

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins by presenting an overview of the research, introducing the central issues that form the basis of the study. It outlines the research background, emphasizing the relevance of analyzing contemporary literary works through a psychological perspective, particularly in relation to subjectivity, desire, and identity as reflected in *The midnight library*. In this regard, the discussion highlights how modern literature often explores internal conflicts such as regret, depression, and the search for meaning, making psychoanalytic approaches especially significant.

Subsequently, the chapter formulates the statement of the problem by identifying the key research questions that guide the analysis. It also sets out the research objectives, focusing on the application of Lacanian concepts such as the Mirror Stage, the Symbolic Order, and *objet petit a*. In addition, the significance of the study is explained in both theoretical and practical terms, demonstrating its contribution to literary criticism and its relevance to future research. Altogether, this chapter establishes the foundation for the overall direction of the study.

1.1 Research Background

Contemporary literature often becomes a space where modern existential struggles are not only represented but also carefully unpacked through the inner lives of characters. In this context, approaching literary works through a psychological perspective becomes particularly relevant, as it allows readers to examine how characters think, feel, and respond to their circumstances. As Endraswara in (Mutmainna et al., 2021) suggests, studying literary psychology is essentially a way of understanding human beings from an internal perspective. This connection between literature and psychology is further clarified by Siswantoro who argues that while literature belongs to the realm of art—such as fiction, poetry, and essays—and psychology is a scientific study of behavior and mental processes, both disciplines ultimately share the same focus: human life and experience.

Because of this shared concern, literary texts can serve as a meaningful site for exploring complex psychological conditions. (Siswantoro in Rahayu et al., 2023)

With this framework in mind, it becomes clear why many recent novels move away from purely external conflicts and instead focus more on psychological tension—particularly how individuals deal with regret, depression, and the ongoing effort to understand who they are. These themes feel especially relevant in a world where people are constantly confronted with choices, expectations, and the pressure to construct a meaningful life. Regret, for instance, is frequently portrayed not as a single moment of looking back, but as something that continues to shape a character's present reality. Characters are often depicted as being haunted by past decisions, repeatedly imagining alternative paths their lives could have taken. This persistent sense of “what could have been” creates a fragmented perception of the self, where identity is no longer stable but constantly negotiated between past, present, and imagined futures. Alongside regret, depression is also presented in a more nuanced way in contemporary works, not as a simple emotional state but as a condition that influences how characters experience time, relationships, and even themselves. Narratives sometimes slow down or become repetitive, mirroring the stagnation felt by the characters, allowing readers to feel the weight of emotional disconnection. At the same time, the question of identity becomes central, as characters struggle to define themselves within social expectations, cultural pressures, or personal trauma, often realizing that identity is not fixed but continuously shifting.

These broader tendencies in contemporary literature can be clearly seen in *The midnight library* by Matt Haig, particularly through the character of Nora Seed. Nora is portrayed as someone who has reached an emotional breaking point in her life, existing in a liminal state between life and death where she enters a strange and symbolic space known as *the midnight library*. This setting functions as more than just a narrative device; it reflects Nora's psychological condition, which is heavily burdened by regret, disappointment, and a persistent sense that her life has

not turned out the way it should have. At this stage, Nora is not simply unhappy, She is overwhelmed by the accumulation of choices she believes she has made incorrectly, leading her to question whether her life has any real value or direction.

Inside the library, Nora is given access to thousands of alternative lives, each one shaped by a different decision from her past. Every book she opens allows her to step into a version of herself who made a different choice—whether it involves her career, relationships, or personal ambitions. However, these experiences gradually reveal that her regrets are not as straightforward as she once believed. The lives she imagined as “better” are still marked by loss, conflict, and imperfection, which forces her to confront a difficult realization: her dissatisfaction is not solely caused by missed opportunities, but also by her tendency to idealize other possibilities while dismissing the complexity of real life.

As Nora moves between these different versions of herself, her perspective begins to shift in a more subtle but significant way. She starts to understand that there is no single version of life that guarantees happiness or fulfillment. Each path carries its own set of consequences, and even the most appealing alternatives involve trade-offs that she had previously ignored. This process does not instantly resolve her struggles, but it gradually challenges her assumption that her original life was a complete failure. Instead, she begins to see it as one possibility among many, none of which are entirely free from difficulty.

More specifically, Nora’s condition at the beginning of the novel can be interpreted as a form of “death of subjectivity,” where her ability to act as a self-determining individual is significantly weakened. She does not experience herself as someone capable of making meaningful choices; instead, she feels shaped and limited by expectations that come from outside herself. Many of the decisions she has made—whether related to her career, relationships, or personal ambitions—seem to reflect what others valued or what she believed she should pursue, rather than what she genuinely desired. As a result, her identity appears unstable and

disconnected, as if she is merely moving through a life that does not fully belong to her.

