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“Hiroya’s Self-Discovery in Michiko Aoyama’s *What You Are Looking For Is in the Library*”

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Abstract. This study explores the psychological and emotional transformation of Hiroya Suda, a character from Michiko Aoyama’s *What You Are Looking For Is in the Library*, focusing on his journey of self-discovery as he transitions from a withdrawn and uncertain individual to someone who begins to embrace meaning, connection, and personal growth. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the research applies psychoanalytic theory and Scott Barry Kaufman’s reinterpretation of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Transcend) to examine how Hiroya’s internal conflicts, suppressed desires, and evolving self-perception shape his development. The findings identify three major stages in his transformation: psychological stagnation, emotional reawakening, and the reconstruction of a new identity, each marked by key interactions and introspective moments. This research contributes to literary discussions on identity formation by illustrating how fictional narratives reflect realworld psychological growth and human resilience. The analysis reveals that Hiroya’s development is not driven by external success but by a gradual shift toward authenticity, self-acceptance, and meaningful living, aligning with the psychological concepts of self-actualization and personal integration.

Keywords: Hiroya Suda, self-discovery, psychoanalysis, self-actualization, identity, transformation

INTRODUCTION

Self-discovery is a fundamental psychological process in which individuals gain a deeper understanding of their own character, motivations, and life direction. It often emerges during moments of personal conflict or transition, enabling people to achieve greater clarity and authenticity in their identity. As the American Psychological Association explains, self-discovery is “the process of gaining insight into one’s own character and behavior” (APA, 2025: 1). This perspective highlights how self-discovery evolves gradually through reflection, vulnerability, and experiences that challenge one’s understanding of self and purpose.

In literature, self-discovery is frequently portrayed as a transformative journey in which characters confront inner struggles and redefine their sense of meaning. In *What You Are Looking For Is in the Library* by Michiko Aoyama, the protagonist Hiroya Suda—a 30-year-old former manga artist—feels disconnected from his dreams and

withdrawn from society. Living with his parents and working part-time, he suppresses his creative ambitions and believes he no longer has the right to pursue a meaningful life. His encounter with Sayuri Komachi, the mysterious librarian, becomes a turning point. As Hiroya admits, "I discovered I didn't have what it took to make it as an artist" (Aoyama, 2021: 119), reflecting the depth of his internal defeat before Komachi helps him reconnect with his creativity.

This study examines Hiroya Suda's psychological transformation as he moves from emotional stagnation to self-actualization, drawing on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) and Scott Barry Kaufman's *Transcend: The New Science of Self-Actualization* (2020). The analysis focuses on three key aspects: Hiroya's initial identity collapse, his emotional reawakening through interpersonal encounters, and his reconstruction of meaning and self-worth. As Schlegel et al. state, "true selves are discovered [and this] positively predicts meaning in life judgments" (Schlegel et al., 2012: 3), which aligns with the themes explored in Hiroya's journey.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-discovery is a psychological process in which individuals uncover their authentic identity, values, and purpose in life. It is often depicted in literature as a transformative journey, where characters undergo emotional and mental changes as they face inner conflicts. According to Corey, self-discovery is a reflective process that helps individuals align their actions with their true selves and achieve personal growth (Corey, 2017: 16). This perspective highlights how self-discovery is not a fixed moment but an ongoing evolution shaped by life experiences.

To analyze Hiroya Suda's transformation, this study applies Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1943) categorizes human motivation into five levels: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Self-actualization, the highest level, represents the fulfillment of one's potential and authenticity. Maslow states that "what a man can be, he must be" (Maslow, 1943: 382), suggesting that human beings naturally strive for growth once their basic needs are satisfied.

Scott Barry Kaufman's reinterpretation of Maslow's theory in *Transcend: The New Science of Self-Actualization* (2020) complements this framework. Kaufman introduces the sailboat metaphor, which emphasizes that self-discovery is not a linear journey but a dynamic process of balancing security and growth. He argues that personal development occurs through exploration, creativity, and purpose, making the journey of self-actualization both flexible and continuous. This modern approach provides a useful lens for understanding Hiroya Suda's emotional reawakening and creative renewal.

Self-Discovery Theory

Self-discovery is a psychological journey in which individuals gain insight into their true identity, values, and life purpose. It often emerges from moments of emotional struggle or personal change, allowing a person to reflect on their inner world and redefine their goals. Corey (2017) describes self-discovery as a continuous process of aligning one's behavior and decisions with authentic personal values. In literature, this theme is often represented through characters who evolve as they confront challenges and gain self-awareness.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow (1943) developed the hierarchy of needs, a framework that explains human motivation through five levels: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. The highest level, self-actualization, is achieved when individuals reach their full potential and find meaning in life. Maslow emphasizes that “what a man can be, he must be” (Maslow, 1943: 382), which highlights the natural human drive toward growth and self-realization once foundational needs are satisfied. This theory provides a clear structure for analyzing Hiroya Suda’s development in *What You Are Looking For Is in the Library*.

