment where caste structures historically influence social organisation. Death functions as a force that dismantles boundaries considered essential during life, therefore exposing the fragility of human systems of classification and challenging assumptions about hierarchy and permanence. The culmination of spiritual transcendence appears in the final expression:

ब्रह्ममेंसमातहै(Chahal 30)

Transliteration:

Brahma mein samaat hai.

Translation:

"One ultimately merges into the Absolute."

The phrase shifts the understanding of death from finality toward transcendence. Death does not indicate disappearance but reunion with a greater spiritual reality, representing human existence as part of a larger metaphysical order where life ultimately returns to its source.

The songs rarely question divine decisions or express anger toward fate. The symbolic structures within these songs reveal what Geertz describes as the cultural "webs of significance" through which communities interpret reality. Unlike modern understandings of death that frequently seek explanations or identify causes, these folk expressions suggest a cultural tendency toward acceptance, reflecting an understanding that human agency remains limited before divine authority. Sorrow exists, but it is ultimately placed within a framework that gives it meaning. Death, therefore, emerges not as chaos or disruption but as continuity within a sacred and divinely ordered world.

The idea of detachment in these songs does not advocate withdrawal from society or rejection of worldly responsibilities. Rather, it points toward a state of spiritual awareness where individuals recognise the temporary nature of material realities. Such a perspective closely resonates with the Indian philosophical concept of *moksha*, where liberation becomes possible through release from excessive attachment to worldly existence.

Gendered Expressions of Grief and Loss

Haryanvi death songs reveal that mourning is not experienced or expressed uniformly; rather, grief is shaped by culturally prescribed gender roles and social expectations. Although death is a universal human experience, the songs indicate that men and women are expected to perform grief differently. Women repeatedly emerge as the principal vocal carriers of mourning, whereas male grief remains restrained, silent, or indirectly expressed. The songs, therefore, reveal not only emotional suffering arising from loss but also how social structures organise emotional expression itself.

From an interpretative perspective, emotions are not merely private psychological responses but culturally mediated experiences. As Geertz observes:

"Culture is public because meaning is" (12)

The expression of grief in these songs operates within a shared system of meanings where emotional responses are shaped by family relationships, social expectations, and gender roles. Mourning, therefore, becomes a culturally structured practice rather than a purely individual reaction to loss.

One of the most powerful examples appears in the widow's lament:

रांडगलीकाटोकडा, मनमानेठुकराए(Chahal 31)

Transliteration:

Raand gali ka tokda, man maane thukraaye.

Translation:

"A widow becomes like a discarded object in the street, rejected at will."

The line moves beyond personal grief and enters the domain of social identity. The metaphor of *tokda* (discarded object) is particularly striking because it symbolically reduces the widow from

an individual with social significance to something abandoned and unwanted, destabilising the woman's social position and cultural identity. Her suffering becomes double-layered: she mourns not only the person she has lost but also the social identity attached to marriage itself. This displacement becomes more visible in another line:

रंगमहलसेउतरी, शीशमहलनजाए(Chahal 31)

Transliteration:

Rang mahal se utari, sheesh mahal na jaaye.

Translation:

"She descends from the palace of colours yet cannot enter the palace of honour."

The contrast between *rang mahal* and *sheesh mahal* intensifies the sense of social dislocation. Colour traditionally symbolises celebration, joy, and marital fulfilment within Indian cultural contexts. The movement away from the "palace of colours" suggests a symbolic departure from spaces associated with social inclusion and emotional vitality, affecting not only the marital relationship but also a woman's social visibility and dignity.

The representation of grief appears differently in the lament of a wife mourning her husband:

आंवतेकामुँहदेखिया, जावतेकीबसपीठ(Chahal 31)

Transliteration:

Aanvate ka muh dekhiya, jaavate ki bas peeth.

Translation:

"I saw your face when you came, but when you left, only your back."

The imagery creates a powerful contrast between presence and absence. The face symbolises

intimacy, companionship, and emotional connection, while the departing back signifies irreversible separation. The wife expresses grief through visual and relational imagery rather than philosophical reflection.

Unlike the songs emphasising spiritual detachment, this lament foregrounds emotional attachment. The focus remains on the disruption of human relationships rather than metaphysical ideas concerning death. The wife speaks not of spiritual transcendence but of separation from shared experiences and emotional companionship.

The songs also represent maternal grief through powerful symbolic imagery:

जबतोघरतैलिगडेआरेगाभरू, शेरजवानहोगे(Chahal 31)

Transliteration:

Jab to ghar tai likadeya re gabhru, sher jawan hoge.

Translation:

"When you left home, O young one, you had become a lion-like youth."

