

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the research. It includes several sub-chapters such as background of the study, research problem, objectives of the study, significance of the study, and scope and limitations. Each part plays an important role in giving a clear understanding of the research context, purpose, and structure.

1.1 Background of The Study

Human condition is often colored by reflection of the past and regret that encourages people to imagine life ‘What life is?’ According to Byrne (2016), people spontaneously create counterfactual alternatives to reality when they imagine how the past could have been different. Such reflections often lead individuals to believe that a different decision might have resulted in a better or more fulfilling life. As implied by William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, “For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (Shakespeare, 1965, p. 62). This quotation suggests that the concepts of a “good” or “perfect” life are not fixed standards but are shaped by individual perspectives and interpretations.

However, in the modern era, subjective search for the meaning of life often clashes with external demands in the form of perfectionism. This perfectionism is no longer an encouragement about growth, but rather about an attempt to avoid judgement. Brené Brown explained:

“Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. It’s a shield. Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us when, in fact, it’s the thing that’s really preventing us from taking flight” (Brown, 2010, p. 55).

This statement shows that perfectionism is not a way to achieve success, but a form of self-defense that prevents a person from developing.

The idea of a perfect life has become increasingly common in modern society. Many people measure their self-worth through achievement, productivity, and social recognition. Giddens (1991) explains that in modern society, individuals tend to view their lives as ongoing projects that require continuous evaluation and improvement. As a result, personal value is often determined by external standards

rather than by self-understanding. This condition can lead to alienation. As Erich Fromm states, “Alienation as we find it in modern society is almost total. it pervades the relationship of man to his work, to the things he consumes, to the state, to his fellow man, and to himself” (Fromm, 1955, p. 121). When individuals become increasingly dependent on social standards to evaluate their lives, they are more likely to pursue idealized images of happiness and success. Jean Baudrillard describes this phenomenon as a hyperreal world, “simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 55). As a result, the life that is considered "perfect" is nothing more than a social illusion, a false image of happiness built on the recognition of others, not on true self-understanding.

This condition opens up space for postmodernist theory to challenge the universal idea of a “perfect life” Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* defines the postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984). This statement reflects a skepticism toward the existence of a single, absolute truth that is considered valid for everyone. In the context of life, it implies rejecting the notion that happiness or fulfillment must follow one fixed model that applies to all individuals. Supporting this view, Linda Hutcheon states, “A more general questioning of any totalizing or homogenizing system. Provisionality and heterogeneity contaminate any neat attempts at unifying coherence (formal or thematic)” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 12). Here, a homogenizing system refers to any framework that tries to make different experiences, identities, and ways of living fit into one uniform pattern. Hutcheon’s statement suggests that meanings and values in human life cannot be forced into such a single pattern because they are always temporary, contextual, and plural. Hutcheon also propose, “The questioning of the universal and totalizing in the name of the local and particular does not automatically entail the end of all consensus” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 12). It means that even when universal models are questionable, people can still reach an agreement. However, that agreement usually only applies to certain groups or situations, not to everyone in general.

Postmodernism not only serve as a critique of universal truth claims but also gives the individual’s freedom to define meaning and reality for themselves.

“Postmodernism is the idea that individuals have both the intelligence and the right to decide for themselves what truth is” (Farhan, 2019). In this explanation, truth is not discovered but constructed through personal experience, cultural context, and individual interpretation. This perspective represents a clear deviation from basic principle of modernism, which is prioritizes objectivity. As Hans Bertens explains, “Postmodernism, then, is several things at once. It refers, first of all, to a complex of anti-modernist artistic strategies which emerged in the 1950s and developed momentum in the course of the 1960s” (Bertens, 1995, p. 3). These strategies challenge modernism’s belief in order, progress, and universal truth. Therefore, postmodernism can be seen as not merely an artistic or philosophical movement, but a conscious rejection of the ideological foundations of modernism, especially the belief that there is only one true or perfect way to life.

