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**Self-discovery and Identity in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020): A
Psychoanalytical Study**

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR MASTER DEGREE IN CIVILIZATION AND LITERATURE

By:

Wiam Nour Elhouda Zerarka

Board of Examiners:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ➤ Dr. S. Bentahar | University of Laghouat (President) |
| ➤ Dr. Mohammed Naoumi | University of Laghouat (Supervisor) |
| ➤ Dr. W. Nouioua | University of Laghouat (Examiner) |

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Dedication

To my loving parents, your support and wisdom have been my light in the darkness. All I can say is thank you for everything from the bottom of my heart.

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Abstract

In today's world, filled with skepticism and emotional struggle, postmodern literature has become a reflective mirror of the chaos of the human life. This dissertation explores Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020), a contemporary British novel that traces Nora Seed's journey through many possible versions of her life. Haig, through his narrative, investigates the critical journey towards the exploration of the self. This piece of art captures the protagonist's struggles to make sense of herself and existence in a world of endless choices. The objectives of this dissertation are to elucidate how the novel embodies the psychological needs through Self-Determination Theory (SDT), focusing on Nora's journey that seems to embody autonomy, competence, and relatedness. It explores how postmodern narrative techniques, such as fragmentation and intertextuality, support the illustration of identity as fragmented. Through a qualitative analytical approach, this study reveals how Nora Seed's identity evolves in fragmented realities, paying attention to postmodern techniques and Self-Determination Theory. The findings demonstrate that *The Midnight Library* shows identity not as fixed but as a fluid and fragmented construct influenced by the fulfillment of intrinsic psychological needs. This work concludes that Self-Determination Theory and postmodern elements offer new perspectives of understanding the self.

Keywords: Postmodernism, skepticism, fluidity, self, self-discovery, identity, fragmentation, intertextuality

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Table of Contents	vi
General Introduction.....	1
Chapter One :	
Understanding Self, Identity, and Self-Determination Theory in Postmodern context	
Introduction.....	7
1.1. Postmodernism A Skeptical Ideology	7
1.2 Understanding the self through philosophical, psychological, and literary perspectives ..	10
1.2.1. Ancient and classical philosophy and the search for the self	10
1.2.1.1 Socrates	11
1.2.1.2 René Descartes	12
1.2.2 Psychological perception of the self	13
1.2.2.1 Sigmund Freud	13
1.2.3 The self in literature.....	14
1.2.3.1 Walt Whitman	14
1.3. Understanding Identity	15
1.3.1 The concept of identity	15
1.3.2 Identity in Literature	16
1.3.3 Self-Determination Theory a Theory of Identity.....	17
1.3.3.1 Definition of Determination	17
1.3.3.2 The Definition of Self-Determination Theory.....	18
1.3.3.3 Psychological Needs of SDT.....	18
1.3.3.3.1 Autonomy	18
1.3.3.3.2 Competence	19
1.3.3.3.3 Relatedness	19
Conclusion	19

Chapter two:

Scrutinizing Identity in *The Midnight Library*: A Postmodern and Psychological Reading

Introduction.....	22
2.1. <i>The Midnight Library</i> A Postmodern Reading.....	22
2.1.1. Intertextuality.....	23
2.1.2. Fragmentation.....	25
2.2. <i>The Midnight Library</i> through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory.....	25
2.2.1. Autonomy and Its Absence Living without choice	25
2.2.1.2. <i>The Midnight Library</i> A Space to Reclaim Autonomy.....	26
2.2.1.3. Disappointment, Satisfaction, and the Strengthening of Autonomy	28
3. The suffering from unmet expectations	28
4 The moment of awakening.....	29
2.2.2. Nora's Journey Toward Competence.....	30
2.2.2.1. The Burden of Incompetence Nora's life Prior to the Library	30
2.2.2.2. The Recovery of a Competent self	31
2.2.3. The Healing Power of Connection Nora's Journey Toward Relatedness.....	31
2.2.3.1. Loneliness as a starting Point	32
2.2.3.2. Parallel lives, parallel connections.....	32
2.2.3.3. Rediscovering Friendship.....	33
2.2.3.4. The Recovery of Inner Relatedness in Nora's Story	34
Conclusion	34
General Conclusion	36
Works Cited	38
Appendix	
Author's biography.....	41
ملخص.....	42
Résumé	43

General Introduction

During the period after the Second World War, the Western world witnessed an intellectual shift as a response to the negative impacts and damages of the war, leading to the emergence of a debated artistic, intellectual, and cultural movement called postmodernism. It influences multiple fields like philosophy, psychology, and literature. It has doubted certainties of Enlightenment and modern thought, challenging the authority of traditional beliefs, ultimate truth, and fixed identity. Instead, it embraces skepticism, fluidity, and fragmentation. In this postmodern era, people started to question and express deep skepticism about the traditional beliefs, and they no longer stand on strong authorities, such as the sense of identity and self, which are no longer observed as singular or unified; on the contrary, they are fragmented. Ultimately, postmodern people encounter a sense of void and emptiness; hence, they keep struggling and changing to find a sense of meaning in their identity and belonging. Therefore, the concept of identity does not take the direction of something we truly are; rather, it focuses on performance and changing process.

In this context, postmodern authors depict how their characters fight in a world full of meaninglessness and fluidity to build a sense of self. Among the authors who deal with this issue is the British author and writer Matt Haig. He shows in his novel *The Midnight Library* how the protagonist Nora struggles to find her true self in a world of multiple choices. This study entitled “Questioning Self and Identity in Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library* (2020): A Postmodern Psychological Approach” investigate the problem of building an identity from both literary and psychological aspects. This study views Nora’s self-discovery from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, a psychological theory developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, which discusses that individuals flourish when three basic psychological needs are fulfilled autonomy, competence, and relatedness. On the other hand, this study manifests the application of postmodern narrative techniques in *The Midnight Library*, which are fragmentation and intertextuality.

The Midnight Library by Matt Haig was published in 2020, so there have been few research works made on it. The first study, a research paper by Dyana Tok in 2022 entitled “Regrets Reflected in *The Midnight Library*,” describes the type of regrets that Nora Seed experiences and how she accepts her regrets. The results that can be extracted say boldness and connection regrets are the dominant type of regrets that the protagonist has encountered. The next work, written by Devilina Sihotang and Zia Hisni Mubarak in 2022 and entitled “Analysis of the Main Character’s Personality in *The Midnight Library*,” aims to explore the personality of the protagonist, Nora, using Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. The analysis marks elements of the id, ego, and superego in her behavior. The findings indicate that the protagonist is primarily guided by her superego. Another study that by Muhammad Rehan and Gul E Zahra in 2021, entitled “Philosophical Exploration of Existentialism and Absurdism in Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library*,” investigates the Existentialist and Absurdist themes in Matt Haig’s novel *The Midnight Library*. They select Albert Camus’ theory of existentialism and absurdism as the theoretical framework for this study, and the findings prove that the elements of absurdism and existentialism have been saturated by Matt Haig in his novel *The Midnight Library*. Another article by Novi Fatati Syihamun Nahdiyah entitled “The Influence of Society in Committing Suicide in *The Midnight Library* Novel by Matt Haig” this study aims to illustrate the social factors that influence Nora to commit suicide. The researcher finds two factors that influenced Nora to commit suicide, specifically egoistic and fatalistic.

Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library* has received important attention for its unique narrative structure and psychological insights. However, existing research has mostly focused on its

philosophical themes, such as regret, absurdism, existentialism, and suicide, and less on psychological perspectives. Therefore, there is a gap in examining the protagonist's identity through the lens of the psychological needs of SDT as a psychoanalytic framework. When these needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, Nora feels satisfaction and happiness, but she feels despair and emptiness when these needs are unfulfilled. Furthermore, there has been little consideration of how the novel embodies postmodern narrative techniques, namely fragmentation and intertextuality that support fragmented representations of identity.

Research Questions:

The main concern of this dissertation is to investigate the following research questions:

1. How does *The Midnight Library* depict Nora Seed's journey of self-discovery and identity construction through the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness?
 2. How does Matt Haig depict the fragmentation and intertextuality techniques in his novel?
- To answer these questions, the study uses a qualitative analytical approach, and relies on Self-Determination Theory, especially the three psychological needs to interpret the protagonist's psychological development, in addition to the use of postmodern framework.
 - Dissertation Division:

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework

This chapter will discuss the concepts of postmodernism, self, identity, and Self-Determination Theory.

Chapter Two: Analysis of *The Midnight Library*

This chapter will analyze Nora Seed's journey, focusing on the depiction of the three psychological needs and postmodern narrative techniques.

Chapter One: Understanding Postmodernism, Self, Identity, and Self-Determination Theory

Introduction

Since antiquity, thinkers have attempted to examine the concept of identity and human self. They have questioned who they are and what the meaning of life and existence is. They adhere to the idea that the self is a stable and inherent essence. However, postmodern thinkers see it from another perspective, claiming it's changeable not fixed due to the challenges of the postmodern era. This chapter is a theoretical framework of this study, it will discuss the concepts of postmodernism, self, identity, and Self-Determination Theory to examine and analyze *The Midnight Library* novel by Matt Haig through the lens of SDT in the context of postmodernism.

1.1. Postmodernism: A Skeptical Ideology

Postmodernism emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. It is an intellectual and cultural movement that questioned the very foundations of modernism and everything considered absolute in modern thought. While modernism grounded in the ideals of progress, reason, and the search for universal truth, postmodernism came as a reaction to the belief in absolute truth and all of which were central to modernism. So it originated as both a reaction to, and a continuation of, the modernist tradition. Postmodernism arose as an ideology that influenced art and reasoning, rejecting the dominant narratives that became common after WW1 and WW2. The traumatic consequences of the war, like the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, deeply changed how people see and think about the role and use of science. Instead of seeing science only as a positive force for improvement, progress, and just a tool for advancement, they became more cautious, critical and sometimes even afraid, worrying about how science could be harmful and something dangerous if misused. Then the postmodern individuals often face a sense of absurdity and meaninglessness when questioning the nature of

the self, identity, and fate. It is also considered as a rebellion against modernism which primarily seeks to find clear answers about life's purpose and meaning; in the other hand, postmodernism suspects whether the existence of the universe are even real, and suggests that reality might be uncertain (Boussebia and Belferd 16).

This ideology is very skeptical, it does not believe in metanarratives that society accept as truth. Philosophers helped build this ideology, especially Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Michel Foucault; they are its leading strategists. According to Lyotard postmodernism questions metanarratives, the general believes that society follow, without questioning them. For example the European civilizing mission as a justification for colonization of Africa or Asia. Postmodernism rejects this narrative as racist and oppressive. In addition, The American Dream if you work hard, you will succeed. It is questioned whether that is true for everyone or just an ideal. Consequently, the belief that religion holds the absolute truth and gives explanations on everything about the world and existence. Another example is the Enlightenment thinker's belief that science and reason will lead to human civilization and development. These metanarratives create widely accepted beliefs within society, often treated as unquestionable truths (17). Because of this widespread acceptance, Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) argues: "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (Lyotard 37). Here Lyotard's insight is not only criticizing its content but also the authority they claim to hold. He expresses that both kinds of narratives whether speculative like the Enlightenment's ideas about science and universe, or the emancipatory narrative that promising freedom and justice (i.e., Marxism); are still met with doubt in the postmodern era.

For Jean Baudrillard, French philosopher and one of the major social theorists who developed postmodern thought. He presents in his influential book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) how people in modern society have lost contact with what is real. Instead, they rely on images, symbols, and models to shape their grasp. So, reality is gradually replaced by simulation, which is an imitative representation or the process of simulating reality (Merriam Webster dictionary). For instance, we look at a map or Instagram photo and we do not look at the real city, and that turns into more real to us than the realistic place. This is what Baudrillard denotes when he says, “It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory” (1). Suggesting that the representation shapes and creates our sense of reality itself, we interact more with image than with the real experience. Those simulations become more powerful than reality. However, when this process detached from any original reference, we sink the realm of simulacrum, when at this point people do not simply copy reality, they have lost all ability to distinguish between nature and artifice. Therefore, to clarify his point Baudrillard identifies three orders of simulacra: the first is the illusion known as a copy; it functions as a place marker for the real. While the second distorts and hides reality, and the third order of simulacra is that there is no longer any distinction between reality and its representations, there is only the simulacrum (Felluga). Humans at this level move from the real to the hyperreal marks the rise of hyperreality, which is the inability of consciousness to distinguish between reality and simulation of reality where what is real and what is fiction are seamlessly blended (“Hyperreality: Jean Baudrillard”).

People are concerned with how things appear through media, advertisements, and digital communication, even though these ones show a fake or idealized version of life. Baudrillard employs Disneyland as a powerful example of this hyperreality. At first sight, Disneyland appears as fantasy or imaginary world, a place filled with simulations of the past and future like

Cartoons and castles. The real issue is that individuals do not notice the illusion; they feel more satisfying and believe they are facing reality due to this perfected and controlled version. Jean Baudrillard sees simulacra as a model of Disneyland: “Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the real country, all of real America that is Disneyland” (Baudrillard 12).

In brief, postmodernism challenges traditional beliefs about truth and reality. Thinkers like Jean François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard see postmodernism as a movement of a radical departure from these social conventions because of questioning the legitimacy of universal truths.

