



Alternative Happiness in Healing Fiction *Welcome to Hyunam-Dong Bookshop*

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Abstract

*This study examines the construction of happiness in *Welcome to Hyunam-dong Bookshop* through Sara Ahmed's concepts of happy objects and alternative happiness. As part of the growing trend of healing fiction, the novel reflects contemporary experiences of burnout, emotional exhaustion, and dissatisfaction shaped by neoliberal ideals of productivity and achievement. Using a qualitative descriptive method and close reading, this research explores how the characters' conflicts reveal tensions between socially prescribed expectations and personal desires. The findings show that happiness is initially constructed through socially valued "happy objects," including marriage, career success, financial stability, family harmony, and educational achievement. These ideals orient individuals toward a normative vision of the "good life." However, the novel also critiques the limitations of such expectations. This study proposes the concept of alternative happiness, which emerges when characters consciously reorient themselves away from socially prescribed paths. Drawing on Ahmed's ideas of the feminist killjoy, unhappy queer, and melancholic migrant, the analysis demonstrates that refusal, misalignment, and unresolved emotions can become productive spaces for redefining happiness. Rather than a fixed outcome, happiness is reimagined as a relational process and an ethical choice. This study contributes to literary scholarship by positioning happiness as a critical analytical lens and by expanding the study of healing fiction beyond therapeutic comfort toward critical reflection. It also highlights literature's pedagogical potential in fostering self-awareness, emotional literacy, and critical engagement with dominant narratives of success and fulfillment.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, healing fiction has emerged as one of the most visible trends in contemporary popular literature, particularly in East Asian markets such as Japan and South Korea. Although the term may vary across contexts, healing fiction generally refers to narratives centered on emotional recovery, ordinary life, and comfort rather than dramatic conflict. These works often portray characters who experience loneliness, exhaustion, disappointment, or loss, and who gradually heal through books, food, friendship, nature, routine, or quiet spaces. As Hilman [1] notes, readers increasingly turn to fiction not only for entertainment but for emotional reassurance and meaning-making. Literature, therefore, remains closely tied to readers' psychological and affective needs.

The growing popularity of healing fiction is inseparable from the condition of modern society, where psychological distress has become increasingly common. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies depression as one of the leading causes of disability worldwide, affecting hundreds of millions of people

globally [2]. Likewise, occupational burnout has become a major concern in contemporary work culture. The WHO defines burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy. These conditions reveal a paradox of modern life: while societies celebrate achievement, speed, and productivity, many individuals experience emotional fatigue, alienation, and dissatisfaction.

This paradox is especially visible in neoliberal societies that equate worth with performance. Byung-Chul Han [3], in *The Burnout Society*, argues that contemporary individuals are no longer primarily oppressed by external force but by internalized pressure to constantly optimize themselves. According to Han, the modern subject becomes both “master and slave,” pushing the self toward endless productivity until exhaustion occurs. Similarly, Alain Ehrenberg [4] links rising depression to a culture where individuals are expected to become autonomous achievers, making personal failure feel like a private deficiency rather than a social problem. These arguments help explain why many people appear externally successful while internally depleted. This pressure is not confined to the professional sphere alone. In educational settings, students at all levels increasingly face comparable forms of psychological strain. Academic burnout, defined as a syndrome comprising exhaustion stemming from academic demands, a cynical and detached attitude toward one's academic environment, and feelings of inadequacy as a student, has been widely documented among secondary and university students. Research confirms that this phenomenon transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, having been observed among students from various educational systems and academic policies [5]. In the Indonesian context, studies involving university students in cities such as Malang report that the overwhelming majority experience academic burnout at moderate to high levels, driven by the complexity of academic tasks, simultaneous responsibilities, and the demands placed upon students to perform consistently across multiple domains [6]. Moreover, academic burnout has been shown to carry significant negative long-term consequences, including reduced motivation, academic disengagement, depression, anxiety, and frustration. Just as working adults internalize the imperative to constantly perform, students are similarly conditioned to equate academic success with personal worth, rendering failure or exhaustion a source of shame rather than systemic critique.

