

## NORA'S DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY AS A LABYRINTH OF REALITY: A FEMINIST READING OF MATT HAIG'S *THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY*

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### ABSTRACT

With an emphasis on Nora's development as a character, this research presents a feminist interpretation of Matt Haig's book *The Midnight Library* (2020). The objective is to examine Nora's journey as she seeks a meaningful life amidst the intricate labyrinth by exploring diverse realities within the library, symbolizing the profound complexities experienced by women in a patriarchal society. This study employs feminist theory, which is the "umbrella" concept for many sub-feminism theories, where Nora's issues align with the strand of Feminist Psychodynamic Theory. The psychological implications of gender are investigated by feminist psychodynamic theory, which also examines how societal expectations, power relationships, and gender roles affect people's mental health. The feminist theory addresses three key issues about Nora's character. It uses Nora's experience with depression and suicidal thoughts as a lens through which to study how social conventions and gender expectations impact women's mental health. Furthermore, it examines how Nora's exploration of diverse life scenarios within the library sheds light on how patriarchal systems and other restrictive institutions curtail women's opportunities and choices. Ultimately, it delves into the significance of Nora's decision to reclaim agency over her life, symbolizing a feminist perspective on autonomy and empowerment. This study elucidates how gendered systems and societal expectations influence women's freedom of choice, mental well-being, and independence. It also delivers a feminist criticism of patriarchal oppression and depicts women as empowered as they negotiate the intricacies of reality through an analysis of Nora's journey utilizing feminist theory. The character of Nora from "The Midnight Library" is used in this study to demonstrate how gendered social norms affect women's autonomy, mental health, and opportunities for meaningful lives, and it also highlights the difficulties women face within patriarchal systems and emphasizes the necessity for empowerment and agency in the pursuit of meaningful lives.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, *The Midnight Library*, Matt Haig, Gender Norms, and Character Development

### INTRODUCTION

A feminist reading of Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* concentrates on Nora Seed's character growth. This study examines how Nora navigates the maze of reality in the quest for a fulfilling life and how her journey through the numerous realities in the library symbolizes the complex complexities of women's lives in a patriarchal society. The limitations placed on women's choices and opportunities by patriarchal and other oppressive structures, as well as the feminist perspective of agency and empowerment embodied in Nora's decision to return to her own life, are the three main issues this essay applies to feminist theory to explore Nora's character.

*The Midnight Library's* compelling portrayal of Nora's journey includes her harrowing struggles and suicidal thoughts, touching on important issues related to women's mental health and the effects of social standards and gender roles. Women in a patriarchal society are subjected to various demands and expectations regarding their appearance, conduct, and accomplishments. Because of the oppression felt, these tasks can lead to emotions of inadequacy, anxiety, and melancholy. Women's mental health has been the subject of extensive research by feminist scholars like Judith Butler, born on 24 February 1956, and bell hooks, born on 25 September 1952 and died on 15 December 2021, in their book; "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" (1990) and "Ain't I a

Woman?: Black Women and Feminism" (1981) respectively focused on the effects of societal pressures and gendered standards based on cultural and social expectations, roles, and norms. Gender performativity, as defined by Butler, refers to the pressure people have to fit into particular cultural expectations and standards based on their gender (Insenga, 2022). While balancing the demands of success in diverse fields, women must frequently display emotional openness, humility, and nurturing. The gap between these expectations and their desires and capacities can be extremely painful mentally for women.

To better comprehend how gendered expectations and social norms impact women's mental health, this research project utilizes feminist theory to analyze Nora's journey. "I did not want to be merely a piece in this vast absurd puzzle. I wanted agency. I wanted to matter," Nora expresses (Haig, 2020). This quote from the novel encapsulates Nora's yearning for a sense of significance, its impact, and control in her own life. She expresses a desire to be able to make significant decisions and have an impact on her fate rather than only being a passive participant in the complexity of living. It highlights her longing to break free from societal constraints and assert her autonomy. By including this quote, one can recognize Nora's pursuit of agency as a central theme and invite further analysis of how her experiences in *The Midnight Library* reflect feminist perspectives on empowerment and the struggle against oppressive structures. "The limitations placed on women's choices and opportunities by patriarchal and other oppressive structures are evident throughout Nora's exploration of various aspects of her existence in the library" (Haig, 2020). This quote highlights the presence of limitations imposed on women's options and potential by patriarchal and other repressive structures. It emphasizes how Nora's journey through the library exposes these constraints and allows for an examination of their impact on her life. By acknowledging these limitations, one can delve deeper into the feminist critique of oppressive systems and their effect on women's experiences. Additionally, this paper discusses how Nora's ultimate decision to return to her life reflects a feminist viewpoint on empowerment and agency in intersectionality. In addition to providing a feminist critique of patriarchal oppression, this analysis is a potent

allegory for the process of self-discovery. Nora's examination of many lives highlights the possibility for change and development, emphasizing the fluidity of identity and people's ability to redefine themselves in search of fulfillment.

