

NORA SEED'S WILL TO SURVIVE IN MATT HAIG'S *THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY*

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Abstrak

Bunuh diri telah sering didiskusikan dalam studi sastra, tidak seperti halnya percobaan bunuh diri dan para penyintasnya. Seperti situasi kritis lainnya, untuk bertahan dari percobaan bunuh diri, seseorang harus menumbuhkan kemauan untuk bertahan hidup. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis keinginan bertahan hidup Nora Seed menghadapi krisis bunuh diri di novel *The Midnight Library* oleh Matt Haig. Dengan menggunakan sudut pandang psikologis humanistik khususnya teori *Survivals Club* dari Ben Sherwood (2009), studi ini percaya bahwa kemauan Nora Seed untuk bertahan hidup berakar dan direalisasikan melalui beberapa kualitas mental seperti ketahanan, keuletan, harapan, tujuan, dan cinta. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dengan melihat tipe penyintas, kecenderungan Nora Seed dapat dikategorisasikan sebagai *Fighter*, *Connector*, dan *Believer*. Selanjutnya, keinginannya untuk bertahan hidup diwujudkan dengan beberapa kekuatan mental yaitu ketahanan, keuletan, tujuan, cinta, empati, harapan, insting, dan kecerdasan.

Kata Kunci: Percobaan Bunuh Diri, Penyintas, Keinginan Bertahan Hidup, Psikologi Humanistik

Abstract

Suicide has been widely discussed in literary studies whereas suicide attempt is rarely being addressed; not to mention, its survivors. Similar to other critical situations, in surviving a suicide attempt, one must, before all else, cultivate a willingness to survive. The current study aimed to analyze Nora Seed's will to survive against suicide crisis in *the Midnight Library* by Matt Haig by exploring her survival type and psychological strengths. Using humanistic psychological viewpoint particularly Ben Sherwood's *Survivals Club* (2009) theory, this paper asserts that Nora's willingness to survive is rooted and displayed through several mental qualities such as resilience, tenacity, hope, purpose, and love. The findings suggested that first, Nora Seed's tendency categorized her into the *Fighter*, the *Connector*, and the *Believer*. Secondly, her will to survive was realized by several mental strengths namely Resilience, Tenacity, Purpose, Love, Empathy, Hope, Instinct, and Intelligence.

Keywords: Suicide Attempt, Survivors, Will to Survive, Ben Sherwood, Humanistic Psychology

1. INTRODUCTION

Suicide is responsible for more death than homicide and war combined (Humphrey, 2018). World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 1 million people die by suicide every year (Peña-Salazar *et al.*, 2019). However, the matter that is rarely being highlighted yet just as concerning is suicide attempt with the number that is 25 times higher (Berardelli *et al.*, 2020). Generally, the underlying factors as of why individuals are wanting or attempt to take their own lives include mental disorders (Brådvik, 2018), hopelessness (Beck *et al.*, 1990), interpersonal relationships (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden *et al.*, 2010), socioeconomic aspects (Kim *et al.*, 2020), and even social factors (Durkheim, 1952). While the underlying factors of the suicide and suicide attempt are quite similar (Peña-Salazar *et al.*, 2019), by definition, suicide or complete suicide is a deliberate act of self-killing resulting in death whereas suicide attempt is considered a non-fatal

or "failed" suicide act where the individual survived at the end (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). It can be by failed methods, inventions, or the person themselves change their mind and eventually fight for survival (Jegathesan and Sean, 2022). As Jegathesan and Sean (2022) reported that in the course of suicide attempts, there are some survivors who were able to stop themselves mid-event and sought help or even admitted themselves to the hospital. It suggested that surviving a suicide attempt is possible. In some cases, people find their call for survival and are able to survive the crisis although with great hardships.

