



## Library as a Source for Transformation: A Study of Matt Haig's The Midnight Library

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**Abstract:** This study examines the library as a crucial point in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* to reshape life through transformation. For Haig, the library is not just a physical place, but a liminal space that stands for a transformation. This paper applies theoretical analysis as a method of interpretation using border theory as a theoretical tool, particularly the concept of liminal space, to project the library as the positive threshold for personal and social transformation. Drawing on Homi K Bhabha's borderland theory related to the liminal space, this study examines how the library serves as a liminal space for reforming life through conversion. Ultimately, the protagonist Nora finds the library as a life-affirming space that points a shift from death mania to life, from self-effacement to optimism and self-discovery. This transformation ranges from factual life to creative life to designate creative world is more powerful than the physical one. This study argues that library not only blurs division that separates the physical world from the fictional creative world but also indicates that creative world is more powerful than the physical world. The conclusion of the novel indicates that the protagonist Nora Seed finds the library as a life affirming space the one that points a shift from death mania to life and hope. The library and librarian are so vibrant that they diffuse the general obsession suicidal tendency and reinforce a support to rejuvenate life. The transformation of Nora Seed's life from self-effacement to optimism and self-discovery is only possible through the liminal space of library.

**Keywords:** library, liminal space, suicidal mania, transformation.

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of the study is to unravel how the rapid development of information and technology brings about unprecedented changes in human society,

leading to an ever-rising aspiration among people resulting with existing personal and social status. It aims at showing that the anguish and apprehension resulting from the proliferating digital technology

among people is deep. Reflecting this present tendency, Haig's novel *The Midnight Library* centers around such themes as insecurity, anxiety, inferiority complex, lack of purpose, low self-esteem, and frayed relationships. Nora Seed, the female protagonist of the novel, undergoes these upheavals at various stages of her life. Seed needs psychological therapy through consolation and psychological support. By navigating personal and social challenges, she ultimately accepts the challenges of life to lead a successful life. This is possible only when she lands in a library at midnight. Upon the encouragement of the librarian Mrs. Elm, Nora Seed is motivated to relive her "root life" (Haig, p.38) and redress the lapses that she suffered in the past through the literary texts that instilled in her a life force through successful life stories. The multiple possibilities opened up by the literary texts in the library brought about a massive transformation in her otherwise debilitating life. Consequently, it dispels the grief and sorrow that engulfed her past life and imparts passion and enthusiasm in her for a new life. The library, projected as "a library of possibility" (Haig, p.64) and "between life and death" (Haig, p.28) is not only a physical space for knowledge but also a metaphorical location that reinforces Nora Seed's to navigate from a life of despair and anguish to that of hope and resilience.

In *The Midnight Library*, the library for Nora Seed functions as the gateway to happiness. Specifically, the library is a liminal space that rids Nora of the anxiety and psychological trauma that she suffered in her unsuccessful and frayed past life. Her obsession with suicide stems from her past failures and frustrations, but the library dissipates her grief because it is the reservoir of knowledge, information, and innumerable possibilities. This study argues that the library blurs the division separating the physical world from the fictional, creative world. For Nora Seed, the library turns out to be a veritable space of multiple opportunities. The transformation occurs from commonplace and unexpected hopeful world, and the intersection of the past and future to the visible and invisible world with myriad possibilities. Therefore, the library in the novel works as a supporter of life.