1.2 Understanding the self through philosophical, psychological, and literary perspectives

What does it mean to know oneself? This question has recurred through the ages, from “know thyself” the ancient Greek inscription at the Temple of Delphi to modern psychological studies on personality and inner understanding. Discovering the self, at its essence is about understanding who we are, what we want, and how we connect and relate to the world around us (Brodsky np). Throughout history, the concept of the self has undergone important transformations. In ancient and classical thought, the self was defined as a simple and fixed core. However, in postmodern thought, they challenge and reject this idea and, seek multiple truths of the self. The self has been conceptualized in ancient and classical philosophy, psychology, and literature.

1.2.1. Ancient and classical philosophy and the search for the self

The search for the self is as old as philosophy itself, a timeless inquiry that has formed human thought for centuries. Among the earliest major philosophers in this exploration are the two great

philosophers Socrates and René Descartes, each offering through his eyes a distinct perspective on what it truly means « to know thyself »:

1.2.1.1 Socrates

Socrates was once asked to summarize what all philosophical legacies could be reduced to; he replied, ‘to know yourself’ (Thomas np).

For Socrates, he believed that the self is synonymous with the soul. Therefore, the soul is the true essence of a person; it was the first to focus on the power of reason on the human self: who we are, who we should be, and who we will become. He explains the self-the-soul as an immortal entity and distinct from the physical body. According to him, the soul belongs to the idealistic realm and seeks wisdom and perfection; however, it is restrained by worldly distractions while tied to the physical body. His famous declaration: “an unexamined life is not worth living,” reflects his perspective that a meaningful existence requires deep self-reflection (Tadema 1).

To know oneself is to start on a never-ending journey of discovery, pursuing truth and morality beyond the distractions of the physical world. Through his Socratic Method, when he describes himself as an ignorant inquirer, not as a teacher he encourages his fellow citizens to live an examined life by engaging them in deep conversations, and asking series of challenging philosophical questions aimed at motivating critical thinking and self-reflection (Britannica dictionary).

By contrast, the postmodern thinker Michel Foucault challenges the idea of “know thyself,” and he said in an interview on October 25, 1982: “I don’t feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the

beginning.” Here Foucault highlights a big life lesson of “staying in the process” (Uchegbu np). And in that, the self is not discovered, rather it is constructed through experiences.

1.2.1.2 René Descartes

René Descartes (1596–1650), the father of modern philosophy, who introduced a new perspective of understanding the self. He wanted to recognize how human reasoning works and how it defines our existence. His famous Latin phrase: “Cogito ergo sum,” in English: “I Think Therefore I am,” is the keystone of Descartes’s concept of self. He argued that the very act of thinking, whether it involves analyzing, questioning, and doubting, is certain proof of one’s existence. As long as an individual is aware of his own thoughts, their existence as a conscious being cannot be debated. Furthermore, Descartes proposed that the self consists of two distinct dimensions: the self as a thinking entity and the self as a physical body. According to him, the mind and body are separate and exist independently. He emphasized that the true core of the self lies in thought and consciousness rather than in the physical body (Tadana 3-4). This idea, known as Cartesian dualism, is the most important concept in philosophy, shaping discussions about self-awareness and identity. Dualism is the idea that something is made of two different parts. Cartesian dualism, specifically, focuses on the idea that humans consist of both a physical body and a non-physical mind. He argued that the body is the physical part that acts, speaks, and moves; however, the mind is the non-physical part that thinks, remembers, and feels, often called the soul. He believed the body works as a machine, following natural laws; besides, the mind directs its actions. He distinguished the mind from the brain, so the brain is physical and can change, while the mind is a whole and cannot be disconnected. He also believed that only human

beings have both a mind and body. Animals, he thought, were only physical and acted just on instinct (“Can You Explain Cartesian Dualism”).

1.2.2 Psychological perception of the self

While philosophy explored the self through abstract reasoning and introspection, psychology starts to ask how the self works, opening new ways to understand the self through emotion, behavior and experience. The self was no longer a mystery of the soul but a subject of study.

1.2.2.1 Sigmund Freud

Austrian psychoanalyst, the founder and developer of psychoanalysis. He had an evolving view of the self over the course of his career. His model of the psyche, which he divided into three parts: the id, ego and superego is one of his most important theories on the self. According to him, human mind is structured into two main parts: the conscious and unconscious mind. The conscious mind contains all things we are aware of; in the other hand, the unconscious mind includes the things outside of awareness. In addition to these three main parts of the mind, this theory also divides human personality into three components: The id that represents the most fundamental aspect of personality, responsible for our essential urges and desires. It operates entirely at an unconscious level, based on instinct without concern for consequences or societal norms. Since acting purely on urges is not always feasible in real-world cases, the ego emerges to regulate these desires and mediate between the demands of the id and the limitations of reality, ensuring that our desires are met in ways that are socially acceptable. Lastly, the superego acts as the conscience, shaped by societal teachings and standards that we learn from our culture (Cherry, “Sigmund Freud’s”).

1.2.3 The self in literature

Literature often discovers the complexities of the self by portraying characters who encounter both inner struggles and external obstacles that shape their identity. Authors and literary theorists do not merely ask what the self is, but instead show how it exposes through characters, conflicts, and storytelling. In this manner, literature becomes a place where the complexities of the self are dramatized, questioned, and reimagined.

1.2.3.1 Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman (1819-1892), was an American poet. His idea of the self, as shown in his *Song of Myself* as a deep exploration of selfhood, which goes beyond individuality to attain a universal spiritual and human experience, where every individual becomes part of a greater unified entity. Whitman's concept of the self is not something static rather a dynamic which can be divided into four stages: in the first one he becomes conscious of his self (Qasim and Zeb 39).

At the beginning of its growth, the self enters a mystical state, through his direct, physical contact with the world around him: "I loaf and invite my soul; I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass" (Whitman lines 4-5). Here the poet lies down on the grass and calls his soul to join him. In the second stage, his concept of the self develops to include all human souls: "And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (lines 1-3).

As for the third stage where the self embraces god: "And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own; And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my

sisters and lovers, and the kelson of the creation is love” (Lines 91-97). Finally, in the fourth stage it embraces the entire universe: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself” (Lines 51), (Qasim and Zeb 41).

1.3. Understanding Identity

The question of identity has long captivated thinkers. During times of doubt, change, or personal crisis, people frequently face the core of who they are. Identity is a vividly reflected theme in literature, where characters struggle with their fragmented selves and the evolving realities they face. It is a journey that performs both inner conflicts and external forces that define human experience. This section delves into the concept of identity and how it can emerge with literature, and then it will investigate Self-Determination Theory the most important psychological theory of identity.

1.3.1 The concept of identity:

Identity is the characteristics that make one person different and apart from others, it is the fact and the feeling that you are different from other persons (Cambridge dictionary).