In order to overcome critical situations, in this case fighting the urge of completing suicide and surviving suicide crisis, Kenneth Kamler (2004) convinced that it began by a willingness to survive. He defined this will to survive by the "faith" or attitude to keep going despite all the hardships. He suggested that sometimes, this will to

survive alone is enough to get through the most critical scenario because it sets one's brain to survival mode as well. Jegathesan and Sean's earlier report presented that the extension one's will to survive by the time of suicide crisis can include visions, imaginary, and spiritual encounters that eventually shift their thinking and make them stop their suicide attempt. This concluded that will to survive plays as a crucial foundation for suicide survival, especially for the ones who ended up choosing to stop and seek help.

In literature, the topic of suicide or suicide attempt has become a prominent theme throughout the history, starting from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1914), Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus* (1992), and more popularly contemporary literature such as *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) by Jay Asher and *All The Bright Places* (2015) by Jennifer Niven. Andrew Bennett (2017) argued that literature is the space where suicide can be "conceptualized and imagined, actualized, promoted, and resisted". However, as Morgan Thomas (2021) also noted, many literary works about suicide focus on complete suicide where the character died, the stories lead up to the decision, and the impacts for people left behind. They rarely take the perspectives from its survivors. That is why one fiction that is not only narrated by suicide attempt survivors but also illuminates their will to survive against it, *the Midnight Library* by Matt Haig, became a compelling object to study.

In summary, this novel talked about a 35-years-old Nora Seed who leads a lonely, depressed, and unfulfilled life. She feels like a failure, a useless person, and cannot find any reason to live. Thus, she attempts suicide. However, instead of going straight to death, she enters an imaginary place in between life and death, the *Midnight Library*. The place is connected to a parallel universe; to other lives that she could have led, had she made other choices in her life. She tries many lives to find the best one to reside. However, the more she roams around the realm, the more it changes her perspective and the more it cultivates her will to survive and live again in her original life. Thereafter, as she eventually fights for her survival, the realm collapses and she regained consciousness in real life. After that, she stops her suicide attempt mid-event and, while enduring the pain, she seeks help herself and, at last, survives (Haig, 2020). This novel had been included on various bestseller lists such as by *The Sunday Times* and *The New York Times*. It also claimed some recognitions including the winner of the Goodreads Choice Award for Fiction (2020), a nominee for the Audie Award for Fiction (2021) and was shortlisted for the British Book Award for "Fiction Book of the Year" (2021).

In terms of research within the literary field, suicide has also been a widely discussed topic although studies on

suicide survivors are still scarce. Some of them have discussed the motivation to suicide namely unmet needs (Arianto and Ambalegin, 2019; Andriani and Wedawati, 2020), lack of social integration (Miah, 2020) and many more. Different perspective between age group (Setiadi, Udasmoro and Cholsy, 2021) as well as its effects especially to the ones left behind (Mustofa and Jumino, 2021) were also examined. While, in regard to survivorship in literature, some studies have been published. To name a few were Alosman and Raihanah, (2020) who found that characters' physical survival does not guarantee their psychological survival, Jimmi, Khairunas and Yulianto (2022) who suggested that there are many survival types and strategies, and (Owa, Separ and Wanggai, 2021) who discussed that ways to survive can be explored through human needs. Further, more specifically, previous researches on *the Midnight Library* novel have already addressed several topics such as contributing factor for suicide, philosophical exploration, and many more. They gave insights on the matters namely positive character development post death experience (Praditha and Wahyono, 2021), post-trauma impacts on character's personality (Rozadi, 2022), existentialism and absurdism themes on the novel (Rehan and Zahra, 2021) and lastly, society's role that leads the character to attempt suicide (Nahdiyah, 2022).

Correspondingly, none of the studies talked from the perspective of suicide survivors especially their will to survive with the *Midnight Library* book as the object. Therefore, this present article intended to investigate Nora Seed's will to survive against suicide crisis in Matt Haig's *the Midnight Library* by revealing both her types of survivors and psychological strengths. This paper believed that Nora's will to survive is rooted and realized by several mental strengths including her resilience, tenacity, hope, purpose, and love. All these aspects were imperative in leading to her survival. Furthermore, the theory that was employed is Ben Sherwood's (2009) *Survivals Club* theory.