## 2. Review of Literature

Since its publication in 2020, the novel *The Midnight Library* has drawn multiple interpretations. Termed as a fantasy novel, it is regarded as an autobiographical sketch of the novelist Matt Haig himself. In an interview that he gave after the publication of the novel, Haig confesses that he became a victim of anxiety and depression at the age of 24 (Pulley, 2020), a situation that Nora Seed grapples with in her own life. Naturally, this dimension gave rise to a flurry of psychological criticisms of the novel. Much of such perspective focused on the psychology of Nora, examining her frustration and her compulsive urge to suicide. Approaching the novel from an existential and absurdist point of view, Rehan & Gul examine how Nora Seed is weighed down by "the monotony of life and feels a misfit" (p.459). They highlight how her relatives "behave like a parasite" and how she is stripped of "all her energies" (p.459). Rehan & Sihotang & Mubarak also analyzed the novel from the point of view of psychoanalytical theory, using that of the Freudian version. The crux of their analysis is that the personality of Nora Seed had the preponderance of "superego, even though the id and ego had dominated her for a few times" (p.1546). Similarly, Kayalvizhi and C.M. studied the dynamism of Nora, pointing out how "Nora's apparent death influences Nora's character development" and how she turns out to be "an open-minded, optimistic, grateful and happier person" at the end (pp.48-49). Thus, Rehan & Sihotang & Mubarak, Kayalvizhi & C.M. subjected the novel to psychological reading, defy Nora's agitations, frustration, and obsession as she journeys through different demoralizing stages of her life, delving deeper into the inner recess of Nora's mind.

A psychological reading of *The Midnight Library* does not stop with short articles, as cited above. Mikaeili's in-depth and sustained investigation reveals Nora Seeds' multifaceted characters. Mikaeili is concerned with keeping track of how Nora grows as an independent and confident individual as she undergoes various vicissitudes in her life. To examine Nora's graduation into a self-independent being, Mikaeili (2023) applies Jung's concept of "individuation theory" (p. 4). Capturing Seed's mercurial experiences of individual growth,

Hana Mikaeili portrays her as being "tired of a hopeless life and dead potentials of what-ifs, struggles with a mental breakdown" (2023, p. 1). Allied with Mikaeili's approach is Schultz & Schultz's view that Jung believes that human beings are always stimulated toward a higher state of consciousness through a process of transformation known as "individuation" (p.93). According to Mikaeili, the Jungian concept of "individuation" (p.2) refers to what is called a "psychological journey" (p.3). This implies that "the unconscious contents are brought into consciousness, and we become aware of them" (p.4). Mikaeili further clarifies that "when these contents become conscious, we have a chance to correct them and defuse their negative effects on our lives" (p.4). Mikaeili justifies the appropriateness of using Jungian psychological criticism, saying this approach is concerned with "psychic activity. . . Which is one of the fundamental influences in our lives" (p.5). These critics value the psychological aspect of the characters.

Emphasizing the wider significance of Jungian criticism, Rowland (2022) maintains that "Jung inspired many artists, writers, philosophers, and therapists, including ones who use art as a tool for therapy" (p.2). He further views that Jungian psychological theory offers a liberation of creativity and imagination to literary studies (p.3). This entire process of a positive shift lends energy to meet "one's capacities and become the unique self" (Schultz & Schultz, 2017,p.95). Thus, Mikaeili's use of Jungian psychological criticism helps to describe how Nora Seed discovered her own "capacities" and "the unique self" (Schultz & Schultz, p. 95) in the end, exactly reflecting a shift from the unconscious paranoia that confronted Nora Seed in her earlier life to a liberating self-awakening consciousness in the end.

Related to psychology is the concept of self-efficacy. According to Sabrina (2022) the concept means "creating a solid foundation in self-motivation" (p.8). She further adds that "individual self-efficacy is a belief in its capacity to face various environmental challenges" (p.8). Reading *The Midnight Library* from this perspective, Sabrina equates Nora Seed's development of the

individual as a foundation in "self-motivation" (p.8). The development supports changing her life. Pulley in the newspaper "The Guardian" (2022) reviews that the novel explores a new world in which "a new universe blossoms from every choice and freedom" (np). Pulley also argues that Matt Haig is mainly concerned with "the psychological effect" that impacts his character Nora Seed as she struggles to negotiate different unsuccessful careers and choices. (Pulley, "The Guardian", np). The library is a novel world for transformation from uncertainty to certainty.