James D. Fearon argues that identity nowadays goes beyond legal status or biological characteristics. It is most clearly explained as a combination of two interconnected elements; firstly, it refers to external social roles like what group you belong to (i.e., Muslim, American, student). Secondly, it includes personal attributes such as beliefs, internal values, or habits that shape how individuals define themselves in manners that feel meaningful and central to who they are.

Besides, identity refers to the comprehensive perception individuals hold about who they are. It includes personal roles, attributes, behaviors, abilities, values, and social connections that shape one's self-image. This self-image is dynamic and evolves over time, affected by personal experiences and environmental factors. Identity is also tied to how individuals see themselves and how they are observed within society, influencing their decisions, attitudes and their sense of belonging in the world (Lopes, np). In addition, the free dictionary by Farlex defines identity as the state of being unique, either as a person or as an object; in other words it is what makes the person distinctive.

1.3.2 Identity in Literature:

The theme of identity is often a problematic concept, as authors build characters who may perform false identities or evolve throughout the story. Writers need to generate many different identities to build interesting characters; for example, a character may act kindly on the outside but hide evil thoughts inside like Shakespeare's Iago, pretends to be honest while privately being deceitful. The construction of identity can be influenced by cultural, and gender stereotypes, and it often changes throughout a narrative. Another example, in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, the protagonist lives away from people and has no obvious identity. Subsequently, because of the experience of love, he connects society again, and rebuild his real identity. So, in literature, identity plays a significant role because it supports us understand the nature of characters, and what message the author is trying to convey. It shows how individuals are shaped by themselves, others, and by their environment (Hamilton, n.p).

1.3.3 Self-Determination Theory a Theory of Identity

The concept of identity has long taken a central place in psychology. Leading to the rise of many approaches that explore how people understand themselves and are understood by others. There are numerous significant psychological theories including the influential contributions of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. Each of these has given worthy insights into the identity development. However, for the objective of this study, the focus will be on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan, as it presents a clear framework for exploring the self and identity through the satisfaction of the three psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

1.3.3.1 Definition of Determination

It is the process of deciding firmly and definitely. Also, Merriam Webster Dictionary defines it as a fixed or unshakable intention to attain and accomplish a goal. In the other hand, Cambridge dictionary defines determination as the process of managing, guiding, impacting, affecting, or deciding something. Additionally, determination means having a firm sensation of purpose and being committed to achieving your goals. It is the act that helps individual keep working serious toward something important for him. Even when it's tough, determination pushes the person to keep going. It helps people become more effective in their pursuits and overcome the fear of failure; it boosts also the self-confidence and increases motivation (Perry).

1.3.3.2 The Definition of Self-Determination Theory

To explore how the self flourishes we turn to self-Determination Theory a psychological approach of comprehending human motivation and personality. It is built on a deeper idea that people are naturally motivated and active beings who have inner resources or strengths that shape how their personalities evolve (Ryan and Deci, “Self-Determination Theory”).

As well as, SDT refers to the ability to make choices and control one’s life. So being non-self-determined it may cause you feel that other individuals control your life, in contrast to being self-determined means that you perceive yourself as being more in control (Cherry, “What is Self-Determination”).

1.3.3.3 Psychological Needs of SDT

At the heart of SDT lies three major psychological needs that help people grow and feel fulfilled: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are like the roots of a healthy tree; when nourished, the whole person flourishes

1.3.3.3.1 Autonomy

Autonomy is the first basic need in SDT. The prudent way to define it is the feeling volitional, and we are making our own choices and controlling our own actions that match our interests and values, which means when the person acts because he truly wants to, not because someone is forcing him. Hence, real self-regulation happens only when actions come from within. Therefore, when someone is autonomous, they feel that their actions are self-endorsed. Autonomy is not the same as independence. Independence means doing things on your own without help, but autonomy is about doing things because you intend to do them even if someone else asked you to.

.Individual can be autonomous and still take advice, follow rules, or work with others as long as the person does it willingly (Ryan and Deci 10).

1.3.3.3.2 Competence

It refers to the second psychological need in SDT, which relates to a person's need to feel efficient or good at something. According to self-Determination Theory, individuals are intrinsically motivated when they believe they can succeed or achieve a goal. Deci pointed out "when people feel competent, they are more likely to be creative, flexible and able to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of life". So when we feel skilled, we can be better at solving problems in life (Avery, np).

1.3.3.3.3 Relatedness

Relatedness, the last psychological need to consider, which is the human need to feel connected and emotionally close to other people, by caring for others and being cared for. Relatedness is about experiencing a sense of belonging with individuals and within one's community. Humans naturally want to be close to others, we are social beings, and we like to feel accepted as an important part of a group. The need to feel related to others is not about what you can get from relationships like rewards (i.e., becoming a group member or spouse). Instead, it is about the psychological feeling of being in secure and safe unity or communion (Ryan and Deci

11). Conclusion

To conclude, postmodernism rejects the belief in a stable self and emphasizes the instability and fragmented nature of identity and self. While postmodernism questions this idea, Self-Determination Theory suggests the possibility of stable identity when basic psychological

needs are met. Consequently, unfulfilled psychological needs lead to fluidity and fragmented sense.of.identity.

Chapter two

Scrutinizing Identity in *The Midnight Library*: A Postmodern and Psychological Reading

Introduction

In the *Midnight Library*, Matt Haig opens a door not only to infinite lives, but also to the depths of the human mind and psyche. As the protagonist passes through various versions of herself, the novel becomes more than a tale of parallel realities; it investigates the complex reality of human identity. This chapter is divided into two sections, the first one focuses on literary form, scrutinizing how Haig points on postmodern techniques particularly fragmentation and intertextuality highlighting that identity is dynamic and shaped through multiple interconnected experiences. In the other hand, the second section of this chapter examines the protagonist's psychological evolution through the lens of SDT suggested by Deci and Ryan. The present analysis applies the three main psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness to Nora's experience. These needs are very essential and serve as the compass guiding Nora's self- discovery.

2.1. *The Midnight Library*: A Postmodern Reading

The Midnight Library is a contemporary novel written by the British author Matt Haig. It follows the journey of Nora Seed, a woman in her thirties who, struggling to find meaning in her life. While facing despair and regret, she attempts to kill herself. When she is physically unconscious, she finds herself in *The Midnight Library*, a liminal space between life and death, guided by Mrs. Elm, her high school librarian. There, she travels through countless versions of her life, in pursuit of finding the kind of life she really wants to lead, the one she could have lived had she made different choices. Through this piece, Haig explores key postmodern concerns such as the fluidity of the self and identity fragmentation. The novel portrays the protagonist's struggle to make sense of her identity while exploring the illusions of alternative realities. This narrative uses several postmodern literary techniques most notably intertextuality and

fragmentation.

