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Research Article

Childhood Grief and Trauma in *The Discomfort of Evening* and *Western Lane*

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ABSTRACT

Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *The Discomfort of Evening* (2018) and Chetna Maroo's *Western Lane* (2023) are fictional narratives that examine the pervasive effects of childhood grief and trauma following the death of a central family member. Rijneveld's novel, set within a reformed Christian family in rural Netherlands, portrays ten-year-old Jas's trauma through grotesque imagery, bodily obsession, and fragmented consciousness, illustrating how grief embeds itself in both mind and body. Maroo's work, situated in a British-Gujarati household, follows eleven-year-old Gopi, who channels her father's unspoken sorrow through the disciplined repetition of squash, demonstrating how trauma can manifest through controlled physicality and heightened sensory perception. Both narratives foreground the relational, psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions of bereavement, highlighting how silence, memory, and domestic spaces shape emotional development and identity formation. This paper analyses these texts through the lens of Trauma Theory, drawing on Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Bessel van der Kolk, to explore the embodied, relational, and cognitive consequences of unresolved loss. The study argues that grief is neither uniform nor predictable but is mediated by familial dynamics, cultural context, and interpersonal modelling, offering nuanced insights into literature's representation of childhood trauma and the enduring imprint of bereavement.

KEYWORDS: Childhood Trauma, Grief, Bereavement, Embodiment, Relationality



FULL PAPER**Introduction**

Childhood trauma has long been a recurring theme in European literature, reflecting its significance as a literary subject. This study examines the impact on a child's development when a central family member dies, as such a loss often alters family boundaries, enforces rigid rules, and may trigger behavioural difficulties. Childhood trauma encompasses the emotional and psychological responses children exhibit following distressing events, including the death of a loved one, abuse, or exposure to violence. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "children experiencing traumatic grief may develop significant trauma symptoms related to the death of an attachment figure, such as a parent or sibling," which disrupts their sense of security and emotional well-being (NCTSN). Similarly, research published in *Counseling Today* notes that traumatic grief arises when the natural grieving process is disrupted due to the traumatic nature of death, resulting in lasting negative effects on a child's functioning. These disruptions often manifest as behavioural challenges, withdrawal, and internalised emotional struggles, reinforcing the enduring psychological impact of childhood trauma (UK Trauma Council).

The psychological and bodily dimensions of childhood trauma are thoroughly examined in Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *The Discomfort of Evening* (2018), which chronicles the experiences of ten-year-old Jas as she grapples with the drowning of her brother, Matthies. Within her reformed Christian family in rural Netherlands, grief manifests physically, emotionally, and psychologically, shaping her interactions and perceptions of the world. Jas's refusal to remove her soiled red coat, her obsessive focus on bodily suffering, and her emotional withdrawal exemplify how trauma embeds itself simultaneously in body and mind. Rijneveld employs grotesque imagery, fragmented narration, and sensory excess to demonstrate how trauma resists articulation, creating a household dominated by silence, repression, and disrupted familial dynamics.

By contrast, Chetna Maroo's *Western Lane* (2023) presents a culturally and geographically distinct exploration of childhood grief through the lens of eleven-year-old Gopi in the British-Gujarati diaspora. Following her mother's death, Gopi absorbs her father's unspoken sorrow, expressing her grief through the disciplined repetition of squash training. The structured movements of the sport function both as a coping mechanism and a conduit for emotional communication within a household constrained by silence and cultural expectation. Maroo's spare, lyrical prose captures the nuanced rhythms of mourning, emphasising the interplay between physical action and emotional stillness. Gopi's navigation of familial pressure, gendered expectation,

and cultural belonging illustrates how trauma intersects with identity formation, portraying grief as both an intimate and socially mediated experience.

This paper analyses these novels through the lens of Trauma Theory, drawing on the insights of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. Caruth's notion of trauma as "unclaimed experience" demonstrates how traumatic events resist immediate comprehension, resurfacing through intrusive memories, embodied reactions, and fragmented perception (Caruth 4). Herman situates trauma within the disruption of relational trust, security, and connection, revealing how silence, repression, and bodily responses operate as both defensive mechanisms and forms of communication (Herman 36). Applying these perspectives allows a nuanced understanding of how Rijneveld and Maroo depict the long-term psychological consequences of childhood loss, demonstrating how grief shapes cognition, behaviour, and interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, scholars such as Caruth and Dori Laub emphasise that trauma narratives operate in the tension between remembrance and forgetting, resisting closure while creating spaces for witnessing and ethical engagement (Laub 57). Integrating these insights enriches the analysis of *The Discomfort of Evening* and *Western Lane*, foregrounding the co-constitution of grief, identity, and family dynamics. It also facilitates consideration of cultural and emotional diversity, illustrating how trauma is experienced differently across contexts, and how inclusion, belonging, and relational recognition shape a child's selfhood following loss. While this study focuses primarily on textual and narrative analysis rather than empirical psychological research, situating trauma at the intersection of memory, body, and relationality offers a robust framework for exploring how these novels represent grief, resilience, and identity formation in culturally and emotionally nuanced ways.

