

**“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY
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Doctoral Thesis

**DEPTHS OF THE NORDIC WELFARE MODEL IN FEMININE
NORWEGIAN LITERARY VOICES**

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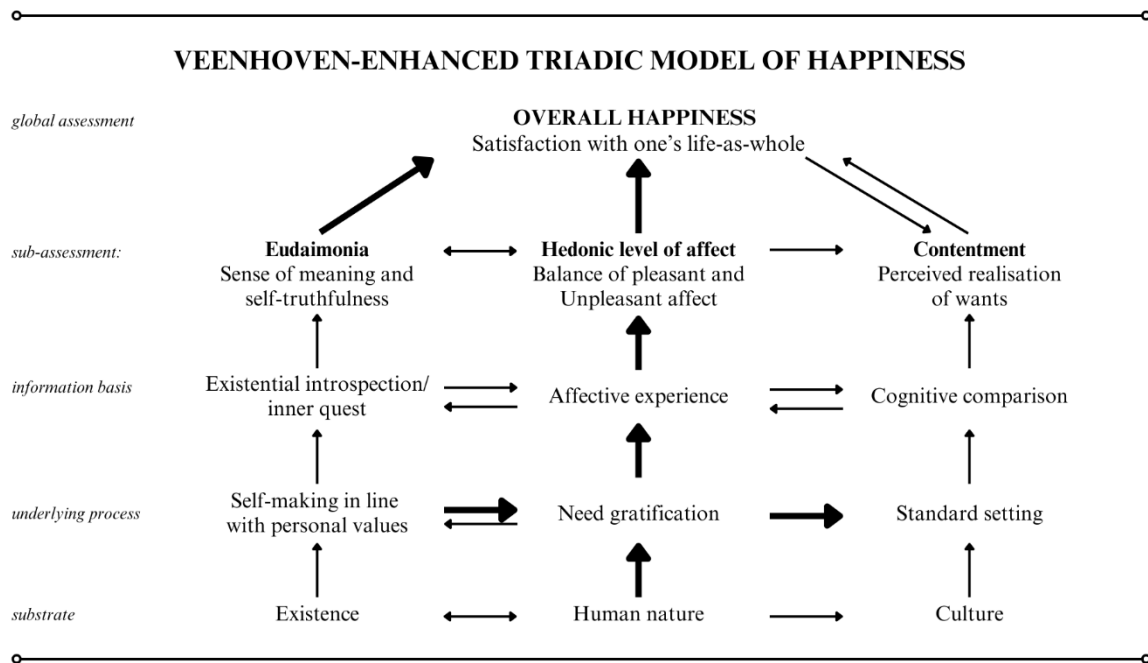
Abstract

Keywords: Nordic Model of Welfare, Lotta Elstad, Hanne Ørstavik, Vigdis Hjorth, *I Refuse to Think*, *The Blue Room*, *A House in Norway*, happiness, reality literature, contemporary women's writings

The present doctoral thesis explores the reflection of the Nordic Model of welfare in contemporary Norwegian women's writings, analysing the characters' happiness in connection with specific welfare indicators, engaging the role of literature in society. The research started from the hypothesis that reality literature reflects a more nuanced picture of the Nordic Model in comparison with international sociological studies such as the UN's World Happiness Report and the Legatum Prosperity Index that constantly depict the Nordic countries among the top ten happiest in the world. In order to discover what lies behind the statistics, and complement the overall Nordic welfare picture, while focusing on Norway as a case study, the thesis connects the dots between literature, sociology and society through a close reading analysis of three contemporary novels – Lotta Elstad's *I Refuse to Think* (*Jeg nekter å tenke*, 2017), Vigdis Hjorth's *A House in Norway* (*Et norsk hus*, 2014), and Hanne Ørstavik's *The Blue Room* (*Like sant som jeg er virkelig*, 1997) – in pursuit of predefined concepts related to happiness and welfare.