2.1.1. Intertextuality

Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* adopts a postmodern literary framework that enables a profound exploration of identity crisis. One of the conspicuous techniques used by Haig is intertextuality. The concept of intertextuality refers to all texts that have some form of influence or borrowing from previous literary works. Some intertextual references are precise lines of dialogue, whereas others are more vaguely referenced (MasterClass, np).

The very central concept of *The Midnight Library* is actually quite similar with the short story “*The Library of Babel*” by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges in 1941, which portrays an infinite library filled with books no one can understand its language. This library appears to follow some kind of order, therefore, people who try to understand its structure often go insane, symbolizing the human struggle to understand divine order (PimaLib, np). Haig reimagines this concept and writes it in a more emotional way than Borges's philosophical dilemma. Additionally, the novel references philosophers like ‘Thoreau’ and ‘Voltaire’, encouraging readers to contemplate existential questions and search for meaning. The protagonist Nora had always admired studying Thoreau (Henry David Thoreau 1817-1862, the most influential American writer and philosopher) over any other philosopher. “Go confidently in the direction of your dreams, Thoreau had said. Live the life you’ve imagined” (Haig 28). “If one advances confidently”, Thoreau had written in *Walden*, in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours” (130).

On the other hand, the protagonist has a black cat named Voltaire, often calls volts. The choice of this name is symbolic and it might suggest that she likes Voltaire (one of the greatest of

all French writers 1694-1778 and important figures of the Enlightenment). Voltaire's ideas in his story *Candide* are similar to the moral of *The Midnight Library*. Candide, a young man, who first accepts the philosophical idea that, "All is for the best...in this best of all world," said by his philosopher, Doctor Pangloss. After his life challenges and experiences such as war's horrors and poverty, he starts to doubt the validity of Pangloss's theory. Candide Travels the world intending to find the perfect life ("Candide"). On the parallel side in *The Midnight Library* Nora also navigates many lives to find the perfect one. Voltaire ends his masterpiece by saying: "we must cultivate our garden" (Voltaire). This is the famous final line that is Candide's reply to the idea of the philosopher Pangloss (Klinkenborg 30). After many challenges, Candide and his companions settle on a small farm discussing philosophy, and they still unhappy until they meet a happy Turk farmer who reveals the secret that he finds his joy by working hard on his farm. Influenced by this, Candide realizes that this is the right path for happiness, and the little group start to work the farm (Candide). When it comes to Nora she realizes in the end of the story that she has to stop searching for another life and just choose to live:

And yet, everything was different.

And it was different because she no longer felt she was there simply to serve the dreams of other people. She no longer felt like she had to find sole fulfilment as some imaginary perfect daughter or sister or partner or wife or mother or employee or anything other than a human being, orbiting her own purpose, and answerable to herself. (278)

2.1.2. Fragmentation

Fragmentation and nonlinear storytelling are other significant postmodern techniques that appear in the novel. These techniques depart from traditional narrative forms, challenging conventional structures. As well as, mirror the chaotic nature of postmodern life and consciousness, creating a reading experience that reflects our fragmented world (Fiveable).

As depicted in the novel, Matt employs the library itself as a metaphorical space where abandons linear progression, supporting the idea of many existences and; reflecting the skepticism toward the ideal life and disorder of the postmodern era.

2.2. *The Midnight Library* through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory

This section explores the novel through the psychological framework of Self-Determination Theory, focusing on the core human needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. By following the journey of the protagonist, the novel shows how these needs help her understand herself.

2.2.1. Autonomy and Its Absence: Living without choice:

According to (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan, autonomy is the deeper experience of self-endorsement. It is not just the freedom to act, it is the feeling that person's actions are truly chosen rather than imposed. Nora's original life is marked by a persistent lack of such autonomy. Her emotional and psychological decline can be traced through the choices she did not make, and the lives she allowed to happen to her without her active consent. From the beginning, Nora seems to have moved into her thirties with no meaningful direction. She works in a music shop she does not like, lives alone, has few relationships, and carries a catalogue of regrets that have come to define her. These regrets are not just about lost opportunities they are about lost strength and the fact that she never really chose what she did in her life. For instance, she gave up swimming just to make her father happy. She did not make this choice for herself; instead, she just followed what is expected from her: "Dad thinks I've thrown everything away. Now I've

stopped.swimming”(14).

Nora herself expresses this erosion of self-direction when she even says, "I didn't have much of a choice" (21). This demonstrate how forces outside her control have formed her life. As we see with Nora she becomes deeply sad and hopeless, and in SDT, people's mental health suffers a lot when they feel they have no control over their lives. Thus, this lack of choice is a serious problem. Moreover, Nora gradually starts to become disconnected from what she really wants. She sinks deeper into depression, feeling suffocated by everything, she even begins to think that she have to end her life. Nora's decision to end her life is a central moment in the novel, so she writes in her goodbye letter, "If I felt it was possible to stay, I would. But I don't. And so I can't. I make life worse for people. I have nothing to give. I am sorry" (34). It shows that she feels unwanted and useless, because her life is no longer what she truly imagined. As a result, Nora's experiences clearly illustrate how being denied the basic psychological need for autonomy, as outlined in SDT, can lead to significant psychological suffering.

2.2.1.2. *The Midnight Library*: A Space to Reclaim Autonomy

The Midnight Library, appearing in the liminal space between life and death, gives Nora a symbolic chance. Mrs. Elm introduces the idea of infinite lives and choices: "Between life and death there is a library", she said. "And within that library, the shelves go on for ever. Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived. To see how things would be different if you had made other choices. . . Would you have done anything different, if you had the chance to undo your regrets" (40)? This quote shows the library as a psychological space for reclaiming strength, to restore her lost autonomy. In SDT, autonomy is not just about having choices, but also about making choices that are really meaningful and self-directed. The

library embodies this scope, each book with a green cover represents a life that have been belongs to her, shaped by choices she did not make, and instances when she might have chosen her own path instead of conforming other's expectations and judgments. Rather than focusing on her past mistakes, the library encourages her to think about future possibilities. She is no longer judged by her failures; instead, she is invited to imagine lives formed according to her own dreams and personal wishes: "You have as many lives as you have possibilities. There are lives where you make different choices. Moreover, those choices lead to different outcomes. If you had done just one thing differently, you would have a different life story. And they all exist in *The Midnight Library*. They are all as real as this life" (42). In SDT, autonomy is the basic need to feel free to make your own choices. Here Ms. Elm encourages Nora to go away from regret-driven choices, in her daily life, she felt trapped, however here, and she can finally decide for herself, she is challenged to experiment with lives that reflects her own imagination, not simply to fix her past mistakes. In addition, this becomes obvious when Nora enters an alternate life where she married to Dan and ran a country pub they had dreamed. Initially, she feels pride and excitement: "We did it, she whispered into the country air. "We actually did it" (54), showing that autonomy can bring joy and happiness when we confirm we are living out our wishes. Yet as time passes, this joy fades quickly, and she notices the problems in this life: "Nora let out a deep exhale. 'Dan wasn't like that.' 'People change,' said Mrs. Elm, still looking at the chessboard" (70). This experience highlights that autonomy is not just about fulfilling past goals, it is about making choices that suit who we are now. Her excitement in this scene shows the initial spark of feeling autonomous, yet it also prepares her to understand that choices driven by past regrets may not satisfy her deeper need for autonomy.