Critics have analyzed the novel from an autobiographical perspective, linking the main character to the author. Autobiographical readings are also found. The writer himself confessed that he had a mental disorder at the age of twenty-four while he suffered severe depression. As Duerden (2015) in "The Independent" says books and readings created a haven for him and stories became his antidepressants" ("The Independent", np). Reiterating the theme of mental disorder, Sheela Shankari writes that the novel moves within the periphery of Nora Seed, a lady of 35 year old, "who suffers from depression and mental health issue and in between she finds a different version of life that she gets a chance to undo her regrets, and eventually it reveals how she overcomes the suicidal thoughts (Haig, p.1). The social mania is self-destructive thought that dominated her psychology in the initial phase. Critics reasoned the novel is the epitome of existential study, exploration of the id, ego, and superego, and dynamism of Nora. However, the crux of the novel rests on the life-injecting function of the library at midnight, inspiring hope, aspiration, courage, and longing for life in the protagonist of the novel. Without studying the myriad experiences that the library injects for the sense of hope, and the positive feelings that Mrs. Elm provokes for Nora, the study of the book becomes incomplete. The library and the librarian are so vibrant that they diffuse the general obsession with suicidal tendencies and reinforce support to reinvigorate life. Therefore, the way the library and the librarian help Nora for further life and a sense of hope has to be the subject of the study.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative procedures to analyze Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* to justify the point that the library transforms human life and presents myriad possibilities in life. Psychological well-being is possible through the knowledge of the library. Borderland theory is the general approach, and Bhabha's (2011) liminal space is the specific approach to analyzing the text. Anzaldua (1987) and Atzili (2012) have been used as secondary sources for theoretical support.

#### **Borderland Theory: A Philosophical Inquiry as Theoretical Framework**

Borderland Theory upsets the commonly conceived notion of geographical borders/ space that separates one nation-state from another. Traditional/ historical perspectives on borders or borderlands view borders as linear and fixed spaces inhabited by entities of rigid categories and classifications. Challenges to such a monolithic concept emanate from different contexts as new international relations and blocs were forged along the line of new socio-political and economic power dynamics. Introducing a new concept of "border fixity" (p.1), Atzili (2012) argues that territorial discussion has changed much in the "post-World War II context" (p.1) He contextualizes these ideas to counter the view that international territorial issues have been almost settled. The idea of geographical territory overlooks the concept called space that straddles both sides of the border. As the scholarship of borderland discussion continued to grow, this new scholarship became associated with such cognate terms as soft borders and multiculturalism, which include "nearly every psychic or geographic space about which one can thematize problems of boundary or limit" (Atzili, p.1).

This transition shows a shift from geographically conceived territory to a place of "politically exciting hybridize, intellectual creativity and moral possibility" and a "privileged locus of hope for a better world" (Atzili, p.2). The vanguard or pioneering theorists of this idea were Gloria Anzaldua & Homi K Bhabha. Bhabha (2011) asserts the concept of third space, "Indeed, for us, the question must be how to think-or how to represent- the liminality of the conditional within unconditional...this interstitial space of thirdness"

(p.6). For her, this space is "an interstitial moment produced through the negotiation of contradiction and ambivalence" (Bhabha,6). She further clarifies the concept of liminality, "Liminalities of hospitality and language, reveal the third as a graspable" (Bhabha,7). Knowledge Their ideas of borderland summarizes the fact that "voices and identities situated in the in-between of a hybrid land --- what Anzaldua (1987) calls a "third country" ---carve out spaces laden with possibilities of liberation" (p.198). Allied with their ideas is the concept of liminal space understood as "occasions to imagine" (p.196). Anzaldua (1987) in the preface of the book expresses an autobiographical note discussing the value of books during the course for the discussion of borderland theory, "Books saved my sanity, knowledge opened the locked places in me and taught me first how to survive and then how to soar" (Preface). Applying the concept of liminal space in *The Midnight Library*, this article projects the library as a liminal space "laden with possibilities of liberation" (198) and "occasions to imagine" (p.196). The theory works to indicate psychological space to create transformation from uncertainty to certainty, from death mania to life wish, and from hopelessness to hopefulness.