In such a climate, healing fiction functions as more than simple entertainment; it becomes a form of emotional refuge. Through narratives of gentleness, rest, kindness, and everyday recovery, healing fiction offers what contemporary readers often lack in real life: slowness, reassurance, and hope. Di Leo [7] stated that happiness has been widely coopted by neoliberal capitalism and regarded with suspicion and distrust, treated as a fantasy of late capitalism to be overcome rather than championed. As Rita Felski [8] argues, literature should not only be understood through suspicion or critique, but also through attachment, recognition, and enchantment. Readers often seek texts that help them feel seen, soothed, or emotionally reoriented. Healing fiction answers this need by presenting alternative rhythms of life beyond relentless competition.

Among recent healing fiction texts, Hwang Bo-Reum's *Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop* [9] is particularly significant. The novel centers on Yeongju, a woman who leaves a socially approved life path to open a neighborhood bookshop, where she and others gradually rediscover meaning through books, conversation, and ordinary human connection. Rather than glorifying ambition, prestige, or wealth, the novel foregrounds quieter forms of fulfillment. This makes the text especially relevant for examining contemporary dissatisfaction with conventional success narratives.

Healing fiction also offers a refreshing direction in literature. In a literary landscape often dominated by dystopia, violence, trauma, and sensational conflict, healing fiction emphasizes emotional repair and humane connection [1]. Its freshness lies not in avoiding suffering, but in imagining recovery as worthy of narrative attention. It reminds readers that small transformations, ordinary kindness, and sustainable happiness can be as meaningful as heroic struggle. In this sense, healing fiction broadens the imaginative possibilities of contemporary literature.

More broadly, literature remains essential in human life because it provides language for experiences that are otherwise difficult to articulate. Martha Nussbaum [10] argues that literature cultivates moral imagination by enabling readers to inhabit the lives of others with sympathy and reflection. Literature preserves memory, critiques unjust norms, and deepens emotional understanding. Especially in periods marked by uncertainty and psychological strain, literary texts become valuable spaces where readers can process vulnerability and imagine alternative ways of living [11]. Yet despite this potential, literature education in many contexts, including Indonesia, remains largely confined to structural and formalistic approaches. Literary curricula frequently prioritize intrinsic and extrinsic analysis, focusing on plot, characterization, theme, and authorial background, while neglecting the affective and therapeutic

dimensions of reading. This structural bias is not unique to Indonesia; as [12] demonstrate in the context of early years literacy pedagogy, dominant instructional methods tend to center around the objectification and rationalization of storying, that is, reducing literary engagement to measurable structural elements such as beginning-middle-end frameworks, thereby displacing pedagogical directions that recognize the subjective, affective, and relational dimensions from which stories are made, learned, and understood. Consequently, popular genres such as healing fiction, which carry significant potential as tools for emotional literacy and resilience training, remain marginalized in academic settings. This marginalization is particularly concerning given that literature holds deep pedagogical value beyond structural analysis. As Coulter et al. [13] argue, storytelling and narrative engagement in educational settings serve not merely cognitive but also moral, practical, and imaginative purposes, enabling learners to reflect on, question, and learn from lived experiences in ways that touch dimensions of the self that formal instruction rarely reaches. The absence of healing fiction from formal curricula thus represents not merely a gap in genre representation, but a missed opportunity for literature to function as an instrument of emotional intervention in education, one that could support students in developing the resilience and emotional literacy increasingly demanded by contemporary academic and social pressures.

Despite the global rise of healing fiction, scholarly attention to the genre remains relatively limited, particularly among Indonesian researchers. Literary scholarship in Indonesia has often focused on canonical works, identity politics, feminism, postcolonialism, or structural analysis, while newer popular genres such as healing fiction are still underexplored. As a result, the significance of healing fiction as a cultural response to burnout, loneliness, and modern dissatisfaction has not yet received sufficient critical engagement. This gap is especially consequential when considered within the context of literary education. Current literature curricula in many educational settings, including Indonesia, remain largely confined to structural and formalistic approaches, prioritizing intrinsic and extrinsic analysis such as plot, characterization, theme, and authorial background, while the affective and therapeutic dimensions of reading are rarely given pedagogical attention. In this regard, popular genres such as healing fiction, with their emphasis on emotional recovery, ordinary life, and human connection carry significant potential as tools for emotional literacy and resilience training, capacities that are increasingly urgent given the rising prevalence of academic burnout and psychological distress among students. The absence of healing fiction from formal curricula thus represents not merely a gap in genre representation, but a missed opportunity for literature to function as an instrument of emotional intervention in education. Furthermore, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, healing fiction has not yet been substantially examined in Indonesian scholarship through the framework of Sara Ahmed. Therefore, this study investigates alternative happiness in Hwang Bo-Reum's *Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop* by analyzing the characters' conflicts and their efforts to build more meaningful lives. This research is important because it contributes to the developing study of healing fiction, introduces Sara Ahmed's happiness theory into the analysis of contemporary popular literature, and reaffirms the humanistic richness of literature as a medium for understanding emotional life in the modern world.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a psychological approach to literature to examine happiness in Hwang Bo-Reum's *Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop*. As Caracciolo [14] explains, literature can be understood not merely as fictional narrative, but as a reflection of emotional experience, subjectivity, identity struggle, and the human search for meaning. In addition, Tyrrell [15] emphasizes that literature plays a crucial role in producing emotional responses and shaping how readers understand experience, as affective elements can influence attitudes and perceptions more powerfully than purely rational arguments. Therefore, happiness in this study is not treated as a fixed condition, but as an affective and socially mediated experience shaped through narrative.

