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Magical Realism Analysis of the Character Nora Seed in the Midnight Library

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Abstract

*This study examines the representation and function of magical realism in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020) through analysis of the character Nora Seed. Magical realism, as a literary mode that seamlessly blends realistic narration with extraordinary elements, provides a productive framework for exploring Nora's psychological transformation and existential struggle. While previous studies on *The Midnight Library* have largely emphasized psychological, sociological, and philosophical perspectives, such as suicide, trauma, and existentialism, limited attention has been given to the role of magical realism as a narrative strategy that shapes the protagonist's development. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, this research conducts close textual and thematic analysis of the novel to identify key characteristics of magical realism and examine how they influence Nora's journey from despair to self-acceptance. The findings reveal that the *Midnight Library* functions not merely as a fantastical setting but as a magical realist space that externalizes Nora's internal conflicts, regrets, and alternative identities. The matter-of-fact narration of the metaphysical library, the coexistence of life and death, and the merging of realistic and fantastical realms enable the narrative to portray psychological healing in a concrete and accessible form. Through magical realism, Nora is able to confront multiple versions of herself and ultimately reconstruct her understanding of meaning, choice, and existence. This study concludes that magical realism in *The Midnight Library* operates as a central literary mechanism rather than a decorative element, demonstrating the genre's evolving role in contemporary literature as a means of representing mental struggle, self-reflection, and existential recovery.*

Keywords: Magical Realism; The Midnight Library; Nora Seed; Character Development; Existentialism; Contemporary Literature

1. Introduction

Magical realism is a literary mode characterized by the coexistence of realistic representation and extraordinary elements, in which the magical is presented as an ordinary and unquestioned aspect of everyday life. Rather than establishing a strict division between reality and fantasy, magical realism sustains a narrative space where both realms operate simultaneously and without hierarchy. This hybrid nature has made magical realism one of the most debated literary modes, particularly due to its resistance to fixed definitions and generic boundaries (Nightingale, 2024).

The term magical realism was first introduced by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe post-expressionist painting in Europe. Roh used the term to explain an artistic tendency that emphasized the mysterious quality inherent in ordinary reality, suggesting that everyday objects and experiences possess an underlying sense of wonder when perceived attentively (Asayesh & Arargüç, 2017). Roh's concept focused on revealing the "magic of being" embedded in the material world rather than escaping from reality, a principle that later became central to literary magical realism (Bundy, 2012). Although the concept originated in Europe, its literary development expanded beyond its initial context, leading to diverse interpretations across cultures.

Magical realism became widely associated with Latin American literature during the mid-twentieth century, particularly through writers such as Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel García Márquez. Carpentier's concept of *lo real maravilloso* (the marvelous real) emphasized that Latin American history, geography, and culture naturally embody the marvelous within reality itself. In this framework, extraordinary events do not disrupt realism but

emerge organically from lived experiences shaped by colonial histories, myth, and cultural hybridity (Karimov, 2022). This perspective reinforced the idea that magical realism functions as a culturally embedded narrative mode rather than a purely imaginative or escapist form. Building on this foundation, later scholars emphasized that magical realism resists separating the real from the magical, instead blending the two into a seamless narrative world. As Hart observes, magical realism has even become a narrative language for the contemporary “post-truth” world, reflecting the tension between fact and imagination (Hart & Hart, 2021). Similarly, Tahira highlights how magical realism destabilizes the boundaries between reality and fantasy, allowing authors to address deeper cultural and existential concerns (Jabeen et al., 2022). Through these theoretical perspectives, magical realism emerges as more than a stylistic device, it is a powerful literary mode for reimagining human experiences in both local and global contexts.

Contemporary scholars argue, however, that magical realism should not be confined to a specific region or historical moment. Limiting magical realism to Latin American literature creates theoretical inconsistencies and excludes texts that formally conform to the mode but emerge from different cultural contexts (Nightingale, 2024). As a result, magical realism is increasingly understood as a transnational narrative mode that adapts to various literary traditions while retaining its defining features, such as the blending of contradictory ontological realms and the matter-of-fact narration of magical events (Asayesh & Arargüç, 2017). Further research describes magical realism as occupying a “space between spaces,” where reality and the unreal coexist without resolution, enabling the mode to challenge conventional realist assumptions without fully departing into fantasy (Bundy, 2012).

