



Exploration of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*

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Abstract

Matt Haig is a renowned British author. He is recognised for his profound exploration of universal struggles, the significance of choices, and the complexities of identity in his works. His novel The Midnight Library delves into themes of parallel lives, self-perception, existential crisis, personal reinvention, and identity formation. The article examines the concept of survival to self-actualisation in The Midnight Library. It chiefly focuses on the protagonist Nora Seed and her journey towards self-actualisation. Matt Haig's The Midnight Library weaves an intricate story on the journey of self-discovery through the perspective of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It highlights the transformative journey from sheer survival to self-actualisation of the protagonist. Nora Seed is the protagonist of the story and has a very complex character. Her life is caught between the maze of unworthy circumstances and tragic incidents. The psychological development of the character seems to be set amidst the needs of life. This article explores the psychological growth and emotional evolution of the protagonist. It outlines Nora's journey within the hierarchy of human needs by illustrating how Haig's novel examines the pursuit of meaning and self-actualisation.

Keywords: Self-Actualisation, Psychological Growth, Survival, Emotional Evolution.

Introduction

Matt Haig is a renowned British author known for themes like hope, self-discovery, and self-actualisation in his works. His writings draw inspiration from his struggles with depression. He blends fiction and non-fiction, making complex emotional themes accessible and relatable. His works often delve into themes of regret, second chances, time, memory, and identity, striking a balance between realism and optimism. Through engaging and thought-provoking storytelling, he encourages readers to find meaning in life's challenges. Through his books, Haig continues to inspire and support readers around the world. Haig has written several novels and non-fiction works that explore mental well-being, resilience, and the human condition. His bestselling works are *The Humans* (2013), *Reasons to Stay Alive* (2015), *How to Stop Time* (2017), and *The Midnight Library* (2020). Haig has also written children's books like *A Boy Called Christmas* (2015) and *The Truth Pixie* (2018), which carry uplifting messages about hope and self-acceptance. This article aims to study how the protagonist Nora Seed in the novel *The Midnight Library* goes from just surviving to finding meaning in life. Here, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs' (*A Theory of Human Motivation* - Section IV) is used to explain her journey of survival to Self-actualisation. As Nora Seed explores different versions of her life, she deals with basic needs like safety and love, and

slowly grows confidence and purpose. Her journey highlights how people don't always move through these needs in a straight line. Instead, the novel shows that personal growth is a flexible and emotional process, helping us understand self-actualisation in a more human and relatable way.

Survival to Self-Actualisation

Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* presents a captivating exploration of fragmented identity through the protagonist, Nora Seed. From survival to self-actualisation, Nora's journey in *The Midnight Library* shows that authentic living begins when we start discovering who we are. This article examines Nora's journey of resilience, personal growth, and self-discovery. It further focuses on how hope and optimism are explored through the themes of identity, morality, and human condition. Nora Seed's journey in *The Midnight Library* is a profound and moving exploration of self-discovery, regret, and transformation. Julia writes,

Nora is full of regrets. Her life seems to be one long series of 'might have beens'. When she reaches the midnight library she is given the chance to experience what might have happened in some of these lives, had she pursued them. She meets herself as an Olympic swimmer giving a speech at a conference, as an international pop superstar, living in Australia with Izzy (another chance she turned down) and married to Dan her former lover. Of course, Nora learns, that life is always complex and nothing is ever completely good or completely bad, that even in these other lives, about which she fantasises, there are downs as well as ups. (Julia's books, April 14, 2021)

Self-discovery begins when one views hope not as an illusion, but as the spark that reignites our purpose. From the moment Nora enters the library, suspended between life and death, she is given an extraordinary opportunity to explore the infinite possibilities of the lives she could have lived. Sheela points out on the stages of Nora's mental depression as,

Mental depression is an aspect constitutes in each and every one's life it leads people to commit suicide, over thinking, failures and lack of confidence leads a way to depression and anxiety, so in this Novel one can able to perceive the hardship and difficulties faced by the protagonist Nora seed, Matt Haig depicted the character Nora Seed in a way that how she is undergoing with an depression and suicidal thoughts here Nora Seed as an leading personality has given a different version of her life. (Sheela Shankari, 301)

Initially, Nora steps into these lives in search of happiness, hoping to find a version of herself that is fulfilled and content. However, what she gains is something far greater than a perfect life. She gains self-awareness, acceptance, and a newfound appreciation for her existence. Each alternate life becomes a lesson, teaching her that no path is entirely free of pain, but within every version of herself, there is potential for joy, resilience, and meaning.

