

## Existential Crisis in Matt Haig's Novel "The Midnight Library"

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### *Abstract*

*The aim of this study is to explore the existential crisis portrayed in Matt Haig's The Midnight Library and to elucidate the defense mechanisms employed by the main character in navigating decision-making. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, this research presents its analysis through a descriptive essay format. The theoretical frameworks guiding this study are Søren Kierkegaard's (1946) existentialist perspective and Anna Freud's (1937) theory of defense mechanisms. Actions and expressions depicted in the novel are categorized according to existentialist themes and analyzed through a psychoanalytic lens. The findings of this study reveal that the existential crises within the narrative encompass themes such as existence preceding essence, freedom, anxiety, alienation, and nothingness, which in turn evoke various defense mechanisms including repression, projection, denial, reaction formation, and rationalization. These defense mechanisms significantly influence the development of the main character's decision-making processes.*

**Keywords:** *psychoanalysis, existentialism, existential crisis, defense mechanism.*

### **A. Introduction**

Psychoanalysis is a theory that discusses the nature and development of human personality and aims to analyze characters and plots in literature. Abrams (1999) states that psychological criticism in literature deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in an indirect and fictional form, or the state of mind and the structure of the author's personality. Furthermore, Corey (2008) also points out that psychoanalysis aims to reshape the structures of individual characters through the reconstruction and discussion of past experiences and the analysis and reinterpretation of those experiences. However, it is difficult to achieve because the emergence into consciousness is extremely painful when ideas and memories result in extremely high anxiety levels, particularly in existence.

This study analyzes *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig, published on August 13, 2020. The writer chose this novel because the author sees many moral messages that can be taken in a work of fiction and many examples of quotes referring to the

existential crisis in *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig (2020). After all, in this novel, there are many moral messages in life. The phenomena that occur in this novel are fascinating because they are spiced with non-mainstream fiction. In addition, this novel also provides a unique reading experience where in a work of fiction, readers can also take stories that are becoming self-help so that the reader can add insight and how the reader thinks about something. Moreover, *The Midnight Library* won the Goodreads Choice Award for Best Fiction Category 2020. Besides, Matt Haig is an English novelist and journalist who wrote fiction and non-fiction for children and adults in the speculative fiction genre. He also won many international awards, including; Nestle Children's Book Prize, Blue Peter Book Award, and Sefton Super Reads. After the explanation above, the writer is interested in analyzing existential crisis in *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig to be the title of the thesis entitled "Existential Crisis in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* Novel".

## **B. Method**

This research adopts a qualitative approach, which focuses on understanding naturalistic phenomena through non-numerical data, as described by Nassaji (2020). Qualitative research aims to explore and comprehend rather than to manipulate variables. Methods such as ethnography, grounded theory, discourse analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis fall under this approach. The data for this study were derived from the novel "The Midnight Library" by Matt Haig, first published digitally in 2020 by Canongate Books. Narrative elements within the novel were examined to identify instances of existential crisis and depressive behavior.

To gather data, the researcher followed these steps:

- Repeatedly reading the novel to gain a comprehensive understanding of its storyline and intricacies.
- Identifying key elements or quotes depicting existential crisis symptoms and defense mechanisms.

Data were extracted from narrative elements and direct quotes within the novel, categorized based on the protagonist's experiences of existential crisis symptoms and expressions of defense mechanisms. Additionally, the protagonist's personality and mental state were analyzed using psychoanalytical criticism. The data were then analyzed in relation to existential crisis themes present in the story, drawing upon Kierkegaard's (1946) existentialist theory and Freud's (1937) theory of defense mechanisms.

## **C. Findings and Discussion**

### **1. How the Main Character's Deals with Existential Crisis**

Furthermore, the writer will describe and explain how the main character of this novel overcomes the existential crisis phenomenon that occurs in her life by using a psychoanalysis approach, more precisely, the defense mechanism proposed by Anna Freud (1937) and the writer takes five parts of the form of defense mechanism, namely; repression, projection, reaction formation, denial, and realization. This step is intended to describe the phenomena that occur in the novel *The Midnight Library* through the perspective of psychoanalysis.

#### **1.1.Repression**

Repression is a phase where a feeling is hidden and forced from conscious to unconscious. This case indirectly occurs because the trigger is considered socially unacceptable. Repression can also be said to eliminate the anxiety that provokes memories from one's consciousness. In this case, Nora Seed experienced an existential crisis that made her limit her daily life. However, after she talked to Mrs Elm, he unconsciously used a defense mechanism in the form of repression to overcome his problem. This can be seen from;

*'I don't know if I can do this. I've gone blank.'*  
*'You're overthinking it.'*  
*'I have anxiety. I have no other type of thinking available.'*  
*'Come on. Don't let us down.'*  
*Don't let us down.*  
*'But—'*  
*She tried to think of music.*  
*Thinking of music had always calmed her down. (The Tree That Is Our Life*  
*p.107)*

The data above is Nora Seed's conversation with her brother before she went on stage to become a speaker at a conference. There she had a panic attack due to excessive nervousness. However, as she thought about music—the thing she loves, her nervousness lessened, and Nora Seed felt calm again. This case shows that Nora Seed uses a defense mechanism in the form of regression. Where she suppresses her anxiety by thinking about other things so she can forget that uncomfortable feeling.