In contemporary literature, magical realism has evolved into a mode capable of addressing modern psychological and existential concerns. Its resistance to explanation and its embrace of ambiguity allow authors to explore fragmented identities, subjective realities, and crises of meaning in ways that realist narratives often cannot. This narrative flexibility makes magical realism particularly relevant to novels that explore inner struggles and alternative realities as part of character development.

Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library* (Haig, 2020) exemplifies these characteristics of magical realism through its portrayal of Nora Seed, a woman who, after attempting suicide, enters a metaphysical library that exists between life and death. Each book in the library represents an alternative version of Nora’s life, allowing her to experience the outcomes of choices she never made. This fantastical space is narrated with the same realism as Nora’s everyday struggles, reflecting what Tahira describes as “irreducible magic,” in which magical elements are seamlessly integrated into reality and accepted without question (Jabeen et al., 2022). The library functions as a magical realist device that enables Nora to confront regret, reassess her identity, and reimagine the meaning of her existence.

Despite the novel’s popularity and critical attention, most existing studies on *The Midnight Library* approach the text primarily through psychological and sociological frameworks. Imansari (Imansari, 2023) examines Nora’s will to survive by categorizing her as a fighter, connector, and believer. Nahdiyah (Nahdiyah, 2022) analyzes Nora’s suicidal tendencies using Durkheim’s theory of suicide, while other study explore her character development through the interaction of the id, ego, and superego (Sihotang & Mubarak, 2024). Other scholars apply Jung’s concept of individuation to Nora’s transformation (Saputri, 2024) or emphasize the long-term impact of unresolved childhood trauma on her adult decisions (Rozadi, 2022). While these studies provide valuable insights into Nora’s psychological condition and social context, they largely overlook the role of magical realism as a narrative framework that facilitates and shapes her transformation. Studies such as Rehan and Zahra’s exploration of existentialism and absurdism focus on Nora Seed’s confrontation with meaninglessness, suicide, and acceptance through the framework of Camus’ philosophy (Rehan & Zahra, 2021). While this approach successfully illuminates the novel’s philosophical depth, it treats the metaphysical library largely as a symbolic backdrop rather than interrogating its formal function as a magical realist space. Notably, even this study explicitly recommends that *The Midnight Library* be analyzed through the lens of magical realism, indicating an acknowledged yet unfulfilled critical direction.

Similarly, broader magical realism scholarship such as studies on *Amélie* (Mulyani, 2023) and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (Hasanah et al., 2021) tends to emphasize identifying characteristics of magical realism using established frameworks like Wendy B. Faris’ five elements (irreducible magic, phenomenal world, unsettling doubt, merging realms, and disruption of time, space, and identity). While these studies are valuable in mapping the formal features of magical realism, they often remain descriptive, concentrating on classification rather than

examining how magical realism actively drives psychological transformation or existential inquiry within contemporary narratives. Furthermore, classical theoretical discussions of magical realism, particularly those tracing its origins to Franz Roh and its later adaptation in Spanish-American fiction, primarily focus on historical development and aesthetic distinctions between realism, fantasy, and the “strange” (Imbert, 1958). Although these discussions establish important conceptual boundaries, they offer limited insight into how magical realism functions in twenty-first-century Anglophone fiction, where the mode increasingly operates as a tool for negotiating mental health, regret, and identity rather than cultural myth or postcolonial history.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the character of Nora Seed in *The Midnight Library* through the theoretical framework of magical realism. By identifying the characteristics of magical realism present in the novel and examining how these elements influence Nora’s development, this research seeks to demonstrate that the blending of reality and fantasy functions not as escapism but as a deliberate literary strategy for interrogating themes of regret, identity, and the search for meaning. In doing so, the study highlights the significance of magical realism in contemporary literature as a mode for reimagining psychological struggles and existential concerns

The Core Concept of Magical Realism

In the realms of fantasy and reality, magical realism is an image in the world of reality and the world of fantasy as a unified whole. Hart and Hart (Hart & Hart, 2021) describe it as the “language of the post-truth world” where fact is confused with fancy. While Jabeen, Khalique and Anwar (Jabeen et al., 2022) highlights how it has blurred the line between reality and fantasy in order to explore deeper cultural and psychological insights. Karimov (Karimov, 2022) also emphasizes that magical realism is not an escape from reality but a means to reveal hidden realities of human life. The eponymous otherworldly library in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* takes this shape in order to give Nora Seed a taste of life in a different way. But previous analyses of the novel have mainly paid attention to Nora’s mental condition without considering its textual construction using magical realism method by which mixtures between realistic facts and fantasy could become a literary strategy for exploring remorse, identity crisis and existential change.