To explore these issues, the research analyzes the intrinsic elements of the novel, including characterization, conflict, plot, setting, dialogue, and narrative development. Character conflicts are central because they reveal tensions between social expectations and personal desires. The *Hyunam-Dong bookshop* is also interpreted as a healing space that enables emotional transformation. The main analytical technique is close reading, which allows careful attention to language, recurring motifs, symbolic moments, and emotional shifts. This method is particularly suitable for healing fiction, where meaning is often conveyed through quiet conversations and subtle emotional growth rather than dramatic events. Close reading in this study goes beyond structural observation; it attends to the affective, relational, and embodied dimensions of narrative, examining how emotional meaning accumulates through language, repetition, and the texture of fictional encounters.

The findings are then connected to broader discourses on happiness, burnout culture, and mental health through Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* [16], especially her concepts of happy objects, Happy Futures, and Happy Means Good. These concepts explain how socially approved goals such as career success, marriage, productivity, and stability are often presented as routes to happiness, yet may fail to provide genuine fulfillment. Furthermore, this study incorporates a critical perspective informed by decolonial and resistance-based approaches. As Omodeo [17] highlights, dominant frameworks often universalize categories such as identity and experience, while marginalizing alternative ways of being. Through this framework, the novel can be read as both a critique of conventional happiness and a narrative of alternative happiness.

This study also uses library research by reviewing recent scholarship on healing fiction, therapeutic reading, and happiness studies. Previous studies generally examine healing fiction through catharsis, bibliotherapy, trauma recovery, reader comfort, and genre popularity. Roy [18] emphasizes fiction's healing power through resilience and reconciliation, while Ummah et al. [19] identify reflection, empathy, and acceptance as core elements of healing fiction. Xiang and Yi [20] highlight poetry as a source of connection and comfort during crisis, and Habibi [21] shows how narrative practices can reduce burnout and restore meaning. Other studies [22] [23] [24] similarly stress the therapeutic value of reading and art for emotional regulation, resilience, and community support.

Despite the developments explained above, few studies have explored healing fiction through happiness as a critical concept, particularly happiness as socially constructed and open to resistance. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no previous study has analyzed *Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop* using Sara Ahmed's framework of happiness. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by examining the novel as a healing fiction text that not only offers comfort, but also challenges dominant happiness narratives through the idea of alternative happiness.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Happy Object of the Characters

In the perspective of Sara Ahmed, *happy objects* are not simply things that individuals personally choose as sources of happiness; rather, they are objects that are already culturally and socially constructed as desirable. These objects circulate within society as shared ideals, such as marriage, family harmony, stable employment, or educational success, and individuals are oriented toward them through narrative, habit, and expectation. Happiness, therefore, does not originate purely from the subject, but from the way subjects are directed toward certain objects that are assumed to promise a good life.

In *Welcome to Hyunam-dong Bookshop*, these *happy objects* are not merely the characters' individual preferences. Instead, the author uses the characters as narrative vehicles to reveal and reflect socially inherited constructions of happiness. Through each character's situation, the novel presents specific objects that are positioned as desirable and worth pursuing within a broader cultural framework.

Through Yeongju's story, the author foregrounds marriage and familial approval as central *happy objects*. These are presented not as purely personal desires, but as socially validated markers of a successful and meaningful life. The narrative reflects how these objects are embedded within expectations of being a "good" woman, daughter, and wife.

Through Minjun, the author highlights a prestigious career aligned with elite education as a dominant *happy object*. This reflects societal beliefs about meritocracy, where academic success is expected to lead to respectable employment, financial stability, and social recognition.