The postmodern idea of individual freedom in determining the meaning of life and rejecting the single truth can be seen manifestly in modern literary works, one of them is *The Midnight Library* (2020) by Matt Haig. Matt Haig is a British novelist and journalist known for exploring themes of mental health, identity, regret, and self-discovery in his works. *The Midnight Library* became an international bestseller and received widespread recognition, including winning the Goodreads Choice Award for Fiction in 2020. The novel depicts a postmodernist’s dubious view of the concept of a perfect life. The main character, Nora Seed, feels that her life is full of regrets and failures until she decides to end her life. However, she wakes up in a mysterious library containing books about different versions of her life, a life she could have lived if she had made a different choice. Through this journey, Haig presents the inner conflicts of modern humans caught between past regrets and the search for true meaning in life. From this arises the main problem that needs to be studied, that is, how *The Midnight Library* represents the rejection of the concept of perfect life through the perspective of postmodernism.

The main problem that arises in the novel *The Midnight Library* is how the main character, Nora Seed, tries to find a life that is considered perfect, but instead finds that perfection never really exists. Each version of life that Nora choose has its own unhappiness. It illustrates the postmodern view that the meaning of truth is not singular, but it formed from individual interpretation and individual experience.

In this study, the researcher focuses on the rejection of a perfect life through Nora Seed's inner journey. Using a postmodernist perspective, this study discusses how the story in the novel critiques the standards of happiness in modern society. In addition, this study also aims to examine how the main character ultimately develops a new understanding of the meaning of life.

Previous research on metanarratives and postmodernism provides an important theoretical foundation for this study. Greene (2025) shows that postmodernism skepticism challenges metanarratives by viewing truth as something relative, context dependent, and social formed. His findings confirm that in the postmodern era, narrative authority is no longer fixed or universal, but constantly questioned and reinterpreted. This perspective is important for understanding how grand narratives can be constructed, maintained, or rejected in literary work.

In addition to conceptual studies, research on postmodernism in Indonesian literary work also further strengthens the basis of the study. Muhsyanur (2019) and Alfadilah (2020) show that postmodern elements, such as parody, irony, eclecticism, pastiche, and camp, appear in various novels and serve to undermine the singular meaning in the text. Their findings show that literary works often become a space for responding to or criticizing established narrative structure. This studies highlight how postmodernism in literature tends to be diverse.

Meanwhile, studies that specifically on *The Midnight Library* provide important insights through a psychological approach. Sabrina (2022) examined Nora Seed's development of self-efficacy and revealed significant emotional transformation, while Salsabilla (2023) analyzed the types of anxiety and defense mechanisms Nora uses to cope with her internal conflicts. Although these studies deepen the understanding of Nora's psychological journey, none of them approaches the novel through Lyotard's postmodern framework, particularly in relation to the construction and rejection of success, romantic, and moral metanarratives. Therefore, the present research aims to address this gap by offering a postmodern metanarrative analysis that has not been explored in previous studies.

1.2 Research Problem

Based on the background of the study presented above, the main problems of this research can be formulated into several research. These questions are intended to clarify the focus of the study and guide the direction of the analysis throughout the research.

1. What metanarratives of a “perfect life” are presented in novel *The Midnight Library*?
2. How does Nora Seed reject to the metanarrative of a “Perfect life in “*The Midnight Library*”?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Related to the research problems, this study is intended to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the metanarratives of “perfect life” in Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library*.
2. To describe how Nora Seed reject to the metanarrative of a “Perfect life in “*The Midnight Library*”.

1.4 Significances of the Study

This research is expected to make a significant contribution both theoretically to the field of literary studies and practically for students and general readers. Theoretically, this research fills an academic void by applying Jean-François Lyotard’s theory of postmodernism to the popular contemporary novel, *The Midnight Library*. This research aims to provide an understanding of how postmodernism concepts, especially the rejection of metanarrative through modern literary works. Practically, this research is expected to help student and readers in understand how literature can function as a way to explain to society about the perfect life and provide an understanding of life.

1.5 Scope and Limitation

The scope of this research focuses on the analysis of Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library* (2020) through postmodern theory by Jean-François Lyotard. The study examine how the literary work shows the rejection of the concept of a “perfect life” by challenging the metanarratives that define in social live. The

analysis explores how these metanarratives are questioned and rejected through the experiences of the main character, Nora Seed.

The data of this study is limited to the intrinsic elements of Matt Haig's novel entitled *The Midnight Library*. This study focuses on utterance, dialog between main character and supporting characters, and the narratives that show rejection of the metanarrative about "perfect life". The external factors, such as reader responses, author's biography, or film adaptations, will not be discussed in this study.