

## Summary:

# *Folkhemmet* or a good, common home in Swedish narratives on childhood

*Folkhemmet* (the Swedish folkhem), literally “Home of the People”, is a commonly used term describing the socio-democratic welfare state. Its narrow usage refers first and foremost to the ideological foundation, whilst the broader one also includes the methods by which common well-being in the social and economic dimension is achieved. Sometimes the notion of *folkhemmet* is used interchangeably with the term “the Swedish model”, which is basically restrained to the labour market, but it is often applied (especially by foreign observers) in the fields of economy and social life. In the ethnological narration *folkhemmet* is perceived as a socio-democratic pedagogical project, whose aim is to form a new type of a society concentrated around common values and patterns which could replace the traditional rural community. From today’s perspective *folkhemmet* can also be seen as the Swedes’ cultural and mental legacy. This makes it a category which, irrespective of political transformations, can be used to describe Swedish society.

Trying to understand the metaphorical sense of this multidimensional notion which can be the key to understanding the specificity of social development in 20<sup>th</sup> century Sweden, it is helpful to reach back to the speech given by Per Albin Hansson in 1928. The leader of the Social Democrats compared the state to a home and its citizens to family members, promoting the ideas of equality, solidarity and social security. In *folkhemmet*, a good, common home, there were to be neither privileged nor marginalized inhabitants. In his speech the two groups were called “darlings” and “stepchildren” respectively.

In the temporal dimension *folkhemmet* also describes a period in modern Swedish history beginning from 1932, i.e. the year when the Social Democrats took over. The symbolic end of *folkhemmet* can be dated back to the 28<sup>th</sup> February 1986, i.e. the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme, but the boundary can also be shifted to 1991, when the coalition of bourgeois parties took over in crisis-stricken Sweden. According to the most common periodisation of *folkhemmet*, three stages of its development can be distinguished: the initial period (1932–45), the period of prosperity (1946–69) and the decadent period (1970–86).

The 1980s and 90s were a time of settling accounts with the socio-democratic vision of the welfare state in Sweden; this period was called “a decade of debates” by the historian Ulf Zander. The dystopic narrative on *folkhemmet* which was developed at that time was meant to counterbalance the predominant socio-democratic story of success. In the most recent discourses, the term *folkhemmet* often plays the role of a buzzword. Its ambiguity and semantic capacity are abused by politicians and columnists to represent a longing for “the good old days”.

This monograph addresses the issue of literary representations of childhood and growing up in Sweden of the *folkhemmet* era, written in the period 1980–2016. Three literary works have been analysed in detail: Kjell Johansson’s *Huset vid Flon* (*House at Flon*), Jonas Gardell’s *En komikers uppväxt*

(*A Comedian Growing Up*) and Torbjörn Flygt's *Underdog*. They are all studied in turn as 1) autobiographical narratives, 2) retrospective narratives on childhood with a prominent perspective of the adult narrator and 3) narratives on *folkhemmet*, being part as the Swedish national discourse. The analysis is based on the historical context, as well as on the historical-literary and the theoretical-literary context.

The monograph consists of three parts. The first part is a historical reflection on the socio-democratic welfare state as a realization of Per Albin Hansson's vision. It comprises a historical outline of the Swedish *folkhemmet*'s genesis and the development of this concept, reflections on the contemporary representations of the *folkhem*'s myth and a review of historical and cultural narratives on the *folkhemmet* as they appeared in the academic and political discourse and the public debate. The author refers mainly to various studies by Swedish historians, ethnologists and political scientists, but also uses some works of scientists from outside Scandinavia. To exemplify the historiographic narrativity the author quotes Jörn Rüsen's concept, whilst the typology of "the use of history" (Swedish: "historiebruk") has been based on Klas-Göran Karlsson's research. As far as the narrative of *folkhemmet* is concerned, the starting point is the insightful study by Martin Wiklund, who focuses on the predominant socio-democratic narrative of success and the counter-narratives of the 1960s and 1970s.

The second part of the monograph looks closely at the idea of returning to the land of childhood. This phenomenon, although widespread in the Swedish literature of the last decades, has not yet been examined thoroughly. Both writers and readers have expressed their interest in the issue since the 1980s, which can be seen, for instance, in greater demand for autobiographical narratives. The author perceives this fact as a literary expression of the public debate on *folkhemmet*, where the tendency of settling accounts with the past goes hand in hand with nostalgic reminiscences. In the review of the books published in the years 1980–2016, which has been made for the purpose of the monograph, the author takes the categories of time, space and author into consideration. The autobiographical traits of the works are indicated and the characteristic topoi and fictional patterns identified. Attention is also drawn to the works' diversity of form, convention and composition.

As autobiographical traits seem to be an essential feature of the Swedish representations of childhood, the issue of autobiographism is discussed in greater detail in the monograph. The author begins with the classical perspective (Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact) to describe the evolution of autobiography towards the borderline between fact and fiction, and to indicate the distinction between an autobiographical novel and autofiction. Reference is made to the findings of French and Polish literary scholars, mainly Małgorzata Czermińska, Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska and Jerzy Lis, but this research also concerns the new directions in Scandinavian discourse on autobiography, such as Bo G Jansson's *autobiographical faction*, Poul Behrendt's *double contract* and Jon Helt Haarder's *performative biografism*. The concepts of autobiographic memory and narrative identity developed by Paul Ricoeur are also reflected upon here.

The third part of the monograph includes an analysis of the chosen literary representations of childhood. *Huset vid Flon*, *En komikers uppväxt* and *Underdog* belong to those literary works whose meaning cannot be underestimated in the Swedish literary milieu, as they have been awarded prestigious prizes and distinctions, have been widely discussed by critics, acknowledged by readers and translated into several languages. Autobiographical motifs intertwine here with the historical and cultural narratives on *folkhemmet*. The narratives are a significant part of the world depicted and constitute the relationship between the author, the narrator-character and the reader. Examining the autobiographical elements in the novels, the author refers mainly to the opinions of critics, who classify them as autobiographical novels and autofiction, and confront them with metatextual comments by the books' authors, and also indicates the three stances: testimony, confession and challenge (according to Małgorzata Czermińska), which can be discerned in the novels. As far as the structure of the narrative of childhood is concerned, the focus is on the ways in which the retrospective narrative and the adult narrator character are put into use. Further attention is also drawn to the narrator's

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visibility, his self-awareness and the internal dialogue with himself (which is possible due to the narrator's double role) and with the reader.

By perceiving the novels by Johansson, Gardell and Flygt as narratives on *folkhemmet*, the author indicates different forms of presence of the historical and cultural narratives, both in the works' structure and in their discursive dimension. The way narrations function in public debate, either cited, paraphrased or provided with a critical commentary, make it possible to interpret the individual fate as a story of a collective or a generation. Autobiographical narratives thus become an intersubjectively available reflection on the evolution, devaluation and reactivation of the myth of *folkhemmet*.