Through Jungsuh, the narrative presents permanent employment as a powerful *happy object* within the labor system. Stability, security, and institutional recognition are constructed as essential to achieving dignity and a sense of worth.

In the case of the bookshop, the author introduces financial success and economic sustainability as the governing *happy object* for a business. Profitability becomes the standard through which value is measured, reflecting a broader capitalist logic embedded in everyday life.

Through Seungwoo, the author emphasizes public recognition and validation as a writer as a *happy object*. Creative identity is framed as incomplete without acknowledgment from others, suggesting that fulfillment is tied to visibility and social affirmation.

In the relationship between Yeongju and her mother, a harmonious family bond is presented as a culturally dominant *happy object*. Emotional closeness and parental approval are depicted as conditions that are expected to produce a sense of completeness in one's life.

Through Jimi, the author reflects a lasting marriage as a socially prescribed *happy object*, where endurance and conformity to social norms are valued over personal emotional well-being. Marriage is constructed as something that must be maintained in order to secure social legitimacy.

Finally, through Mincheol, the narrative foregrounds higher education (university) as a widely accepted *happy object*. Academic achievement is portrayed as the conventional pathway to success, stability, and future happiness.

Overall, the novel does not simply depict characters pursuing happiness; rather, it critically reflects how happiness itself is structured, distributed, and imposed through socially recognized objects. The author, through these characters, brings into view the normative framework that defines what is considered a "good life," showing that these *happy objects* exist prior to and shape the characters' orientations toward happiness.

3.1.2 Alternative Happiness in Welcome to Hyunam-dong Bookshop

Building on the previous discussion of *happy objects*, this section develops what I term alternative happiness in *Welcome to Hyunam-dong Bookshop*. If *happy objects* represent socially prescribed directions toward happiness, then alternative happiness refers to the ways in which the characters consciously reorient themselves, choosing forms of life that are not dictated by dominant expectations, but grounded in their own lived experiences and reflections.

This reorientation can be understood through the framework of Sara Ahmed, particularly her concepts of *feminist killjoy*, *unhappy queer*, and *melancholic migrant*. These concepts do not simply reject happiness; rather, they rethink how happiness is defined, who has access to it, and under what conditions it becomes possible.

The figure of the *feminist killjoy* represents a critical stance toward socially sanctioned happiness. A *killjoy* is someone who refuses to participate in forms of happiness that depend on silence, inequality, or the suppression of discomfort. For example, when a situation is assumed to be harmonious, such as family unity or romantic relationships, the *killjoy* interrupts that harmony by pointing out underlying tensions or injustices. This interruption is often perceived negatively, as if the person is "causing" unhappiness. However, Ahmed argues that the *killjoy* does not create unhappiness but reveals what has been concealed beneath the surface of normative happiness. In doing so, the *killjoy* opens space for imagining other ways of living that are more honest and less constrained by social expectations.

Similarly, the concept of the *unhappy queer* challenges the assumption that happiness lies in following a "straight" or heteronormative life path. In many societies, happiness is associated with a linear progression, education, career, marriage, family, which implicitly privileges heterosexual relationships and conventional life choices. The *unhappy queer* emerges when individuals do not or cannot align with this trajectory. Rather than viewing this as failure, Ahmed suggests that such misalignment can be productive. Being "unhappy" in this sense allows individuals to question the inevitability of normative life paths and to create alternative forms of intimacy, belonging, and fulfillment that are not recognized within dominant frameworks.

Meanwhile, the concept of the *melancholic migrant* draws attention to how happiness is unevenly distributed and often tied to histories of power, particularly in relation to migration and colonialism. Migrants are frequently expected to demonstrate happiness as evidence of successful integration into a new society. However, this expectation can obscure experiences of loss, displacement, and not fully belonging. The *melancholic migrant* embodies a form of attachment to what has been left behind, an attachment that cannot be easily resolved or replaced. Rather than seeing this melancholy as something to overcome, Ahmed frames it as a condition that reveals the limits of normative happiness and opens up alternative ways of understanding belonging, identity, and emotional life.

Thus, the three concepts suggest that alternative happiness is not about achieving a new fixed ideal, but about creating space for self-defined ways of living. They offer a framework in which refusal, deviation, and even discomfort become meaningful starting points for reimagining what it means to live well.

In this light, the novel presents alternative happiness not as an abstract idea, but as something lived and practiced through the characters' choices.