In *Survival Clubs* (2009), Ben Sherwood created a framework of categorizing survivors and explaining survivorship. Survivors were categorized into their general types before moving to a more specific views of their psychological strengths leading up to their survival. According to Sherwood, there are five types of survivors namely the **Fighter**, the **Believer**, the **Connector**, the **Thinker**, and the **Realist**. This painted a picture to one's personality or tendency in time of crisis. **The Fighter** has both determination and willpower "to struggle, resist, and overcome" a crisis (p.308). They realize that they have purpose as their motivation and will continue to fight until the end with resilience and tenacity. **The Believer** is defined as someone who draws power from their faith in

God. This faith allows them to see lights at the end of the tunnels, resulting in both hope and optimism to go through any adversity. Additionally, some people survive due to their bonds with their loved ones. Sherwood referred to them as **The Connector**. Confiding in the matters such as love and empathy and perceive them as the purpose or motivation to survive offers enormous power to thrive. **The Thinker** relies on their brain to overcome hardships. Combining intelligence, creativity, and ingenuity, this type analyses the main issues and applies their knowledge to conquer it. Finally, **the Realist**. This type emphasizes on the matters that are within their control and go with the flow. They are mainly cold-headed, pragmatic, intuitive and instinctive in time of crisis.

Furthermore, in connection to the type of survivors, Sherwood also believed survivors commonly share several mental strengths namely are resilience, hope, faith, tenacity, purpose, love, intelligence, ingenuity, empathy, instinct, adaptability, and flow. In details, **resilience** is the strength to get up again after a knocked down. **Tenacity** is the determination to endure and persist. **Hope** is the mindset that things will get better however it is realistic instead of naïve. **Faith** is the trust in God, that He has a plan and will look after us. **Purpose** is the reason that one's alive, things that make one's days worthwhile. **Love** is the devotion that one will do or survive anything for the people they love. **Intelligence** is the ability to use our brain, to apply the knowledge one acquires to survive. **Ingenuity** is about being inventive, clever, and resourceful. **Empathy** is the ability to look after the others before you care for yourself. **Instinct** is to directly act on one's gut feelings. **Adaptability** is the capacity to adjust and change one's attitude and behavior to handle different situations or challenges. **Flow** is to follow and sail along the challenges. Altogether, as Kauffman (2016) noted, these aspects are connected to and can furtherly build one's will to survive.

2. METHOD

The present study used humanistic psychological approach. Essentially, psychological approach allows the writers to assess the character's psychological state (Bagtayan and Lantowa, 2022). Meanwhile, humanistic viewpoint in particular is often referred to as "positive psychology" and concentrates on human and their experiences with the emphasize on psychological health and growth (Bland and DeRobertis, 2019; Lestari, Waluyo and Wardani, 2019). In the process of composing this study, the first step was data collection. The primary source of the data was Matt Haig's novel, *The Midnight Library*, published by Viking in 2020. Aside from that, the writers also utilized other data to support the primary data. It included books, journals, and internet source that are

related closely to the topic. The data were taken in the form of indirect explanations and direct quotations from the book. Moreover, the data were obtained by reading the entire novel, highlighting, and note-taking. After obtaining the data, next step was data analysis. All data were presented and examined according to aforementioned theory by Ben Sherwood (2009). Following the theory's framework, the writers, firstly, analyzed Nora's survivor type and then furtherly expounded the mental strengths in correlation with her will to survive.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Nora Seed begins by a desire to kill herself thus she attempts suicide. However, after being thrown into the Midnight Library and experiencing many other lives, her decision changes and cultivates a will to survive. Hence, when she regains consciousness, she fights for survival. This discussion would explain her will to survive by exploring her survival type and psychological strengths she displayed in time of crisis.

