

Childhood trauma in Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *The Discomfort of Evening*: A Reading¹**Afrah Sheriff**

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One of the most distressing human experiences involves childhood trauma, which can be understood as resulting from certain unsuitable circumstances that children go through. Trauma is formed when children encounter or observe adverse situations during their formative years and such experiences prove detrimental to their physical and emotional well-being, causing them to live in a state of perpetual anxiety, distress and fear. Children succumb to childhood trauma due to harrowing experiences such as abuse, violence, neglect, bullying, and loss. These experiences can linger in their minds with a lasting impact well into their adulthood. Several works of fiction deal with this sensitive and painful condition experienced by some children. One such narrative is Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's novel, *The Discomfort of Evening*, which evocatively portrays the theme of childhood trauma. Set against the cold, pastoral backdrop of a rural Dutch landscape, the narrative revolves around the 10-year-old protagonist, Jas, whose life is shattered by her older brother's death as she believes that she is responsible for this tragedy. The novel paints an agonizing picture of how Jas and her siblings, Obbe and Hanna, grapple with the unbearable loss of a beloved member of their family, evincing their grief through painful and disturbing explorations of adult fantasies, fetishism and sexual experiments. Such activities serve as unsound coping mechanisms for the loss they experience, leading to a loss of innocence among the children. The novel also suggests the devastating impact of the emotional unavailability and detachment of parents, which amplifies the isolation of children and their process of grieving. This article aims to foreground the harmful effects of childhood trauma and illustrate the dynamics of a dysfunctional family on children in times of loss with specific reference to Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's novel, *The Discomfort of Evening*.

Keywords: childhood trauma, loss of innocence, coping mechanisms, grief, loss, precociousness.

Introduction:

Dutch writer and the winner of the International Booker Prize in 2020, Marieke Lucas Rijneveld is known for works such as *My Heavenly Favourite* (2024) and her debut novel that brought her recognition, *The Discomfort of Evening*, which was originally published in 2018 and translated by Michele Hutchison in 2020. Her novels are centred on themes such as grief, trauma, sexual abuse, redemption and loss. *The Discomfort of Evening* revolves around Jas, the protagonist, who is a 10-year-old girl when the novel opens but grows into an adolescent in the course of the work. Set on a farm in Netherlands, Jas and her family deal with an irreparable loss: the death of the oldest brother of Jas during a skating accident that takes place before Christmas.

Thus, Jas and her other siblings – Obbe (her older brother) and Hanna (her younger sister) – grapple with ‘childhood trauma’ in the wake of her oldest brother, Matthies’ death. Childhood trauma is characterised by traumatic experiences during one’s childhood often involving abuse, loss, bullying, and torture. Such experiences haunt children and may have consequences in their adulthood as well: “Childhood trauma can occur when a child witnesses or experiences overwhelming negative events in childhood. Many childhood experiences can overwhelm a child” (Blue Knot). Childhood trauma can also be encountered when children witness or come across unfavourable experiences during their childhood and such experiences may impede the emotional growth, leading them to live in constant fear, anxiety and mistrust.

Jas and Hanna are presented as children in the initial parts of the book, whereas their older brother, Obbe, is an adolescent. The three siblings mourn the loss of their brother Matthies in different ways—, crucially without parental support. Although their parents are physically present, they are withdrawn as they attempt to cope with grief themselves neglecting to notice the impact of the tragedy on their other children. Kaminer and Eagle state that:

Like younger children, these junior school-aged children may also become more dependent and fearful of being left alone. Again it is important for caretakers to respond as openly as possible to the trauma and to help their child to talk about their experiences and fears in a sensitive and non-pressurising way. (134)

Children belonging to the same age groups as Jas and her siblings develop increased dependence and are afraid of staying alone after experiencing a traumatic event. It is crucial for parents or caregivers to respond with transparency and gentleness. However, in the case of Jas and her siblings, the parents are emotionally detached and the children are unable to confront such a great tragedy on their own:

After the initial tragedy, the children are left to fend for themselves with the

emotional absence of the parents, and the children are scarred beyond repair. Here, parents ignorantly believe that they are doing a great job by not bringing Matthies' death but the issue of grief needs to be addressed especially if it involves children as they are at a vulnerable state where they can't properly interpret and understand their emotions. (Vaishnavi 4)

