



## Deconstructing Suffering: A Critical Exploration of ‘The Discomfort of Evening’ by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld

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### Abstract

This paper critically explores *The Discomfort of Evening* by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld with focus on the multifaceted nature of suffering through the lens of Pain and Trauma theories. Focusing on the experiences of Jas, a ten year old girl, coping with the sudden death of her brother, the study focuses on the fragmentation of grief within a rural Christian family. Through the Cartesian Dualistic Theory and Gate Control Theory, the paper interrogates the complex psychological and behavioural responses to loss depicted in the novel. The findings in the novel point out that suffering is not a singular event, rather an ongoing fracture that dismantles identity, relationships and faith. Further, the study reveals how mental illness, loneliness and sin-consciousness intersect with childhood imagination expanding trauma from a private affliction to a collective family affliction. Ultimately, the novel highlights the duality of trauma- on one hand it fragments and disrupts lives, on the other it offers an opportunity for empathy, self-reflection and post-traumatic growth.

**Keywords:** Trauma, suffering, pain, depression, mental illness.

### Introduction

*The Discomfort of Evening* by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld unfolds within the confines of a rural Christian family grappling with the death of the eldest son Matthies in an ice-skating accident. The novel is narrated from the point of view of Jas, a 10-year-old who captures the disintegration of a once-stable family. The novel is a poignant reminder of how life can become topsy turvy and change forever when Death knocks at the doors.

The exploration of trauma and suffering in literature has garnered significant scholarly attention, reflecting a growing interest in how narratives represent and process these profound human experiences. Literary scholars often draw on theories from psychology, sociology, and cultural studies to analyze the portrayal of trauma in texts. Scholars like Dominick LaCapra and Shoshana Felman have explored how literature can serve as a medium for processing and understanding trauma. LaCapra's work on "historical trauma" and Felman's analysis of the "testimony" of trauma highlight how literature can reflect, resist, and reconstruct traumatic experiences. Rijneveld's use of symbolic language and fragmented narrative techniques mirrors these literary strategies, offering a profound commentary on the nature of trauma and its impact on the psyche.

After Matthies' death, his sister Jas becomes skeptical about the longevity of her parents and siblings. She begins to live in dread as the harsh reality of life hits her. She begins to fear so much that she starts imagining the excuses she will give to the

teacher about how her parents died.

Mum shrugs when I ask what time they will be back, I lie for hours staring at the ceiling. Then I imagine how I will cope as an orphan and what I will tell the teacher about the cause of their deaths. (Rijneveld 39).

Through various instances Jas also reveals how Matthies' death has led to different psychological issues to develop with her mother. Jas's mother stops eating most of the food items and is usually in a lost and mindless state.

Are you angry?' 'No,' Mum says. 'Sad?' 'No.' 'Happy?' 'Just normal,' Mum says, 'I'm just normal.' No, I think to myself, my mum's anything but normal. Even the omelet she is making right now is anything but normal. There are bits of eggshell in it, and it is stuck to the bottom of the frying pan, and both the white and the yolk have dried out. She stopped using butter and she forgot the salt and pepper again. (Rijneveld 49).

This portrayal aligns with John Irving's insight in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* where he reflects,

"When someone you love dies, and you are not expecting it, you do not lose her all at once; you lose her in pieces over a long time," Similarly, Matthies' family loses him in pieces too, revealing the depth of their collective grief.

## 1. Theoretical Perspectives on Pain and Trauma

This section offers a framework for understanding the experiences depicted in *The Discomfort of Evening*.

### Understanding Pain

According to Lindsay A. Trachsel, Sunil Munakomi, and Marco Cascella in their Pain Theory, the capacity to feel pain is an essential component of the body as it helps it to heal. They also believe that pain is a subjective experience and is influenced by complex interactions of biological, psychological, and social factors.

### Historical Theories on Pain

- **Cartesian Dualistic Theory:** Is the oldest existing theory on pain. It believed that pain was the result of committing immoral acts. This theory is applicable to the text as Jas's mother believes Mathies' death to be God's way of punishing them as he was conceived before marriage.
- **Intensive Theory:** Suggested that pain was not a unique experience, rather an emotion which could be experienced if the stimulus lasted for a long time.
- **Pattern Theory:** Believed that the nerves involved in detecting pain also detect other sensations such as cold, heat, touch etc.
- **Gate Control Theory:** It stated that if the gates in the body opened, it caused the sensation of pain whereas when they closed, a person was likely to be relieved of pain. In the context of the novel, Jas's refusal to part with her red coat is like a coping mechanism. The 'red coat' here symbolises a gate that contains and filters out the pain. Apart from this, there are other psychological gates such as Jas's fixation on death, and her imagined excuses for her parents' demise.

