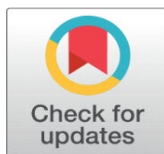


OF SHAME AND SALVATION: THE INTERPLAY OF GRIEF AND GUILT IN THE DISCOMFORT OF EVENING

Dr. Alphonsa C. A. ¹

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Mar Athanasius College, Kothamangalam, Kerala, India



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.6448](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.6448)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2022 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Childhood bereavement produces complex, multifaceted responses, shaped not only by the child but by the larger family and culture. Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *The Discomfort of Evening* (2018; English trans. 2020) chronicles the aftermath of a child's death in a Dutch Calvinist farming family, narrated through the disoriented voice of ten-year-old Jas. This paper argues that grief in the novel is inseparable from guilt: Jas interprets her brother Matthies's drowning as punishment for her prayer, internalizing his loss as her fault. Religious intertexts from the Bible provide a punitive framework, while cultural references to Nazi atrocities embed personal mourning within European collective trauma. Through close readings, I demonstrate how Jas's rituals of shame and self-punishment exemplify Freud's melancholia and Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as belated narration. By drawing on intertextual discourses — scripture, sermons, folklore, and historical memory — Rijneveld dramatizes bereavement not as healing but as melancholic preservation. Shame becomes Jas's paradoxical salvation, a way of holding onto her brother through guilt and suffering.

Keywords: Grief, Guilt, Intertextuality, Bible, Holocaust, Childhood Bereavement, Trauma

1. INTRODUCTION

Grief, when filtered through a child's perspective, rarely follows the structured trajectories described by grief psychology. Instead, it emerges through ritual, obsession, and distortion. Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *The Discomfort of Evening* offers one of the most disturbing yet illuminating depictions of childhood bereavement in recent European fiction. The novel, awarded the 2020 International Booker Prize, is narrated by Jas, a ten-year-old girl whose brother Matthies drowns while ice skating. Convinced that her prayer — asking God to take “one of us instead” — caused his death, Jas enters into a spiral of silence, cruelty, and shame.

This paper examines the interplay of grief and guilt in the novel, focusing on two intertextual frameworks that dominate Jas's imagination: the Bible and Nazi atrocity narratives. The novel's Calvinist milieu supplies her with a vocabulary of punishment, sacrifice, and silence. At the same time, Nazi references embed private grief in the cultural memory of European catastrophe. Jas's narration thus becomes a palimpsest: personal loss is articulated through theological and historical intertexts.

Drawing on Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Bowlby's attachment theory, and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the paper argues that Rijneveld depicts Jas's mourning as melancholia — unresolved, embodied, and guilt-ridden. Rather than working through grief, Jas preserves Matthies by incorporating guilt into her identity. Intertextuality makes

this possible: scripture and history give her the language to experience grief as sin and shame, which paradoxically become her means of salvation.

2. BIBLICAL FRAMES OF GRIEF AND GUILT

The novel's opening establishes a biblical logic of substitution. Jas recalls: "I prayed for God to take one of us instead of Matthies" (Rijneveld 4). The echo of Genesis is unmistakable. Like Abraham bargaining over Sodom, Jas pleads with God, attempting to negotiate life and death. Yet while Abraham's plea secures mercy, Jas's prayer brings disaster. Her brother's drowning literalizes her substitution, convincing her that she has entered a covenant of guilt with God.

This aligns with Calvinist doctrine, in which suffering is interpreted as divine will. Jas does not perceive Matthies's death as chance but as punishment, her prayer the trigger. Her grief is therefore inseparable from guilt. Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia helps illuminate this: Jas cannot detach from Matthies because she identifies herself as complicit in his death.

The family's silence after the tragedy also takes biblical form. At dinner Jas notes: "At table, no one spoke anymore; knives scratched on plates as if they were angry" (32). Her mother withdraws to bed, her father to farm work. This muteness echoes the Book of Job, where suffering defies speech and companions remain silent before God's will. In a Calvinist context, silence becomes submission: to question is to sin. Thus, grief becomes wordless endurance, shaped by scriptural models of obedience.

Sacrificial imagery pervades the novel. Jas envisions her mother as a lamb silenced by God: "God had put a blanket over her mouth, the way He did with the lambs" (51). This recalls both the Passover lamb (Exodus 12) and Christ as sacrificial lamb (John 1:29). The mother's muteness is not interpreted as depression but as divine offering. Jas thus frames bereavement through a theology of sacrifice, seeing her family as lambs for God's will.

Jas also invokes apocalyptic imagery: plagues, divine punishment, and cosmic silence. She fears that every action might trigger catastrophe: "If I take off my coat, He'll take another one of us" (14). This reflects Pauline and Revelation texts where sin invites divine retribution. Jas's coat becomes an apotropaic ritual, a child's way of embodying Calvinist fear of punishment. Her shame is literally worn as salvation.

3. SHAME, RITUAL, AND THE CHILD'S BODY

Jas preserves guilt through bodily rituals. She refuses to remove her coat, starves herself, and harms animals as substitutes for her brother. When she buries frogs alive, she imagines: "If the frogs stayed alive under the earth, then maybe Matthies could breathe underwater too" (73). Such rituals combine biblical resurrection motifs with grotesque experimentation, turning grief into compulsive cruelty.

