



Philosophical Exploration of Existentialism and Absurdism in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*

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Abstract

The philosophy of existentialism has made many writers to pen down their thoughts about the existence of human beings and the meaning of life. Existentialist theory states that human beings can establish their own meaning of life just by using their consciousness. The power of free will and personal responsibility can enable the human being to define his meaning of life. However, Absurdism contradicts the idea of Existentialism by emphasizing that there is no meaning of life, and that meaninglessness leads to suicide. The purpose of this very paper is to explore the Existentialist and Absurdist themes in Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library*. The qualitative research methodology has been used for this research and the data is collected by purposive sampling. While Albert Camus' theory of Existentialism and Absurdism has been chosen as a theoretical framework for this paper. The analysis testifies that the elements of Absurdism and Existentialism have been impregnated by Matt Haig in his novel *The Midnight Library*. For future recommendations, the novel can be analyzed by the lens of Magical Realism and Psychoanalysis.

Keywords: Absurdism, Existentialism, Suicide, *The Midnight Library*, Albert Camus

Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophy which came into existence in the late 19th century and reached its zenith in mid-20th century in France when Simon de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus were simultaneously writing on Absurdism and Existentialism. Existentialism says that life has no pre-defined meaning. It is up to human beings to make a meaning out of it in order to live it. Human beings have to make rational decision in order to survive in the irrational world. The main focus of existentialists is on human actions, free-will, freedom, choices they make and the decisions they take. Existentialism gained popularity as a school of thought right after two fatal world wars. They believed that there is no such thing as God exists. There is no supernatural being which can save people from the catastrophes of war and absurdities of life. Therefore, human beings are on their own to create the meaning of life. It can be done by accepting the fact that life means nothingness. At this point, Absurdism and Existentialism shake hands with one another.

The theory of Absurdism is associated with Albert Camus, according to which life is intrinsically meaningless and, search for the meaning goes in vain. No matter what human beings do, they find nothing out of their search from the meaning. As a result, every human being passes



through three stages of life. First one is termed as philosophical suicide which means seeking help from some divine being. The second one is physical suicide in which one finds life nothing but boring and meaningless. As a result, one thinks that taking own life will end all the suffering. The third one is acceptance in which one embraces the life the way it is along with all its absurdities.

Existentialism emerged in opposition to three school of thoughts about the existence of God: (1) atheists who opine that God does not exist at all, (2) theists who believe that God is the reason behind everything and (3) agnostics who believe that it does not matter whether there is a God or not. What matters is how we live our life. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who is known as the father of existentialism, is the major figure of this movement. Dutch philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was also the major propellant of this philosophy. Other major figures of Existentialist movement who did a great job regarding its development are Arthur Schopenhauer, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka. Existentialism, In the twentieth century, the theory of Existentialism was also adopted by other prominent writers, including Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. These writers used the existentialist ideas in their works to the maximum. Themes used by them are meaninglessness, nothingness, limited freedom, dread, boredom, pointlessness, social isolation, and commitment. Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2000) expounded the ideas of pointlessness, existential crisis, nothingness and meaning and purpose of life. Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (2003), *No Exit* (1944) and *Nausea* (1949) used these themes. Likewise, Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1989) is also a major work of this movement.

One of the major characteristics of Existentialism is pessimistic world view: they provide pessimistic vision of the world and incite feelings of uneasiness in reader's mind. They try to find the answers to the deep questions which are related to sensitive issues like purpose of our existence, the meaning of life and the existence of God. They consider them erudite questions which requires serious answers. The second major characteristic is freedom of choice. Existentialists think that every individual has freedom of choice. But we do not have any power over other people's freedom and our environment. This clash creates absurdity.

Next one is *human existence* which has to learn how to differentiate between harsh realities and absurdities which come in the way of life. Another important characteristic is *individualism and individual ethics* which recognizes humans as free and independent single unit not as a 'part



of the whole.' Existentialists look at the human beings free of any tags and prejudices. They do not take into consideration race and ethnicity. According to *individual ethics*, every individual has freedom of choice. He or she is free in their actions and owe no explanation to anyone.