#### **1.2.Projection**

Projection is when a person diverts unwanted feelings instead of dealing with them. The diversion can be in the form of other, more pleasant thoughts. However, in some cases, the diversion is manifested through aggressive behavior or sexual fantasies. In Nora Seed's case, she engaged in aggressive behavior by having a big desire to kill herself. She did it impulsively and aggressively without much thought.

The following supporting data;

*She knew only one thing with absolute certainty: she didn't want to reach tomorrow. She stood up. She found a pen and a piece of paper. It was, she decided, a very good time to die (Antimatter p. 31)*

In the quote above, Nora Seed diverts the negative feelings caused by her existential crisis through aggressive behavior; suicide. She also had time to write a will and there he explained how the universe was not on her side, she also felt that it would be better if her life ended right then and there. This can be seen in;

*I had all the chances to make something of my life, and I blew every one of them. Through my own carelessness and misfortune, the world has retreated from me, and so now it makes perfect sense that I should retreat from the world.*

In addition, projection defense mechanisms are also seen in;

*'Death is outside.'*  
*'Well, I should go there. Because I want to die.'* Nora began walking (The Midnight Library p.38)

Nora Seed's monologue in the quote above occurs a few moments after she kills herself and enters The Midnight Library. She thought that she was crossing a realm that was between life and death. With that, he voluntarily stepped into it. Next, in the sentence "I should go there. Because I want to die." really explains how much Nora Seed wanted to commit suicide.

### 1.3.Denial

Denial involves refusing to accept reality, thereby blocking external factors from influencing one's feelings. If someone is caught in a situation that is too difficult to deal with, that person will respond by refusing to accept by denying whatever happened. People generally use denial to avoid situations that hurt them or some part of their life that they do not want to be acknowledged. In Nora Seed's case, she uses a denial defense system to deal with the negative feelings that are causing her existential crisis. The following are quotations that show the process of accepting reality from Nora Seed through the denial defense system;

*...she had managed to convince herself that there was no way out of her misery. That, she supposed, was the basis of depression as well as the difference between fear and despair. Fear was when you wandered into a cellar and worried that the door would close shut. Despair was when the door closed and locked behind you. (The Many Lives of Nora Seed P. 203)*

The data above shows that Nora Seed has experienced an existential crisis that made her unable to distinguish between fear and despair. This case causes her to think that there is no way out of suffering. After that, she thought it would be better if she just ended his life. However, in the end, Nora Seed unconsciously uses a defense mechanism to save herself. Namely by rejecting the fact that inside her, there is a

desire to end her life. This case can be seen from the scene where she is talking to a nurse at the hospital where Nora Seed is being treated for a suicide attempt;

*'And how do you feel right now?'*  
*'I don't know. A bit strange. But I don't want to die any more.'*  
*And the nurse scribbled on the form. A little later she deleted her suicidal social media posts, and – in a moment of sincere sentimentality – she wrote something else instead. She titled it 'A Thing I Have Learned (Written By A Nobody Who Has Been Everybody)'. (The Other Side of Despair p. 257)*

In the quote above, it can be concluded that Nora Seed denied that she had uploaded posts on her social media about wanting to kill herself. Furthermore, deleting it resulted in Nora Seed regaining the passion for moving on with her life which the line can indicate, "But I don't want to die anymore." Ultimately, she changed the post about his suicide to "A Thing I Have Learned" There, she wrote about her journey in overcoming his existential crisis and finally regretted her actions. In it, she wrote;

*But it is not the lives we regret not living that are the real problem. It is the regret itself. It's the regret that makes us shrivel and wither and feel like our own and other people's worst enemy. (A Thing I Have Learned (Written By A Nobody Who Has Been Everybody) p.259)*

Nora Seed's writing above shows her regret from Nora Seed's perspective of what she has done to herself. With the stage of denial of reality, she regretted wasting her life which should have been a perfect life, if she is not acted rashly. Furthermore, in the post, she also wrote about her hopes for life in the future, as quoted below;

*We are as completely and utterly alive as we are in any other life and have access to the same emotional spectrum. We only need to be one person. We only need to feel one existence. We don't have to do everything in order to be everything, because we are already infinite. While we are alive we always contain a future of multifarious possibility. So let's be kind to the people in our own existence. Let's occasionally look up from the spot in which we are because, wherever we happen to be standing, the sky above goes on for ever. (A Thing I Have Learned (Written By A Nobody Who Has Been Everybody) p.259)*

From the excerpt from Nora Seed's social media post, it can be seen how influential the rejection of reality has been on Nora Seed's journey to becoming a more grateful and confident person. In the sentence "we always contain a future of multifarious possibility" it can be interpreted that Nora Seed has overcome her existential crisis, and she urges anyone who reads the post not to give up on circumstances so that they experience a lack of hope in life.