First, happiness is redefined as the choice of place and environment. Yeongju's decision to leave behind a prestigious office and an outwardly "perfect" marriage in favor of a small neighborhood bookshop illustrates that happiness is deeply tied to where one chooses to be and the kind of space one inhabits. The bookshop becomes a consciously chosen environment that enables a different way of living.

Second, the novel frames happiness as a process rather than an outcome. Through Minjun's attention to brewing coffee and Jungsu's engagement with crocheting, happiness is located in the act of doing itself, not in achieving externally validated milestones. This reflects a shift away from goal-oriented happiness toward a more immediate, experiential form.

Third, the narrative introduces happiness in shared silence. Moments of quiet companionship, particularly between Yeongju and Minjun, suggest that happiness does not always require expression or performance. Instead, it can exist in mutual presence, trust, and unspoken understanding.

Fourth, happiness is portrayed as the integration of wounds rather than their erasure. Each character carries emotional scars, yet the novel does not propose complete healing as a prerequisite for happiness. Instead, it suggests that meaning can still be constructed alongside unresolved pain, aligning with Ahmed's idea that discomfort and dissatisfaction can open new orientations toward life.

Fifth, the text highlights happiness in giving without expectation. Acts such as sharing knowledge, mentoring, or creating for others are not framed as obligations but as sources of fulfillment. Happiness here is relational, emerging through acts that connect individuals without demanding return.

Sixth, happiness is linked to the courage to let go. The characters' decisions to leave behind marriages, careers, or social expectations reflect a critical moment of refusal—one that resonates with the *killjoy* figure who disrupts normative paths. Letting go becomes a condition for making space for alternative possibilities.

Finally, the novel presents happiness as a chosen community. The relationships formed within the bookshop are not based on obligation, but on mutual recognition and care. This reflects an alternative mode of belonging—one that is not inherited, but intentionally built.

Taken together, these forms of alternative happiness show that the characters in *Welcome to Hyunam-dong Bookshop* do not simply find happiness, they consciously reshape it. Their journeys reflect an ongoing negotiation, where happiness is no longer tied to socially prescribed *happy objects*, but emerges from deliberate choices about how to live, where to belong, and what to value.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Healing Fiction as an Instrument of Emotional Literacy and Resilience in Education

The analysis of happy objects and alternative happiness in *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop* does not only yield insights into literary and cultural criticism; it also leads us to open a productive conversation about the role of healing fiction within educational contexts. If the novel's central argument is that happiness can be consciously redefined through reflection, refusal, and the construction of meaning outside of dominant frameworks, then we argue that this very argument carries significant implications for how literature might be taught and experienced in formal educational settings. Ahmed's concepts of the feminist *killjoy*, the unhappy queer, and the melancholic migrant are not merely analytical tools for reading fiction; they are, we suggest, pedagogical concepts that can help students understand their own affective lives within educational systems that frequently demand happiness as a condition of participation.

We observe that contemporary educational discourse has increasingly acknowledged that students face significant psychological pressures rooted in academic burnout, social expectations, and achievement culture. When we examine the experiences depicted through the characters in this novel, Yeongju's collapse under the weight of a successful but hollow life, Minjun's disillusionment with elite career trajectories, and Jungsu's sense of invisibility within institutional labor systems, we find that these are not merely fictional representations. They are narrative mirrors of conditions that many students recognize from their own lives. We contend that this recognition itself constitutes a form of pedagogical value, and we further argue that Ahmed's theoretical framework offers a particularly generative lens through which students can begin to name and critically examine these conditions. Just as the feminist *killjoy* reveals what has been concealed beneath the surface of normative happiness, students who encounter these characters are invited to ask what has been concealed beneath the surface of academic success culture, what discomforts, losses, and misalignments have been silenced in the name of collective cheerfulness and institutional productivity.

However, we note that dominant instructional approaches to literature tend to reduce texts to their structural components, thereby displacing the affective, relational, and experiential dimensions from which meaning is actually made. When we consider a healing fiction text such as *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop*

through the lens of exclusively intrinsic or extrinsic structural analysis, we risk losing precisely the qualities that make it pedagogically powerful: its capacity to evoke emotional recognition, to model alternative ways of living, and to offer a narrative space in which readers can reflect on and learn from lived experience at the level of the moral and imaginative self. We identify this gap between the affective potential of healing fiction and the structural limitations of current literary curricula as a significant missed opportunity. Through the analysis we have conducted in this study, we propose at least four concrete ways in which healing fiction can function as an instrument of emotional literacy and resilience training in educational settings.