Kaufman’s Transcend Theory

Scott Barry Kaufman (2020) expands on Maslow’s ideas by introducing the sailboat metaphor in his book *Transcend: The New Science of Self-Actualization*. Kaufman explains that security needs, represented by the boat, create stability, while growth-oriented needs, symbolized by the sail, allow individuals to explore and create. He emphasizes that self-discovery is “not a destination but a continuous voyage” (Kaufman, 2020: 45), highlighting its evolving nature. This theory complements Maslow’s hierarchy by illustrating how personal growth requires both a stable foundation and openness to new experiences, much like Hiroya’s journey of rediscovering his creativity and confidence.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the journey of self-discovery experienced by Hiroya Suda in *What You Are Looking For Is in the Library* by Michiko Aoyama. A qualitative method is appropriate because it allows for in-depth interpretation of the character’s emotional and psychological transformation, which is central to this research. The primary source of data is the English-translated version of the novel, with a specific focus on Hiroya Suda’s storyline. The theoretical framework used includes Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Scott Barry Kaufman’s *Transcend* theory. These frameworks are applied to examine how Hiroya progresses through the stages of self-discovery from emotional stagnation to personal growth and eventual self-actualization. Corey’s concept of self-discovery is also used to support the psychological dimension of the analysis. Data collection involved close reading of the novel, especially the sections that present Hiroya’s background, internal conflict, turning points, and emotional recovery. These passages were highlighted and categorized according to Maslow’s five levels of needs and Kaufman’s sailboat metaphor. Each phase of Hiroya’s transformation was matched with theoretical concepts that illustrate the movement from basic security needs toward self-fulfillment. The analysis was conducted thematically, focusing on the progression of Hiroya’s self-perception, the role of external influences such as the librarian Komachi, and the significance of symbolic elements like books and objects in his growth. By connecting textual evidence with psychological theory, this study aims to show how literature can reflect the complex and non-linear process of self-discovery.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of Hiroya Suda’s self-discovery journey in *What You Are Looking For Is in the Library* is divided into three main stages: initial withdrawal and identity collapse, emotional reawakening, and reconstruction of a new self-authored meaning of life. Each stage highlights a different aspect of Hiroya’s psychological transformation, showing how he progresses from a state of hopelessness to a life filled with purpose and

connection. This analysis combines textual evidence with ² Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Kaufman's concept of self-actualization to understand the depth of Hiroya's growth.

A. Initial Withdrawal and Identity Collapse

Hiroya's story begins with an overwhelming sense of failure and passivity. At thirty, he lives with his mother and spends most of his time in front of the television. He has no stable job, and his daily routine is marked by stagnation and guilt. These early scenes portray Hiroya as someone who has completely disconnected from his own ambitions and the world around him. His lack of direction represents the lower stages of Maslow's hierarchy—he is struggling to meet his psychological and esteem needs, which prevents him from reaching a higher sense of self. One key passage reflects Hiroya's monotony:

"It's Friday afternoon and I'm sitting on the sofa watching TV. Mum dumps her bag of vegetables on the kitchen table." "They had this great big daikon today – Miura daikon, they're called. February's the season for them. They were enormous!" She unpacks potatoes, carrots and apples from her flowery eco shopping bag. These are big too. "I wanted to buy one, but with all this, it was too much to carry home." She pulls out a Chinese cabbage (Aoyama, 2021:114)

This simple line is loaded with meaning. It captures not only the emptiness of Hiroya's daily life but also his emotional detachment. Watching television becomes a metaphor for passivity, while his mother's presence emphasizes his reliance on others. Hiroya's inactivity and unwillingness to pursue change show how deeply he is stuck in a cycle of avoidance. The root of Hiroya's stagnation lies in his failed career as an illustrator. Once passionate about drawing, he now views his past efforts as wasted time. His self-criticism is harsh and unforgiving:

"I discovered I didn't have what it took to make it as an artist." This is the pathetic excuse I give for being unemployed. Ms Komachi rolls her head around and clicks her neck. "Why is that?" Her head tilts to one side. "Because only the chosen few can make a living from illustrating. Not just illustrating either – probably less than one person in a hundred can turn the thing they like doing into paid work." (Aoyama, 2021:133)

This confession shows that Hiroya's self-worth is directly tied to his career failures. He does not simply believe he failed at drawing; he believes he is incapable of succeeding at anything. Such negative self-talk reflects a deep emotional wound, where fear of failure prevents him from even trying again. In Maslow's terms, he has not satisfied his esteem needs, as he lacks both self-respect and recognition from others.