Following Matthies' death, Jas and her siblings are forced to take care of themselves as their parents become distant, leaving a void in their lives. The parents are under the mistaken impression that they are handling the situation well by eluding the topic of Matthies' death and ignoring to discuss the event, though painful, honestly and openly with their children. Grief must be confronted, particularly when it concerns children, as they are in a delicate phase and struggle to comprehend their feelings, in particular when they are forced to deal with an event of this magnitude. Childhood trauma is escalated when parents do not support their children when they need them the most and as Nicki observes, "it is normal to want to be loved and part of a community, but many survivors of chronic childhood trauma do not have supportive relatives they can rely on for unconditional love, support, and a high tolerance for mistakes, weaknesses, and flaws" (230). Jas and her siblings long for parental love, familial connection, and, especially, answers for their fears, but receive none. The parents are unavailable to deal with their dilemma and fear.

Jas, Obbe and Hannah thus develop childhood trauma that makes them experience strange desires and also experiment with adult fantasies as a means of dealing with the sorrow and emptiness. They contemplate methods to cope with their sorrow. However, the harder they attempt, the more vacant they feel. Even so, they make an effort to support one another, as is expected of a family. Their activities, however, include self-harm, sexual exploitation and gratification, precociousness, imitating their parents, wishing to go to the 'other side', masking their pain, having suicidal thoughts and the like.

The narrator of the novel, Jas, harbours a fear that her father may kill her pet rabbit, Dieuwertje, as he often implies that the rabbit would serve as a suitable dish for Christmas dinner and expresses a desire to fatten it up. Jas does not want to lose Dieuwertje and wonders if it could be saved if God takes her older brother in its place:

For a moment, I saw my skates before me, greased and back in their box, ready to be returned to the attic. I thought about being too small for so much, but that no one told you when you were big enough, how many centimetres on the door-post that was, and I asked God if He please couldn't take my brother Matthies instead of my rabbit. 'Amen.' (16)

As an innocent child, Jas prays fervently to God to take Matthies, with the hopes of keeping her rabbit alive. However, she does not know that her innocent prayer would cost her. Her wish would become true as Matthies indeed dies in a skating accident:

'Evertsen pulled him out of the lake.' He paused for a moment, looked from Obbe to me and then added, 'Your brother is dead.' I looked away from him, at the towels hanging from the

hook next to the sink that were stiff from the cold. I wanted the vet to get up and say it was all a mistake, that cows are not that much different from sons: even if they go into the big wide world they always return to their stalls before sunset to be fed. (18-19)

The veterinarian who frequents Jas' cowshed to check her parents' cows informs her about Matthies' death. Jas is in denial at first, and wants the veterinarian to take back his words. She thinks of the analogy of cows returning to their sheds for food, no matter how far they go, with the belief that Matthies would also return the same way after the skating with his friends even though this does not happen.

When the mother helps Jas and Hanna bathe in a tub, she reassures them that their brother, Matthies would come back after skating. However, Jas and Hanna are not sure of how to process their emotions and as a result, the former pretends to be oblivious to what they were just told: "To give myself something to do, I floated a Lego boat on the waves my sister Hanna made. She hadn't understood what had just been said and I realized that I could also pretend my ears were blocked, that they'd been tied in a permanent knot" (19). Jas pretends to not comprehend her mother's words. For Jas, feigning nonchalance to the events that transpired served as a form of escapism in the beginning, giving her the chance to feel less guilty about the death wish she had towards her brother, but with time, she struggles to rid herself of the guilt.

Jas' guilt stemming from childhood trauma eventually manifests in speechlessness and nightmares. She frequently wonders how Matthies would have slipped while skating, mainly because she wished for his death without being aware of the consequences:

I lay flat on the ice, like a snow angel fallen from heaven, and looked at my parents – they looked like the dinosaur in a pot I got for my birthday once that were stuck in a kind of jelly. Obbe and I had dug them out of the jelly with an apple corer. Once they were out, there wasn't much point to them: their inaccessibility made them interesting like my frozen parents. I tapped the ice, laid my ear to it, and heard the singing sound of skates. I wanted to call out to them but nothing escaped my throat. (89-90)

Jas imagines herself in her brother's place and thinks of her parents and what they are going through. She strikes the ice, pressing her ear against it, listens to the melodic sound of skates and yearns to call her parents but could not utter a word. Words fail her as Jas gives into auditory hallucinations in her nightmares. All Jas thinks about is the sound of Matthies' skates and how they lead to his death. During church service, Jas notices Reverend Renkema and the Easter bunny and is reminded of Dieuwertje.