The comparison of the son with a lion is culturally significant because the lion symbolises strength, masculinity, and vitality. The mother's grief extends beyond the death of an individual and reflects the destruction of an anticipated future. The son embodies continuity of lineage, familial responsibility, and future expectations. His death, therefore, interrupts both emotional relationships and imagined possibilities. The mother's sorrow intensifies in another expression:

मारीक्यूनकोतरी, मारयाक्यूनकाग(Chahal 32)

Transliteration:

Maari kyun na kotri, maarya kyun na kaag.

Translation:

"Why did you not strike the bird? Why did you not drive away the crow?"

The crow acquires symbolic significance as a messenger associated with death and misfortune. The mother's repeated questioning does not seek rational answers; instead, it reflects emotional helplessness before an irreversible reality. The questions become expressions of resistance against loss itself.

Significantly, women repeatedly emerge as the primary speakers of grief within these songs. Mothers, wives, sisters, and widows become the voices through which sorrow is articulated and remembered. Their grief is public, vocal, and embodied through lamentation. In this sense, grief itself becomes a form of gendered labour. Women are expected not only to mourn but also to perform mourning publicly on behalf of the family and community. Through lamentation, they become custodians of emotional memory and preserve the social significance of the deceased.

Male grief, by contrast, appears indirectly. The text observes that a husband mourning the death of his wife does not cry openly because of social restraints, "He sheds tears in solitude." (Chahal)

The Haryanvi death songs thus demonstrate that mourning functions as a culturally organised practice in which emotional expression itself becomes structured through gender expectations. Women's voices dominate these songs not simply because they experience greater sorrow, but because cultural structures position them as performers and preservers of collective grief. The songs, therefore, reveal how gender identities are reinforced, negotiated, and symbolically enacted at moments of death and bereavement.

Ritual Mourning and Collective Healing

While death produces personal loss, the songs suggest that grief is not expected to remain confined within the private sphere of the individual. Mourning in Haryanvi culture appears

as a collective process in which family members, relatives, and the larger community participate through ritual performances and songs. The significance of these songs lies not only in what is sung but also in why it is sung and who participates in the act of singing. Through collective performance, personal pain gradually becomes integrated into communal memory, reducing emotional isolation and allowing mourners to experience support through collective participation. The text itself explicitly indicates this function: "These songs play an important role in releasing or easing the grief that arises in the hearts of relatives after the death of a loved one" (Chahal)

This observation suggests that mourning songs perform functions beyond aesthetic expression. They create a cultural space where emotional pain that might otherwise remain internalised becomes acknowledged through collective participation. Mourning, therefore, becomes not solely an emotional response but also a social process through which communities sustain emotional continuity. The communal dimension of grief becomes visible in the lament sung after the death of a married daughter:

हाय-हाय, बागाकीकोयल(31)

Transliteration:

Haay-haay, baaga ki koyal

Translation:

"Alas, the cuckoo of the garden."

The metaphor of the *koyal* (cuckoo) carries strong symbolic significance. Rather than referring directly to the deceased daughter, the song employs imagery associated with sweetness, beauty, and vitality. Through this metaphor, the deceased is remembered not merely as a lifeless body but as an emotionally meaningful presence within the family. Memory is therefore preserved through symbolic representation rather than factual description.

The lament further continues through collective questioning:

किन्हेंतेरीबांधीअर्थी, किन्हेंकरैयांसिंगार(31)

Transliteration:

Kinhen teri baandhi arthi, kinhen karaiyaan singaar

Translation:

"Who tied your bier, and who adorned you for the final rite?"

The repeated questioning does not seek literal answers; rather, it creates a shared emotional dialogue among mourners. The act of recalling ritual details becomes a means through which participants collectively revisit emotional bonds and acknowledge the reality of loss. Grief thus shifts from the language of personal sorrow toward a communal act of remembrance.

Geertz observes:

"Culture is public because meaning is" (12).

The mourning songs illustrate this idea because grief is represented not as an isolated psychological experience but as a culturally shared process. The meanings associated with loss become public through collective rituals and symbolic performances. Emotional suffering, therefore, acquires social recognition and communal legitimacy.

The process of collective healing becomes particularly visible in practices surrounding the death of elderly individuals. Unlike intense lament songs associated with untimely deaths, the text notes that devotional songs known as *Hajras* are sung, "When an elderly person dies, women from the relatives come singing devotional songs called *Hajras*." (Chahal 31)

The transition from lamentation to devotional singing carries important cultural significance. While lament songs allow immediate emotional release after loss, devotional songs gradually redirect attention toward acceptance and spiritual reflection. The movement from sorrow toward devotion indicates a shift in emotional orientation.

