



## **THE RETURN OF REPRESSED IN *THE NOVEL MIDNIGHT LIBRARY* (2020) BY MATT HAIG**

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### **Abstract**

This research is an analysis of novel *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig (2020). The design of this research is qualitative descriptive analysis. The analysis delves into the form of repression in the experience of Nora Seed. It enhances the analysis process by assisting in the unveiling of the meaning. The research used psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud. The data in this research was obtained from the novel *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig (2020), Based on the use of quotations from character, plot, and setting from the novel. The results show that there are two form of return of repression in the main character Nora Seed, consist of dream and anxiety. Furthermore, the data found from the novel shows Nora has released her repressed emotion by accepting her failure , Tolerancing the negative emotions, forgiving her parents in fact her parents are full of love to her, realizing that life is full of trials and needing connection to humans.

**Keywords:** *Repression, Return of Repressed, Release Repressed Emotions*

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

In today's era, depression among people is a pressing concern that demands our attention. Many individuals face a multitude of challenges, including early trauma, that contribute to the onset of depression. The prevalence of depression and its devastating effects can significantly increase the risk of suicidal ideation and behaviors. According to Richesson, Magas, Brown & Hoenig (2022) from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, in 2021 estimated 14.1 million United States adults aged 18 or older had at least one major depressive episode with severe impairment in the past year. This number represented 5.5% of all U.S. adults. This distressing fact warrants further investigation into the emotional responses

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to early trauma, aiming to mitigate the incidence of depression among victims. The exploration of emotional responses to early trauma, particularly in relation to the return of the repressed, is a captivating subject in psychology. The discussion in scientific and clinical contexts often centers on whether childhood traumatic experiences can be suppressed. Lauretis (2008) suggests that repressed memories become traumatic upon resurfacing, involving an awareness of their sexual nature and the realization that associated emotions are unacceptable. This internal conflict prompts the ego to repress the memory, leading to secondary repression and the emergence of neurotic symptoms. Individual that are confronted with heightened levels of stress and trauma, potentially give rise to the emergence of repressed thoughts, memories, and desires. According to Madison (1961) The concept of the return of repressed suggests that when thoughts or memories are repressed due to their unacceptable or threatening nature, they may resurface in distorted forms, disrupting conscious functioning. The return of the repressed often expressed indirectly through dreams, slips of the tongue , and symptoms such as anxiety, phobias, or neurotic behaviors (Doreen Fowler, 2000). These repressed elements can have significant negative consequences on both mental and physical health. According to (Patel & Patel, 2019) repressing emotions can lead to detrimental effects on physical health, mental well-being, and overall quality of life. Therefore, this study discusses the novel *The Midnight Library* (2020) by Matt Haig, where the main character named Nora Seed clearly exhibits the development of repression as the story unfolds.

In the mesmerizing novel *The Midnight Library* (2020) by Matt Haig, the central theme of the return of the repressed is prominently featured, leading readers on a profound exploration of regret, missed opportunities, and the relentless pursuit of fulfillment. The story revolves around Nora Seed, a 36-year-old music store employee, who wrestles with deep sorrow and dissatisfaction with her life. Over the course of a single day, Nora experiences a series of unfortunate events including the loss of a beloved pet, job termination, conflicts, and strained relationships. The weight of her past decisions, particularly breaking off an engagement after her mother's death, intensifies her existing anxieties. Nora's life seems overshadowed by suffering, anguish, and regret, driving her to contemplate suicide as a possible escape. However, instead of an afterlife, Nora wakes up in front of the Midnight Library—in her realm of unconscious mind. With the guidance of Mrs. Elm, a familiar figure from her past, Nora encounters the Book of Regrets, a magical book containing a comprehensive list of her life's regrets, each represented by a book on the library's shelves. In her dream-like state, Nora embarks on a unique journey, exploring alternative lives and the different paths she could have taken.