The last characteristic in the list is *emotion* which is of great importance for Existentialists. To understand existentialism, emotions play major role because they are deeply connected with our choices and decisions. Similarly, it is also related with Absurdism. Nothingness, meaninglessness and existence of pointless things and incident are the major part of absurdist works of fiction.

This study closely examines the feature of existentialism and Absurdism in Matt Haig's novel, *The Midnight Library* which is full of Existentialist and Absurdist features.

Research Question

- In what manner the elements of Existentialism and Absurdism are impregnated in Matt Haig's work "*The Midnight Library*"?

Significance of the Study

The aim of the study is to analyze the text of *The Midnight Library* by using the theoretical lenses of Absurdism and Existentialism. This book was published in 2020 so there has been no research work conducted on this novel. That is why, this study will be a good addition to the storehouse of literary knowledge.

Research Framework and Methodology

This research article is the descriptive qualitative study of "*The Midnight Library (2020)*" written by Matt Haig. The reason for selecting this novel is that it encompasses the philosophical ideas of Existentialism and Absurdism. The contemporary era is the era of science and technology and the absurdities created by scientific inventions. People are facing existentialist issues to its fullest. Method used for data collection is intensive reading, annotating the text and interpretation of the novel keeping in mind the themes of Absurdism and Existentialism. At the end, the selected and annotated text has been analyzed according to the philosophy produced by Albert Camus.

Literature Review

G. Sankar & K. Jaya, (2016) in their article *The Psychological problems and Existentialist view of the Great Two Americans Ernest Hemingway and F. Scot Fitzgerald-A Glimpses* explore the aspects of Absurdism and Existentialism. Both of these writers, Hemingway and Fitzgerald,



suffered from the catastrophes of war physically, mentally and financially. *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) by Hemingway depicts the existential disillusionment of the characters. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) also explores existentialist ideas. The protagonist Mr. Gatsby is an independent individual who is fighting the absurdities of life.

A lot of work has been done on Franz Kafka's novels through Existentialist lens. Mondal (2018) has studied Existentialist and Absurdist themes in Kafka's novel *The Trial* (1925). In the article she shows Kafka's view about the world i.e., there is no logical connection between our existence and events taking place around us. As this novel revolves around the judicial system, she emphasizes the need of better judiciary for the right working of the system because, without it, universe is as absurd as shown in the novel.

Couder (2017), has done the absurdist analysis of the novel *Catch 22* (1961) by Joseph Heller. The characters in the novel are facing the causalities of war which gives birth to absurdity. The war does not make any sense to them. The writer presents these absurdities in a humorous manner which is known as *Absurdist humor*. According to Couder (2017) the use of humor makes the novel interesting for readers as compared to other works of this kind.

In the same manner, the authors of this paper have studied the traces of Existentialism and Absurdism in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020).

Discussion and Analysis

After an in depth study of the novel, it is found that Matt Haig has impregnated his novel *The Midnight Library* (2020) with elements of Existentialist and Absurdist philosophy. Every chapter and every event revolves around these philosophies. These elements are Absurdism, the Myth of Sisyphus, and Pessimism.

Absurdism

Absurdism is described as the idea that the world is illogical and meaningless, and that the quest for order brings a person into clash with the world around. Camus says that absurdity is produced by the conflict, the conflict between our understanding of the universe as something logical and rational and the universe it is (irrational and indifferent towards our expectations).

The elements of Absurdism are found in abundance in this novel. The novel is about a middle-aged woman, Nora Seed, who is thirty-five years old. She is suffering from anxiety and depression and wants to die. She tries to kill herself by taking an overdose of anti-depressants.



suddenly, life takes an abrupt turn and as a result she is living ‘Schrödinger’s life. Both dead and alive in your own mind’, as quoted in the book. One day her neighbor, Mr. Ash tells her that her cat has died on roadside. Same day at midnight, she takes an overdose of the anti-depressants to end her life. Right at 00:00 at midnight, she wakes up in a place called *In-Between* or *Midnight Library*. The library is like a time-machine. She can wish for a different kind of life and can go there. Though she has the autonomy to choose a life but not enough to choose its ending.

Nora is not happy with her life because she is unable to understand the absurdities in life. Her expectations are in clash with the world and people around her. All her wishes are unfulfilled. This sense of unfulfillment leads to anger and disappointment. Moreover, the burden of expectations from all the people around her fills her heart with aggression and regrets. She feels that she is an incomplete person.