This loss of agency is intensified by the way Nora relates to her past. Rather than seeing it as something open to interpretation, she treats it as a fixed record of failure. Her memories are dominated by moments she interprets as mistakes, and these moments are constantly revisited in her mind, creating a cycle of regret that is difficult to escape. In this sense, her subjectivity becomes trapped in retrospection, where the past continuously defines her present. The more she dwells on what could have been, the less capable she feels of acting in the present, reinforcing a sense of paralysis that further weakens her sense of self.

Because of this, regret does not function merely as an emotional response, but as a structure that organizes how Nora understands her entire existence. It shapes the way she evaluates her life, narrows her perception of available possibilities, and limits her ability to imagine a future that feels worth living. This is what makes her condition resemble a “death of subjectivity”: not a literal absence of self, but a state in which her capacity to desire, to choose, and to assert meaning in her own life has been significantly diminished.

This condition is closely related to the way regret operates in shaping an individual’s sense of self. Regret, in this context, can be understood as more than a passing emotional response; it operates as a structure that shapes how an individual relates to time, self, and possibility. When a person is constantly preoccupied with what should have happened, their attention becomes anchored in an imagined version of the past rather than the reality of the present. This creates a split within the self: on one side, there is the individual who exists in the present, and on the other, an idealized version of the self that belongs to an alternative timeline. As a result, the present self is often experienced as lacking or incomplete, because it is continuously measured against a version of life that was never actually lived.

This condition makes it difficult for an individual to function as a “whole subject” in the present. Instead of actively engaging with current circumstances,

they become trapped in repetitive cycles of reflection, replaying past decisions and imagining different outcomes. The past, in this sense, is no longer something that has been left behind; it becomes an active force that interrupts the present. Because of this, the individual's ability to make decisions is weakened, as every choice is overshadowed by the fear of repeating previous "mistakes." The result is a kind of paralysis, where the subject hesitates to act, not because there are no options, but because every option feels potentially wrong.

Moreover, regret tends to produce a distorted sense of causality. Individuals often assume that a single different decision would have led to a completely better life, overlooking the complexity and unpredictability of lived experience. This simplification reinforces the idea that the present self is the product of failure, rather than one possible outcome among many. Consequently, the subject's identity becomes fixed around loss and missed opportunity, rather than growth or change. The more this narrative is repeated, the more difficult it becomes to imagine a future that is not already defined by past disappointment.

In this way, regret limits the subject's capacity to exist fully in the present, because their sense of self is continually pulled backward. Instead of being an active agent who can interpret, choose, and redefine their situation, the individual becomes someone who is passively shaped by what they believe should have been. This is precisely what prevents the formation of a stable and coherent subjectivity: the inability to reconcile the past with the present, and to accept that meaning is not found in correcting past decisions, but in how one chooses to live with them moving forward.

To place this research within the context of previous studies, it is necessary to look at earlier work that discusses the psychological aspects of Nora Seed's character. One relevant study is "*The Return of Repressed in Novel The midnight library (2020) by Matt Haig,*" (2024). This study uses the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud to examine how repression works within Nora's psyche.

The findings show that the return of the repressed appears mainly in the form of dreams and anxiety. Both of these reflect unresolved emotional conflicts that remain in Nora's unconscious. The study also explains that Nora begins to release these repressed emotions as she learns to accept her past failures and forgive the people around her. This process becomes an important point in her development, as it shows a shift in how she deals with her inner struggles. In terms of relevance, this study is closely related to the present research because it also explores Nora's unconscious psychological condition. The discussion of her internal conflicts supports the analysis of desire and subjectivity, which are the main focus of this research.

However, this study is still limited to a Freudian perspective, especially in its focus on repression and the concepts of id, ego, and superego. This is where the gap can be identified. The present research goes further by applying the theory of Jacques Lacan, which offers a different way of understanding the subject. In Lacanian terms, desire is not simply something that is repressed, but something that is formed through the subject's relation to the Other. As a result, subjectivity is seen as something unstable and never fully complete. This approach allows the research to examine Nora's condition in a deeper way, beyond what can be explained by Freudian psychoanalysis alone.

Another study that can be considered in this context is "*Literary Criticism Psychological Approach: Nora Seed's Character in The midnight library by Matt Haig*" (evania et al, 2025). This study applies the psychoanalytic framework of Sigmund Freud to analyze Nora's character.

