

**A STUDY OF EVOLVING NEO-GOTHIC MOTIFS AND CULTURAL ANXIETY IN MATT HAIG’S**

**THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY**

**Kausalya Devi Himani**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Seshadripuram College, Bengaluru.

**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18782387>**

**ABSTRACT:**

This article examines Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library* (2020) as a Neo-Gothic text that reinterprets classical Gothic motifs to explore contemporary cultural anxieties surrounding identity, mental health, and selfhood. In contrast to traditional Gothic fiction, which externalises horror through supernatural elements, Haig’s novel internalises fear, presenting psychological fragmentation, existential uncertainty, and the burden of choice as central sites of Gothic tension. *The Midnight Library* functions as a liminal space suspended between life and death, where alternative lives emerge as haunting representations of rejected and unsuccessful identities. Engaging Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, the study highlights how depression, suicidal ideation, and encounters with “failed selves” destabilise the boundaries of identity, reflecting the abject dimensions of modern subjectivity (Kristeva 2). Michel Foucault’s concepts of disciplinary power and heterotopia further illuminate the library’s regulated structure, demonstrating how freedom, choice, and self-optimisation operate as subtle mechanisms of control and internalised surveillance (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 202; “Of Other Spaces” 24). By situating *The Midnight Library* within the evolving Neo-Gothic tradition, this study argues that Gothic motifs of liminality, confinement, and haunting are effectively adapted to interrogate late-modern anxieties, psychological distress, and socio-cultural regulation.

**KEYWORDS:**

Neo-Gothic, Cultural Anxiety, Abjection, Power and Discipline, Matt Haig.



## Introduction

Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* presents a unique Neo-Gothic exploration of modern identity, mental health, and existential choice. While classical Gothic literature externalises fear through castles, monsters, and supernatural horrors, Haig internalises these Gothic tropes to interrogate the psyche, reflecting the contemporary anxieties of late-modern life. The novel's protagonist, Nora Seed, exists in a liminal space suspended between life and death, exploring a library containing countless alternative lives she might have lived. These lives manifest as haunting representations of failure, loss, and unrealised potential, echoing the Neo-Gothic fascination with the uncanny and liminality.

This study employs Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Michel Foucault's analyses of power, discipline, and heterotopia to examine how the novel reconfigures Gothic motifs of confinement, haunting, and liminality into a contemporary psychological and cultural framework. By interpreting the *Midnight Library* as a heterotopic, regulated space and examining Nora's encounters with abjected selves, the paper demonstrates how Gothic forms can articulate cultural anxiety, mental health struggles, and the pressures of modern identity.

## Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, text-based methodology, drawing on close reading, thematic analysis, and theoretical application to investigate Neo-Gothic motifs and cultural anxiety in *The Midnight Library*. The study is structured around the following approaches:

**Close Reading and Textual Analysis:** The primary text was examined for Gothic tropes, liminal spaces, haunting, and psychological fragmentation. Key passages were analysed to reveal how Haig's narrative techniques manifest abjection, existential anxiety, and internalised societal pressures. Direct quotations were

selected to demonstrate specific instances of Gothic and psychological tension (Haig 5, 18, 23, 72, 142).

### **Theoretical Frameworks:**

**Kristeva's Theory of Abjection:** This framework guided analysis of Nora's encounters with failed selves, depression, and suicidal ideation, exploring how the novel externalises internalised horror and identity destabilisation (Kristeva 2–4).

**Foucault's Concepts of Disciplinary Power and Heterotopia:** Foucault's theories were applied to interpret the Midnight Library as a regulated space that enforces subtle forms of self-surveillance and behavioural control, transforming freedom into a source of anxiety (Discipline and Punish 202; "Of Other Spaces" 24).

**Comparative and Intertextual Analysis:** Secondary scholarship on The Midnight Library was reviewed, including studies by Theebiha (2024), Pokharel and Sharma (2025), and Sinda (2024), to contextualise Haig's work within broader discussions of memory, nostalgia, transformation, and Neo-Gothic motifs.

This methodology allows the study to explore the intersection of Neo-Gothic narrative strategies, psychological realism, and cultural critique, producing insights into how contemporary Gothic fiction negotiates anxiety, identity, and societal pressures.

### **Literature Review**

Contemporary scholarship on Matt Haig's The Midnight Library has highlighted the novel's treatment of psychological transformation, choice, and identity, providing a foundation for theoretical readings within broader cultural and existential frameworks.

V. P. Lakshanya Theebiha's The Interplay of Memory and Nostalgia in Matt Haig's The Midnight Library foregrounds memory

and nostalgia as crucial forces in Nora Seed's emotional development. Theebiha argues that Haig uses these themes to depict how Nora's reflections on past choices propel her existential journey through alternative lives, ultimately leading to self-acceptance and hope (Theebiha 16–27).