### **I. GENDERED EXPECTATIONS AND SOCIAL NORMS IN NORA'S SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AND DEPRESSION**

The journey of Nora in Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library*, which takes place in a fictional setting that is not explicitly tied to a specific time or place, is a moving examination of the significant impact that gendered standards and social expectations have on her feelings of hopelessness and suicidal ideation. Nora focuses on the difficulties and pressures she encounters as she transitions through several incarnations of her life, illuminating the effect of gendered expectations and social conventions on her mental health. The novel's quotations that follow shed light on Nora's experiences:

As I jumped from life to life, I could not escape the fact that "Each Version of me had its burdens, its regrets, its pain. However, as I continued to jump, I noticed one thing: People do not change unless they want to, and someone rarely changes because someone else wants them to." (Haig, 2020)

According to Haig (2020), "When you reject the distinctive, when you reject the individual, what you get is numbers. And numbers don't feel. Numbers don't laugh or weep or love." Cause and effect are a "dream within a dream within a dream. An illusion. A mirage. A fallacy" (Haig, 2020). Haig underlines the inherent significance of individuality and the distinctive human experience in these moving comments. Society lowers people to nothing more than statistics or data points by ignoring the unique qualities that make each person unique. The ability to feel real emotion, connect with others, and empathize is taken away by this dehumanization. In addition, Haig questions the accepted notion of cause and effect by arguing that it is a multi-layered fabrication, similar to a dream inside a dream. He claims that it is illusory and more complicated than it first appears. This viewpoint challenges deterministic views of life and emphasizes the complexity and unpredictable nature of human experience.

The following passages from *The Midnight Library* highlight Nora's self-reflective observations on the nature of change, individuality, and the delusion of causality. They help us comprehend Nora's hardships in a patriarchal culture and how she struggles with cultural standards and gendered expectations.

Women in patriarchal cultures often face societal pressures and unrealistic norms, such as appearance, behavior, roles, and obligations, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and pessimism (Porcaro, 2022). In this section, feminist theorists like Judith Butler and bell hooks discuss how gendered norms affect women's mental health. Understanding how societal norms and expectations are established via repeated performances has been made possible by Judith Butler's key work on performativity and gender identity. Women may find themselves adopting prescribed gender roles and behaviors in patriarchal environments, which can have a significant negative impact on their mental health. By highlighting the fact that these standards are dependent on cultural and social situations rather than being absolute truths, Butler's theory offers a framework for evaluating and questioning these norms. Bell hooks' intersectional feminist perspective also emphasizes how many forms of oppression, such as those based on race, class, and gender, are interconnected. Women from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently experience added pressures in patriarchal situations, which can increase feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. By emphasizing the significance of identifying and eliminating these interconnected oppressive structures, hooks' work provides a deeper comprehension of how cultural standards affect women's mental health. We can better understand the complex connections between societal expectations, gender identity, and mental health in patriarchal situations by embracing the findings of theorists like Butler and hooks. With this expanded viewpoint, we may create more effective plans for advancing women's rights, combating restrictive practices, and advancing empowerment and mental health in these settings.

A useful foundation for comprehending how Nora's struggles are shaped by the standards and expectations of her society is provided by Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. According to Butler, gender results from performative behaviors continuously used and

reinforced in society rather than an innate or stable attribute (Insenga, 2022). Women must frequently adhere to strict standards of performance, conduct, and appearance due to oppressive gendered expectations (Cumberbatch, 2021). Like many other women, Nora always internalizes these norms and feels pressure to conform and fulfill social expectations (Kusumaningrum, 2021). The weight of self-criticism and failure thoughts increases when she feels she falls short, making her misery worse.

Bell hooks' writings, for example, "Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism" (1981)" and "Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center" (1984), provide more insights into how patriarchal structures and gendered norms encourage women to experience a cycle of insecurity and poor self-worth. According to hooks (2000), women frequently absorb social messages that minimize their voices, bodies, and experiences. Their sense of agency is reduced by this internalization, which can also make them feel helpless. Nora's experience of depression and suicidal thoughts reflect this internalized oppression as she struggles with feelings of worthlessness and attempts to fit in with a culture that enforces rigid gender stereotypes.

