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**The Depiction of Mental Health in Contemporary  
English Literature using Matt Haig’s  
The Midnight Library  
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**ABSTRACT:**

This paper examines the representation of mental health, specifically clinical depression and existential crisis, in contemporary English literature through the lens of Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library* (2020). By utilizing the speculative device of a “liminal library,” Haig navigates the complexities of “The What If” syndrome—the paralyzing nature of regret. This study explores how the protagonist, Nora Seed, serves as a surrogate for the modern reader’s struggle with burnout and social pressure. The paper argues that Haig’s work marks a shift in contemporary literature toward “Radical Hope,” (Haig, 2020) where mental illness is treated not as a character flaw, but as a byproduct of a society obsessed with optimized living.

**KEYWORDS:**

The Midnight Library, Bibliotherapy, Mental Health Representation, Existentialism, Cognitive Reframing.

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## 1. Introduction

In the landscape of contemporary English literature, the “internal turn”—a shift toward exploring the intricacies of the human psyche—has become a defining characteristic. As global conversations surrounding mental wellness evolve, literature has transitioned from depicting mental illness as a gothic trope or a tragic flaw to portraying it as a nuanced, lived experience. One of the most significant contributions to this modern canon is Matt Haig’s 2020 novel, *The Midnight Library*.

The novel follows the journey of Nora Seed, a woman overwhelmed by “the weight of her own life” (Haig, 2020) and the paralyzing effects of regret, who finds herself in a liminal space between life and death. Through this speculative lens, Haig explores profound themes of clinical depression, anxiety, and the existential dread birthed by the “what ifs” of modern existence.

This research seeks to examine how Haig utilizes the metaphor of the “infinite library” to externalize the internal struggle of depression. By analysing Nora’s transition from a state of total hopelessness to a tentative acceptance of life’s imperfections, this paper argues (Haig, 2020) that *The Midnight Library* serves as a contemporary manifesto for resilience. Furthermore, it explores how Haig’s narrative mirrors current psychological frameworks, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes, 2012), ultimately repositioning the mental health narrative from one of “curing” a defect to one of navigating a complex human condition.

## 2. Literature Review

The depiction of mental illness in the English literary canon has undergone a significant transformation, moving from the “pathologization” of the individual to a more systemic critique of the human condition (Pérez-García, 2022). While Victorian narratives often utilized mental distress as a marker of moral failing or institutional containment, modern literature increasingly explores how trauma and psychological struggles are situated within

broader cultural and historical narratives (Bhartiya Knowledge Systems, 2024; Pérez-García, 2022). This literature review situates *The Midnight Library* within this broader context, viewing it as a contemporary psychological fiction that utilizes existentialist themes and “counterfactual thinking” to navigate the protagonist’s journey from despair to self-acceptance (Ismail et al., 2024; Sholikhah, 2024).

### **2.1. Historical Perspectives on Mental Health in Fiction**

Historically, literature has often treated mental illness as a source of Gothic horror or tragic inevitability. From the “hysteria” depicted in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* to the tragic descent in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, early depictions focused heavily on the confinement of the patient. Scholars like Feder (1980) argue that these texts served as “maps of the mind,” but often left the protagonist—and the reader—trapped within the illness.

In contrast, contemporary literature has moved toward what Illouz (2007) calls “Cold Intimacies,” where the narrative focuses on the emotional labour of self-improvement. *The Midnight Library* represents the pinnacle of this shift, where the protagonist is not a passive victim of a “bell jar” but an active participant in a metaphysical experiment of recovery.

### **2.2. The “Bibliotherapy” Movement and Matt Haig**

Recent scholarship has begun to categorize Matt Haig’s work under the umbrella of Bibliotherapy—the use of books to aid in the treatment of mental health issues. Brewster (2009) notes that “fiction provides a safe space for the rehearsal of emotional responses.”