Complementing this, Bishnu Prasad Pokharel and Balkrishna Sharma's *Library as a Source for Transformation* frames the *Midnight Library* itself as a liminal and transformative space where personal renewal is facilitated through engagement with alternative life paths (Pokharel and Sharma 16–23). The library acts as a threshold that supports Nora's reconstruction from despair to life affirmation. This spatial reading aligns with Foucault's concept of heterotopia, where regulated space mediates both constraint and liberation, articulating psychological and cultural anxieties.

V. Sinda's *Symbolism of Life and Death Desire in Matt Haig's The Midnight Library* examines the novel's symbolic representations of life and death impulses. Sinda highlights how Haig portrays internal conflict—desires for survival and annihilation—through the library's symbolic structure, reflecting Nora's struggles with depression and self-worth (Sinda). These studies established the groundwork for examining *The Midnight Library* as a Neo-Gothic text shaped by Kristevan abjection and Foucauldian disciplinary dynamics.

### **Reinterpreting Gothic Motifs Through The Midnight Library**

Nora Seed's experience in the *Midnight Library* exemplifies Kristeva's theory of abjection, wherein boundaries of identity collapse, and the subject confronts expelled aspects of the self (Kristeva 2). The infinite lives she encounters embody rejected selves—failed, lost, or unrealised—returning as haunting presences that destabilise her sense of identity. As Nora reflects, she feels she is “nineteen years before she decided to die” (Haig 5), illustrating a fragmented temporal and psychological self. The abject returns persistently, converting traditional Gothic haunting into an internal,

psychological phenomenon.

This abjection is intensified by Nora's self-perceived failures: she lists herself as having "failed at being a daughter, a friend, a partner, a worker, a human being" (Haig 72). Kristeva associates abjection with loss and self-repulsion (Kristeva 4), and Nora's suicidal ideation reflects the societal imposition of worth through productivity and normative success. In Haig's Neo-Gothic vision, horror resides not in external monsters but within the psyche, transforming Gothic decay and fragmentation into psychological and cultural critique.

The library itself exemplifies Foucault's concept of heterotopia, a space that mirrors and regulates reality while appearing separate from it ("Of Other Spaces" 24). While Nora seemingly has infinite freedom to explore alternate lives, her choices are constrained: she must "find the life you were meant to live" or risk dissolution (Haig 18). This conditionality exemplifies disciplinary power, where control operates through subtle regulation, implicit rules, and internalised surveillance (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 202).

Nora constantly evaluates her choices against societal standards of success, happiness, and productivity, reflecting Foucault's notion of self-surveillance. In the library, freedom is simultaneously liberating and anxiety-inducing, demonstrating how Neo-Gothic liminal spaces can manifest both possibility and constraint.

Haig reinterprets traditional Gothic motifs—confinement, haunting, and liminality—within a contemporary psychological framework. Confinement is existential as much as spatial: Nora is trapped within depressive thoughts and regret (Haig 23). Haunting emerges through the persistent return of rejected lives, reflecting Kristeva's assertion that the abject "returns to disturb the subject" (Kristeva 4). Liminality pervades the narrative; the library exists between life and death, mirroring both Gothic threshold spaces and modern anxieties regarding choice, meaning, and identity. By fusing

Kristevan abjection with Foucauldian regulation, Haig transforms Gothic tropes into a Neo-Gothic narrative that interrogates mental health, societal pressures, and cultural anxieties.

## Conclusion

The *Midnight Library* demonstrates the evolution of Gothic motifs into a Neo-Gothic framework through Kristeva's theory of abjection and Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and heterotopia, that engages contemporary cultural anxieties. The novel's liminal library, haunted by failed selves, illustrates how internalised horror, psychological fragmentation, and societal norms shape identity in late modernity. Haig's narrative transforms Gothic confinement, haunting, and liminality into psychological and spatial forms, offering a culturally resonant critique of mental health crises, existential choice, and the subtle mechanisms of modern power. The Neo-Gothic thus remains a vital lens through which contemporary literature can articulate and negotiate the anxieties of our time.

## References:

1. Haig, Matt. *The Midnight Library*. Canongate Books, 2020.
2. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1977.
3. Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27.
4. Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982.
5. Pokharel, Bishnu Prasad, and Balkrishna Sharma. "Library as a Source for Transformation: A Study of Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*." *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies and Innovative Research*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2025, pp. 16–23.
6. Sinda, V. *Symbolism of Life and Death Desire in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library**. UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, 2024.
7. Theebiha, V. P. Lakshanya. "The Interplay of Memory and Nostalgia in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*." *ILN Journal: Indian Literary Narratives*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 2024, pp. 16–27. DOI:10.70396/ilnjournal.v1n2.a.03.