#### **Liminality and Nora's Identity**

Nora Seed exists in a liminal space with a liquid identity in the library in the wake of her transition from an early life of precariousness to that of optimism. Her experience in the library metaphorically represents the borderland experience because she enters the third space and finds life. Borderland is a space of possibilities, a crisscross, that is a "privileged locus of hope for a better world" (Haig,p.2). She has to navigate conflicting wishes and experiences. The metaphorical use of language in the literature supports conveying the myriad layers of the meaning. The novelist's use of midnight hints at the temporal liminality, the transition between yesterday and tomorrow, and the evolution from despair to hope. While the former is the experience that Nora Seed lived through, the latter implies hope and a bright future that she looks forward to living. For her, the midnight hour is a crucial temporal position of transitioning from one stage to another, a time for decision-making. The library is

the metaphorical space for Nora Seed to explore manifold potentials in life so as to continue life with multiple possible choices. When the whole world is fast asleep, it opens up for giving life to her. This liminal space transforms from one sphere to the next. This is so because it positively offers Nora to discover the world having hundreds of choices that are available for her. Chess board symbolizes countless opportunities in life that develop the internal drive to life, accept the challenges, and work for alternative possibilities.

Midnight time indicated through the clock indicates myriad possibilities at the crossroads of life. The word crossroad is invested with a connotative import that stands for possibilities and choices. One can choose the way for future happenings. The novel indicates: "She looked at the digital display of her watch. 00:00:00 Midnight, as the clock had told her" (Haig,p.23). The midnight symbolically indicates the crossroad to begin a new life, accept what was there in the past, and make a fruitful beginning. Midnight makes her aware of life and living. The clock symbol indicates a threshold of life and death.

The library supports gaining momentum in Nora Seed's life. The books in the library "were everywhere" and they were "all green" (Haig, p.24). The availability of the books indicates multiple possibilities that are open for Nora Seed in her life. The word "green" signifies hopes for a better and brighter future. There is the possibility of transforming life from darkness to bright with the support of a library. This is the transition place in which a person has abundant choices out of multiple possibilities for life and living. The novel functions as a point to blur the demarcation between life and death.

The librarian acts as a source of life to find significance in Nora Seed's life. Mrs. Elm is the librarian in the novel, who arouses hunger and keenness in Nora for life. She guides the protagonist Nora to lead a life having a hopeful future in this crucial time. Mrs. Elm's intervention in Nora's life could not have been more opportune because Nora was at a very crucial and volatile stage of her life. She was at the eleventh hour of her life, on the verge of killing herself. She is life-

affirming and motivating as she caresses Nora: "Mrs. Elm had held her, stroking and smoothing the back of her head like a baby" (Haig, p.26). Her support for the protagonist transforms Nora from her obsession with death to a zeal for life. Once Nora asked about her whereabouts, she responded, "A library, of course" (Haig, p.27). The library symbolizes multiple and myriad experiences. Her next question was, "Am I dead? Is this the afterlife?" (Haig,p.27). Death and the afterlife signify her death wish.

The librarian motivates Nora to go through the variegated experiences presented in the books, which in turn prevents the suicidal tendency that had chased her from early on. The conversation between Nora and Elm indicates her confusion about life and death. According to Elm, "Between life and death, there is a library" (Haig, p.28), meaning the library is the liminal place that infuses Nora with life sensation. The line between life and death is the library. This is the turning for people to grasp the world and develop a love for life. She further points out "While *the Midnight Library* stands, Nora, you will be preserved from death. Now, you have to decide how you want to live" (Haig, p.29). The underlying point is the multiple possibilities that the library projects to preserve Nora from death.

### **Library as a Source for Transformation**

The library acts as a source for personal transformation from death's urge to courage and resilience. Nora Seed's multiple identities surface in the library, showing her in-betweenness. Information from books in the library averts her pending death and motivates her to live because the library is the accumulated knowledge of hope, aspiration, and love. Finally, it acts as a source of inspiration. Elm reasons that "Every life contains many million decisions" and "these books are portals to all the lives you could be living" which "all exist in *The Midnight library*. They are all as real as this life" (Haig,p.30). The library contains multiple experiences with multiple possibilities. Multiple human experiences are written in the books through social acceptance. The books offer a fix to the overall disenchantment and discontentment that Nora suffers almost all of her life till the time she finally enters the library. Mrs.