Critics of Haig’s earlier memoir, *Reasons to Stay Alive*, noted his ability to translate complex neurochemical states into accessible metaphors. In *The Midnight Library*, scholars observe a “fictionalization of self-help.” While some literary critics, such

as those in *The Guardian* (2020), initially dismissed the work as “sentimental,” recent academic analysis by Goff (2022) suggests that Haig’s “sentimentalism” is actually a deliberate aesthetic choice designed to combat the irony and cynicism that often exacerbate modern depression.

### **2.3. Existentialism and the Multiverse Narrative**

The use of the “Multiverse” as a tool for psychological exploration is a relatively new phenomenon in contemporary literature. Unlike the hard science fiction of the mid-20th century, Haig uses the “many-worlds interpretation” purely as a psychological device.

This mirrors the Existentialist theories of Jean-Paul Sartre, specifically the idea that “existence precedes essence.” Literature reviewers have noted that Nora Seed’s struggle is a modern retelling of the Sisyphus myth. However, as Miller (2021) points out, Haig updates this for the digital age, where the “boulder” Sisyphus pushes is no longer a physical rock, but the crushing weight of “missed opportunities” and “potential selves” curated by social media algorithms.

### **2.4. Identifying the Research Gap**

While much has been written about Haig’s personal biography and his impact on public discourse regarding mental health, there is a lack of rigorous academic analysis regarding the structural symbolism of the library itself as a therapeutic framework. This paper seeks to fill that gap by analysing the novel not just as a story of recovery, but as a blueprint for Cognitive Reframing through speculative narrative.

## **3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The research methodology employed in this study is a qualitative literary analysis, utilizing a multi-disciplinary approach that bridges traditional literary criticism with contemporary psychological frameworks. To provide a rigorous examination of

Nora Seed's journey, this paper utilizes three primary methodological pillars:

**Qualitative Close Reading:** At its core, this paper employs the method of Close Reading, a technique popularized by New Criticism. This involves a meticulous examination of Matt Haig's linguistic choices, specifically his use of metaphors (the "Library," the "Heavy Book," the "Glaciers") to represent internal psychological states. By analysing the syntax and tone of Nora's internal monologue, the study maps the transition from Depressive Realism to Existential Agency.

**Psychological Frameworks:** To move beyond mere plot summary, the study applies specific psychological theories to the text:

- **Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT):** The paper analyzes the "Library" as a narrative manifestation of CBT, where Nora is forced to confront and "reframe" her cognitive distortions (Beck, 2011).
- **Logotherapy:** Drawing from Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, the methodology examines how Nora's recovery is predicated on the discovery of "will to meaning" rather than the pursuit of pleasure (Frankl, 1946/2006).

**Socio-Literary Contextualization:** Finally, the paper adopts a Socio-Critical approach, looking at the novel as a product of the 21st-century "Burnout Society" (Han, 2015). This involves analyzing how Haig critiques neoliberal concepts of "the optimized self." The methodology investigates how the text reflects modern societal pressures—such as the "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO) and social media comparison—and treats them as significant contributors to the protagonist's mental decline.

### **The Anatomy of Despair in Nora Seed**

In Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020), the "root life" of Nora Seed serves as a case study in the anatomy of terminal

despair. At thirty-five, Nora's existence in Bedford is defined not by a single catastrophe, but by the cumulative weight of "thwarted belongingness" and "perceived burdensomeness" (Joiner, 2005). Her depression is portrayed as a physical and mental entrapment—a "cellar door" that has finally locked behind her.