Jas reflects on the nightmare and about the process of the baked Easter rabbit infested with mold. She comes to a conclusion that the disintegration of the Easter rabbit would take time. However, in her nightmare, Reverend Renkema was present amidst the reeds, poised

like a cormorant, ready to peck but the scene faded and Jas felt like the salt under her feet started dissolving as she was gliding beneath the ice until she noticed a hole, emitting light from her room.

Yet another instance of Jas's nightmares occurs when she dreams of her classmate, Belle, turning into a fox: "Wherever I walk, Belle appears with her rusty red fox's body" (242). Jas experiences this nightmarish episode after witnessing Belle become the subject of a painful sexual experiment on Obbe's request. She visualises Belle asking her dark and philosophical questions about death: "Is your brother really dead or is Death your brother?" (243).

Matthies' death haunts Jas subconsciously. She is speechless again, and so she does not answer. Belle answers the question herself: "Death has no family, that is why he keeps looking for new bodies so that he won't be lonely. Until that person is under the ground, then he looks for a new one." (243). Belle's reply does not appear to originate from a child. Her words sounded as if they were an adult's in Jas' nightmare because it was not characteristic of a child to sound so morbid. Notwithstanding Jas' age, her precociousness started growing. During this nightmare, Jas contemplates her own death as Belle, the fox, tells her that she would eat her up, allowing her to bear the pain as it would hurt Jas. Even in this nightmare, Jas attempts to escape but her legs give out. Yet, she somehow manages to run but keeps hearing Belle's voice. These nightmares are reminders of the trauma caused by Matthies' death and the guilt that she tries so hard to confront; consequentially, she ends up having morbid thoughts:

More pathological symptoms were found in children whose self-reports and parental estimates described their nightmare experiences as 'chronic' when compared to those who either did not have nightmares or had idiopathic nightmares. Symptoms included emotional difficulties, hyperactivity, inattention, conduct problems, and problems with peer relations. (Ocean 8-9)

A greater number of pathological symptoms have been identified in children whose self-reports and parental assessments characterized their nightmare as 'chronic' in comparison to those who did not experience such nightmares. The symptoms observed in children who were victims of childhood trauma include emotional challenges, behavioural issues, lack of attention and issues related to relationships with peers.

Furthermore, Matthies' death haunts Jas' thoughts similar to her nightmares, from time to time, as a reminder that her brother is still alive:

Dad paints over the doorpost where he used to mark the children's heights after Matthies doesn't come home and won't be getting any taller, but no one cancels his judo magazine subscription, so that 'his death comes crashing onto the doormat again' every Friday. (Mars- Jones).

Jas observes her father painting the spot where he once marked the physical heights of his children even after Matthies' death. Further, Matthies' uncanceled magazine subscription that arrives every week is a reminder to highlight the difficulty of moving on.

Jas not only struggles to comprehend her nightmares but also in addition develops sexual fantasies such as the thought of wanting her bereaved parents to make love to each other, assuming that they would feel happy again. As her life starts falling apart due to unresolved childhood trauma, she believes that this is the sole method to restore her parents' sense of completeness. Though Jas did not have a strategy earlier, she devises a plan as she engages with toads during their migration, forcing them to mate, under the impression that it would make them feel whole by providing positive results.

Jas attempts to look for ways to make her parents happy as she is afraid of losing them. Despite her sadness, she wants to help them live happily and believes engaging in sexual activities may help them: "Jas, the narrator, is acutely aware of the changes in her mother's appearance and the implications for her family's future. This awareness disrupts the seamless progression of the narrative, drawing attention to the characters' existential concerns" (Jha 89). Jas trusts that when her mission is accomplished, she can slip away to the 'other side' in search of a better life or a better childhood, free from any tragedy.