Therefore, this research explores the extent to which Nora Seed exhibits forms of the return of the repressed and the degree to which she expresses the release of repressed emotions based on quotations from character, plot, and setting in the novel *The Midnight Library* (2020), utilizing psychoanalytic theory by Sigmund Freud.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

The data in this research will be analyzed using the psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud by paying attention to: the condition of the character's personality and the character's behavior. The research method that is used in this research is descriptive qualitative research. There are three key steps most qualitative data analysis approaches have in common:

1. Close reading involves detailed analysis of the novel to explore specific language, imagery, and themes related to the main character's return of the repressed. This technique allows for deep engagement with the textual elements of the novel, identifying the character, plot, setting, dialogue and narration that convey the return of the repressed.
2. Classifying quotation related to the main character and repression.
3. Interpretation using Sigmund Freud psychoanalysis theory.

## **C. DISCUSSION**

### **1. The Return of The Repressed**

The return of the repressed, as witnessed through dreams and anxiety, unveils the intricate interplay between the human psyche and unresolved emotions. Dreams serve as a testament to the fact that the wishes portrayed as realized within the dream are not always reflective of present desires. The dream in question may also represent a past desire, fears and experiences that has been forsaken, suppressed, or buried (Freud, 1900:81). Anxiety, on the other hand, acts as a manifestation of the surfacing repression, reflecting how unaddressed internal conflicts can generate distress and unease. In the novel *The Midnight Library* Nora is often triggered and experiences anxiety when recalling things related to bad memories and trauma. According to Worchel (1955) Anxiety can be triggered by specific words and events experienced by an individual, that anxiety can extend to words with similar meanings or those closely connected to it. In this discussion, Nora's repression emerges to the surface, including aspects such as dreams and anxiety.

#### **1.1 In Form of Dream**

Repression, as a psychological mechanism, often surfaces in the form of dreams, revealing the innermost desires, fears, and unresolved conflicts of an individual's

unconscious mind. According to Scalabrini, Esposito & Mucci (2021) neuroscientific research indicates that dreams are intricately linked to the limbic and right emotional brain circuit, particularly during REM (rapid eye movement) stages, involving self-related and visually generated processing

By analyzing these dreamscapes, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of their own psychology, unearthing repressed memories, desires, and unresolved issues that have the potential to influence their waking lives, as explained in the quotation below.

‘Who are you?’  
(. . .).  
‘I’m the librarian,’ the woman said, coyly. ‘that is who.’  
(. . .).  
‘Mrs Elm.’  
Mrs Elm smiled, thinly. ‘Perhaps.’  
Nora remembered those rainy afternoons, playing chess.  
She remembered the day her father died, when Mrs Elm gently broke the news to her in the library. Her father had died suddenly of a heart attack while on the rugby field of the boys’ boarding school where he taught. 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.’  
(p.25)

In this data, Nora Seed's dreams reveal the repression. Her encounter with the old school librarian, Mrs. Elm, unfolds in a dreamlike midnight library setting, allowing Nora to revisit repressed memories, particularly one linked to her father's sudden death. Mrs. Elm holds a significant place in Nora's life, offering support during difficult times. This dream provides a symbolic space for Nora to confront unresolved emotions related to her father's passing, a traumatic event that had been repressed in her waking life

In the Midnight Library, the books serve as representations of Nora's traumas and regrets. Each book depicts a different life she could have lived, emphasizing the choices and possibilities that didn't materialize. These books provide Nora with a means to envision the potential in her life and the things she wishes she had done differently. They act as tangible reminders of her regrets, enabling her to delve into and contemplate the consequences of her past decisions, as indicated in the quotation below.

the power of all the regrets simultaneously emanating from the book was becoming agony. the weight of guilt and remorse and sorrow too strong. She leaned back on her elbows, dropped the heavy book and squeezed her eyes shut. She could hardly breathe, as if invisible hands were around her neck. (p.35)

In the above quote, Nora is in a dream state, a dream that reveals the midnight library with books that represent a collection of bad memories and regrets that occurred throughout her life. This dream serves as a representation of repression visualized in the dream. The "heavy book" act as an symbol, explains that the bad memories and regrets Nora experiences are a heavy burden. One of the bad memories that resurfaces during the dream stage is about Nora feeling like a failure, as seen in the following quotation.