#### **4. Thematic Analysis Part I: The Anatomy of Depression**

##### **4.1 The Anatomy of the Triggers**

Nora's spiral toward suicide is precipitated by three primary triggers that dismantle her remaining tethers to the world:

- **The Cat (Voltaire):** The death of her cat, Volts, acts as the final emotional anchor being severed. For Nora, Volts was the only creature she felt she hadn't let down. Seeing him dead on the road, she experiences a chilling symptom of severe depression: envy. She perceives his stillness as a "complete absence of pain," viewing death not as a tragedy, but as a peaceful exit she is currently denied.
- **The Job:** Being fired from "String Theory" by her boss, Neil, strips Nora of her last remaining social utility. The irony of the shop's name—referencing a theory of infinite possibilities—highlights her internal stagnation. When she is told she is "no longer needed," it validates her internal narrative that her presence in the world is redundant.
- **The Brother (Joe):** The estrangement from her brother, Joe, represents the "root" of her interpersonal guilt. Having backed out of their band, Labyrinth, Nora carries the burden of his perceived failure. His silence is a constant reminder of a version of herself she "killed" off, leaving her isolated and convinced that her family would be better off without the burden of her existence.

##### **4.2. "The Book of Regrets" as Clinical Rumination**

Upon entering the Midnight Library, Nora is confronted with

The Book of Regrets. This heavy, charcoal-grey volume serves as a literal manifestation of clinical rumination—the repetitive, intrusive, and passive focus on the causes and consequences of one’s distress (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008).

- In psychology, rumination is a hallmark of depression where the mind becomes a “record player” stuck on the same scratch. Every entry in Nora’s book—from small choices like “I regret not staying in the band” (Haig, 2020, p. 32) to major ones like “I regret leaving Dan at the altar”—functions as a brick in her mental prison. The book is physically heavy because Nora has given these thoughts mass and power, illustrating the “cognitive heaviness” associated with depressive episodes.
- By forcing Nora to read these regrets, the librarian, Mrs. Elm, mirrors the therapeutic process of externalization. By turning internal shame into a physical object (a book), the narrative allows Nora to view her thoughts as separate from her identity (White & Epston, 1990). The library reveals that Nora’s depression isn’t just about what happened to her; it’s about the “warped logic” of counterfactual thinking—the cognitive tendency to create “what if” scenarios that contrast the present with a perceived superior past (Roese, 1997). The anatomy of her depression is ultimately revealed to be this fixation on the “perfect life” that never existed, which effectively kept her from living the imperfect one she actually had.

## **Thematic Analysis Part II: The Library as Therapeutic Space**

### **4.3. The Library as Therapeutic Space: A Sanctuary of Solace and Growth**

The conceptualization of the library has evolved significantly from a mere repository of books to a dynamic “therapeutic landscape” (Gesler, 1992). In this context, the library functions as a sanctuary—a controlled, predictable environment that offers emotional regulation, cognitive restoration, and social safety. This

thematic analysis explores how the physical and metaphorical attributes of the library contribute to the psychological well-being of its patrons.

#### **4.4. The Architecture of Calm**

The physical environment of a library is often the first layer of its therapeutic value. Unlike the high-stimulation environments of modern urban life, libraries are characterized by “soft fascination”—a core tenet of Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (Kaplan, 1995). The muted acoustics, organized shelving, and steady lighting allow the brain to recover from directed attention fatigue.

**Predictability and Agency:** For individuals experiencing anxiety or trauma, the library offers a rare sense of control. The rules are clear, the layout is logical, and the “quiet zones” provide a socially sanctioned excuse for solitude without isolation.

**Sensory Grounding:** The tactile experience of handling paper, the specific scent of aged books (lignin), and the visual rhythm of organized stacks act as grounding mechanisms, anchoring the individual in the present moment (Pallasmaa, 2012).

#### **4.5. The Librarian as a Facilitator of Care**

While not clinicians, librarians often act as “information first responders.” The therapeutic nature of the space is upheld by the librarian’s role in creating an atmosphere of radical hospitality. Through curated displays on mental health, community workshops, or simply providing a non-judgmental interaction, the staff reinforces the library as a place of safety (Pyati & Sullivan, 2008).

### **5. Comparative Analysis — The Midnight Library vs. The Bell Jar**

To contextualize Haig’s work within the canon of English literature, one must compare it to the definitive text on female depression: Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963).