Jas believes that her parents are running out of time, prompting her to urge the toads to mate before it becomes too late. Thus, she physically manipulates the toads by rubbing them together as she remembers watching it on television before. In this process, Jas loses her innocence as she contemplates different methods to encourage the toads' mating. She compares the toads to her parents and worries about their well-being. Nevertheless, she recognizes that change requires time and that she must also allow her parents the opportunity and space to heal and change. However, the parents are still emotionally detached to Jas and her siblings:

In some families, parents or caregivers are emotionally unavailable. They might be cold and withhold physical affection or encouraging words because they grew up in a similar environment. They may have an authoritarian parenting style and believe the adage that "children should be seen and not heard." (Nittle)

Caregivers may not be emotionally available in certain families because they themselves had been raised in an atmosphere devoid of love and comfort. Therefore, they may be aloof and avoid physical connection and may not offer words of encouragement. The phrase "children should be seen and not heard" may reflect an authoritarian parenting technique as emotionally disconnected parents or caregivers invalidate their children's emotional needs.

Having become a victim of childhood trauma, Jas also has a pressing urge to be saved, especially by a man. This can be viewed as Jas being a victim of ‘Cinderella complex’ as she thinks that she is incapable of saving herself and that only a man can help her in tackling misery:

In her book, *The Cinderella Complex: Women’s Hidden Fear of Independence*, published in 1981, Dowling theorized that women traditionally are conditioned from birth to be dependent on others—particularly men—for their emotional and physical safety and security. Dowling used the analogy of the fairytale character Cinderella, who cooks and cleans for her abusive stepmother but ultimately is rescued and taken care of by “Prince Charming.” (Hanes 2020)

Colette Dowling proposed in her work that women are conventionally socialized from birth as they usually tend to rely on others, — especially men, as they think that they are protective. Therefore, Dowling takes the example of Cinderella’s story who dutifully performs all the household chores on her stepmother’s commands but is eventually saved by her "Prince Charming." It is observed that in some cases, children, especially young girls, who go through trauma at an early stage are also susceptible to Cinderella complex as seen in Jas’ case: “‘That’s right. I’m looking for a man to save me from this terrible village. Someone who is very strong. And handsome. And kind’” (111). Jas fantasizes about the man who is most likely to save her. She contemplates a Dutch singer, Boudewijn de Groot, rescuing her as she likes listening to his music but starts to develop an interest towards a middle-aged veterinarian who visits them regularly. Jas is emotionally dependent on anyone who is willing to help her and she believes that despite his age, the veterinarian seems like someone she can rely on.

Jas’ is encouraged by her younger sister, Hanna, to engage in sexual activities starting with kissing. After Hanna kisses her, Jas feels guilty for giving in to an innocent yet incestuous temptation just to get rid of the thoughts of her brother Matthies. She worries about what would happen if their very religious father finds out.

A guilt-ridden Jas thinks from her father’s perspective and considers he may quote the Bible to make her atone for her sin. Jas is anxious about her guilt stemming from participation in an activity that is deemed immoral, and she internalises the blame:

Childhood abuse and neglect can lead to significant psychological outcomes in later life. Many individuals internalize early traumatic experiences, resulting in feelings of low self-esteem, chronic self-criticism, and irrational thinking. This internalized blame can stem from being conditioned to feel guilty or responsible for the circumstances that occurred during childhood. (*Grand Rising Behavioral Health* 2025)

As a result of childhood trauma, Jas’ guilt escalates. She feels guilty not just for Matthies’ death but also for inviting sin into her life. She becomes self-critical and believes

that one may prevent the guilt of sin from entering their heart, but it can never be kept out of their home. Jas masks her pain and guilt by hiding behind her coat after Matthies' death as it is one of her coping mechanisms as well as a means of escapism. She feels comfortable in her coat as it not only helps her brave the weather but also in maintaining anonymity. Even when it gets warm, Jas refuses to take off her coat: "As I pick up a new bale, my coat sticks to my sweaty skin. Even now it's boiling hot I don't take it off" (118). Jas does not take off her coat for it provides her warmth and protection. She also stores her favourite objects in her coat pockets, including a cube of cheese and allows toads to rest in her pockets. The coat also helps her with hiding her problems related to digestion and excretion following Matthies' death. In this way it can be perceived that, childhood trauma affects children's physical health too:

