

Reconstructing Identity: Existential Reflections on Choice and Authenticity in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*

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Abstract

Whether through allegory, symbolism, or narrative structure, literature offers a forum for philosophical inquiry, challenging assumptions, expanding worldviews, and fostering empathy and understanding. The noteworthy events of the 20th century such as the Jews Holocaust, the Spanish flu epidemic, World Wars, the Publication of Darwin's Origin of Species etc., instilled a question concerning the purpose of man's existence. This led to many literary works pertaining to the very concept of Existentialism. *The Midnight Library* written by Matt Haig paints a philosophical picture of the influence and impact of choices in an individual's life. The paper is explored in an existentialist perspective that underscores the inherent anguish and responsibility that accompany human existence including the anguish of confronting the inherent uncertainty, fragility and ambiguity of existence within the individuals, and the act of feeling responsible for one's choices and their consequences.

Keywords

Existentialism, Choices, Authenticity, Redemption, Inherent Anguish

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1. Introduction

Literature is termed to be as, any art form used to describe written or spoken material. It provides a rich tapestry of perspectives, inviting readers to contemplate on the meaning of existence, the nature of truth, and the pursuit of wisdom. Whether through allegory, symbolism, or narrative structure, literature offers a forum for philosophical inquiry, challenging assumptions, expanding worldviews, and fostering empathy and understanding.

Existentialism has become the insightful paradigm of study in the post modern era. The noteworthy events of the 20th century such as the Jews Holocaust, the Spanish flu epidemic, World Wars, the Publication of Darwin's Origin of Species etc., instilled a question concerning the purpose of man's existence. This led to many literary works pertaining to the very concept of Existentialism. Hence, the choices one take during his existence is what that determines his purpose of living.

The sub theory taken under consideration is Jean Paul Sartre's Existentialism. This theory is invariably dealt in his text, *Being and Nothingness* in which Sartre argues that humans exist first and they define their essence through their actions and choices. He also advocates that human beings are not born with predetermined natures or purposes; rather, they gain them through their actions and choices. Throughout the text, Sartre insists on the impact of choices in an individual's life. This paper through the application of an existentialist perspective underscores the inherent anguish and responsibility that accompany human existence including the anguish of

confronting the inherent uncertainty and ambiguity of existence within the individuals, and the act of feeling responsible for one's choices and their consequences.

2. Reconstructing Identity: Existential Reflections on Choice and Authenticity in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*

The Midnight Library written by Matt Haig paints a philosophical picture of the influence and impact of choices in an individual's life. The paper views the novel through the lens of an existentialist. To substantiate this idea, the argument is derived through analyzing the character of Nora Seed. Nora's journey of discovering herself results in empathetic and reflective encompasses regarding the choices we decide to take, the paths, we, as human beings undertake and each of our positions we create during our life on earth. In the beginning of the novel, Nora is portrayed as though she is constrained inside an imaginary cocoon who fails to react to the negativities around her. The novel deeply concerns the impact of choices on an individual's life. The story revolves around Nora Seed, who unknowingly positions herself being confined inside a Bell Jar and feels passive of being unable to react to the struggles she undergoes.

The anguish in her begins when she learns about her cat's death. This cat symbolizes her anchor of hope, that once she has this loss, she thinks that it marks the beginning of something even more worse, shaking her hope to a greater extent. These struggles coupled with her earlier hardships

such as her mother's death instills suicidal thoughts in her. This made her unable to cope up every other incident which happened later in her life.

Nora sets back her engagement with her fiancé, Dan, just two days before her wedding, decides not to move to Australia with her close friend Izzy, and also backs out of serving to be a great singer in *The Labyrinths* with her own brother, Joe along with his best friend, Ravi. These incidents, though the choices were taken by her, push her to depression. According to Nora, existence relies in experiencing highs than lows. She considers herself to be a black hole imploding all by its own. Therefore, she pens a suicidal note and overdoses pills and wine so that she would die soon.