The study finds that Nora's personality is strongly influenced by three defense mechanisms: displacement, repression, and projection. These mechanisms explain how Nora responds to emotional pressure and unresolved conflicts in her life. Through this lens, her behavior is understood as a psychological strategy to cope with distress, particularly when she is unable to confront her problems directly. At the same time, the study acknowledges its own limitation, as it only focuses on a

single character within one novel and relies solely on classical Freudian theory. It also suggests that further research could benefit from using different psychological perspectives.

In relation to the present research, this study is relevant because it directly examines Nora's psychological development and the internal mechanisms that shape her behavior. This provides a useful foundation for understanding how her subjectivity is formed and reconstructed throughout the narrative.

However, the limitation identified in the study also points to a clear research gap. By depending only on Freudian concepts, the analysis tends to reduce Nora's actions to defensive responses against psychological conflict. In contrast, this research responds to that gap by adopting the perspective of Jacques Lacan. From a Lacanian point of view, Nora's repeated movement between different lives cannot be explained merely as a result of defense mechanisms. Instead, it reflects a deeper structure of desire, one that is shaped by a fundamental sense of lack (lack of being). In this sense, her actions are not simply attempts to protect herself, but part of an ongoing search for completeness that can never be fully achieved. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of her subjectivity, beyond the limits of classical psychoanalysis.

To further deepen the theoretical discussion, it is also important to consider studies that apply a similar conceptual framework. One relevant article is "*The Manifestation of Lacanian Desire in Atonement and Saturday*," by Hourieh Maleki Qouzloo and Bakhtiar Sadjadi, published in *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2021). This study employs the theory of Jacques Lacan to explore how desire operates within the characters of Ian McEwan's novels.

The study focuses on the concept of *objet petit a* as the cause of desire, showing that even when a character's needs appear to be fulfilled, a sense of dissatisfaction and incompleteness still remains. This happens because desire is not directed toward a concrete object, but toward something that is fundamentally lost and can never be fully recovered. As a result, the subject continuously constructs substitute

objects in an attempt to fill this absence, which in Lacanian terms explains why desire is never truly satisfied.

In relation to the present research, this article is highly relevant because it discusses desire and subjectivity within a literary context using a Lacanian framework that is closely aligned with this study. Concepts such as *objet petit a*, the Other, and the unattainable nature of desire provide a strong theoretical basis for analyzing Nora Seed's experience in *The midnight library*.

However, there is still a noticeable difference that marks the gap between this study and the present research. The article mainly focuses on McEwan's novels, which are set in contexts such as war and social life, where desire is often shaped through relationships with others and the pursuit of social recognition. In contrast, this research moves in a different direction. Nora's desire is not primarily oriented toward other people, but toward alternative versions of herself. This inward, almost narcissistic dimension of desire becomes central to how her subjectivity is reconstructed. Therefore, this study offers a different perspective by showing that the search for fulfillment is not only external, but also deeply internal, as Nora continuously negotiates who she is and who she could have been.

To expand the range of Lacanian-based studies, another relevant work is "*Wandering and Freedom: A Lacanian Reading of Subjectivity in The Adventures of Augie March*." This article, written by Tao, Zhang, and Zhan and published in the *International Journal of Literature Studies* (2025), applies the theory of Jacques Lacan to examine the development of the main character, Augie.

The findings of this study indicate that Augie's subjectivity can be traced through several key Lacanian stages, starting from the mirror stage in childhood, moving into the symbolic order during adolescence, then to the concept of the split subject in adulthood, and finally to the idea of lack and becoming. Through these stages, the research explores how Augie continuously negotiates the question of "Who am I?" while being caught between external social expectations and his own

internal desires. This progression shows that subjectivity is not something fixed, but something that is constantly shaped and reshaped over time.

When viewed in relation to the present research, this study becomes particularly relevant because of its analytical structure. The way it follows the subject's movement through different Lacanian stages is quite parallel to the approach used in this research. Nora Seed's experience in *The midnight library* can also be understood as a process of becoming, where her shifting between different lives reflects an ongoing reconstruction of her subjectivity.

Nevertheless, a clear distinction can be identified between this study and the present research. The analysis of Augie mainly focuses on subjectivity shaped by real-world experiences, such as failure, geographical movement, and resistance to social conformity within the context of 20th-century America. In contrast, the present research introduces a different dimension. Nora's subjectivity is reconstructed through a metaphysical journey across multiple possible lives, taking place in a liminal space between life and death. This setting can be understood as a form of Lacanian fantasy, where desire is staged in a more abstract and speculative way. Therefore, this research not only adopts a similar theoretical framework, but also extends it into the context of contemporary fiction with a more complex narrative form.