The death of an elderly individual is represented not merely as a tragic interruption but as the completion of life's journey. Consequently, the communal response also changes. Instead of emphasising emotional rupture, the songs emphasise continuity and spiritual peace.

The distinction between lament songs and *Hajras* reveals an important process of emotional transformation: grief moves from shock toward expression, and from expression toward acceptance. The songs, therefore, do not erase suffering; rather, they reorganise it within a culturally meaningful framework.

The selected Haryanvi death songs, therefore, function as cultural instruments of collective healing. Through symbolic language, ritual participation, and communal performance, they transform grief from an individual experience into a shared emotional process. Healing within these songs does not emerge through the disappearance of sorrow but through its cultural reorganisation, restoring both emotional and social continuity after loss.

Conclusion

The analysis of Haryanvi death songs reveals that death within folk consciousness is understood not merely as the end of life but as a culturally meaningful experience interpreted through symbols, rituals, and collective beliefs. Rather than reacting to death as an isolated event, the community constructs frameworks through which loss becomes emotionally and spiritually comprehensible. Through these symbolic expressions, mortality is transformed from a biological reality into a deeply social and cultural experience.

A significant insight emerging from the study is the coexistence of emotional sorrow and philosophical acceptance within the songs. While the songs express longing, separation, and grief, they simultaneously direct individuals toward acceptance, detachment, and continuity. Human suffering is neither denied nor exaggerated; instead, it is gradually reorganised within a cultural structure that allows individuals to endure and negotiate loss.

The study further demonstrates that mourning practices embedded within folk traditions perform functions extending beyond emotional expression. These songs preserve collective memory, reinforce communal relationships, and transmit cultural values across generations. Grief is therefore not treated as an entirely private burden but as a shared social experience shaped through participation and ritual performance.

The songs also reveal how philosophical reflections concerning mortality, impermanence, and spiritual existence become integrated into everyday cultural life. Ideas often associated with formal religious discourse appear here through ordinary language, folk metaphors, and communal singing traditions. Their simplicity should therefore not be mistaken for intellectual absence; rather, it reflects the ability of folk traditions to communicate complex existential ideas through culturally familiar symbols.

At another level, the study highlights the importance of preserving oral traditions that remain marginalised within mainstream literary and academic discussions. Haryanvi death songs preserve emotional histories, cultural values, and lived experiences that formal historical narratives frequently overlook. Interpreting these songs through a cultural framework demonstrates that folklore functions not merely as entertainment or tradition but as a meaningful system through which communities interpret human existence itself.

Ultimately, the selected songs reveal that while death may be inevitable, its meanings are culturally constructed. The enduring strength of

these folk traditions lies in their ability to transform suffering, grief, and mortality into experiences that remain emotionally meaningful, socially shared, and spiritually interpretable.

Works Cited

Chahal, Ramphal.

हरियाणवीसंस्कृतिकीजीवंतपरम्पराएँ.

Akshardham Parkashan, 2023, pp. 31-32.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1973.

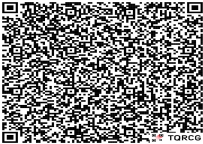
<https://people.ucsc.edu/~ktellez/geertz1973.pdf>

Ghosh, Banhishikha, and Athira B. K. "From Ritual Mourning to Solitary Grief: Reinterpretation of Hindu Death Rituals in India." *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying*, vol. 89, no. 2, 2024, pp. 759–776. DOI: 10.1177/00302228221085175

Kumar, Devender. "Haryanavi Folk Songs." *Dialog*, no. 44, Autumn 2024, pp. 130–146. https://dialog.puchd.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/9_Haryanavi-folk-songs_Devender-Kumar.pdf. Accessed 16 May 2026.

About the Author

Niketa Malik is a research scholar in the Department of English at Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya. Her research engages with folklore, cultural studies, and women's oral traditions, with particular emphasis on communities in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. She has published in UGC-listed journals and has presented her work at national and international conferences. Her scholarship explores cultural representation, oral heritage, and gendered voices in regional literary traditions. She holds certificates in Poem Writing and the French language.

Access this Article in Online	
	Website: www.ijarm.com
	Subject: Cultural studies
Quick Response Code	
DOI: 10.22192/ijamr.2026.13.05.003	

How to cite this article:

Niketa Malik and Geeta Phogat. (2026). Death, Grief, and Cultural Meaning in Haryanvi Folk Songs. *Int. J. Adv. Multidiscip. Res.* 13(5): 26-35.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22192/ijamr.2026.13.05.003>