First, we argue that healing fiction cultivates the capacity for emotional recognition, particularly through the figure of the feminist killjoy. Through our close engagement with characters such as Yeongju, Minjun, and Jungsuh, we observe how students can be invited to name and validate experiences, burnout, disillusionment, loneliness, and the pressure to perform happiness, that are often silenced within competitive academic environments. We find Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy especially instructive here: the killjoy does not create unhappiness but reveals what has been concealed beneath normative scripts of success and fulfillment. When students encounter Yeongju's decision to abandon her prestigious career and socially approved marriage, they are encountering a killjoy figure — someone whose refusal of normative happiness disrupts the assumption that the prescribed path leads to genuine fulfillment. We contend that this encounter gives students a language for their own discomfort, enabling them not only to understand fictional characters but to recognize and articulate the tensions they themselves experience between social expectations and personal well-being. This linguistic and affective empowerment is, we argue, foundational to emotional literacy.

Second, we suggest that the novel's exploration of alternative happiness offers a meaningful framework for developing resilience, one that resonates deeply with Ahmed's concept of the unhappy queer. By resilience, we do not mean the simple capacity to endure or recover from adversity, but rather the ability to reconstruct meaning in the face of failed promises. The unhappy queer, in Ahmed's framework, is someone who cannot or does not align with the linear trajectory of normative life, education, career, marriage, family, and who finds, in that very misalignment, the possibility of alternative forms of belonging and fulfillment. We observe this dynamic operating powerfully throughout the novel: Minjun's departure from the path of elite employment, Jungsuh's refusal to accept the terms of her institutional invisibility, and Yeongju's construction of a small, unhurried life within the bookshop all reflect forms of productive unhappiness that open rather than close possibilities. When we trace the process of integrating wounds rather than erasing them, of finding happiness in process rather than outcome, and of building chosen communities rather than inheriting obligatory ones, we find that the novel provides students with narrative models for understanding that deviation from normative trajectories is not failure but potentially a precondition for more honest and sustainable forms of living. We propose that this is a form of resilience that literary engagement, at its best, can teach.

Third, we maintain that healing fiction can serve as a site for developing critical consciousness about social constructions of happiness, and we find Ahmed's concept of the melancholic migrant particularly illuminating in this regard. Through the analysis we have undertaken in this study, we reveal how normative happiness, structured around career success, institutional belonging, and social recognition, functions as a form of social pressure that shapes individual orientations before those individuals have the chance to question them. The melancholic migrant, in Ahmed's framework, is someone who carries an attachment to what has been left behind, an attachment that cannot be easily resolved or replaced, and that reveals the limits of the expectation that one should simply move forward and demonstrate happiness as evidence of successful integration. We observe this figure resonating in the experiences of several characters in the novel, particularly those who carry grief, loss, or a sense of not fully belonging within the worlds they are expected to inhabit. When we introduce this concept into literary education, we suggest that students learn to recognize not only the social construction of happiness in fiction, but also the way that demands for happiness in educational contexts can similarly obscure experiences of loss, displacement, and not fully belonging. We observe that students who learn to identify happy objects in fiction gradually develop the capacity to identify similar structures in their own lives, recognizing when they are pursuing goals that belong to society rather than to themselves. We consider this critical literacy to be especially valuable in educational contexts where academic achievement culture and social expectations around success remain powerful forces in students' psychological lives.

Fourth, we propose that the bookshop as a healing space in the novel offers a powerful metaphor for the kind of learning environment that promotes emotional well-being, one that stands in deliberate contrast to the spaces from which Ahmed's killjoy, unhappy queer, and melancholic migrant figures are so often

excluded. When we examine the Hyunam-dong bookshop as a narrative space, we find that it functions as a space of slowness, presence, mutual recognition, and non-instrumental exchange, the opposite of the competitive, performance-driven spaces from which the characters escape. Crucially, the bookshop is a space in which unhappiness is not treated as a problem to be solved but as a starting point for genuine connection and alternative meaning-making. In Ahmed's terms, it is a space that makes room for the killjoy, the unhappy queer, and the melancholic migrant, figures who would otherwise be pressured to conform or be silent. We read this metaphor as carrying a pedagogical invitation: to consider how literature classrooms might themselves be reimagined as spaces of unhurried engagement, where students are encouraged to dwell with texts, to share responses, and to build what the novel calls a chosen community of readers. We argue that such a classroom culture would not replace rigorous literary analysis, but would complement it by acknowledging that reading is also an affective and relational practice, one that cannot be reduced to the identification of plot structure or the classification of literary devices.