Unresolved childhood trauma can also manifest as physical issues. It's thought that unresolved emotions such as guilt, shame, and fear may be stored in the body and lead to a range of physical problems. For example, chronic fatigue syndrome, irritable bowel syndrome, and fibromyalgia are all conditions that have been linked to unresolved trauma from the past. It's worth noting that physical issues can also result from disordered eating or self-harming behaviors due to guilt and shame. (Ford 2023)

Unaddressed childhood trauma may also present itself through physical ailments. It is believed that unprocessed emotions including guilt and fear can be retained within the body, resulting in many physical complications as time passes. Indigestion and irritable bowel syndrome are physical health issues that Jas encounters and recollects the times when she had to undergo pain when her father pushed green soap in her body to help her excrete: I free myself from Belle and escape into the changing rooms, where I put my coat on over my costume and lie down on the bench. It smells of chlorine. I'm convinced the water's going to start bubbling with soap-suds from the chunk of green soap in me. Everyone will point at me and then I'll have to tell them what's wrong inside. (101)

Jas instantly wears her coat after swimming in school and is concerned about other students spotting foam from her body because of the remnants of soap. She is not prepared to answer the questions that others may pose. Nonetheless, she is pleased that she gets to wear her coat.

Similar to Jas, Hanna who is also affected by childhood trauma, engages in precocious activities despite her age. She also has a taste for partaking in adult activities so as to gain sexual gratification. Though Hanna is younger than Jas, her precociousness keeps getting intensified although she is fully able to comprehend the loss of her oldest brother. Her fetishism is triggered by the urge to act like her parents, and use non-living things to gain pleasure or her father's clothes:

The complexity of mental health intersects with fetishes when the following set of characteristics exist for six months: intense sexual arousal stemming from a body part that is not genitalia or forms an inanimate object, recurring urges and fantasies, anxiousness related to the fetish, and disruptions to home, work, and relationships. (Bradley 2023)

The intricacies of mental health converge with fetishes. It happens when certain characteristics persists for a duration of six months such as extreme sexual drives and excitement originating from inanimate objects or non-sexual parts of the body. These urges can have an impact on interpersonal relationships, and lead to domestic problems. Similarly, Hanna's fetishism resulting from trauma involves strange sexual drives that are applicable to Jas' as well.

Much like Jas, Hanna is also curious about exploring the 'other side,' in search of solace. Hanna is so fixated on the 'other side' that her conversations with Jas usually allude to it: "Do you ever want to go to the other side?" (42). She often asks Jas if she wants to explore the 'other side' as she is eager to know what it would be like: "Don't you want to know what it's like there?" (42). Here, Hanna's way of dealing with grief seems less intense than that of Jas'. She wants to escape to another place, beyond the lake and tries to convince Jas to join her. The reason why Hanna is obsessed with the 'other side' is to also to evade death and the pastoral life in the village: "Hanna's right: we have to get away from this village, away from the cows, away from death, away from life in its original form" (102). Hanna seeks to move on, but trauma holds her back, regardless of her efforts. Her dark thoughts often lead her in pursuit of sexual gratification even though she is a child by allowing her to satisfy herself in order to numb the pain of losing her oldest brother:

'I heard yesterday that you can fantasize yourself dead, the more and more holes will appear in you because it will nag away at you until you break. It's better to break by just trying it – that's less painful.' My sister brings her face close to mine. 'There are people waiting on the other side who can only lie on top of you in the dark, like the way night presses day to the ground, only nicer. And then they move their hips. You know the way rabbits do. After that, you're a woman of the world and you can grow your hair as long as Rapunzel in her tower. And you can become anything you like. Anything.' (266)

Hanna explains to Jas how people on the 'other side' are happy because they are sexually active like rabbits and by doing so, one can be who they want to be. Hanna knows that they are fragile as they do not have the strength to cope with grief. When Jas enquires her if they are fragile, she replies: "As fragile as a blade of straw" (174). Hanna is aware of their brokenness and compares their fragility to a blade of straw. She implies that they are so delicate and can break easily without support.