This article is analysed through the perspective of Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' (*A Theory of Human Motivation* - Section IV). Maslow's hierarchy of needs outlines human motivation as a progression through five levels. They are physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation. Abraham Maslow in his paper entitled *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943) introduces this hierarchy in Section IV, titled 'Summary' by stating "There are at least five sets of goals, which we may call basic needs. These are briefly physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualisation" (394). Each stage of Maslow's theory reflects a significant aspect of Nora's mental and emotional transformation. Nora's journey can be understood as a struggle to navigate these stages, with

much of the novel focusing on her attempts to reach self-actualisation. It is evident throughout the following lines that Nora has finally decided to accept herself and find a new sense of purpose, showing that she is moving toward self-actualisation after struggling with regret and meaning in her life. Haig points out,

The one truth she had, a truth she was now proud of and pleased with, a truth she had not only come to terms with but welcomed openly, with every fiery molecule of her being. A truth that she scribbled hastily but firmly, pressing deep into the paper with the nib, in capital letters, in the first-person present tense.

A truth that was the beginning and seed of everything possible. A former curse and a present blessing.

Three simple words containing the power and potential of a multiverse.

I AM ALIVE. (*The Midnight Library*, 271)

At the beginning of the novel, Nora's physiological needs are met at a basic level. She has food, shelter, and the essentials for survival, but her mental and emotional state is deteriorating. Depression drains her energy and motivation, making even the simplest tasks feel overwhelming. The weight of regrets, failures, and perceived shortcomings consumes her, leading her to believe that life is no longer worth living. Though her body survives, her mind is in turmoil, preventing her from moving forward. Beyond basic survival, Maslow's second level, the need for safety and stability, is also absent in Nora's life. She lacks financial security after losing her job at String Theory, and her relationships with family and friends feel fractured beyond repair. Her father's high expectations, her mother's emotional detachment, and her estrangement from her brother Joe contribute to a profound sense of instability. Without a secure foundation, she spirals into despair, culminating in her decision to attempt suicide. This act is not just a response to immediate circumstances but a reflection of the deep-rooted insecurity that has shaped her existence. Vatina Sinda et al says about Haig,

...Haig reflects on questions of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. His exploration of life and death desires often revolves around characters seeking answers to existential questions and grappling with their place in the world. This quest for meaning resonates with Haig's own search for understanding and reconciliation in the face of depression and mental illness. (Vatina Sinda, Hasbi Assiddiqi, Agry Pramita, 7)

One of the most significant voids in Nora's life is the absence of love and belonging, the third level in Maslow's hierarchy. She feels isolated and disconnected from the people who once mattered to her. She abandoned her dreams of being a musician, which distanced her from her brother Joe. She called off her engagement with Dan. She even lost touch with her best friend, Izabella, failing to nurture their bond. The overwhelming loneliness she experiences reinforces her belief that she is unworthy of love and that her presence in the world does not matter. However, as she explores different versions of her life in the library, she begins to see the impact she has had on others. Even in alternate lives where she achieves success, she realises that connection is not external achievements but what truly gives life meaning. When confronted with despair and regret, Nora's initial state reflects the fundamental need for survival and belonging. As she experiences alternative versions of her life, she begins to question the nature of fulfilment, identity, and purpose. Through a deepening sense of self-awareness, Nora undergoes a profound personal transformation, gradually moving toward emotional healing and a clearer understanding of her intrinsic



worth. The novel becomes a compelling narrative of character development, illustrating how confronting internal struggles and embracing change can lead to the realisation of one's full potential. Abdulkadir points out,

***The Midnight Library* exemplifies the great potential of the science fiction genre to enlighten aspects of the human experience that are typically difficult to communicate through the use of conventional storytelling. Although the novel under literary criticism does not expressly focus on the process of recovering from trauma, it does explore themes of sorrow, bereavement, and selfexploration. These themes have the potential to emotionally connect with persons who have struggled with difficult experiences. It is an interesting instance of how our viewpoints influence the way that we experience the world around us that Nora's adventure into multiple alternative universes gives as an engaging analogy. In these universes, she might undo certain regrets by shifting bookcases that she has imagined moving around. In conclusion, her experiences illuminate the limitations of idealised hypothetical scenarios and highlight the fact that reaching fulfilment often includes appreciating the present moment and cultivating vital connections rather than becoming fixated on opportunities that were not taken advantage of. The moving shelves of the library gave her the opportunity to realise that every life has its own unique set of advantages and disadvantages, and she was able to understand this point. (Abdulkadir ÜNAL, 198)**