3.1. Nora Seed's Type of Survivor

Among Sherwood's five types of survivors, Nora Seed generally fell into 3 types namely the Fighter, the Connector, and the Believer.

3.1.1. The Fighter

Instead of giving up, Nora Seed shows her persistent tendency and turn to her calling in life as her motivation. It was most clearly shown in the entire 2 chapters toward the end of the novel entitled "*Don't You Dare Give Up, Nora Seed!*" and "*Awakening*" (Haig, 2020, pp. 268–273). These chapters showed how she is saving herself both by the time the library is in ruin and by the time she regains consciousness. In these life-and-death moments filled with struggle, she continues to pick herself up and fight. "*I don't want to die... She had to try harder*" (Haig, 2020, pp. 269). Moreover, she continuously reminds herself of her life purposes including the desire to become the best version of herself and live the meaningful life she is capable of. Drawing strengths from these purposes combined with her persistence personality signify her type as the Fighter.

3.1.2. The Connector

Nora Seed also matched the description of the connector as she draws strengths by her bond with her loved ones. By the time of the library collapsing, she thinks of her brother, her best friend, her student. The people that she loves are still alive and that is all that she needs (Haig, 2020, pp. 269). She recounts her desire to get back together, to mend their relationship, and even to build a new relationship with other people. There is also her bond with the imaginary version of Mrs. Elm who guides her inside the Midnight Library. When Nora is about to give up, she always hears and remembers Mrs. Elms who

tells her not to not to give up and to live (Haig, 2020, pp. 267-269).

Here, by turning to her connection with other people as the motivation to survive, Nora can be categorized as the Connector.

3.1.3. The Believer

Sherwood's illustration of the Believer mainly linked to one's faith in God to see brighter picture. While Nora Seed does not necessarily talk about God, her belief in her potential and that things will get better as long as she survives indicate the same hopeful notion. "*She didn't want to live any other life than the one that was hers. The one that could be a messy struggle... a beautiful messy struggle.*" (Haig, 2020, pp. 269). Moreover, before she regains consciousness in the ruining Midnight Library, she shows how that as long as she lives, she can do and be everything. She moves to accept her life as it is. "*A truth she had not only come to terms with but welcomed openly... the beginning and seed of everything possible... I AM ALIVE*" (Haig, 2020, pp. 271).

Similar to war prisoners who hold their faith in God, Nora's belief in her herself and her life stands at center of her survival. By this faith, she regains consciousness and eventually survive. This faith categorized her as the Believer.

In regards to the two remaining types of survivors namely The Realist and The Thinker, evidences were not prevalent enough to categorize Nora Seed within these types.

3.2. Psychological Strengths as the Roots and Manifestation of Nora's Will to Survive

Nora's will to survive could be furtherly explained by several psychological strengths that Sherwood referred to as the "tools" commonly shared by survivors. This section would dig deeper into Nora's psychology and exemplify mental strengths that bring her to survival.

3.2.1. Resilience & Tenacity

In the process of surviving her suicide crisis, there are many obstacles either with her motivation or physically. However, Nora always persists and get back up even with great pain. Right after she regains consciousness, she describes how it is almost impossible to continue yet she chooses not to give up.

"Choking, exhausted, dehydrated, struggling, trembling, heavy, delirious, pain in her chest, even more pain in her head... It was hard, near impossible, to pull herself off the bed but she knew she has to get vertical" (Haig, 2020, pp. 272).

Even when she can only desperately look for help and there is no one, she keeps continue until she finds one. One scene when her phone is slipping off her hands and lost

meanwhile Ash is not in his place. Then, while failing and staggering, she crawls into her neighbor's house across the streets, Mr. Banerjee, to finally, get help. She only allows herself to fall after she makes sure she gets to Mr. Banerjee (Haig, 2020, pp. 273). This shows her resiliency of getting back up again and again.