Magical realism in *The Midnight Library*

Magical realism takes the form of a book facility in Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library*, a realm between life and death in which each book equates to another version of Nora Seed’s life. This surreal realm makes sense in the story line and gives Nora a chance not only to regret her decisions but to witness the results of those decisions and to find herself again. Previous researches mainly dealt with psychological aspect from Nora, including her desire to life, will end of life/suicide attempted, trauma that she experienced, and personality of herself. Although these viewpoints aid in our comprehension of her difficulties, they pay less attention to the role of magical realism. This interpretation of the book reveals that the library is more than just a fantastical setting; it is the main tool that aids Nora in processing her suffering and looking for meaning.

2. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the elements of magical realism in Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library*. The qualitative approach is used because it focuses on interpreting literary meaning and exploring how narrative elements construct the story’s deeper significance. The data source of this research is limited to the novel itself, which serves as the primary object of analysis. Data were obtained through close reading to identify and interpret the presence of magical realism within the text. The analysis applies textual and thematic analysis techniques to examine how magical elements, such as the existence of the *Midnight Library*, intertwine with realistic aspects of Nora Seed’s life. Through this process, the study aims to reveal how magical realism functions as a literary device that reflects Nora’s psychological transformation and existential search for meaning.

3. Results and Discussions

This section presents the findings based on textual and thematic analysis of *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig. The analysis focuses on how magical realism operates as both a literary and psychological framework that

enables Nora Seed's transformation. Through the lens of magical realism, the novel constructs a liminal space the Midnight Library that exists between life and death, reality and imagination. This space functions not merely as a fantastical setting, but as a symbolic arena where Nora confronts her regrets, unfulfilled desires, and fragmented sense of self. The blending of realistic emotional struggles with fantastical elements allows the narrative to explore complex psychological themes, particularly depression, hopelessness, and the fear of making irreversible life choices, without being constrained by conventional realism. Magical realism thus becomes a narrative strategy that renders internal conflicts visible and experiential.

Each book in the Midnight Library represents an alternative version of Nora's life, shaped by different decisions she could have made. This multiplicity of realities reflects the human tendency to imagine "what might have been," while also highlighting the emotional burden of regret. As Nora moves through these parallel lives, magical realism facilitates a process of self-exploration akin to psychological therapy. She is able to test identities, values, and aspirations in a way that mirrors cognitive reframing, gradually challenging her belief that her existence is meaningless or burdensome. Moreover, the rules governing the magical world such as the instability of the alternative lives and the library's dependence on Nora's mental state underscore the close relationship between imagination and psychological well-being. The collapse of certain realities when Nora feels disconnected emphasizes that fulfillment cannot be sustained by external success alone, but requires internal acceptance. Through this mechanism, magical realism bridges the gap between fantasy and mental health discourse, allowing readers to engage empathetically with Nora's emotional journey.

Ultimately, the use of magical realism enables Nora's transformation from despair to self-compassion. By navigating an imaginative yet psychologically grounded world, she gains insight into the intrinsic value of her present life. The findings suggest that magical realism in *The Midnight Library* functions as a powerful framework for representing healing, illustrating how imaginative narratives can facilitate profound emotional and existential understanding.

1. The Novel's Uses of Magical Realism as a Literary Device

Magical realism in *The Midnight Library* is immediately established in the opening line: "Between life and death there is a library... Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived" (Haig, 2020, p. 5). This statement sets up a metaphysical yet rationally narrated setting that defies binary distinctions between reality and fantasy. The library is a threshold world neither heaven nor earth, but rendered believable through realistic description: "The books were arranged on shelves that seemed to go on forever" (Haig, 2020, p. 8). Haig's realist tone situates the supernatural as natural, fulfilling what Jabeen, Khalique, and Anwar (2022) call the "blurring of boundaries between reality and fantasy." Previous studies such as Imansari (Imansari, 2023) and Nahdiyah (Nahdiyah, 2022) focused on Nora's will to survive and her suicidal tendencies, analyzing her despair as psychological realism. However, these studies did not consider how the narrative form itself, the magical library, creates the conditions for that transformation.