Furthermore, his relationship with his family highlights his internal conflict. Hiroya compares himself to his brother, who appears more successful, and this comparison worsens his feelings of inadequacy. Rather than seeking to rebuild his life, Hiroya retreats further into isolation. This early stage of his journey is critical because it establishes the emotional void that will later push him toward rediscovery.

Hiroya's emotional withdrawal also reflects the psychological concept of learned helplessness, where repeated failure leads individuals to believe that their efforts are pointless. In his case, each rejection of his artwork further convinces him that he lacks talent, causing him to abandon his passion entirely. This mindset isolates him not just socially but creatively, as he stops attempting to connect with the world through his drawings. His relationship with his family amplifies this condition—while his mother

shows care, Hiroya's constant comparisons with his brother deepen his feelings of inferiority. This stage is crucial because it represents the psychological "rock bottom" from which Hiroya must rise, making his later growth more impactful.

Another significant detail in this phase is how Hiroya's environment mirrors his state of mind. The mundane setting of his mother's house and the repetitive act of watching television create an image of someone whose life has stopped moving forward. These early chapters of the novel highlight how unfulfilled creative individuals can spiral into self-doubt when their ambitions meet harsh realities. This is not just a personal failure but also a reflection of societal pressures, where success is often measured only by recognition and income.

B. Emotional Reawakening

The turning point of Hiroya's journey comes through his encounter with Sayuri Komachi, the librarian. Komachi's question, "What are you looking for?" strikes a chord within him. This seemingly simple inquiry forces Hiroya to confront his inner desires and acknowledge the emptiness of his current existence:

"What are you looking for?" Her voice is deep and low. I gulp. What am I looking for? Words spring into my mind and take me by surprise. Tears form." (Aoyama, 2021:118)

This moment signifies a breakthrough. For the first time, Hiroya allows himself to consider what he truly wants rather than what he has failed to achieve. Komachi's empathetic but firm approach serves as a catalyst for his emotional reawakening. Her role aligns with Kaufman's concept of "growth triggers" interactions or experiences that push individuals to rediscover their potential.

Komachi's gift of *Evolution: A Visual Record* is symbolic. The book's theme of adaptation resonates with Hiroya, reminding him that personal growth requires change and resilience. It reignites his creative instincts, as seen in his sudden urge to draw:

"Then whoa! All of a sudden I get the urge to draw. I haven't felt this in ages. I know I won't be able to settle until I do something about it." (Aoyama, 2021:127)

This reaction is more than a nostalgic return to his old hobby; it is the beginning of reclaiming his sense of identity. Drawing becomes a therapeutic act, helping Hiroya reconnect with a part of himself that he had suppressed. In Maslow's framework, this marks a shift toward the higher stages of the hierarchy, where self-expression and creativity play a key role in achieving fulfillment.

Nozomi, another character in the novel, reinforces this process of reawakening. Through their conversations, Hiroya realizes that vulnerability is not a sign of weakness but a source of connection. Nozomi encourages him to appreciate his art, even if it does not bring fame or success. Her words help him see that creativity can be *"lovable in its own way"* (Aoyama, 2021:128), which challenges his previous belief that artistic value is tied to external recognition. These interactions collectively form the foundation of Hiroya's emotional recovery.

Hiroya's emotional awakening is gradual rather than sudden, emphasizing that personal transformation often begins with small shifts in perspective. His meeting with Komachi is symbolic, as she does not give direct solutions but instead offers prompts that force Hiroya to reflect. Her recommendation of *Evolution: A Visual Record* can be seen

as a metaphor for survival and adaptation qualities Hiroya must develop to move forward. This encounter shows how external guidance, when subtle and empathetic, can help individuals rediscover their own strength.

The role of creativity in Hiroya's reawakening is also significant. When he picks up his pencil to draw again, it represents not just a hobby but a reclaiming of identity. Creativity becomes the bridge between his inner self and the outside world, helping him heal from the stagnation of his past. His renewed passion for drawing also reflects Maslow's idea of self-expression as a path to self-actualization. Furthermore, his bond with Nozomi reinforces the power of supportive relationships in building confidence. Through these interactions, Hiroya learns that self-discovery is not an isolated journey but one that thrives on connection and encouragement.