Childhood Grief and Trauma in *The Discomfort of Evening*

Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *The Discomfort of Evening* (2018) presents childhood trauma as a pervasive force shaping body, mind, and identity. Ten-year-old Jas experiences her older brother Matthies's drowning as a shattering event that reverberates across her reformed Christian family. The trauma manifests in bodily, psychological, and relational domains, illustrating how grief permeates every aspect of a child's existence. Jas's refusal to remove her red coat, "I was ten and stopped taking off my coat" (Rijneveld 3), symbolises her attempt to impose control over an uncontrollable loss. The coat functions simultaneously as a protective barrier against external intrusion and a marker of a fractured self, echoing Cathy Caruth's claims, "trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (Caruth 58).

Jas's psychological trauma is intensified by the family's silence. She internalises grief, reflecting, "there's less talk in general and that's why most of the conversations only take place inside my head" (Rijneveld 186). Bessel van der Kolk's assertion that "trauma is not just an event that took place in the past, but also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body" (van der Kolk 21) clarifies how Jas's isolation leads to obsessive rituals, intrusive thoughts, and heightened bodily awareness. Her hyper awareness of touch and sensation, when her mother applies udder ointment and "the pressure of her mother's thumbs makes it feel as though my eyeballs would plop into my skull like marbles" (Rijneveld 3), reveals how trauma alters bodily perception, making even care feel invasive. Similarly, hallucinations, such as imagining herself as a folding chair abandoned on ice (Rijneveld 254), dramatise dissociation and the disintegration of identity caused by unprocessed grief.

Trauma also manifests in self-loathing and guilt, both religious and personal. Jas believes her existence contributed to Matthies's death: "Maybe it's our fault that Matthies and Tiesey (pet hamster) are dead" (Rijneveld 115), and fears she worsens her mother's suffering: "Sometimes I'm worried it's our fault that we're nibbling away at her from the inside" (Rijneveld 45). This internalised blame extends to bodily control; she withholds bowel movements to contain grief physically, describing the pain as "stabbing feelings in my belly" (Rijneveld 230), and engages in self-inflicted harm, pushing a pin into her navel (Rijneveld 93). Judith Herman notes that recovery "can take place only within the context of relationships" (Herman 133), highlighting how the absence of parental guidance compounds these manifestations, leaving trauma embedded in both mind and body.

Jas's relational trauma is evident in her interactions with siblings and peers. She assumes a protective role toward her younger sister Hanna, yet simultaneously enacts distress through controlling behaviour, attempting to suffocate her in fear of loss: "She doesn't want Hanna to put on her ice-skates one day and disappear" (Rijneveld 42). Her elder brother Obbe channels grief outwardly through cruelty, abusing animals and asserting dominance over Jas and Hanna (Rijneveld 78), illustrating how trauma produces contrasting coping mechanisms: internalised suffering versus externalised aggression. The family's broader emotional absence, including the father's retreat into religious detachment and the mother's physical withdrawal, ensures that grief is neither acknowledged nor mediated, leaving the children to enact trauma on their own bodies and relationships.

Memory and objects mediate Jas's encounter with loss. She preserves Matthies's presence through physical remnants, from sleeping in his attic room to reconstructing his face nightly, reflecting Pierre Nora's insight that "Memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events" (Nora 22). These compulsive acts reveal the intersection of trauma and memory, as she attempts to resist the passage of time and

maintain control over a world destabilised by death. Historical fantasies, including Holocaust imagery, further reveal how trauma externalises itself through grotesque imaginings, providing a framework to comprehend overwhelming grief: “I see the images of Jews, lying on top of each other like braising steaks” (Rijneveld 53).

Rijneveld’s narrative style mirrors the impact of trauma. The fragmented, stream-of-consciousness narration conveys the disordered consciousness of a child unable to process grief linearly. Grotesque imagery, bodily obsession, and surreal hallucinations reflect trauma’s material and discursive entanglements, aligning with contemporary trauma theory that positions the body as a site of memory, emotion, and identity negotiation. Jas’s grief is thus embodied, relationally enmeshed, and cognitively intrusive, making *The Discomfort of Evening* a profound exploration of how childhood trauma reshapes perception, agency, and survival in the aftermath of sudden loss.

Childhood Grief and Trauma in Western Lane

Chetna Maroo’s *Western Lane* explores the pervasive impact of childhood grief through the perspective of 11-year-old Gopi, who navigates life following her mother’s death. Set within an English Gujarati family, the novel examines how unresolved bereavement manifests physically, emotionally, and relationally, shaping daily routines, perception, and identity. Even a year after the loss, grief continues to govern family dynamics, aligning with Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory, which posits that trauma often manifests in repetitive behaviours and bodily experiences rather than direct articulation (Caruth 4).