Elm reasons with Nora that human society and social upheavals can be fixed through books: “This book is the source of all your problems and the answer to them too.” But what is it? It is called, my dear, *The Book of Regrets*” (Haig,p.32). Specifying one specific book, she points out solutions for probable catastrophes of life. Every aspect of life has been encompassed in the book. The arrangement of life moves in the book from chapter one to chapter 35. Year by year, the length of the chapter increased. There were bundles of regrets ranging from personal matters to family and social matters. One of the regrets that she narrates is “I regret the time I spent on social media” (Haig,p.33.). For her, social media instigated in her the urge for suicide pointing to expectations and over-ambitions. However, she regrets it because of "all those arguments with Dad" and "financial mismanagement" (Haig, p.34). Family complications and financial bungling caused frustration in life that in turn paved the way for her obsession to die.

The library is the source of life and happiness due to which it is called the midnight library. It is the crossroad for future possibilities: “The library is called *Mid Night Library* because every new life on offer here begins now. Now is midnight. It begins now. All these futures” (Haig, p.37). When a person enters a library, opens a book, and embarks into the life of the creative imagination, there is a possibility of a world of hope and a bright future. The books erase the ugly past and create the palpable hope for a better future indicating a resplendent future. The future and the present merge here at the moment indicating hope and aspiration. The library is the store of experiences that can change one's destiny from one stage to the other.

The protagonist repeatedly indicates her death wish at the beginning of the novel due to her unfulfilled personal, family, and social expectations: “I want to be dead. I would be dead because I want to be. That’s why I took the overdose. I want to die.” (Haig, p.38). The repetition of the death wish is not for self-effacement but to do away with frustration. Elm handed a book, “The book was one of the darker shades of green. She handed it to Nora. It was a lot lighter than *The Book of Regrets*” (Haig,

p.39). The librarian’s motivation to read another book indicates the myriads of experiences lying in the next store of knowledge and information. Life deserves importance having both multiple sides indicating the pleasant and unpleasant sides. The book projects physical and psychological vibrations that in turn infuses in her an irresistible urge to live. After reading a few books in the library, Nora Seed experiences a new sensation "in her body" like [a] little healthier, a little stronger, but tense” (Haig, p.49). The books induced positive energy and vitality in life. It shows the way knowledge and information have positive and adverse impacts. Social media had filled her with negative thoughts and induced suicidal tendencies whereas books from the library made her feel healthier and stronger.

The atmosphere of the library supports life and longing for living. After taking the short bath, Nora Seed realizes a new life during the night, “inside the midnight library” (Haig, p.54). The new feeling emerged due to her reading of the books. The books had the magic power to convert her psychology from darkness to brightness. Still, she felt that “Like I still want to die. I have wanted to die for quite a while” (Haig, p.57). The dilemma of life and death still prevails in her psychology but she feels that longing for life is more powerful than the willingness to die. She feels that her life is a disaster. She rejects other books of regret given by Elm.

The transformation from a death wish to a zeal for life is the turning point of the novel. Even then Nora expresses, “So I could open a book and just to die?” (Haig, p.64). She diverts from a complete death wish to partial love for life. This is the function of the library. However, Elm responds by stating the importance of the library having a sense of hope and multiple options, “It is a library of possibility. And death is the opposite of possibility. Understand?” (Haig,p.64). The library makes her understand the significance of life.

Frustration in life is a troublesome human experience to demoralize people. Nora expresses that “My problem is life fright” (Haig, p.100). She implies that she has frustration in life. She had the shock, “It wasn’t the shock of having been close to death. It was the shock of realizing she wanted to

live” (Haig, p.120). Nora developed the realization: “To be a part of nature was to be part of the will to live” (Haig, p.120). Willingness to live makes her stronger than before.