The first chapter anchors the thesis from a theoretical perspective, introducing and defining the prerequisites, research method and relevant concepts that will be used in the close reading analysis. The first section focuses on the conceptualisation of happiness, which will be used for analysing the protagonists' happiness, in a triadic model of subjective wellbeing developed from Ruut Veenhoven's overall happiness theory. The model consists of three happiness dimensions: the hedonic level of affect reflected in the characters' moods, feelings and emotions related to the gratification of their essential needs, the cognitive contentment facet assessed through the perceived realisation of one's goals and wants established via cultural standard-setting comparison, together with the additional existential eudaimonia connected with the sense of meaning and self-truthfulness that comes from living in line with one's personal values (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Veenhoven-Enhanced Triadic Model of Overall Happiness: Including Eudaimonia Dimension



Source¹: Veenhoven, R. (2009). "How Do We Assess How Happy We Are". *Happiness, Economics and Politics: Towards a Multi-Disciplinary Approach*, edited by Amitava K. Dutt and Benjamin Radcliff, University of Notre Dame, personal.eur.nl/veenhoven/Pub2000s/2009a-full.pdf, p. 27. Accessed 12 Jan. 2025.

Subsequently, the chapter continues with the conceptualisation of the subjects related to the Nordic Model of the welfare state, clarifying how these shall be used in close reading. After defining the welfare state in terms of a state that aims to satisfy the needs of its population through various welfare regulations, the research explores and identifies the most relevant welfare indicators that shape the Nordic Model, which will represent the themes of analysis in each selected novel: freedom of choice and good governance, institutional and interpersonal trust, social support and a sense of community, good safe and secure living conditions, the relationship with nature, and gender equality – a quality that is central to my thesis focused on literary female voices. The chapter thus ends with a section dedicated to a historical overview of remarkable Norwegian women's writings from earlier times up to contemporaneity, focusing on their social and cultural impact via their literary preoccupations for individual happiness and self-realisation, which contributed to the foundation of a welfare society based on equality and trust, acting as a red thread that anchors my research interest. Showcasing the contributions of

¹ The source reflects the original scheme composed by Veenhoven, which consists of the Hedonic level of affect and Contentment, together with the Eudaimonia dimension, which is my addition. The overall figure thus reflects the triadic model employed in the thesis.

Norwegian authoresses like Dorothe Engelbretsdatter (1634-1716), Camilla Collett (1813-1895), Cora Sandel (1880-1974) and Bjørg Vik (1935-2018), the sub-chapter shows that the basis of the Nordic Model of welfare appears to have been set hundreds of years before its formal formation, through a continuous stir towards a better society, inspired by literature based on the reality of the time, echoing marks of the contemporary reality literature trend that anchors the three novels selected as thesis corpus. The conceptualisation of reality literature, referring to Poul Behrendt's relevant work entitled *From the Shadows of What We Know. Art as Reality Production* (*Fra skyggerne af det vi ved. Kunst som virkelighedsproduktion*, 2019), marks the end of the first chapter, and this literary anchoring is important for the validity of the thesis' conclusions – as it aims to identify possible societal answers in literature, it is only reasonable to opt for writings reflective of reality.

The second, third and fourth chapters represent the core of the thesis, covering the close reading of the three selected Norwegian novels with a focus on the reflection and impact of the Nordic Model of welfare on the protagonists' happiness, applying the concepts defined in the first chapter, dedicating one chapter to each novel, and employing an analogous structure provided by the preidentified welfare indicators, which is also reproduced in the fifth chapter that compares the preliminary conclusions of the novels' analysis, preparing for the thesis' final conclusion. To be concise, while similarities are observed in the analysis of the novels, each one brings value added to the overall picture. *I Refuse to Think* emphasises the importance of personal freedom, and it discloses welfare solutions related to inclusivity and good governance. *A House in Norway* stresses the significance of meaningful and supportive communal relationships, urging self-awareness and wise usage of one's privileged status for the benefit of the less advantaged. *The Blue Room* accentuates the impact of healthy familial relationships, providing learning opportunities for both parents and children. All in all, the results of the close reading confirm the thesis hypothesis, as the three novels reveal the refined image behind the international sociological studies, complementing them in a contrasting manner and disclosing ways in which the welfare society could still improve.

As there is presently no evident literary research direction of welfare in Norwegian literature, this thesis intends to be a gate-opener for future related studies. Observing the formation and evolution of the Nordic Model of welfare over time, it is important to notice that the model is not fixed, but it is the result of a stage. Therefore, given the richness of literary research offer and its incipient phase, I hope my thesis will lay the groundwork for related literary happiness and welfare research, and consequently, to the possibility of improving happiness and the quality of life, starting from Norway, and moving further into the world.

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