“In chess, as in life, possibility is the basis of everything. Every hope, every dream, every regret, every moment of living” (193). This metaphor helps Nora understand that life is all about trying different paths. By comparing life to chess, the novel reminds us that even small moves are important, and that we shape our journey through the choices we make. ‘I want’, she said, ‘a gentle life. The life where I worked with animals. Where I chose the animal shelter job – where I did my work experience at school – over the one at String Theory. Yes. Give me that one, please’ (193). Nora starts to see that she has the strength to shape her life simply through her decisions.

2.2.1.3. Disappointment, Satisfaction, and the Strengthening of Autonomy

Nora is pulled once again into the Midnight Library, Each time an alternate life disappoints her. That is why disappointment becomes a recurring experience in her journey: “And the moment after that she was back, somewhere inside the Midnight Library and Mrs. Elm was staring at her from a small distance away with a curious smile. ‘Well, how did that go’ ” (67)? Every life that initially appears hopeful ultimately reveals its cracks, leading Nora into moments of profound reflection. Significantly, these disappointments are not failures; instead, they transform into chances for Nora to strengthen her autonomy and her ability to decide based on her authentic desires, as outlined in (SDT).

3. The suffering from unmet expectations

When Nora tries the life of living with Dan and managing a country pub, she initially feels satisfaction. As time goes by, Nora notices Dan's drinking habits and the financial pressures on their marriage: "This is the life you dreamed of. You wanted me and you wanted this and yet you've been unfaithful and you drink like a fish and I think you only appreciate me when you don't have me, which is not a great trait to have. What about my dreams" (66)?

Moreover, this leads to a decline in excitement: "She stared at him and tried to feel the attraction she had once felt so deeply. It seemed to require a Herculean effort. She hadn't expected this" (63). Her disappointment illustrates the SDT idea that autonomy involves not just having options, but making actual choices that resonate with one's true self. Nora's regret in this situation relates not only to a failed life, it is about understanding that past dreams might not match current requirements or needs.

4 The moment of awakening

During another reflective moment, after exploring various lives, Nora begins to grasp the significance of her journey: "She saw it now not as a burden but a gift to be cherished." (192), this quote signifies a change in Nora's perspective, the endless lives once seemed heavy, nearly punishing, but now she starts to view them as an opportunity for self-discovery. And when Nora approaches her ultimate decision, she has moved superficial regret. She no longer pursues a life devoid of mistakes but one that embodies her real self: 'Never underestimate the big importance of small things', Mrs. Elm had said. 'You must always remember that' (248), this simple phrase encompasses Nora's new viewpoint that autonomy is discovered not through radical transformation but in appreciating and shaping the ordinary experiences of her life. It is here that Nora's autonomy genuinely grows when she realizes she can mold her life not by escaping it, but by accepting it. Nora's journey in *The Midnight Library* vividly depicts the development

of autonomy as described in SDT through experiences of disappointment and introspection. Letdowns drive her toward deeper self-awareness; introspection aids her in recognizing what she truly values; and over time, she discovers how to make choices from a place of authenticity. The library thus, evolves from a whimsical realm into a psychological training space, helping Nora in converting regret into self-determination.

2.2.2. Nora's Journey toward Competence

In the novel, Matt examines not just Nora Seed's challenges for autonomy, but also her difficult journey toward restoring competence, the second essential need in Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Competence refers to the need of feeling effective, mastering tasks, creative, flexible and able to deal with the life challenges. Lacking it, individuals fall into hopelessness and insecurity. Nora starts her story believing she has failed in every situation, as a daughter, friend, athlete, and so on. Yet, as she explores the alternate lives within *The Midnight Library*, she slowly rediscovers her own capabilities, realizing that competence does not mean being perfect, but rather having the desire to face life's obstacles.

2.2.2.1. The Burden of Incompetence: Nora's life prior to the Library

Initially, Nora finds herself burdened by self-criticism when her cat has died, she perceives herself as ineffective: "And they seem so damn happy to have made it and you don't resent them, but you do resent yourself for not having their ability to work it all out. Do you? Or is this maze just for me? Ps. My cat died" (68). Additionally, she has lost her job, her manager informs her that she's being let go, saying: "It's just that when times are tough I can't pay you to put off customers with your face looking like a wet weekend... I'm going to have to let you go" (22). And this moment reinforces her sense of incompetence. In other such existence, she is an Olympic swimmer, celebrated by both the media and her admirers: "Nora Seed! You're still my hero!" (97). Her position did not foster a sense³⁰ of capability, and this superficial validation

fades: “I am not this person. I don’t enjoy this” (90). It also appears here: “This is someone else’s life, not mine” (105).

2.2.2.2. The Recovery of a Competent Self

Throughout her multiple lives, Nora experiences moments of unexpected skills. For instance, in one life as a glaciologist, she encounters danger but maintains her focus and notices her own strength: “I’m. Not. Scared, I’m. Not. Scared, I’m. Not. Scared, I’m. Not. Scared” (135), these seemingly minor victories are significant. According to SDT, repeated experiences of mastery, even in small tasks, help rebuild a person’s sense of competence. Nora’s healing is not about a single grand achievement but about accumulating small, meaningful successes that gradually restore her self-belief.

2.2.3. The Healing Power of Connection: Nora’s Journey toward Relatedness

In Self-Determination Theory, relatedness is the last pillar; it is the profound human need to feel linked to other individuals and to experience a sense of belonging. In *The Midnight Library*, Nora's feeling of loneliness and isolation is one of her most significant sources of suffering. As Deci and Ryan suggest, relatedness goes beyond simply being surrounded by others; it involves

having meaningful connections and feeling that we have importance in this life. This section examines how Nora's experiences through multiple lives slowly recapture her ability to connect, with both herself and others. The story illustrates that recovery begins when the barriers of isolation begin to collapse, allowing authentic connections to emerge.

2.2.3.1. Loneliness as a starting Point:

At the novel's outset, Nora's existence is defined by deep loneliness. She feels disconnected from her family, friends, and even her own self. The writer states: "She was superfluous to the universe, to the planet, to her own town, to herself" (31). This statement painfully reflects her feeling of disconnection. From a theoretical viewpoint, her unmet need for relatedness drives her despair. SDT suggests that when people lack meaningful relationships, this undermines motivation and well-being.