In this manner, her resilience and tenacity represent Nora's very willingness to survive. Both embody its notion to keep going despite all odds. No matter what happens, Nora keeps dragging herself until she gets the help she needs to survive.

3.2.2. Purpose

Nora realizes that there are purposes in her existence including to help Leo, her former piano pupil in her root life, and to realize her capabilities.

One turning point of Nora's Midnight Library journey is when in her best life yet, she meets Leo who's become a delinquent. Because in that life, she is another version of herself, they never met. Without meeting Nora and consequently without music being a part of his life, Leo's future is crumbling. Only then Nora comes to understand that all along, she has been helping Leo to pursue a better future. Her existence alone, as a part time piano teacher, actually is significant to change the course of someone else's life.

Not only that, as the Midnight Library allows her to live many different lives and each life offers her a different version of herself had she chose differently. She realizes that she truly has limitless potentials. She is capable of many things, becoming a good part time piano teacher who is saving her pupil's life, a great sister, an amazing best friend, etc. It makes her believe that she can become anything, fix, and pursue anything. Good relationship with beloved people, her passion and her dreams now seem possible.

By realizing her purposes, Nora reflects to them in time of the crisis. "*She could have been all those amazing things, and that wasn't depressing... It was inspiring*" (Haig, 2020, pp. 269). These become her motivation, "booster" and source of strength of her will to survive.

3.2.3. Empathy

Nora's empathy was depicted by being compassionate towards Leo. Thereafter, she sees that helping him can also be a purpose of her existence in her root life. As explained that without meeting Nora, Leo moves toward a bleak future. Nora's empathy towards Leo makes her reconsider her position and throws her into a dilemma (Haig, 2020, pp. 257) thus causing her to be brought back into the Midnight Library.

Further, when the library is crushing, one of Nora's thoughts is her role as Leo's teacher. She reminds herself that she has been serving a purpose, helping a young human being all along and can continue to do so. It shows

that her empathy makes her feels obligated to survive for Leo's sake. Thus, this way, her empathy plays a role in supporting her willingness to survive.

3.2.4. Love

In her original life, Nora loses connection with the people she cares about including her brother, Joe, and her best friend, Izzy. In the Midnight Library, in some good lives when there are no people she loves in it, she refuses to live inside it. Even in one seemingly perfect life where she gets to be with everyone she loves, Joe and Izzy, her husband and daughter, Ash and Molly. As happy as she feels, it only makes her realize how much she misses that in her root life. *"The thing that had left her vulnerable, really, was the absence of love."* (Haig, 2020, pp. 248). Although she is happy at that moment, she does not feel like it is herself. Instead of experiencing the perfect life she has at that moment, there is a longing to make it happen for real in her root life.

That is why, by the time of the library starts collapsing, she keeps reevaluating her life and remember the people in her life. She says *"actually, the life she had been living had its own logic to it. Her brother was alive. Izzy was alive."* (Haig, 2020, pp. 269). It means that it is giving her a chance to fix the relationship she had lost. She uses that remaining bonds that she has as another reason to live. In addition to Nora's bond with Mrs. Elms, her love finally becomes the fuel of her willingness to survive and hence is important for her survival.

Some theories indeed argued that social connection is crucial to counter suicide's desire (Durkheim, 1952; Joiner, 2005; Van Orden *et al.*, 2010; David Klonsky and May, 2015). Therefore, in Nora's case as well, it is becoming a contributor to regain a will to survive.

3.2.5. Hope

Especially for suicide, some theories have argued that hopelessness is one of the main reasons for the act (Beck *et al.*, 1990; Van Orden *et al.*, 2010) thus the existence of hope is crucial for "buffering" suicide ideation (Huen *et al.*, 2015). Nora feels this state too before. But she starts to regain hope throughout her journey in the Midnight Library. That hope becomes her root of her will to survive.

When the library is about to be shattered and her survival is threatened, as opposed to her original intention to die, Nora shows that she has regained her hope for living. This belief is what lead her to survival. Her hope and will to survive is apparent from her reflection right after the crisis.