Rijneveld depicts Jas's grief as visceral discomfort. She describes constipation: "My belly was full of hard clods of earth that could never come out" (67). The imagery merges the farm's soil with her own body, linking bereavement to decomposition. Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body (Rabelais and His World) helps explain this: the body becomes porous, exaggerated, and linked to death and renewal. Jas's grief, unspeakable in words, erupts through grotesque bodily metaphors.

Paradoxically, shame becomes Jas's salvation. Her coat, her constipation, her cruelty — all function as proofs of guilt. By suffering, she preserves Matthies's memory. She cannot let go; instead, she keeps him alive through her own shame. This melancholic preservation exemplifies Freud's claim that in melancholia, "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego" (249). Jas becomes both mourner and guilty victim, her shame a distorted continuation of love.

4. HISTORICAL MEMORY: NAZI INTERTEXTS

Alongside biblical references, Nazi imagery punctuates Jas's narration. She imagines corpses "stacked like at the camps," recalls starvation "thin as in the war when they ate tulip bulbs" (112), and compares divine punishment to mass extermination: "If they could take away thousands of people in one go, why wouldn't God take one of us too?" (138).

For a ten-year-old, such references suggest how deeply Holocaust memory permeates Dutch culture. The camps become her measure of absence, supplying a vocabulary for grief's enormity. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known," and is thus narrated obliquely (Unclaimed Experience 4). Jas

borrowed atrocity discourse to speak the unspeakable: her brother's absence is comprehensible only when imagined as genocide.

These references are not incidental. The Netherlands' cultural memory of Nazi occupation — from famine to deportations — lingers in collective imagination. Rijnveld embeds Jas's bereavement within this legacy, showing how even rural children inherit discourses of atrocity. Her grief is shaped not only by the Bible but by national memory of war.

The convergence of biblical and Holocaust intertexts intensifies Jas's guilt. Her brother's death is simultaneously sacrificial offering and Holocaust-like annihilation. She imagines divine will operating like Nazi extermination: arbitrary, collective, inescapable. This fusion magnifies her guilt: she is both sinner and survivor, complicit in a logic that spans scripture and genocide.

5. INTERTEXTUALITY AND TRAUMA NARRATIVE

Kristeva's theory of intertextuality helps illuminate Rijnveld's narrative technique, for Jas's voice is never wholly her own but stitched together from a network of borrowed discourses—Biblical verses, the cadences of sermons, fragments of folklore, and even echoes of atrocity narratives. These intertexts are not merely decorative but constitutive of meaning: they provide Jas with the only available language to articulate what she cannot fully comprehend. Caruth's trauma theory explains why this reliance on other voices becomes necessary. Trauma, as Caruth argues, resists direct representation; it returns belatedly, in fragments and repetitions, rather than in coherent narration. For Jas, the death of her brother Matthies cannot be expressed in a direct vocabulary of loss or mourning. Instead, her grief emerges obliquely through the texts she inhabits—her prayers that mutate into curses, her imaginings of Biblical plagues, and her fixation on stories of wartime atrocities that seem to mirror the violence she feels inside.

This layering of intertextual fragments shows how Jas's interior world is mediated by larger cultural scripts of sin, punishment, and sacrifice. For instance, her recurring association of Matthies's death with her childish prayer for him not to go skating invokes a Biblical logic of guilt and divine retribution. Similarly, her grotesque bodily fantasies draw on folklore and collective trauma narratives, suggesting that her personal loss is filtered through cultural tropes of suffering and violation. In this sense, Rijnveld demonstrates how bereavement is never a purely private experience but one structured by the symbolic resources a culture provides. Jas's shame and guilt thus do not arise in isolation but are articulated through inherited discourses that both give form to and distort her trauma, confirming Walter's assertion that mourning is always culturally constructed (Walter 193).

6. CONCLUSION

The Discomfort of Evening portrays bereavement as inseparable from guilt and shame. Jas interprets Matthies's death through biblical sacrifice, Joban silence, and apocalyptic dread. Her rituals of guilt become salvation, preserving her brother through suffering. At the same time, Nazi references embed her private mourning in collective trauma, showing how cultural memory of atrocity shapes individual grief.

Rijnveld demonstrates that childhood bereavement is profoundly intertextual: the child speaks not in her own words but through scripture, sermons, and history. Shame becomes both the burden and the means of connection, illustrating how guilt can paradoxically function as a form of salvation.

By weaving biblical and Holocaust intertexts into Jas's voice, Rijnveld situates private grief within Europe's deepest cultural scripts of punishment and death. The novel resists closure: mourning remains melancholia, grief persists as shame, and salvation arrives only through suffering.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky, Indiana UP, 1984.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Bowlby, John. *Attachment and Loss*. Vol. 3. Basic Books, 1980.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, Hogarth Press, 1957, pp. 243–58.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Word, Dialogue and Novel." *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi, Columbia UP, 1986, pp. 34–61.
- Rijneveld, Marieke Lucas. *The Discomfort of Evening*. Translated by Michele Hutchison, Faber & Faber, 2020.
- Walter, Tony. *The Revival of Death*. Routledge, 1994.