2.2.3.2. Parallel lives, parallel connections

In an alternate life, she is a glaciologist, traveling across Arctic terrains with colleagues who appreciate her contributions. She experiences a surprising sense of belonging: "It was inspiring, being among these scientists who were trying to discover precisely what was happening to the planet, trying to observe glacial and climatic activity, and in so doing to inform, and to protect life on Earth. Back on the main boat, Nora sat quietly in the dining area as everyone offered sympathy for the bear encounter" (137). Nora here undergoes what Deci and Ryan refer to as positive relatedness, she feels acceptance, appreciation. This shows that meaningful work relationships can also satisfy the need for relatedness.

2.2.3.3. Rediscovering Friendship:

The book emphasizes both familial bonds and friendships. One of Nora's greatest regrets involves Joe her brother. In her original life, their relationship has become emotionally distant and withdrawn. When Nora explores a life in which they remain close, she experiences a mix of happiness and sorrow: “I always feel like I let you down, Joe. Well, don’t... But I feel like I let you down too. Because I was such an idiot... I was horrid to you for a little while’. These words felt like a tonic she had been waiting years to hear. ‘Don’t worry about it,’ she managed” (239), and in another quote: ‘Ah, sis. I love you. We were young fools’ (274). This moment underscores the emotional strength of sibling relationships. In SDT language, reconnecting or reliving these connections can renew a feeling of belonging and acceptance.

Suddenly and without warning, Nora is confronted with a disturbing reality she was not prepared to face: “what happened to Izzy? ‘Nora realized she had just asked the question out loud. Jojo looked confused. ‘Izzy? Your old friend Izzy?’, ‘Yeah.’ ‘The one who died?’ The words came so fast Nora could hardly absorb them. ‘Um, what?’ ‘The car crash girl?’ ‘What?’ Jojo looked confused, as curls of smoke wisped across her face. ‘You okay, Nora?’ She held out the joint. ‘Wanna toke’ ” (86)? This sense of confusion is reinforced here: “‘Oh my God,’ she whispered to herself, feeling faint. ‘Oh, Izzy.’ She knew that Izzy wasn’t dead in all her lives. Or even most of them. But in this one, it was real, and the grief Nora felt felt real too. The grief was familiar and terrifying and laced with guilt” (87). In those passages, her reaction to Izzy’s death highlights how deeply Nora values friendship. Her sorrow is intense showing that the link she shared with Izzy fulfilled a deep human need for closeness.

2.2.3.4. The Recovery of Inner Relatedness in Nora's Story

One of the most significant types of relatedness Nora regains is her bond with herself. As time passes, she begins to forgive herself and acknowledge her own value: “And yet, everything was different. And it was different because she no longer felt she was there simply to serve the dreams of other people. She no longer felt like she had to find sole fulfilment as some imaginary perfect daughter or sister or partner or wife or mother or employee or anything other than a human being, orbiting her own purpose, and answerable to herself” (277). This change embodies SDT's expanded view of relatedness; it involves not just connections with others, but also self-acceptance. As Nora develops compassion for herself, she establishes the foundation for more positive relationships with others. Ultimately, the character of Mrs. Elm, the librarian, she serves as Nora's guide and emotional support in the *Midnight Library*. She comforts, provokes, and aids Nora, serving as a symbolic representation of connection. Nora's engagements with Mrs. Elm highlight that even short but significant connections can change an individual's path: “She remembered Mrs. Elm's voice telling her at the time: “Things will get better, Nora. It's going to be all right.” (38) Mrs. Elm's insight aids Nora in overcoming solitude and reestablishing her connection to life.

Conclusion

Through this exploration of *The Midnight Library*, helped by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and postmodern framework, we draw the conclusion that Matt Haig used intertextuality and fragmentation to portray the self and identity as fluid multifaceted entities. This mirrors the complexity of human existence. Also, Nora's journey goes hand in hand with SDT's basic needs - autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Thus, the absence of such constituents leads to despair, while their rediscovery emphasizes self-acceptance and purpose. Finally, the novel fosters the idea that true fulfillment is the result of one's embracing authentic choices and connections. All this summarizes the objective of postmodern narrative and psychological theory revolving around the depth of study with regards to human condition.

General Conclusion

The issue of identity formation continues to be a primary focus in contemporary psychosocial and literary studies. Postmodern psychological theories emphasize that identity formation is a fundamental process by which individuals develop self-perceptions to achieve personal stability. Thus, the postmodern perspective explores the deeper aspects of the core development of the contemporary individual and shifts the understanding of identity from being stable to being shaped by fragmented storytelling and emotional experiences. It proposes that identity is an adaptable, changeable construct. Thus, it is necessary to create a correlation between the issue of identity and the psychological conditions that form it. In particular, a person's need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and narrative frameworks that reflect the inherent fragmentation of the self and the construction of identity through intertextuality and fragmentation.

The Midnight Library depicts the journey of the protagonist with her self-doubt, which is marked in the beginning by despair and emotional fragmentation because of her failure to meet the need for autonomy, which is to control herself and make decisions that resonate with her rather than doing what others impose on her. Furthermore, Nora seems disillusioned because she believes she has failed at everything. But as she tries out different lives, she rediscovers her abilities and feels empowered. Finally, moving from isolation and loneliness to reconnecting with others and oneself, emotional belonging is therefore essential for identity recovery.

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Appendix

Author's Biography

Matt Haig is an English writer born on July 3, 1975. Who published many novels during the postmodern epoch. He has written over 25 books for adults and children. He studied English and History at the University of Hull. Matt is famous for *The Midnight Library*, a story about life and choices, and *Reasons to Stay Alive*, about his battle with depression and anxiety. The writer often explores deep and emotional themes, like mental health, the meaning of life, and hope and resilience. He uses a simple and clear language that everyone can understand.



ملخص

في عالمنا المعاصر المليء بالريبة والنزاع العاطفي، أصبح أدب ما بعد الحداثة كمرآة تعكس فوضى الحياة الإنسانية. تدرس هذه الأطروحة رواية "مكتبة منتصف الليل" (2020) للكاتب البريطاني مات هيج، وهي رواية تسرد رحلة نورا سيد خلال العديد من الحيات المحتملة من حياتها. تتناول هذه الدراسة استكشاف الذات الانسانية والهوية، فتجسد صراع بطلة القصة لفهم هويتها في عالم من الخيارات اللانهائية، من خلال تطبيق نظرية تقرير المصير لإدوارد دسي وريتشارد راين التي تتمثل في تحقيق الاحتياجات النفسية من استقلالية وكفاءة وارتباط وكذلك لاستكشاف كيف تساند تقنيات السرد ما بعد الحداثة، مثل التجزئة والتشابك، في توضيح الهوية على أنها مجزأة. لتكشف كيف تتطور هوية نورا سيد في وقائع مفصلة، مع الاهتمام بتقنيات ما بعد الحداثة ونظرية تقرير المصير. لتوضح لنا النتائج في الاخير أن مكتبة منتصف الليل تُظهر الهوية كبنية سائلة ومجزأة متأثرة بتلبية الاحتياجات النفسية لتصبح ثابتة في استقرار.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الحداثة، الشك، السيولة، الذات، اكتشاف الذات، الهوية، التجزئة، التشابك