There was an invisible baton of failure her mother had passed down, and Nora had held it for a long time. Maybe that was why she had given up on so many things. Because she had it written in her DNA that she had to fail. (p.121)

Nora still thinks about how heavy failure feels for her. She compares it to an "invisible baton" passed down from her mother, which means she feels like she's meant to fail. Saying failure is "written in her DNA" shows how she believes it's a big part of who she is, affecting how she sees herself and the choices she makes. This is in line with Sigmund Freud's theory, which states that the unconscious mind emerged as a consequence of repression, encompassing thoughts, desires, and emotions deemed unacceptable by the conscious self (Rennison, 2001:30).

## **1.2 Return In Form of Anxiety**

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health conditions, and they manifest as disturbances in mood, thinking, behavior, and physiological activity (Jbireal & Azab, 2019). The pervasive nature of anxiety disorders underscores their ability to act as a form of repression. Anxiety can often stem from unresolved conflicts, past traumatic experiences, or suppressed emotions, and it serves as a defense mechanism to cope with these underlying issues. When left unaddressed, anxiety can lead to a cycle of repression, where individuals consciously or subconsciously avoid addressing the root causes of their anxiety. In Nora's context of anxiety she experiences result from unfulfilled desires, traumatic experience, and the negative perception of herself. As an example, Nora undergoes anxiety similar to the one described below.

“Nora hated herself for silently correcting the ‘our’ to ‘my’. “I don’t think your problem was stage fright. Or wedding fright. I think your problem was life fright. This hurt. The words took the air out of her.” (p.13-14)

The evidence in the sentence above shows that Nora Seed experiences anxiety. The word 'life fright' in the sentence 'life fright' shows fear. In this case, Nora Seed felt scared and confused about whether the choice to decide to become a glaciologist, marry with Dan, and have to decide to leave the band The Labyrinths was the right decision. Then, she also felt that she would disappoint everyone with the decision she was about to make. In the end, she felt that this was not because of

problems with The Labyrinths Band or her marriage, but this was a problem with her because she was afraid of life.

‘Which regret stands out? Which decision would you like to undo? Which life would you like to try on?’

She said that, precisely. Try on. As if this was a clothes shop and Nora could choose a life as easily as a T-shirt. It felt like a cruel game.

‘that was agony. I felt like I was about to be strangled. What is the point of this?’ (p.36)

In this quotation, Nora is asked to pick a regret or make a different choice in her life. The way it's mentioned, like trying on clothes, makes it seem simple, but for Nora, it feels like a really tough and almost painful thing. The comparison to a game, albeit a cruel one, amplifies the distress she experiences. The mention of feeling like she's about to be strangled underscores the intensity of her anxiety, suggesting a suffocating and overwhelming emotional response to the prospect of revisiting past regrets and alternate lives. It shows how rethinking about life choices can bring up emotional stress and mental strain, portraying anxiety as a real and distressing feeling in Nora's life.

‘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—’ (p.96)

The data above indicates the presence of repression, which is marked by anxiety, Nora's anxiety is strongly connected to a time when she let her brother down by leaving their music band. Now, the fear of letting him down again makes her anxiety worse, and it's hard for her to focus and do well. The bad experience from the past, where she messed up their dream of making music together, still bothers Nora a lot. She feels a lot of pressure to show that she can do better now and make up for what she did before. The words "Don't let us down" remind her of the past disappointment and make her anxiety even stronger. This mix of old bad memories and current expectations shows how anxiety can affect Nora well-being. This is strengthened by the quotation and Nora's statement below, which states that remembering and rethinking about bad past experiences make her feel distress.