"Today, that same messy life seems full of hope. Potential. Will my life be miraculously free from pain, despair, grief, heartbreak, hardship, loneliness, depression? No. But do I want to live?... A thousand times, yes" (Haig, 2020, pp. 278).

This evidence is in line with Sherwood's description that hope is not only about optimism but also realism. Nora believes that better days are coming but she is not naïve. Despite it is true that nothing changes in her root life, she still believes on the potential of it to improve. Nora's illustration of optimism and hope to survive become the foundation of her will to survive. As long as she has hope, there is always a possibility for everything.

3.2.6. Instinct

Nora shows her survival instinct when she enters an existence in which she is an Artic researcher. While doing an observation, she meets a bear and is about to get eaten alive. If one dies in the Midnight Library (or in its universes), they will disappear or actually dead by that moment (Haig, 2020, pp. 39). Realizing that she is going to die for real, Nora automatically acts on her instinct. She screams loudly and banging her ladle into the saucepan to chases away the polar bear.

Right then, she only comes to realize the existence of her will to survive. *"In the face of death, life seemed more attractive"* (Haig, 2020, pp. 132). Before, she is so sure that she is ready to die but when it is right in front of her the face, her body and consciousness say otherwise. Above evidence shows her fear of death resurfaces and her will to survive clings to life. Hence, it is implied that Nora's instinct becomes a trigger for her willingness to survive.

3.2.7. Intelligence

Intelligence can be a powerful weapon to overcome crisis. Nora's depiction of this psychological strength begins with her investigation of what the Midnight Library is and how it operates with Hugo, another "Sliders" as they call it; a person who, just like Nora, can jump between parallel universe that is connected to the in-between realm (Haig, 2020, pp. 148). They begin connecting various feasible concepts such as quantum physics, Schrödinger's cat, and Gestalt psychology to finally conclude that the Midnight Library is the simplest way the brain interprets what happens to them; the regrets, suicide, and threats for survival (Haig, 2020, pp. 144, 152, 265). Moreover, she applies this knowledge to accommodate her will to survive by the time of the crisis.

Moreover, when the library is crumbling, she remembers that the library is actually her brain's work. Hence, she concludes that to survive, she has to convince her mind that she wants to live and truly desires her root life, the life she always thought she hates. She combines her understanding with the information from Mrs. Elm and eventually find the book which is the key to get back to her root life. At the end, she succeeds in regaining consciousness. This pictures how Nora utilizes her comprehension and knowledge as tools to assist her will to survive. This strength eventually brings her to survival.

4. CONCLUSION

In Matt Haig's *Midnight Library*, Nora Seed's will to survive was described through several psychological strengths. Based on the analysis above, the writers found that in terms of survivor's type, Nora Seed fell between the Fighter, the Connector, and the Believer. This exploration of survivor's type allowed the writers to see Nora's tendency in time of crisis. As a Fighter, Nora shows persistence and draws strength from her purpose. As a Connector, she draws strength from her connection with the people she loves. While as a Believer, her belief that on herself and her life potential offer her a motivation to survive. Additionally, Nora's will to survive can be seen from several psychological strengths namely Resilience & Tenacity, Purpose, Empathy, Love, Hope, Instinct, and Intelligence. All these aspects contributed to the cultivation and development of Nora's will to survive and eventually were pivotal in her suicide attempt survival.

At last, this paper encouraged a more pervasive, and comprehensive study of suicide attempt and survivorship against suicide in literature. This current study only limited solely to one character in one book that is Nora Seed in the *Midnight Library* by Matt Haig. Furthermore, as suicide is a complex matter, combined with a will to survive, the writers recognized that the current approach or analysis is still be lacking thus inviting other researchers to investigate deeper and discuss the subject further. Other viewpoints such as Magical Realism or Hyperreality can also be considered to approach both the book and the topics.

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