I haven’t become an Olympic swimmer. I haven’t become a glaciologist. I haven’t become Dan’s wife. I haven’t become a mother. I haven’t become the lead singer of The Labyrinths. I haven’t managed to become a truly good or truly happy person. I haven’t managed to look after Voltaire. (Haig, 2020, p. 32)

Everyone in her family and around has been a kind of failure in life. They projected their desire on Nora. Even the librarian, Mrs. Elm, had expectations from her just like Nora’s mother. This is the reason Nora angrily compares her to her mother. Her sense of individuality is challenged. It all adds to absurdities.

It was hard not to compare Mrs Elm to her mother, who treated Nora like a mistake in need of correction. For instance, when she was a baby her mother had been so worried Nora’s left ear stuck out more than her right that she’d used sticky tape to address the situation, then disguised it beneath a woollen bonnet. (Haig, 2020, p. 13)

Nora’s life experiences have made her weak. She is emotionally vulnerable. She is always trying to run away from absurd nature of life because it suddenly ends. Whenever she confronts the death during her stay in midnight library, she immediately returns to library. “Even death was something Nora couldn’t do properly, it seemed” (Haig, 2020, p. 32).

The death of loved ones shakes her existence and affects her mind and body. During her periods of grief, she becomes preoccupied with thoughts, memories and images of her the departed one, faces difficulty accepting the absurd facts and experiences long lasting periods of sadness and



yearning. She is unable to understand that death and loss are part and parcel of life. In her root life, she loses both of her parents. In almost all the lives she lived during her stay in midnight library, she loses someone one or other way around. In one life she loses her cat. In another life she loses her brother. In the life where she goes to Australia, her friend Izzy dies in a car accident. In the life where she marries Dan, she loses her relationship because Dan is having an extra marital affair. Despite all her experiences, she cannot handle loss and keeps running from it. Even in one of her songs “Howl” her fugitive nature is expressed:

To the winter forest
And nowhere to go
This girl runs
From all she know. (Haig, 2020, p. 130)

The Myth of Sisyphus

Camus wrote the novel *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2000) in order to present his idea about The Myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is a character in Greek mythology who was condemned by the gods forever, to move a boulder up a mountain for nothing because it always rolls down to the starting point all over again. By doing this, he understands life. Camus says, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy”. To entertain herself just like Sisyphus, Nora keeps on choosing different lives during her stay in midnight library. These different lives are a metaphor for continuous struggle the way Sisyphus is doing the rock. Just like Sisyphus, she finally understands the meaning of live.

In one life she was an aid worker in Botswana.

In one life a cat-sitter.

In one life a volunteer in a homeless shelter.

In one life she was sleeping on her only friend's sofa. (Haig, 2020, p. 149)

In all these lives, she cannot control the events. Every time, in search of meaning, she gets disappointed. Camus says that human beings keep looking for the purpose of living but, in the long run, they find out that all this search is the wastage of time. No matter what human beings do, they find nothing out of their search from the meaning. As a result, every human being passes through three stages of life. First one is termed as *philosophical suicide* which means seeking help from some divine being. The second one is *physical suicide* in which one finds life nothing but boring and meaningless. As a result, one thinks that taking own life will end all the suffering. The third



one is *acceptance* in which one embraces the life the way it is along with all its absurdities. The reaction towards this absurdity and then acceptance is also seen in Nora.

I think it is easy to imagine there are easier paths,' she said, realising something for the first time. 'But maybe there are no easy paths. There are just paths. In one life, I might be married. In another, I might be working in a shop. I might have said yes to this cute guy who asked me out for a coffee. In another I might be researching glaciers in the Arctic Circle. In another, I might be an Olympic swimming champion. Who knows? Every second of every day we are entering a new universe. And we spend so much time wishing our lives were different, comparing ourselves to other people and to other versions of ourselves, when really most lives contain degrees of good and degrees of bad. (Haig, 2020, p. 127)

Pessimism

Pessimism is the basic part of existentialism which provides a pessimistic view of the world. The pessimistic themes in *The Midnight Library* (2020) are discussed below.