Taken together, through the analysis we have developed in this study, we suggest that healing fiction is not merely a popular genre to be consumed outside of formal education. We argue that it is a pedagogically rich resource that, when approached through Ahmed's framework of happy objects, feminist killjoy, unhappy queer, and melancholic migrant, can contribute meaningfully to the development of emotional literacy, psychological resilience, critical consciousness, and a more expansive understanding of what it means to live well. We conclude that the absence of such texts from formal literary curricula represents not only a scholarly gap but an educational one, a gap that this study, through its integration of literary analysis, happiness theory, and pedagogical reflection, has sought to begin addressing.

4. CONCLUSION

This study offers a critical shift in understanding happiness in literature by demonstrating that happiness is not merely an emotional state experienced by characters, but a constructed orientation that is first imposed and then consciously renegotiated. Drawing on the framework of Sara Ahmed, the analysis reveals that *Welcome to Hyunam-dong Bookshop* does more than portray individual struggles; it exposes how happiness operates as a social directive through *happy objects*, while simultaneously opening space for what this study conceptualizes as alternative happiness.

In terms of contribution to literary studies, this research expands the application of affect theory by positioning happiness as a critical analytic lens, rather than a background theme. It introduces the concept of alternative happiness as a way to read literary texts not only for what they represent, but for how they intervene in dominant narratives of the good life. This approach allows literature to be understood as a space where normative values are both reproduced and contested.

Beyond its literary contributions, this study argues that healing fiction carries significant and underutilized potential as a pedagogical resource, particularly within language education and character education curricula. The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop* does not merely offer comfort or entertainment; it models critical emotional processes — the recognition of socially inherited expectations, the courage to question them, and the gradual construction of more self-defined ways of living. These are precisely the capacities that educational systems increasingly need to cultivate, especially in contexts where students face mounting pressures of academic burnout, performance anxiety, and identity fragmentation.

We therefore propose several concrete recommendations for educators, educational practitioners, and curriculum developers who seek to integrate healing fiction as an alternative teaching material. First, healing fiction such as *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop* can be incorporated into language or literature curricula not merely as a text to be analyzed structurally, but as a site of reflective engagement, inviting students to examine how the characters' experiences of burnout, disillusionment, and reorientation resonate with their own lives. Rather than asking only what happens in the story, educators can ask students what the story reveals about the social expectations they themselves have internalized. Second, Ahmed's concepts of happy objects, feminist killjoy, unhappy queer, and melancholic migrant can be introduced as accessible analytical frameworks in the classroom, enabling students to develop a critical vocabulary for understanding how happiness is socially constructed and how resistance to normative happiness can be a meaningful and generative act. This approach supports the development of critical thinking and emotional literacy simultaneously. Third, in the context of character education, healing fiction can serve as a vehicle for cultivating values such as self-awareness, empathy, resilience, and the courage to make deliberate life choices, values that are difficult to teach through didactic instruction but that emerge naturally through sustained engagement with narrative. The characters in this novel model what it looks like to question

inherited scripts, to sit with uncertainty, and to build meaning from the inside out rather than from the outside in. Fourth, we recommend that curriculum developers consider expanding the canon of literary texts used in Indonesian educational settings to include popular genres such as healing fiction, recognizing that these genres often address the emotional and psychological realities of contemporary life with a directness and accessibility that canonical texts do not always offer. The inclusion of healing fiction in formal curricula would signal a recognition that literature education serves not only cognitive and cultural purposes, but also emotional and humanistic ones.

Ultimately, this study argues that happiness in literature should not be read as a stable endpoint, but as an ongoing, contested, and conscious practice. The characters in *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop* exemplify this by demonstrating that to be happy is not simply to follow a path, but to choose, question, and sometimes refuse the paths that have been laid out in advance. We conclude that healing fiction, when taken seriously as both a literary and pedagogical resource, has the capacity to do what the best literature has always done: not merely to reflect the world as it is, but to open imaginative and emotional space for the world as it might otherwise be. It is in this capacity, to disturb, to comfort, to question, and to reimagine, that healing fiction finds its most enduring educational value.

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