### Contemporary Perspective on Pain

- **Biopsychosocial Model of Pain-** describes pain and disability as a multidimensional, dynamic integration among physiological, psychological, and social factors that reciprocally influence one another. (Turk and Jensen e12123)

### The Concept of Trauma

The term trauma has a Greek origin, where it denotes a physical injury from an external cause. In Luke's Gospel we read of a traveler (the "Good Samaritan") who, encountering the body of a man lying beside the road, took pity on him, went to him, and bandaged his *traumata* [τράυματα] – his wounds. Today, however, we more frequently use the term trauma to describe emotional or psychological injury, as opposed to bodily harm. (Kurtz)

## 2. Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *The Discomfort of Evening*: A Thematic Overview

The novel is replete with various themes, each interwoven to reflect the profound impact of trauma and grief.

**Grief and Loss:** The novel opens with Matthies' death, the eldest son of the family. The suddenness of the trauma leaves the family in disarray. The younger siblings Jas, Hanna and Obbe do not yet understand the concept of death, its permanence, and its irrevocability. They cling to the hope that Matthies is going to turn up one day and their lives will go back to how they used to be earlier. Each member is impacted by the death and takes it differently. Matthies' death leads to the throwing away of the Christmas tree which had been decorated for Christmas.

LaCapra differentiates between 'acting out' (repetition, being stuck in trauma) and 'working through'. The endless excuses that Jas comes up with, for her parents' death and her fixation on death align with LaCapra's notion of acting out.

**Mental Illness and Suffering:** The novel is full of instances where the characters display thoughts and behavior that are extremely uncomfortable and prove that the characters are immensely distressed. For instance, Jas refuses to take off her Red Coat even though it stinks. Students in her class talk about it, make fun of her yet she refuses to part with it. In her words, she needs the coat to feel a little heavy, to be able to keep things in the pockets, to feel like she matters. As the novel progresses, her thoughts become extremely disturbing ranging from morbid fantasies to violent impulses such as thoughts of pushing her sister into the river just to check how Matthies might have died. Caruth is of the view that trauma is an unspeakable wound that has a tendency to return or resurface. Jas's unsettling fantasies of violence are examples of trauma manifesting obliquely as stated by Caruth. Jas is always thinking of things that can make the reader shift in their chairs. We see streaks of mental illness even in Jas's mother who jumps off a height when Jas refuses to take off her red coat.

**Trauma and its Impact on Psyche:** Matthies' death leaves a deep impact on the psyche of his parents and siblings. They begin to behave in abnormal ways. The parents sink into an abyss of depression and the children in the process are left ignored and unmonitored leading to exploration.

**Depression:** Depression shows up in the story in various ways. The parents become emotionally unavailable and distant from their children and between themselves. Jas' mother stops eating gradually and becomes frail. She also experiences bouts of crying and goes into solitude. The parents refuse to bond with each other too as if Mathie's death was somehow the other's fault. They continue to play the blame game.

**Coming of Age and Loss of Innocence:** The novel portrays the children's transition from innocence to a stage of exploration. They carry out experiments in order to satiate curiosity. They explore themselves, each other, and the outside world.

**Isolation and Loneliness:** Isolation and loneliness is a recurring theme. Jas yearns for her mother's affection who has changed after Mathies' death and refuses to bond with anyone. Loneliness is a constant feature in their family. Obbe has a 'Do not disturb' sign board outside his bedroom door and yet he himself keeps coming to Jas and Hanna's bedroom. This points to the innate need of humans for real bonds and connection. Jas explicitly states that the two sisters do not have any such signboard outside their door because they want to be disturbed. The parents do not communicate much with each other, are not intimate and prefer to lead aloof lives.

**Religion and Spirituality:** Religion and spirituality is an integral theme in the novel as the family is a strictly devout Christian family. The family goes to the Church regularly, avoids using slang and are God-fearing. The novel portrays God as punitive, not someone who is kind and loving and forgiving. The kids in the family live in constant fear of being punished for their deeds. In fact, at one point, Jas' mother gets into an argument with her husband over Matthies' death. She believes that since Matthies was born before they got married, God is punishing them for their sins by taking Matthies away. The characters' fear of God's judgment and the associated guilt add another layer of complexity to their grief. Such a belief shows how trauma is filtered through religious

frameworks of sin. This can be understood through Shoshana Felman's theory of testimony- a coded way of narrating loss. The family's dependence on religious guilt reveals how trauma surfaces indirectly, disguised in doctrinal speech.