In addition to her fascination for the ‘other side’, Hanna also engages in subtle ways of harming herself: “‘Now she’s eaten all the strawberries, Hanna starts on her fingernails. Sometimes there are bloody bits of cuticle between her teeth’” (141). Hanna displays signs of nervousness and stress by nibbling on her cuticles, which cause them to bleed. Though she does it unconsciously, only Jas notices it.

As Hanna is the youngest child, she remains quite playful, even though she is more aware of violence and adult life compared to Jas. However, like Jas, Hanna is also concerned about her parents’ grief and how they are unable to move forward. In her work, Gabriele Schwab alludes to the life of Art Spiegelman and states: “The parents refuse to accept their firstborn’s death and never mourn him properly because they couldn’t believe he was dead” (281). Spiegelman’s parents could not believe that their first child was no more and as a result, did not acknowledge the loss properly, which in turn makes the children experience trauma. In the same vein, Hanna has similar feelings about her parents but makes an effort to avoid getting consumed by those disturbing thoughts.

Both the sisters participate in their made-up rituals in bed and call it the “initiation”: “Hanna immediately begins to twist the lower part of her body, which means I have to use more force. Her hands thrash around, clawing into my coat. I’m stronger than her; she can’t get out from under me” (170). Hanna turns violent in such activities in spite of being physically weaker than Jas. She comes up with the concept of acting like grown-ups to imitate their parents and assumes the role of their father while allowing Jas to take on their mother’s role during these activities.

Having participated in Hanna’s sexual fantasies, Jas decides to push Hanna in the lake to find out how Matthies would have felt, but the latter did not react much. Hanna also gradually started mimicking their brother, Obbe: “It looks like she’s in pain but also isn’t. I try to think of explanations for her behaviour. Is this because I pushed her into the water?” (267). Jas wonders how Hanna feels as she barely responds to Jas’ actions. Childhood trauma leads to ambivalent feelings such as those observed in Hanna’s case. She neither feels extremely happy nor sad but sometimes she feels both. Victims of childhood trauma struggle to place their emotions. Similarly, Hanna’s emotions also contradict each other. However, she only tries to help Jas during difficult times and reassures her that she would pray for her. Furthermore, the second oldest sibling, Obbe, who is an adolescent turns violent and sadistic after Matthies’ death. He is unable to acknowledge the violence caused by trauma that haunts him: “Children falling victim to violence do so mainly within the family, within the community, at the institutional level or as a result of war” (*WHO*, African Region).

Children who are victims of violence primarily experience this within their families, in their communities, at institutional levels, or as a consequence of warfare. However, Obbe did not acquire a violent nature because of war or from school but from the situation at home

after his brother's death. He forces his sisters to participate in his painful and violent sexual experiments, especially Hanna. For example, Obbe uses a Coke can to hurt Hanna by inserting it into her genitals.

He derives joy and satisfaction by watching his sister suffer. However, Hanna does not react much even after being hurt and abused. She does not even consider her brother's actions as violent or abusive. Consequently, Hanna disregards the torture inflicted by Obbe. Therefore, the magnitude of such trauma caused by bullying and coercion is considered lesser than big T-trauma. However, the irony is, Hanna is a victim of sexual abuse though she does not see it that perspective: "It is the Small-t traumas that are often overlooked, cast off, and not recognized as abuse by either the victims themselves or by the general public" (Carpenter 67). Minor traumas like these go unnoticed. They are dismissed, and unacknowledged and are not considered as abuse by the victims or people at large. Likewise, Obbe elevates his violent sexual processes by finding a new subject to experiment on for he is under the impression that his subject would enjoy it. He tortures Jas' classmate, Belle, under the pretext of playing a game, by inserting a large needle that is used to artificially inseminate cows.