## 5.1 The Metaphor of the Tree vs. The Library

Both novels use botanical/structural metaphors to describe the paralysis of choice. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood envisions her life as a fig tree, where every fig represents a different future—husband, career, travel (Plath, 1963, p. 73). As she sits in the “crotch of the tree,” unable to choose, the figs rot and fall to the ground.

In contrast, Nora’s Library is a space where the “figs” (the books) never rot; they are always available for trial. This represents a fundamental shift in how literature views regret and decision-making:

**Plath’s Era:** Choice is final; failure to choose leads to total decay. This reflects the 20th-century preoccupation with existential angst and the “irreversibility of time” (Sartre, 1943).

**Haig’s Era:** Choice is iterative. The struggle is not the loss of choice, but the “paradox of choice”—the exhaustion and anxiety caused by an abundance of options (Schwartz, 2004).

## 5.2 The Medicalization of the Soul

Esther Greenwood’s journey is defined by the failure of the medical establishment, characterized by the horrors of early electroshock therapy and the coldness of clinical psychiatry (Wasserman, 2010). Nora Seed’s journey, however, is defined by the failure of the social establishment. Nora’s “treatment” is philosophical rather than clinical.

While Plath’s novel ends on a note of clinical uncertainty (the “bell jar” merely lifting but remaining suspended), Haig’s novel ends with a philosophical resolution. This reflects a contemporary literary trend where “recovery” is framed as an internal narrative shift—a reconstruction of the self through storytelling—rather than just medical stabilization (Illouz, 2008).

## 6. Conclusion

The Meta-Narrative of Recovery: Matt Haig’s *The Midnight*

Library stands as a definitive text in the landscape of contemporary English literature, reflecting a pivotal shift in how society conceptualizes and narrates mental health. Through the character of Nora Seed, Haig successfully dismantles the “perfection myth” that characterizes the 21st-century experience, replacing the paralysis of regret with the necessity of existential presence.

**Synthesis of Findings:** The research conducted in this paper demonstrates that the novel functions as more than a work of speculative fiction; it is a literary intervention. By framing the library as a liminal space for cognitive reframing—a transitional state where the self is deconstructed and rebuilt—Haig bridges the gap between clinical psychology and narrative art (Turner, 1969). Our analysis has shown:

**The Evolution of the Genre:** Unlike the tragic finality found in 20th-century works like *The Bell Jar*, *The Midnight Library* posits that mental health is an iterative process, moving the “suicide narrative” toward a framework of Radical Hope (Lear, 2006). This involves a commitment to a meaningful future even when the old ways of life have collapsed.

**Societal Critique:** The novel serves as a scathing critique of the “optimized life,” suggesting that the modern epidemic of depression is deeply tied to the “What If” syndrome—a byproduct of a world of infinite, yet superficial, choices (Fisher, 2009).

**The Power of Perspective:** Ultimately, Nora’s journey proves that while external circumstances (success, fame, relationships) are volatile, the “internal weather” of the mind can be navigated through the acceptance of one’s own limitations—a core tenet of Existential Psychotherapy (Yalom, 1980).

### **Final Reflections:**

The significance of *The Midnight Library* lies in its accessibility. Haig’s prose intentionally mimics the “brain fog” and gradual clarity of recovery, making the text a form of bibliotherapy

for a generation grappling with unprecedented levels of anxiety and burnout (Brewster, 2011).

In conclusion, the depiction of mental health in contemporary literature, as exemplified by Haig, has moved away from the observation of the “broken individual” toward an exploration of the “resilient soul.” Nora Seed’s realization that “you don’t have to understand life, you just have to live it” (Haig, 2020) provides a roadmap for readers to close their own “Books of Regret.” Haig reminds us that even in a library of infinite lives, the only one that truly matters is the one being lived in the present moment.

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