The intersectionality of Nora's experiences further complicates her quest. The idea of intersectionality, which acknowledges that people have many social identities, like as gender, color, class, and sexual orientation, which intersect and impact their experiences of privilege and oppression, was popularised by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Simon et al., 2022). For Nora, how her mental health problems present themselves is influenced by how her experiences as a white woman connect with other facets of her identity (Nahdiyah, 2021). This intersectionality emphasizes how crucial it is to consider women's particular difficulties as they negotiate with numerous repressive organizations.

One can learn more about the complex ways gendered expectations and social norms affect women's mental health by analyzing Nora's experience of depression and suicidal thoughts through the feminist philosophical lens and taking into account the lessons from *The Midnight Library*. As Nora reflects on her journey, she realizes, "In the grip of anxiety and fear, I had lost sight of the only thing that mattered, the only thing that ever matters. I had lost sight of love" (Haig, 2020). This quotation highlights how

gendered expectations and societal pressures can lead individuals like Nora to prioritize external standards over self-love and personal fulfillment, contributing to feelings of hopelessness and depression. As Nora questions the notion of cause and effect, she realizes, "People go on making the same mistakes because they're afraid to make new ones" (Haig, 2020). This quotation underscores how fear and the pressure to adhere to societal expectations can prevent individuals, including Nora, from breaking free from harmful patterns. It highlights the importance of challenging established norms and embracing change to find personal growth and happiness. Nora's journey serves as a microcosm that encapsulates the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies, highlighting the importance of confronting and dismantling oppressive structures while fostering empathy and understanding for diverse women's experiences.

Nora's story vividly illustrates women's difficulties when they internalize societal messages that undermine their self-worth, silence their voices, and restrict their opportunities for growth and fulfillment. Nora contemplates the impact of conforming to societal norms and states, "We are all the subjects of impressions, and some of those impressions are enduring, and some are transient, and in the end, but always ultimately, our lives are made up of nothing but those impressions" (Haig, 2020). This quote emphasizes how gendered expectations and social norms shape individuals' lives and experiences. Nora recognizes that these impressions influence her perception of herself and contribute to her struggles with self-doubt and conformity. Nora's struggle mirrors that of numerous women who struggle with the restrictive nature of patriarchal systems as she faces self-doubt and fights against the pressure of conformity.

The intersectionality of Nora's experiences makes her journey even more complicated. She has certain advantages and disadvantages as a white lady, influenced by her ethnic identity. The concept of intersectionality, as put forth by Kimberlé Crenshaw, serves as a reminder that people are made up of various identities that interact and shape how they experience privilege and oppression (Simon et al., 2022). Nora's investigation of her identity and the particular difficulties she faces provides an emotional reminder of the necessity to consider the overlapping parts of women's lives and

experiences. The main causes of Nora's oppressive situation are societal norms and her own deeply held convictions. The oppressors in this situation are not particular people; rather, they are the standards of society as a whole, which define how she should live. These conventions enforce strict standards for relationship success, professional success, and personal accomplishments, leaving Nora feeling inadequate and unfulfilled. Nora also battles internal battles, such as her self-doubt and regrets, which exacerbate her sense of oppression.

## II. EXAMINING INTERSECTIONALITY AND PATRIARCHAL RESTRICTIONS IN DIVERSE VERSIONS OF LIFE

Nora's restrictions were shaped by the intersections of gender, race, social status, and personal circumstances, revealing the intricate maze of reality that women must negotiate. "In each life, Nora saw how the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures and societal norms affected her choices and sense of fulfillment. These constraints were not isolated but intertwined with other aspects of her identity" (Haig, 2022). The passage from Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* sets the tone for Nora's investigation and illustrates how patriarchal constraints and the complications of intersectionality affect women's options and possibilities. "Nora's exploration of different lives illuminated the pervasive nature of patriarchal restrictions. She witnessed firsthand how deeply ingrained societal norms dictate women's roles and limit their potential for self-determination" (Haig, 2020). This quote emphasizes Nora's observations of the pervasive nature of patriarchal restrictions as she explores different lives. It shows the profound impact of deeply ingrained societal norms on women's roles and their potential for autonomy and self-determination. The quote underscores Nora's understanding of the limitations imposed upon women by these societal norms. One may further examine and comprehend how these oppressive institutions restrict women's agency and affect their lived experiences via the perspective of bell hooks' and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concepts on intersectionality (Hardy, 2022).