The current analysis extends their findings by revealing that the metaphysical library is not a passive backdrop but an active literary device that allows the psychological conflict to unfold safely within a fantastical yet believable frame. Karimov (Karimov, 2022) argues that magical realism "reveals hidden realities of human life." In Haig's narrative, this hidden reality is Nora's internal struggle. The library externalizes her regrets and subconscious desires, giving them spatial form. The librarian, Mrs. Elm, embodies both realism and symbolism. She is Nora's former school librarian but also her inner conscience. This duality exemplifies Hart and Hart's (Hart & Hart, 2021) idea of magical realism as "the language of the post-truth world," in which factuality and imagination fuse to express deeper emotional truths.

2. Nora Seed's Psychological Transformation

At the novel's beginning, Nora's existential paralysis is clearly articulated: "She wanted to live somewhere different. She wanted to be someone different. But she was stuck in the same life" (Haig, 2020, p. 13). This despair aligns with Nahdiyah's analysis using Durkheim's theory of suicide, which situates Nora's condition in social disconnection and lack of belonging. However, through the lens of magical realism, Nora's attempted suicide becomes a portal to an imaginative but psychologically authentic space for introspection. Each of Nora's alternate lives as glaciologist, musician, Olympic swimmer, wife, or mother symbolizes a narrative experiment in self-discovery. While Saputri interprets these shifts as Jungian individuation (the integration of one's shadow

and persona), magical realism reframes them as the literalization of her inner search. Every life is a concrete metaphor for potential selves that exist within her subconscious.

Mrs. Elm's guidance: "You don't have to understand life. You just have to live it" (Haig, 2020, p. 202) marks the turning point where Nora moves from self-blame to acceptance. In this context, the library acts as a therapeutic mechanism. This is what Rozadi would call the resolution of "the tension between past trauma and present identity." The magic of the library thus becomes the means of reconciling these fragments into wholeness. Thus, magical realism becomes both setting and strategy. It translates Nora's internal psychological process into a visible journey. Her realization that: "It is not what you look at that matters, it's what you see" (Haig, 2020, p. 175) crystallizes this transformation: self-awareness is not achieved through escape, but through perception.

3. The Narrative Strategy of Intertwining Realistic and Fantastical Elements

Haig's narrative employs magical realism not merely as decoration but as the novel's organizing principle. Nora perceives the library as "Both alive and dead... real, and yet not real" (Haig, 2020, p. 47). The seamless coexistence of realism and fantasy allows the narrative to maintain psychological credibility while exploring metaphysical questions. Unlike traditional fantasy, Haig's narration does not seek to suspend disbelief. Instead, the fantastic is presented with the matter-of-fact tone of realism. This aligns with Imansari's observation that Nora's character evolves from denial to belief, yet Haig's use of magical realism provides the narrative mechanism for that evolution. The realist tone acts as the bridge between Nora's emotional world and the reader's empathy, ensuring that the impossible feels authentic.

The narrative consistency also embodies Karimov's argument that magical realism exposes "the hidden continuity between consciousness and reality." Each of Nora's experiences operates according to internal logic: she reads a book, enters a life, lives it until disillusionment, and returns. This cyclical structure mirrors the repetitive nature of human reflection such as thinking, regretting, and reimagining, which deepens the novel's existential dimension. The line: "Every life contains its own contradictions. Every life contains its own sadness" (Haig, 2020, p. 226) reflects the narrative's ultimate philosophical equilibrium. Through this blending of tones, Haig converts abstract emotional truths into tangible narrative experience.

4. The Role of the Midnight Library as a Therapeutic and Reflective Space

The library functions as the narrative's emotional and metaphysical heart, embodying what Rozadi describes as "a reflective arena for processing trauma." Nora's journey through its endless shelves symbolizes the act of self-reflection and confession. The setting itself mirrors the structure of the human mind, orderly on the surface yet infinite in depth. Mrs. Elm's lesson "The only way to learn is to live" (Haig, 2020, p. 120) represents the therapeutic principle underlying Nora's recovery. Each alternate life functions as a metaphorical counseling session. The "Book of Regrets" epitomizes cognitive confrontation: as Nora reads it, she literally faces the weight of her remorse. When the text narrates that: "She began to feel something she hadn't felt for a long time. Hope" (Haig, 2020, p. 280) it marks the culmination of psychological healing through magical experience. Consequently, the Midnight Library serves as both a therapeutic metaphor and a literary experiment. It demonstrates how the blending of the real and the unreal allows the narrative to address psychological truths without clinical exposition.