Nora's struggles with self-esteem form another crucial aspect of her journey. She internalises the idea that she is a failure, believing that every choice she made was the wrong one. Whether it was giving up on swimming, leaving her music band, or not pursuing a career in glaciology, each decision felt like proof of her inadequacy. The library offers her a chance to step into lives where she makes different choices, but even in those alternate realities, she faces struggles and disappointments. **"The transformation occurs from commonplace and unexpected hopeful world, and the intersection of the past and future to the visible and invisible world with myriad possibilities. Therefore, the library in the novel works as a supporter of life."** (Bishnu Prasad Pokhare & Balkrishna Sharma., 17) This realisation helps her shift her perspective that self-worth is not determined by external success or the absence of mistakes, but by one's ability to accept and learn from life's imperfections. The final stage of Maslow's hierarchy, self-actualisation, represents the turning point in Nora's journey. Initially, she believes that the only way to find happiness is to erase her regrets and choose a better life. However, as she navigates through the library, she comes to understand that no life is free from struggle. The pursuit of a perfect existence is an illusion. True fulfilment comes not from changing the past but from embracing the present and shaping the future. Through the guidance of Mrs. Elm, the Librarian who serves as her mentor in the library, Nora gains the confidence to return to her original life, not because she has found a flawless path, but because she has learned to see herself differently.

One of the most significant shifts in Nora's journey is her ability to accept herself. In the past, she had been harshly critical, constantly measuring her worth against unrealistic expectations. However, as she explores different lives, she realises that perfection is an illusion. Every version of herself comes with flaws, yet in each life, she also finds moments of joy and fulfilment. This understanding allows her to cultivate self-compassion and to see herself not as a collection of failures, but as someone who is doing their best with the knowledge they have. She stops striving for an unattainable ideal and instead begins to

embrace herself as she is, with kindness and acceptance. Raikana & Dr.K.Soniya affirms that, **Haig uses the interplay between time and choice to explore profound questions about the nature of existence, the impact of decisions, and the possibilities for redemption and self-discovery. The fluidity of time and the significance of pivotal moments underscore the interconnected and dynamic nature of human experiences. (Ms. Raikana & Dr.K.Soniya, 1795)**

Nora's journey also aligns with the Burnt Toast concept, which suggests that even minor inconveniences and setbacks in life can lead to unexpected positive outcomes. Just as burning a piece of toast might delay a person from leaving home, ultimately saving them from an accident, Nora's regrets and disappointments were necessary for her self-discovery. Had she not experienced pain, she would never have found the library. The wasted years of her life were not wasted at all. They were leading her toward a greater understanding of herself. Every mistake, every moment of despair, was a part of a larger journey toward awakening. Kayalvizhi & Dr. Kanchana delineates that,

Nora is now starting to see the best in her life. Nora is being greater confident with her life and she is living a full of happiness in her life right now. Nora starts to appreciate that in all her life there must be various trials to come. Everyone also has difficulties and problems in their life. So Nora makes a decision to love herself more for who she is. She starts enjoying her life and unable to live her life with positive thoughts. As Nora sees the wonderful things in her life, she becomes more happier. She now sees that everything in her life is more inspiring. (V. Kayalvizhi & Dr. Kanchana, 349)

Nora's journey in *The Midnight Library* is a testament to the human spirit and the power of perception. From the depths of despair to the light of newfound hope, she learns that life does not have to be extraordinary to be meaningful. Her experiences have taught her that genuine happiness is not derived from external validation, but rather from accepting life with all its imperfections, uncertainties, and limitless potential. This realisation extends to her understanding of human connection in the modern world. As the novel states,

And that had led to them talking about social media – he believed that the more people were connected on social media, the lonelier society became.

'That's why everyone hates each other nowadays,' he reckoned. 'Because they are overloaded with non-friend friends. Ever heard about Dunbar's number?'

And then he had told her about a man called Roger Dunbar at Oxford University, who had discovered that human beings were wired to know only a hundred and fifty people, as that was the average size of hunter-gatherer communities. (The Midnight Library, 127)

These lines suggest that, when digital interactions often replace genuine relationships, Nora recognises that true connection is not about the number of friends but about meaningful bonds. By shifting her perspective, she discovers that hope is not found in an idealised life but in authentic relationships.

Conclusion

Nora's journey in *The Midnight Library* is not about discovering different lives. It is about finding herself. Through facing her regrets, embracing her strengths, and ultimately choosing to live, she realises that the power to shape her story has always been in her hands. Her awakening serves as a reminder to all that one can choose to live with purpose, hope, and self-love regardless of where we are in life. By looking at her experiences through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, one can see how Nora gradually moves from meeting basic needs to



reaching self-actualisation. The novel reminds us that personal growth is not always a straight path, but with reflection, support, and hope, transformation is possible. Nora's story encourages readers to believe in second chances and to keep striving toward a life that feels truly meaningful.

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