Anxiety

Nora is at a stage where having anxiety and depression is like being hurt and feeling-less at the same time. She has a fear of failure but no urge to be productive. She wants friends and family around her but hates to socialize. Sometimes she is even numb and feel paralyzed. She is alive but dying every moment. It is a kind of mental paralyses. She is unable to move, think or even speak. For her, breathing is difficult and standing up cause dizziness. She feels difficulty in holding the ground. Her mind and body do not obey her. When her cat dies, she feels nothing. She rather envies it for dying because she wants herself die.

She knew she should be experiencing pity and despair for her feline friend – and she was but she had to acknowledge something else. As she stared at Voltaire's still and peaceful expression– that total absence of pain – there was an inescapable feeling brewing in the darkness. Envy. (Haig, 2020, p. 17)

Her anxiety makes her hide her feelings and indifferent to other's death just like Camus's hero in *The Stranger* (1954).

I'm sorry,' she told Neil, in the scruffy little windowless box of an office. 'My cat died. Last night. And I had to bury him. Well, someone helped me bury him. But then I was left



alone in my flat and I couldn't sleep and forgot to set the alarm and didn't wake up till midday and then had to rush. (Haig, 2020, p.18)

She had the same reaction when her father died.

She was numb for about half an hour, and had stared blankly at the unfinished game of chess. The reality was simply too big to absorb at first, but then it had hit her hard and sideways, taking her off the track she'd known. She had hugged Mrs Elm so close, crying into her polo neck until her face was raw from the fusion of tears and acrylic. (Haig, 2020, p. 31)

Limited Freedom

Nora always feels bound. She has no freedom. During her child childhood, Nora never felt at home. Her parents never considered her as person but a source of their atonement. Her father wanted her to be an Olympic Swimmer. Her brother wanted her to continue her career as a singer. Her boyfriend wanted her to marry him and help him run the bar. She could never find out what she really wanted. These things increased troubles in her life.

The married life in the pub had been Dan's dream. The trip to Australia had been Izzy's dream, and her regret about not going had been a guilt for her best friend more than a sorrow for herself. The dream of her becoming a swimming champion belonged to her father. And okay, so it was true that she had been interested in the Arctic and being a glaciologist when she was younger, but that had been steered quite significantly by her chats with Mrs Elm herself, back in the school library. And The Labyrinths, well, that had always been her brother's dream. (Haig, 2020, p. 137)

Alienation

Nora always felt alienated since her teenage. Her father stopped caring for her when she rejected to be an Olympian. Her brother cut his ties with her when she left the band. She felt abandoned after the death her mother. Everyone around her doubted her intentions.

Nothingness

Nothingness is the aspect of Absurdism and Existentialism which gives a person feeling that whatever he or she does is insufficient and gives no benefit to anyone. This is the situation with Nora. She tries to make everyone happy but ends up hurt and lonely. Nora finds out that all her brother cares about is money. When she was reluctant to deliver the talk, he becomes angry at her. "You're freaking me out. You're acting not quite yourself" (Haig, 2020, p. 80).



Pointlessness

It is like nothingness and is also an important aspect of existentialism. Nora finds her life pointless. She does not want to do anything because she believes that it will not change her life in any way. She does not want to use her potential even if someone tries to make her realize. She works at a music shop. The owner, Mr. Neil, tries to encourage her to do somethings else but she ignores. “That’s a long time. I feel like you are made for better things. You’re in your late thirties” (Haig, 2020, p.18).

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Matt Haig’s novel *The Midnight Library* contains the major themes of Existentialism and Absurdism. These themes are absurdism, pointlessness, meaninglessness and anxiety which are faced by the protagonist, Nora. She is in continuous struggle with her surroundings and is trying to assert her individuality in the face of indifferent nature of the world around her. The themes and plot of the novel creates absurdity in the minds of the reader. Nora Seed is tired of the monotony of life and feels misfit. Everyone around her behaves like a parasite. Her anxiety robs her all her energies. As a result, all these circumstances lead her to suicide. The novel also suggests that parents should not expect too much from their children. Their job is to support and encourage them not to make them a source of reparation. If they do not do so, the result will be the existential crisis.

Future Recommendations

For future studies, the novel can be analyzed from the lens of magical realism and Psychoanalysis.



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