C. Reconstruction of a New Self-Authored Meaning of Life

The final stage of Hiroya's journey is defined by his decision to take action and engage with the world around him. Volunteering at the community center marks a turning point, as it demonstrates his willingness to contribute despite uncertainty:

"Um, I, er ... Maybe I could do it if you'd let me?" Sweat breaks out on my forehead. Nozomi belongs in the library. She has to stay here, so she can become a librarian. She's trying so hard. I have no idea what this job involves, but at least I have the time to spare." (Aoyama, 2021:139)

This moment illustrates Hiroya's growing courage. Although he feels nervous, he chooses to step outside his comfort zone. His act of volunteering is not just about filling time but about rebuilding his self-worth by being useful to others. This aligns with Kaufman's idea that personal growth involves balancing security (the boat) and exploration (the sail).

As Hiroya begins designing posters and flyers for the community, he gains a sense of belonging and accomplishment. His pride in seeing people appreciate his work is subtle but powerful:

"Sometimes I'd see people walk past them on the wall and stop to look or comment. Whenever I overheard praise, I'd do a secret fist pump inside." (Aoyama, 2021:140)

This feeling of quiet success shows that Hiroya no longer seeks validation through external achievements like fame. Instead, he finds meaning in small contributions and in the joy of creating for others. This transformation is the essence of self-actualization finding fulfillment in authenticity and connection rather than external approval.

The reconstruction of Hiroya's meaning is also psychological. By accepting his past failures and moving beyond them, he builds a stronger sense of identity. He no longer defines himself solely by his career or by comparison to others. Instead, he embraces a life driven by personal values, creativity, and community. In Maslow's terms, Hiroya has moved from survival and esteem needs to the peak of self-actualization, where he achieves growth by being true to himself.

Hiroya's contribution to the community center is not only an act of service but also a declaration that he values his time and skills. By engaging with the community, he begins to rebuild his self-image, shifting from someone who hides from responsibility to someone who actively shapes his environment. This stage illustrates how meaningful work no matter how small can restore a sense of purpose. The praise he receives for his posters, though modest, validates his talent and encourages him to keep moving forward.

Moreover, this reconstruction phase highlights the broader message of the novel: fulfillment does not come from grand achievements but from being present and useful in everyday life. Hiroya's transformation is not about becoming a famous artist but about finding joy in his own path. His journey reflects Kaufman's idea that self-actualization is not a destination but an ongoing process. By volunteering, accepting praise with humility, and continuing to create, Hiroya achieves a balanced life that combines both personal satisfaction and community connection.

CONCLUSION

Hiroya Suda's journey of self-discovery in *What You Are Looking For Is in the Library* demonstrates that the path toward personal growth is rarely straightforward. At the start of the novel, Hiroya's life is characterized by stagnation, disappointment, and emotional withdrawal. His failure as an illustrator has left him feeling incapable of achieving anything meaningful, leading to a collapse of both his confidence and his identity. He lives passively with his mother, avoids challenges, and believes he has nothing valuable to offer the world. This initial phase reflects the lower stages of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where unmet psychological and esteem needs prevent individuals from pursuing higher goals such as self-actualization. Hiroya's story reminds us that personal failure, if left unaddressed, can trap someone in a cycle of self-doubt and hopelessness.

The turning point in Hiroya's journey begins when he encounters Sayuri Komachi, whose role as a librarian goes beyond simply recommending books. Through her thoughtful questions and symbolic gifts like the book *Evolution: A Visual Record* Komachi helps Hiroya confront his inner emptiness. This moment of emotional reawakening is subtle yet powerful, as it allows Hiroya to rediscover a sense of curiosity and creative passion he thought he had lost. His decision to pick up his pencil again represents not only the revival of his artistic talent but also the start of healing his self-worth. This process highlights Kaufman's idea of "opening the sail," where growth begins once individuals allow themselves to explore, create, and engage with life again. In this phase, Hiroya also learns the value of human connection. Support from characters like Nozomi reinforces the idea that encouragement and genuine understanding from others can play a significant role in rebuilding one's confidence.

The final stage of Hiroya's transformation is his reconstruction of a new self-authored meaning of life demonstrates how small actions can lead to lasting change. By volunteering at the community center and designing posters, Hiroya shifts from being a passive observer of life to an active participant. His pride in seeing others appreciate his work shows that fulfillment often comes from contributing to the well-being of others rather than seeking fame or external validation. This transition aligns with Maslow's concept of self-actualization, where an individual reaches their fullest potential by embracing authenticity and personal growth. Hiroya's journey also reflects Kaufman's idea that self-discovery is not a destination but a continuous process of navigating between stability and exploration.

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