## 2. Nora's Releasing Repression

Releasing emotions allowing individuals to view their personal memories from a greater distance, aiding them in reassessing and reintegrating their memories into a new emotional context. This guides person to better accept and reconcile their personal history (Waller et al. 2018;5). In *The Midnight Library* (2020) by Matt

Haig, Nora confronts her repressed emotions and memories, she begins to release the restraints they hold over her psyche. releasing this emotion helps her to see objectively, facilitating a deeper understanding and accept her personal history. Through this introspective process, Nora gradually learns to reconcile her past regrets and struggles, ultimately paving the way for her emotional growth and self-acceptance.

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)

Nora experienced deep sorrow upon the death of her beloved cat. Understanding the inevitability of mortality, including her cat Volts', Nora acknowledged her grief by accepting Mrs. Elm's condolences with the phrase "Poor Volts." Through this process, Nora came to understand that her cat's passing resulted from illness rather than any shortcomings in her care. Ultimately, Nora allowed herself to come to terms with her cat's death.

Yesterday I knew I had no future, and that it was impossible for me to accept my life as it is now. And yet today, that same messy life seems full of hope. Potential. The impossible, I suppose, happens via living. Will my life be miraculously free from pain, despair, grief, heartbreak, hardship, loneliness, depression? No. But do I want to live? Yes. Yes . A thousand times, yes" But on that boat she realised something. She had loved her parents more than she ever knew, and right then, she forgave them completely (p.123)

When Nora has experienced all the pain of life such as was abandoned by her parents and cat, left by her brother, got fire from String Theory, and all kinds of failure things she had. She was feeling had no future ahead. She couldn't expect any possible chance of her life. She only thought the best choice for her was dead. Then, Nora finally cope her negative thought by struggling in the midnight library. She passed the entire life that she had in midnight library there such as becoming an excellent swimmer, a glaciologist, a wife, and so on. Finally, she encounter her depression by the sentence "and yet today, that same messy life seems full of hope. Potential." Indicates Nora's full of positive mind and mentally in which to accepting all the kinds of pain in her life. In accepting pain, despair, grief, heartbreak, hardship,

loneliness, and depression of her life are part of life to be enjoyed. That why she wants to live

It was as though she had reached some state of acceptance about life – that if there was a bad experience, there wouldn't only be bad experiences. She realised that she hadn't tried to end her life because she was miserable, but because she had managed to convince herself that there was no way out of her misery (p.192)

In this paragraph, Nora reflects a new sense of acceptance of life's difficulties, recognizing them in the midst of challenges. She understands that she thought about ending her life not just because she felt sad, but because she believed there was no way to escape her sadness. This shows she's starting to see things differently and is trying to understand her feelings better. It's an important step toward understanding herself and becoming stronger emotionally and indirectly helps release repressed emotions.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

The novel *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig depicts the return of the oppressed in the main character named Nora Seed. There are several findings that researchers have found regarding the manifestation of repressed emotions that come to the surface and how Nora released the emotion.

The data found from the novel show Nora Seed experience return of the repressed in form of dream and anxiety is not static but evolves throughout the novel. Aligns with Freud's theory of the return of the repressed, representing the resurfacing of emotions and thoughts. Dreams depict the emergence of suffering, anguish, and regret that have come to the surface. Through these dreams, unresolved issues from the Nora's past emerge, providing a window into their subconscious. anxiety, representing the resurfacing of repressed emotions and thoughts. As Nora experience anxiety, it becomes a visible manifestation of the inner conflicts and unresolved issues they have pushed into their subconscious. This portrayal of dream and anxiety in novel *The Midnight Library* is supports Freud's idea of repressed material such as distressing traumatic event and thought returning to consciousness. Furthermore, the data found from the novel shows Nora has released her repressed emotion by accepting her failure, Tolerancing the negative emotions, forgiving her parents in fact her parents are full of love to her, realizing that life is full of trials and needing connection to humans. Then, Nora considers herself as a volcano in which every failure or regret there will be success and happiness for the future. Thus, finally knew her potential ability and realized that deciding to embrace the present.



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