Gopi’s father, unable to express grief verbally, channels his distress into rigid structure and discipline, enrolling Gopi in intensive squash training at Western Lane. This physical regimen functions as both a coping mechanism and a symbolic enactment of unspoken trauma, allowing father and daughter to avoid confronting emotional pain directly. As Gopi reflects, “My legs were so tired I didn’t know if I could keep going” (Maroo 1), illustrating the embodiment of grief: the exhaustion of her body mirrors the weight of her unresolved emotional burden. The repetitive drills and rhythmic sounds of squash, described as “a quick, low pistol shot of a sound, with a close echo” (Maroo 1), function as mnemonic triggers, embedding grief in both memory and physical endurance. Trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body” (van der Kolk 21). Gopi’s grief also manifests as emotional detachment and heightened sensory awareness. She observes her father’s withdrawn behaviour, sitting silently, murmuring to her absent mother, and internalises these patterns as models for processing loss. Vygotsky’s social development theory posits that children learn emotional responses through observation (Vygotsky 57), explaining how Gopi mirrors

her father's unspoken grief. The echoes of the squash court, the muted sounds of the household, and subtle shifts in her sisters' behaviour become Gopi's interpretive framework for understanding bereavement, highlighting how trauma shapes a child's cognitive and emotional engagement with the environment.

Memory plays a central role in Gopi's trauma, where every day spaces and objects trigger recollections of maternal presence. The squash court itself becomes a site of mourning: repetitive drills and sounds echo past family routines, embedding grief in physical performance. The fort, once a playful site of familial bonding, transports Gopi to moments of collective joy, "watching Wimbledon on TV and eating strawberries covered in sugar" (Maroo 20), revealing the intertwining of memory and loss. Similarly, domestic spaces like the bathroom evoke past rituals, where moments of maternal care, such as applying sindoor, contrast sharply with the present void, demonstrating how trauma persists through sensory memory and embodied recollection (Maroo 27).

Maroo depicts grief as a familial phenomenon, affecting each sibling differently. Mona experiences depression through physical and emotional symptoms—aches, irritability, and introspective worry (Maroo 34), while Khush displays hallucinatory attempts to reconnect with the absent mother, speaking in Gujarati as if to bridge the gap (Maroo 23). Gopi witnesses these expressions silently, internalising the family's collective trauma while navigating her own grief. Even the father exhibits signs of unresolved loss, engaging in mutterings to unseen presences (Maroo 108), reinforcing the idea that bereavement permeates the household in subtle, unspoken ways. Maroo's narrative style mirrors the disorienting effects of trauma. Through a first-person, retrospective perspective, past and present blend fluidly, reflecting the instability of memory in the wake of loss. Fragmented storytelling, sparse dialogue, and observational prose convey emotional detachment and internalised grief. Sensory and physical experiences, particularly within the squash court, evoke the weight of trauma without overt sentimentality, aligning with trauma theory's emphasis on fragmented recollection, intrusive memory, and the bodily imprint of grief.

Conclusion

A comparative reading of *The Discomfort of Evening* and *Western Lane* foregrounds the multifaceted nature of childhood grief and trauma, illustrating how loss reverberates across mind, body, and environment. Both novels centre on young female protagonists, Jas and Gopi, whose experiences of bereavement manifest through emotional isolation, altered perception, and unspoken sorrow. Rijneveld portrays trauma through grotesque imagery, fragmented consciousness, and compulsive bodily reactions, whereas Maroo presents grief as restrained, internalised, and mediated through disciplined physicality and heightened sensory awareness,

highlighting that grief is neither uniform nor predictable but both individually embodied and relationally shaped, dependent on family dynamics, parental coping mechanisms, and socio-cultural context. Both texts emphasise the impact of emotional repression. Jas internalises trauma through intrusive thoughts and obsessions with mortality, while Gopi channels her grief into the rhythmic repetition of squash, reflecting her father's unspoken sorrow. Silence, absence, memory, domestic spaces, and everyday routines operate as conduits for grief, linking past and present while reinforcing unresolved loss, exemplifying Caruth's assertion that trauma resists direct articulation (Caruth 4) and van der Kolk's argument that it leaves lasting imprints on mind and body (van der Kolk 21). Relational contexts further mediate trauma. Jas confronts her suffering in grotesque internalisations, whereas Gopi expresses grief through controlled observation and physical action, reflecting parental modelling (Vygotsky 57). Despite stylistic and expressive differences, both narratives demonstrate the isolating consequences of unprocessed trauma and its profound, lasting effects on identity, perception, and emotional development. Ultimately, these novels collectively underscore the urgency of acknowledging and engaging with grief, showing that its suppression perpetuates cycles of emotional detachment and internalised suffering, and highlighting the complex interplay between narrative form, emotional experience, and the embodiment of childhood loss, offering nuanced insights into literature's representation of bereavement.

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