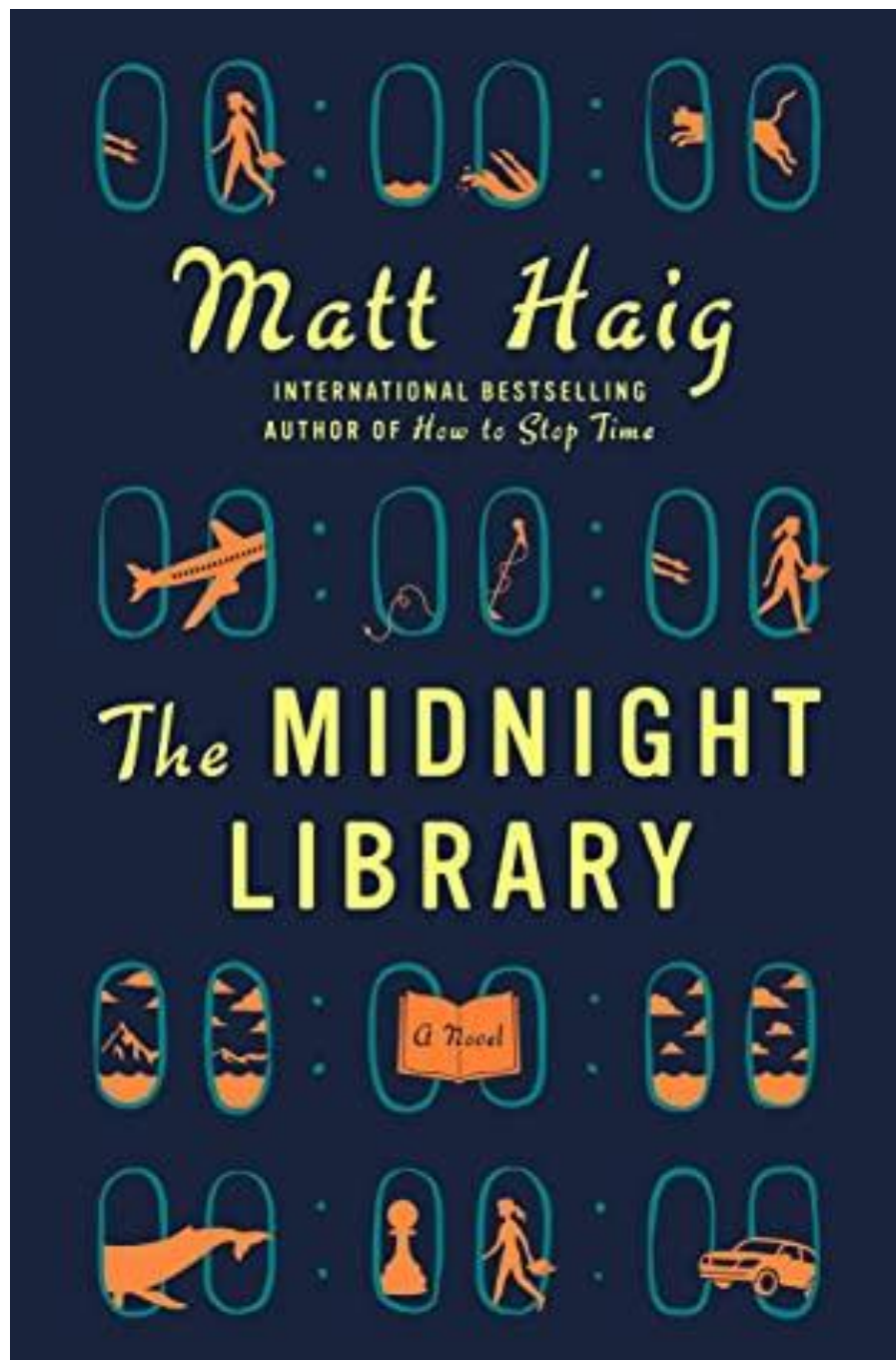
Résumé

Dans notre monde actuel, marqué par le scepticisme et la tourmente émotionnelle, la littérature postmoderne s'est métamorphosée en un reflet du désordre de l'existence humaine. Cette thèse examine « *The Midnight Library* » (2020) de Matt Haig, une œuvre littéraire britannique actuelle qui suit le voyage de Nora Seed à travers de nombreuses versions possibles de sa vie. Haig, explore à travers son récit le voyage critique vers l'exploration de soi et la réflexion sur son identité. Cette œuvre d'art capture les luttes de la protagoniste pour donner un sens à son identité dans un monde de choix sans fin. Les objectifs de cette thèse sont les suivants : 1__élucider comment le roman incarne les besoins psychologiques de la théorie de l'autodétermination (SDT) en se concentrant sur le parcours de Nora à travers l'autonomie, la compétence et la parenté; ainsi que d'explorer comment les techniques narratives postmodernes, telles que la fragmentation et l'intertextualité, soutiennent l'illustration de l'identité comme fragmentée

Grâce à une approche analytique qualitative, cette étude met en lumière l'évolution de l'identité de Nora Seed à travers des réalités fragmentées, en se concentrant sur les techniques postmodernes et la théorie de l'autodétermination. Les résultats indiquent que *The Midnight Library* présente l'identité non pas comme quelque chose de fixe, mais comme une construction fluide et fragmentée, influencée par la satisfaction des besoins psychologiques intrinsèques. Ce travail conclut que l'intersection des concepts psychologiques comme (SDT) et l'analyse postmoderne offre de nouvelles perspectives de compréhension du soi et de l'identité.

Mots-clés : postmodernisme, scepticisme, fluidité, soi, découverte de soi, identité, fragmentation, intertextualité

Synopsis of *The Midnight Library*



The Midnight Library was published in 2020 as one of the most celebrated works of the British writer Matt Haig; it is a reflective and imaginative exploration of regret, choice, and the search for meaning.

The Midnight Library follows the story of Nora Seed, a woman overwhelmed by regret and disappointment, who finds herself in a magical library between life and death. In this library, every book represents a different version of her life, each shaped by the choices she could have made. As she explores these parallel lives, Nora experiences alternate realities: careers she abandoned, relationships she never pursued, and lives she could have lived. Through this journey, she reflects on the nature of regret, identity, and personal fulfillment. Ultimately, the novel explores the importance of embracing one's own life, with all its imperfections, and finding meaning in the present.