To add another perspective within Lacanian studies, one relevant research is "*Reclaiming the Self: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and the Trauma of Identity in The Color Purple*." This article, written by Bashir and Ahmad and published in the *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* (2026), uses the theory of Jacques Lacan to analyze the character of Celie.

The results of the study show that early traumatic experiences play a major role in shaping Celie's identity. The violence, oppression, and exclusion she experiences affect how she understands herself and how she positions herself in relation to others (the Other). As a result, her sense of self becomes unstable and fragmented, often marked by feelings of worthlessness, lack, and unfulfilled desire.

The study explains that Celie does not immediately recognize her true self, which reflects Lacan's idea of misrecognition. Through her interactions and experiences, her identity is gradually formed, but it remains incomplete and constantly changing. By using key concepts such as misrecognition, desire, and the symbolic order, the research shows that subjectivity is not something fixed, but something that is continuously shaped by both internal struggles and external pressures.

If we connect this with the present research, the study is relevant because it also focuses on how subjectivity is formed through the interaction between trauma and desire. These two elements are important in understanding a character's inner conflict and their ongoing search for meaning. In the case of Nora Seed in *The midnight library*, a similar pattern can be seen in how she struggles with feelings of regret, failure, and dissatisfaction with her life. Even though Nora's experiences are different from Celie's, both characters show that the sense of self is never fully stable, and is always influenced by deeper psychological processes.

In this sense, the idea of lack in this research becomes more internal and existential. Nora's struggle is not only about what has happened to her, but also about what she feels is missing within herself. This is why her journey across multiple lives can be understood as an attempt to deal with that sense of lack. However, instead of resolving it, each new life only shows that her desire can never be fully satisfied. Therefore, this research highlights a deeper dimension of subjectivity, where the problem is not only shaped by external conditions, but also by an ongoing internal sense of incompleteness that cannot be easily resolved.

1.2 Statement Of Problem

Although *The midnight library* by Matt Haig has been widely discussed for its exploration of mental health, life choices, and existential concerns, there is still limited research that examines the novel through the framework of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory.

This study addresses the problem of how Lacanian concepts can provide a more comprehensive understanding of identity crisis, desire, and subject formation in *The midnight library*. Therefore, The following Research Question Arise :

1. How do the Mirror Stage and transition to the Symbolic Order reflect Nora Seed's identity crisis in the novel *The midnight library*?
2. How is the *Objet Petit a* (the lost object of desire) manifested through the various 'lives' that Nora Seed tries out in *The midnight library*?
3. How is the reconstruction of Nora Seed's subjectivity achieved through her acceptance of desire and reality in the Symbolic Order?

1.3 Research Objective

This research aims to analyze the manifestations of the Mirror Stage and Nora Seed's shift towards the Symbolic Order in Matt Haig's novel *The midnight library*. The analysis focuses on how Nora's identity crisis and self-alienation reflect a fragmented subjectivity, a key characteristic of the Mirror Stage in Jacques Lacan's theory. Through the alternative life experiences presented in *The midnight library*, this study examines Nora's transition from the dominance of the Imaginary Order to her attempts at self-articulation in the Symbolic Order, namely the realm of language, law, and social structures that shape the subject's identity.

Furthermore, this study aims to identify and explain the manifestations of the concept of *objet petit a* in Nora Seed's various life choices. Each alternative life lived by Nora is analyzed as a representation of constantly shifting desires, not as objects of fulfillment, but as markers of a fundamental emptiness within the subject. Thus, the *objet petit a* is understood as a desire that is never fully satisfied, motivating Nora to continue searching for a "better" version of life, yet always ending in dissatisfaction.

Finally, this study aims to describe the process of reconstructing Nora Seed's subjectivity through the lens of Lacanian theory. The analysis focuses on how Nora

gradually reconstructs her understanding of herself, not through the illusion of an alternative perfect life, but through the acceptance of limitations, loss, and imperfection as part of the structure of human subjectivity. This process demonstrates Nora's transformation into a subject who is more aware of her position in the Symbolic Order, while also marking a shift from the search for an ideal identity to a more authentic self-acceptance.

1.4 Research Significance

This research contributes to the study of contemporary English literature by offering a psychoanalytic reading of *The midnight library* through the theoretical framework of Jacques Lacan. In response to the research background that highlights the novel's exploration of identity crisis, regret, and fragmented subjectivity, this study enriches literary scholarship by demonstrating how Lacanian concepts, such as the Mirror Stage, the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders, and *objet petit a*, can be systematically applied to analyze character construction in a contemporary novel. By situating Nora Seed's existential struggle within Lacan's theory of subject formation, this research not only expands the scope of psychoanalytic literary criticism but also reinforces the relevance of Lacanian theory in interpreting modern narratives that address psychological and existential dilemmas.