### 3. The Symbolic Language of Pain and Trauma in *The Discomfort of Evening: A Semiotic Analysis*

As Shoshana Felman stated, testimony functions as a mode of expression, and trauma often resists direct narration. Studying symbolism in the novel becomes all the more important. Literature in itself acts as a testimony to trauma. In this sense, the reader becomes the necessary witness who helps carry the burden of trauma, transforming Rijnveld's novel into an act of collective testimony.

**Animals:** Symbolism can be found in the novel 'The Discomfort of Evening' from the outset to the finale. Animals have been used as an essential symbol. The death of a young calf has been used to highlight Matthies' death in the novel. Animals have also been used as a symbol to represent the sexual desires of humans. For instance, Jas, the 11-year-old protagonist in the novel often observes the toads' mating thinking it might encourage her parents to bond intimately.

**The Red Coat:** Jas' red coat symbolizes her attempt to contain trauma, and later, turns into a distorted expression of her developing identity. Initially, she wears it as a protective shield. As the novel progresses, Jas becomes aware of her changing body and often fantasizes about appearing desirable to others. The red coat continues to take on new meanings in Jas' life. It is also representative of Jas' complexity as a character in the novel.

**Milk:** It is another important symbol in the novel. The family depends on cattle heavily for their daily bread. However, the quality of milk to decay rapidly also symbolizes death and decay of human life in the novel. In line with Caruth's theory, milk turns into an indirect language of trauma.

**Snow:** Turns into a symbol of destruction and isolation. It brings about Matthies' death and the eventual distance between the family members who grow cold and indifferent to each other's pain. This is also an indirect language of trauma in the novel.

**Toads:** Toads occur several times in the novel. They symbolize the metamorphosis of the characters because of the trauma experienced by them. They aren't just symbolic of curiosity about nature, rather they symbolise how trauma accelerates the process of loss of innocence.

**Religion:** Is a theme that pervades the novel throughout. It has a dual effect on the family, of both suppression and liberation. It helps the family to cope up with grief. But at the same time, realistic concepts are dealt with shame and secrecy in the family. Throughout the novel, we come across didactic messages and references to Lazarus, Isaiah, Luke etc. In the story of Lazarus, Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus. It represents resurrection and hope after death. The role of prayer is also paramount in the novel as Jas and her family pray to deal with their grief and loss. The concept of sin is also iterated throughout the novel and its consequences on the sinner.

### Conclusion

By highlighting the fragmented nature of grief, Rijnveld stresses that trauma is not a monolithic experience but a multifarious process of emotional fragmentation and gradual adaptation. The novel's portrayal of mental illness, isolation, and familial breakdown reveals how trauma affects the individual psyche and relational dynamics. This portrayal

aligns with contemporary theories of trauma that recognize its profound and often disorienting impact on mental health and interpersonal relationships.

Trauma can significantly impact not just the mind but the body too. The book "The Body Keeps the Score" by Bessel van der Kolk provides extensive evidence to support this claim. Van der Kolk argues that trauma is stored in the body and can manifest in physical symptoms such as chronic pain, headaches, and gastrointestinal problems. He writes, "Trauma produces actual physiological changes, including a recalibration of the brain's alarm system, an increase in stress hormone activity, and alterations in the system that filters relevant information from irrelevant" (van der Kolk 19).

In addressing the questions of whether trauma has solely negative impacts or if it can yield personal growth, *The Discomfort of Evening* suggests a more complex interplay. While the characters' suffering is profound and disruptive, it also reveals a potential for deeper empathy and self-reflection. The novel's depiction of suffering thus invites readers to consider the broader implications of trauma- its capacity to both fragment and transform, to isolate and connect.

In *The Post-Traumatic Growth Workbook* by Richard Tedeschi and Bret Moore argue that traumatic events can lead to post-traumatic growth. They write, "Trauma is not all negative. It can have positive effects, including increased personal strength, enhanced relationships, and a deeper appreciation of life" (Tedeschi & Moore 2).

Van der Kolk in *The Body Keeps the Score* notes that persons who have gone through extremely traumatic situations have valuable insights. He writes, "The people I have met who have emerged from terrible adversity with strong and resilient minds are generally those who have constructed coherent narratives about their experiences and integrated them into their lives" (van der Kolk 193). Trauma prompts individuals to reflect on their experiences and develop a new perspective on the world. As van der Kolk suggests, "Trauma can be a catalyst for developing a deeper appreciation for life and a greater sense of connection to others" (van der Kolk 3).

Ultimately, the novel throws light on the significance of compassion when navigating and addressing trauma. Yet, Rijnveld does not present healing as the only end-point; the novel remains unsettling in its refusal to resolve suffering wholly, reminding us that trauma can continue to exist in fragments. Growth may emerge, but only as a possibility glimpsed through the act of narrative witnessing.

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