Bell hooks underlines the interconnectedness of oppressive systems and the significance of taking into account different facets of identity,

such as race, class, and sexual orientation, in order to properly comprehend women's experiences (Okpokwasili, 2023). The library inquiry Nora conducts offers a platform for analyzing her intersectionality and the particular limits she faces. Investigating many facets of her life allows us to see how patriarchal institutions interact with other oppressive systems to limit her options and chances (Biana, 2020). Nora's situation is a product of social forces, personal choices, and psychological issues. Insecurity and sorrow make her feel unfulfilled. Although no one particular is to blame for her difficulties, cultural conventions have a big impact. She sets out on her quest through the library in search of a life that feels more real. She learns throughout that each life has its unique obstacles in addition to its unique experiences. Her journeys through the labyrinths emphasize the feminist themes of the book by serving as a metaphor for the challenges and limitations that women frequently experience when negotiating societal expectations.

According to Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, people can hold several different social positions at once, and these intersections influence how they experience privilege and oppression (Jackson et al., 2021). "The intersections of Nora's gender, race, and social status within each reality revealed the complex web of oppression she had to navigate. It was a constant balancing act, as she confronted the limitations imposed by multiple oppressive systems" (Haig, 2020). This quote draws attention to the intersections of Nora's gender, race, and social status in her various realities. It underscores the complexity of oppression she experiences and the challenges she encounters in navigating multiple oppressive systems. The quote highlights how these intersections contribute to the limitations she faces in her journey. These intersections influence the barriers she faces and underscore the importance of employing an intersectional approach to comprehend the intricate nature of her journey.

The presence of patriarchal and oppressive systems becomes evident as Nora navigates through different realms within the text:

"Her freedom to make choices regarding her career, relationships, and overall sense of fulfillment is limited by gender roles and societal expectations. These restrictions reflect broader

social norms that limit and define women's roles, maintaining the patriarchal system." (Haig, 2020)

This quote highlights how gender roles and societal expectations constrain Nora's choices and sense of fulfillment. It emphasizes that these restrictions are not personal but reflect broader social norms that uphold and reinforce the patriarchal system.

Furthermore, Nora's limits show how oppression acts as a recurring pattern. According to intersectionality, women's perceptions of limitation and restriction are influenced by a variety of social factors in addition to gender (Axelrod et al., 2022). For instance, if Nora is a disadvantaged racial or socioeconomic group member, she may experience more challenges and come across more complex constraints in each reality she explores. In the end, Nora's status as a member of a disadvantaged racial or socioeconomic group has a big impact on how she navigated the library. Her experiences would gain layers of complexity and depth as a result, shining light on the complicated ways that overlapping identities affect people's lives. This portrayal highlights the significance of identifying and resolving systematic disparities in society.

One may better understand how patriarchal institutions constrain women's options and chances by critically assessing Nora's experiences in the library and applying intersectionality and patriarchal restrictions (Smith et al., 2020). "As Nora explored different lives, she realized how societal expectations and patriarchal norms shaped her choices, leaving her feeling constrained. It was a constant struggle between her own desires and the external pressures imposed upon her" (Haig, 2020). This quote highlights Nora's realization of societal expectations and patriarchal norms. It emphasizes the internal struggle she faces between her desires and the external pressures placed upon her by societal norms. To build more inclusive and egalitarian societies, it is urgently necessary to confront and destroy these institutions, as Nora's story in *The Midnight Library* serves as a current warning. It promotes the use of a comprehensive strategy to understand the daily difficulties women face, emphasizing the importance of using an intersectional analysis to recognize the interconnected oppressive systems that impact women's experiences (Collins et al., 2020).

### III. NORA'S RETURN DECISION: AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT IN INTERSECTIONALITY

In the framework of intersectionality, Nora's final decision in *The Midnight Library* to return to her own life expresses a feminist viewpoint on agency and empowerment. Her choice to reclaim control over her life and forge her course proves the strength of self-determination and leading a meaningful life. This section will focus on Nora's decision to come back, the intersectionality of oppression, and how it represents a feminist conception of female strength. It highlights the interconnection of social identities and how many oppressive institutions interact to form people's experiences, as advocated by academics like bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw (Valtchanovo, 2022). Nora's choice to go back to her own life is an example of oppression's complexity and multidimensionality because she acknowledges that her journey is influenced by several intersecting identities, including her gender, color, class, and sexual orientation (Argenta, 2020). Nora temporarily encounters several sexual orientations in parallel lives. Gender has a connection to societal roles and identity, as opposed to orientation. The richness and interdependence of personal identities, including gender and sexual orientation, are emphasized throughout the book. Nora's journey through the Midnight Library gives her the opportunity to temporarily experience all elements of her identity, including potentially several sexual orientations. This serves to highlight the diversity and fluidity of identity as well as the relationship between different aspects of oneself. Nora emphasizes the value of recognizing the particular difficulties experienced by women navigating a variety of restrictive institutions and recovering their agency within this context.