Obbe is also of the opinion that he and his sisters must sacrifice animals and insects in order to keep their parents alive. He emphasises the importance of these rituals as he convinces Jas also to join him. At first, Obbe kills his hamster, Tiesy, and eventually starts killing and preserving butterflies as a part of his collection. Unlike his sisters who think of less painful forms of escapism to deal with grief, Obbe's life takes a dark turn as he becomes sadistic and wants to inflict pain on those whom he thinks are weaker than him: "Sadistic impulses present in all human beings are held in check by most people. Freudian and modern-day psychoanalysis incorporate the concept of the "id" (libidinous and aggressive energy) as core components in all individuals" (Psychology Today 2022). Though sadistic impulses can be controlled by individuals to some degree, Obbe's impulses are beyond his control as he is charged with "id" and acts on his sexual drives. Jas is also worried about Obbe as she thinks he is sinful and that he tortures butterflies:

It suddenly dawns on me that I can no longer hear the fluttering of butterfly wings against the lids of the cottage cheese tubs. A line from Matthew springs to mind: 'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.' Obbe and I really need to talk. (192)

Jas gets wind of Obbe's activities with his butterflies and how he kills them to feel satisfied and recalls the lines from the scriptures as she is concerned about her brother's mistakes. However, Obbe pays no heed to Jas' words. He also instructs Jas on how to torture their cows: "First you have to gain their trust and only then do you strike without mercy, that's what Obbe taught me. That was how he'd caught the butterflies for his collection"

(193). Obbe teaches his sister to gain the cows' trust by being gentle with them and to hit or kill them brutally. Obbe's morbid fascination with killing insects and animals frightens Jas. Furthermore, he also insists that Jas should sacrifice their father's favourite cockerel so they can bide their time with regard to the Day of Judgement as well as for their parents to feel alive. Following Matthies' death, Obbe becomes numb and exhibits no remorse for his actions, unlike Jas:

I'm not jealous because Obbe's with Dad, but because he has the death of dad's favourite cockerel on his conscience just as much as I do and it hasn't made him fall backwards on the snow. Why does he never catch a chill from the ice-cold plans he drags us into? (274)

Obbe feels no remorse whatsoever after watching Jas kill the cockerel. He is devoid of emotions and does not mind killing animals. He also inflicts pain on Jas: Obbe presses his index finger to his temple, makes a shooting sound and then suddenly pulls the cords of my coat together, constricting my throat. I stare him straight in the eye for a moment and see the same hatred as when he shook the hamster around in the water glass. (156-157)

Obbe attempts to pull the strings of Jas' coat tighter, choking and suffocating her for his own sadistic pleasure. According to Jas' description, Obbe had hatred in his eyes when he tortured his pet hamster. His murderous instincts escalated after Matthies' death. In an effort to compensate for the loss of their brother, Obbe mercilessly takes the lives of innocent beings and develops the habit of banging his head against his bed that leads to scars. Obbe bangs his head in his sleep as well. In the wake of Matthies death, he starts inflicting pain on his sisters and animals but in time, he harms himself too.

In addition to self-harm, Obbe is also affected by irritability and mood swings. He uses swear words although his parents get offended by such profanity that wounds their religious sentiments. He becomes quick-tempered and yells at his parents in fits of rage and admits that he would not be troubled if his mother were to pass away from grief, as he believes that the death of Matthies has scarred him and his sisters more profoundly than their parents. Obbe's methods of coping are different from his sisters. However, his different coping strategies do not indicate that he is unaffected by his brother's death:

What is traumatic to one child differs from another as it depends on the child's perception of the stimulus and their ability to cope. Hence, it is important to talk the child someone after a traumatic event has occurred, even if they show no initial signs of disturbance. Trauma can manifest days, months or even years after the actual event. (Quincy 6).

As far as Obbe's grief is concerned, he does not openly communicate his feelings and the lack of communication from his parents exacerbates his trauma. As a result, Obbe's trauma also takes a toll on his mental health too, with enduring outcomes.

Therefore, Jas, Obbe and Hanna are shattered by Matthies' death, becoming victims of childhood trauma. They forfeit their innocence and navigate through their childhood by seeing pain and horrors of an adult life and eventually descending into sadness and grief despite trying to maintain their bond. Rijnveld's *The Discomfort of Evening* can be considered a good case study to comprehend the effects of childhood trauma as a result of a grief that is not addressed by those in the family who are affected most. The ill effects of not facing a difficult event such as the untimely death of an offspring leads to severe repercussions in the lives of the rest of the family. Coping measures take myriad forms including inappropriate fantasies and acts of violence. In this way, Lucas Rijnveld's fiction *The Discomfort of Evening* can be considered a work that serves as a cautionary tale of the dangers of childhood trauma.

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