5. Implications of Magical Realism in Contemporary Literature

Haig's use of magical realism redefines the genre for the 21st century. While earlier studies such as Imansari and Nahdiyah analyzed Nora's survival instinct and despair as psychological conditions, this study shows that those same emotional states are also structurally expressed through the magical realist device. The library's fantastical design transforms the process of introspection into narrative motion. As Nora concludes: "Maybe there is no perfect life. Maybe there are just lots of ways to live" (Haig, 2020, p. 284). This final reflection encapsulates Haig's adaptation of magical realism for a contemporary readership: the fantastic no longer critiques social myth, as in Latin American works, but instead functions as an interior, therapeutic mirror. The genre's focus shifts from collective identity to individual consciousness, signaling a broader transformation in the function of magical realism within modern literary discourse. In *The Midnight Library*, magical realism is stripped of its traditional political urgency and instead repurposed to address the psychological realities of late modern life,

such as anxiety, alienation, and decision paralysis. The fantastical elements do not destabilize social structures or historical narratives; rather, they stabilize the protagonist's inner world by offering a controlled environment in which emotional chaos can be examined safely. This inward turn reflects contemporary readers' concerns with mental health, self-actualization, and personal meaning in an increasingly fragmented world.

Furthermore, the library's structure mirrors the nonlinear nature of human thought, particularly in moments of crisis. Regret, rumination, and imagined alternatives often dominate depressive cognition, and Haig externalizes these mental processes through the endless shelves of books. Magical realism thus becomes a formal extension of cognitive experience, allowing abstract psychological states to take concrete narrative form. Unlike classical magical realism, where the supernatural is accepted as part of communal reality, Haig's magical elements are deeply personalized and dependent on Nora's consciousness, reinforcing the genre's shift toward subjectivity. This reinterpretation also challenges the binary between fantasy and realism. The Midnight Library does not offer escapism in the traditional sense; instead, it confronts the reader with the emotional consequences of escapist thinking itself. By experiencing multiple "better" lives and finding each lacking in some way, Nora learns that dissatisfaction is not resolved through endless choice, but through acceptance of imperfection. Consequently, Haig positions magical realism as a tool for ethical and emotional inquiry rather than social commentary. In this sense, The Midnight Library exemplifies a contemporary evolution of magical realism, one that aligns the genre with therapeutic storytelling. The magical is no longer a collective myth-making force, but a reflective mechanism through which individuals negotiate meaning, resilience, and self-forgiveness in the modern age.

6. Contrast with Previous Studies

A comparative thematic review of prior research reveals that most analyses of The Midnight Library have prioritized psychological or philosophical interpretations. Imansari emphasized Nora's resilience, categorizing her as a "fighter, connector, and believer." Nahdiyah applied Durkheim's sociological theory to examine her suicidal tendencies, while Sihotang and Mubarak explored her psyche through Freud's structural model of personality. Saputri interpreted her journey as Jungian individuation, where Nora integrates different aspects of herself into a cohesive identity.

While these studies deepen our understanding of Nora's character, they share a common limitation: they treat magical realism merely as background rather than as the primary narrative engine. Textual and thematic analysis in this study reveals that magical realism is not a passive frame, it actively shapes Nora's transformation. The fantastical library is the structural core of the narrative, enabling her psychological evolution by providing a literal stage for her abstract struggles. This study thus extends the discourse by foregrounding magical realism as the textual and thematic mechanism that integrates Nora's inner and outer realities, making psychological transformation narratively visible. Thus, The Midnight Library illustrates how magical realism continues to function as a powerful literary medium for addressing internal struggles, bridging the boundaries between imagination and psychology, and transforming existential despair into a reawakening of life's meaning.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that The Midnight Library by Matt Haig employs magical realism as a narrative structure that conveys Nora Seed's transformation from despair to self-acceptance. The blending of realism and fantasy constructs a believable metaphysical space where Nora confronts her regrets and explores multiple versions of her life. Through this process, magical realism becomes a literary mirror of psychological reflection, turning abstract emotions into concrete experiences. The Midnight Library symbolizes both consciousness and renewal. Each book Nora opens represents the human capacity for change and the recognition that perfection is unattainable. The novel demonstrates that understanding and meaning emerge not from escaping life's imperfections but from accepting them. Therefore, magical realism in Haig's novel illustrates the genre's evolving purpose in modern fiction: to portray mental and emotional recovery through imaginative realism. The story reaffirms that even within uncertainty and regret, human life retains the potential for hope, choice, and renewal.

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