The Soliloquy penned by Nora has also been attached as an addendum to the book, *The Midnight Library*. The narrative serves as a means of advocacy to the people reading that letter. Here, she addressed the readers to be whoever, where she accepts the mistakes she had done in her past to be her own inattentiveness and improper way of making use of her free will. In the course of the novel, Nora compares the city with the person. She saw a new and a righteous place in the city, thereby telling the readers to focus on ethical places and ignore the vicious places.

"A person was like a city. There may be bits you don't like, a few dodgy side streets and suburbs, but the good stuff makes it worthwhile." (Haig 48). The above lines serve as a clarion call and as an awakening to the readers that good choices yield good results.

Also in the novel, Nora says that if she had the possibility to stay in this world, she would, but she doesn't have one. This is only the fluctuated mindset of Nora that makes her unable to survive. She considers herself as making life worse for people. She even addresses that she has nothing to give to people anymore. She feels completely unworthy of herself and regrets her own behavior for that. All these thoughts of Nora are only her perspective of looking at the issues blaming herself where there are plenty of positive perspectives and opportunities to set right the same.

Despite all the chaos Nora has faced, she enters into a building. Later, she wakes up in a completely strange environment filled with books. When Nora comes across the *Midnight Library*, she feels as a re-born individual. The library enables her to explore the different paths in her life that she could have crossed through her wise choices. The story is essentially about the "what ifs" one often considers in life, and the story spends a lot of time considering the notions of what success is, how our actions affect others, or how our lives are often influenced by the people around us. She finds her old school librarian, Mrs. Elm there. This leaves her in a quantum state making her to move between an infinite numbers of possible versions of her life. Nora also delves deep into the realm of a parallel life that teaches her about regrets. Each book in the library serves as a symbol of different lives she had missed because of her choices.

Also in the course of time, Nora learns the profound

lessons of happiness and the importance of embracing every moment as she asked the readers not to underestimate the power of small things and to always remember the same in all walks of life.

Towards the end of the novel, Nora realizes that she still has chance to contribute for her betterment. This is evident in the lines, "She wasn't a black hole, she decided. She was a volcano." (Haig 286) Nora even admitted deliberately that she had enough chances to set right her life but she had blown every one of them. Thus to substantiate that her own choices led to her struggles and mishaps, Sartre says, "Each person is an absolute choice of self from the standpoint of a world of knowledge." (425)

The art of swimming was about purity. The more focused you were on the activity, the less focused you were on everything else. You kind of stopped being you and became the things you were doing. (Haig 72, 73)

These lines substantiate that if an individual is focused on any activity, we tend to change pertaining to the activity where we fail to realize of who we are. Also there is a saying that, "You don't have to understand life. You just have to live it." (Haig 218) Understanding life is a tedious task, so one should adapt to the struggles and live life as it is, is being narrated in the above mentioned quotation. This switch over of her emotion shows her perseverance to come up again in life.

It is noteworthy when Nora realizes that the wise choices one take during their lifetime are very vital that she says that if one aims to be something they are not, they would always fail. Rather she asks to aim to be us, aim to look and act and think like we normally do, and aim to be the truest version of us. She also insists the readers to embrace that you-ness, Endorse them and to love them. The lines serve as an anchor of hope in the minds of the ones who wish to attain success. Thus the speaker advises the readers to aim at being their own self as being as they are matters the most in every walks of life.

Thus Nora's switch over portrays her as being let out of the bell jar or an imaginary liminal space striving to break through the personal and societal constraints. In the words of Sylvia Plath, "the bell Jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air." (176) The above statement in context to the text, means that Nora knows she was once confined inside a bell jar or an enclosed cocoon and is also sure that it will enclose her anytime in the future.

Thus, Descartes says that will is an infinite thing and is necessary to try to conquer ourselves rather than fortune. This is often considered as a philosophical idea that our wisest choices play a vital role in determining not our fortunes but ourselves.

3. Conclusion

Hence, from the character arc drawn from Nora's life story, it is evident that the choices she made after entering into the library enhanced her free will and determination to survive.

This has changed her complete perspective of looking at the mishaps of her life by causing a significant change in even her frames of reference. Thus the paper is explored in an existentialist perspective, underscoring the inherent anguish and responsibility that accompany human, thereby inducing them a feeling of responsibility for one's choices and their consequences.

References

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