#### **1.4.Reaction Formation**

The reaction formation phase occurs when a person is in denial about a situation and acts contrary to what they should be feeling or thinking subconsciously. Reaction

formation provides instructions for excessive and obsessive tendencies. In Nora Seed's case, she had a reaction formation because she unconsciously denied her feelings by doing something that was the opposite of her true feelings, as quoted below;

*She knew she should be experiencing pity and despair for her feline friend and she was but she acknowledge something else. As she stared at Voltaire's still and peacefully expression that total absence of pain. There was an inescapable feeling brewing in the darkness. (The Man at the Door p.17)*

The death of her beloved cat—Volts, was not just a painful experience. However, it triggers a situation that threatens Nora Seed's mentality. Thus, she experienced an existential crisis by often feeling the uselessness of only caring for one cat. The day after her cat died, Nora Seed was late for work because she had felt pretty sad all night. This case resulted in Nora Seed conversing with the music shop owner—Neil. There Nora Seed feels offended when her boss discusses Nora Seed's mental instability and its effect on her performance in the store.

### **1.5.Rationalization**

Rationalization acts as a defense mechanism and an attempt by the ego to make specific actions acceptable to the superego. According to Freud (1937), understanding unconscious motivations for behavior is an essential precursor for trauma healing. In this case, Nora Seed experienced an existential crisis that made her limit her daily life. But subconsciously, she uses rationalization defense mechanisms to overcome her problems.

*You see, cats know. They understand when their time is up. He went outside because he was going to die, and he knew it. ' Nora tried to take this in. Now she thought about it, there hadn't been any external signs of damage on her cat's body. She had just jumped to the same conclusion that Ash had jumped to. That a dead cat on the road was probably dead because of the road. And if a surgeon could think that, a mere layperson would think that too. Two plus two equals car accident.*

*'Poor Volts,' Nora muttered, mournfully (p.60)*

From the quote above, Nora Seed's mentality was triggered when Volts—her beloved cat, died. At first, she blamed herself for the death of her cat. She felt that if she had cared for her cat better, Volts would not have just died. This guilt causes Nora Seed to fall into an existential crisis. But with the emergence of a defense mechanism in the form of rationalization, she became aware that all living things will eventually die, including Volts. Nora Seed realized she could overcome her existential crisis by trying to accept all of Mrs. Elm's arguments through the line "Poor Volts" Later, she accepted the fact that her cat died because it was destined to die from illness and not just because Nora Seed did not take good care of her cat. In the end, Nora Seed lets her cat die. Furthermore, rationalization is also seen in;

*'Would you like to consult again with The Book of Regrets? Would you like to think about those bad decisions that turned you away from whatever you feel success is?' Nora shook her head quickly, like a dog shaking off water. She didn't want to be confronted with that long interminable list of mistakes and wrong turns again. She was depressed enough. And besides, she knew her regrets. Regrets don't leave. They weren't mosquito bites. They itch forever. (Fish Tank p.87)*

The quote above is a conversation between Nora Seed and Mrs. Elm—the librarian who helped Nora Seed travel to the Midnight Library. At that time, Nora had opened *The Book of Regrets*, which recorded all the wrong decisions that Nora Seed had taken. After reading the book, Nora Seed was triggered and did not want to see the problems life had gone through. This indicates that Nora Seed found the root of the problem in her life, making her fall into an existential crisis. Next is the sentence, “She didn’t want to be confronted with that long interminable list of mistakes and wrong turns again.” This indicates that Nora Seed had rationalized that the things she regretted would still be regrets, and in the sentence “she knew her regrets. Regrets don’t leave. They weren’t mosquito bites. They itch forever.” describes that regret will remain and Nora Seed needs to accept it.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The conclusion that can be drawn after the discussion discussed in the previous chapter is that an existential crisis is marked by several conditions where a person questions his existence; does his life have meaning, does this person have a purpose in his life and does he already feel that he is a useful and functioning human being. Nora Seed as the main character in the novel *The Midnight Library* written by Matt Haig has gone through the phases of her existential crisis because she does not fulfill the five categories of human beings who have existence, among others are; existence precedes essence, freedom, having anxiety, experience alienation and nothingness. The data that has been found in the novel shows that Nora Seed goes through five phases of existential crisis from the perspective of existentialism theory above. And there are five ways of solving through the defense mechanism; repression, projection, denial, reaction formulation, and rationalization. Throughout her life, Nora Seed felt that she had no value, did not have the freedom to choose her own path in life, experienced anxiety disorders, felt useless to those around her, and she has a low self-esteem so she felt empty. Furthermore, other data show that Nora Seed overcame her existential crisis by bringing up her defense mechanism by repressing her bad thoughts into music that is more comfortable to think about, accepting other people's criticism, forgiving misunderstandings with her parents, removing negative things that are still sticks to herself, and starts a relationship with other people again which in turn has a

positive effect on her way of seeing the world. Apart from that, Nora Seed also began to accept herself and realized that the choice to end her life was the wrong thin.

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