According to Nora, her decision to return reflects the multidimensionality of oppression and her willingness to make her path; she stresses that recovering agency within the intersectionality of oppression necessitates realizing the intertwined nature of multiple social identities (Haig, 2020).

The dramatic act of self-affirmation and defiance to patriarchal and oppressive conventions that Nora's return to her life implies. It represents her refusal to be constrained only by social norms and her rejection of the constrained

opportunities provided by the realities of the library. She disproves the idea that women should adhere to gender-specific responsibilities and expectations by adamantly following her path (Parthibha, 2020). A feminism that defends women's autonomy and emphasizes the value of personal agency in navigating and transcending the difficulties of reality is represented by Nora's choice of going to her own life as she acknowledges that several intersecting identities influence her journey.

Nora's decision to return is a testament to the feminist ideal of personal agency and empowerment because it defies cultural norms and shows how unwilling she is to be constrained by preconceived gender roles (Haig, 2020). Nora's choice to come back is significant because of its enormous intersectional implications and its importance as a personal accomplishment. Her experience spurs a critical examination of the oppressive systems that restrict women's options and abilities, acting as a catalyst for societal change. Nora challenges the social conventions that limit and define women's lives by recovering her agency and asserting her own story (Lim et al., 2019). By doing this, she questions the status quo and inspires others to do the same with repressive structures.

Nora's choice to exercise her agency and rewrite her story acts as a potent critique of the constrictive social conventions that prevent women's autonomy, and her actions encourage others to break free from the constraints of societal expectations and pursue their paths (Haig, 2020). In *The Midnight Library*, Nora's decision to go back to her own life is an example of a feminist concept of empowerment and agency within the context of intersectionality. Nora opposes societal conventions and motivates people to recover their agency by realising the complexity of interlocking repressive institutions and establishing her path. Her choice spurs social transformation and calls for a critical analysis of the oppressive systems that restrict women's options.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the intricate and diverse nature of women's experiences within a patriarchal society, utilizing a feminist analysis of Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*. It challenges patriarchal oppression and

gives a vision of hope for women navigating the maze of reality. Readers are encouraged to challenge social standards and seek to create a more inclusive and just society.

A feminist interpretation of Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* provides a rich analysis of Nora's growth trajectory as a maze of reality in conclusion. When examined through a feminist lens, the character of Nora becomes a symbol representing the diverse and multifaceted realities faced by women in a patriarchal society. The study delves into three main themes: Nora's decision to reclaim her life, symbolizing autonomy and empowerment; the intersectionality of her journey and the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures; and the impact of gendered expectations and societal norms on her battle with depression and suicidal thoughts.

Nora's exploration of alternate versions of her life within the library exposes the restrictions imposed by patriarchal systems and cultural conventions. The analysis underscores the significance of intersectionality in comprehending how these oppressive institutions intersect and shape women's possibilities and choices. The study provides readers with a broader understanding of the intricate reality women must navigate by considering the interconnected nature of gender, race, class, and personal circumstances.

In the book, Nora's experiences in parallel worlds are used to examine sexual orientation briefly. She temporarily assumes several sexual orientations to show how fluid they are. In contrast to gender, which also includes societal roles and identity, this feature is unique. The book emphasizes the intricate relationship between gender and sexuality. The book concludes that identity is multifaceted and determined by decisions, experiences, and cultural expectations. Nora's simultaneous lives are a profound exploration of self-awareness and development. It stresses the importance of recognizing personal complexity and the possibility of change to find pleasure and contentment. In the end, Nora's choice to return to her own life represents a feminist viewpoint on autonomy and empowerment. Nora's decision to defy the constraints imposed by patriarchal and oppressive norms is a radical manifestation of self-assertion

and defiance. Her choice reflects a feminism that values women's autonomy and the importance of human agency in conquering life's problems. This study examines Nora's character growth and transformation using a feminist theoretical framework, focusing on gendered expectations, intersectionality, empowerment, and agency.

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