During the conversation, Elm expresses to Nora the way she changed her attitude from dying to living: “The fact that you have so thoroughly changed your attitude towards dying” (Haig, p.139). Previously, she wanted to die, she had got suicidal mania, and now she wished to live. As she further points out, “You wanted to die and now you don’t” (Haig, p.139). The library induces her to live because it is conceived what Anzaldúa calls a space “laden with possibilities of liberation” (Haig, p.198). This space liberates her from the bondage of responsibilities and makes her free.

The library, symbolically, represents a place for social and personal welfare because the thousands of human experiences lie in a library. Mrs. Elm says that the library is the place from where you are free to make myriad choices: “But you only have an infinite number of lives to choose from so long as the time in Midnight library stays, well, at midnight” (Haig, p.139). She further points out that “Your root life -is somewhere between life and death” (Haig, p.139). The library is a line between life and death and it erases the frustrations of life and injects sources of hope. According to her, “Life could be worth living if only you found the right one to exist inside” (Haig, p.140). This is the point for transformation from a dismal and gloomy stage of life to optimism.

Music arouses positive vibrations to work a person out of despair with its soothing cadence. It generates a conducive atmosphere to engender enthusiasm in life whereas improper situation causes frustration in life. The protagonist of the novel is an example of such a situation. For Nora happiness could be found in music, “When Nora thought her closest access to happiness, it was music” (Haig, p.140). After accompanying by music, there is a physical change in Nora, “Her body was coursing with adrenaline, and her clothes were clinging to her.... a roar of life slowly finding rhythm and shape” (Haig, p.141). Music gives an outlet to the wrong and frustrated thinking of life. Her concept changed from denunciation to

redirection: “There is no rejection, there is only redirection” (Haig, p.151). Changing from one critical phase to the other phase is redirecting life.

Comparing the chess game with the choices in life, the narrator says, “In chess, as in life, the possibility is the basis of everything” (Haig, p.175). When there are multiple possibilities, one can choose one among many possibilities. In a chess game, the player has multiple choices to move to win and escape from the probable danger. Mrs. Elm expresses that Nora is successful in reviving her eagerness for life and existence because of the library: “You have decided you want to be alive” (Haig, p.238). Ultimately, Nora says, “I am Alive” (Haig, p.243). Willingness to live is the point that books made her feel. This is the point that the library induces. Therefore, “A little later she decided her suicidal media posts, and -in a moment of sincere sentimentality” (Haig, p.248). She discovers life through the library. This place transforms her from suicidal mania to the willingness to live. Therefore, the library has the magic power to transform people from despair to hope. The sense of hospitality, cruelty, and lack of homeliness made her quit the world. But books with knowledge, information, and belongingness change her mind from death to life. The library converts her from suicidal paranoid to a person to loves for life and living. The library blurs the demarcation line between the physical and real, world of frustration and to happy world.

#### 4. Conclusion

The library is a liminal space that functions as a change agent in the life of Nora Seed. Her growth has stilted severely as she experiences a welter of failures until she lands in the library at midnight. Nora's early self-effacement finds a new self in experiences of reading books and enacts her unfulfilled past, which remains buried under the debris of past failures and incoherence. Her experience in the library is transformative as she slowly glides from death wish to a determined aspiration and fortitude. After she plunges deep into the world of books, she emerges as a transformed person. The librarian Mrs. Elm librarian acts as the source of change, embodying life, hope, and aspiration. The myriad books in the library act as the store for hope and aspiration. This

is the very place where a person can exercise his volition of mending or dismantling the existing barrier. The library is the antithesis of the dismal past and paves the way for a future endowed with hope and prosperity. It is a source of life because it takes a person like Nora Seed through multiple upheavals, volatility, and frustration to a life of optimism and affirmation. This study, in this regard, grounds the power of knowledge that is loaded in the closets of books and libraries. Knowledge has transformed the phases of human civilization towards the right direction during the multiple crossroads. In this regard, the study further instigates to explore the domain of hypertexts and digitalized books and their power to liberate and transform the modern-day world glittered by the mechanistic outlook.

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