

3

Review of Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *The Discomfort of Evening*

Rijneveld, Marieke Lucas. *The Discomfort of Evening*. United States, Graywolf Press, 2020. 224 pp. Rs 1280.

Reviewed By

Aparna Patnaik

Independent Researcher

In his debut novel, *The Discomfort of Evening*, Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's advances by exploring the child narrator Jas' perceptions of a precarious world, ready to fall apart. *The Discomfort of The Evening* received the Booker International Prize for literature in 2020. Set in Netherlands, it was translated by Michele Hutchison into English from Dutch. The narrator, Jas is ten years old and through her the readers are introduced to the intense trauma that the narrator and her family had to undergo.

The terrible personal loss, along with keeping up with the school, taking care of her family-the toads and a growing 'discomfort' leaves Jas is grappling with the question of why and who could be Death's next favourite – Pigs, Cows, Hitler or Jas herself? As writer Max Porter adds, it is "one of the best debut novels I have ever read...Utterly Unforgettable." The novel's setting may be completely unfamiliar to an Indian reader, but the thoughts of a terrified child bring a ten-year-old in me closer to the novel.

The novel revolves around a Presbyterian family who dares to revolt against God only in their minds. The family consists of a father, a mother, and their four children, one of whom is Jas, the omnipresent narrator. The disturbed relationship between nature and God in the post-postmodern age is distinctly portrayed in the agitated marriage of the father and the mother – "It might sound crazy but I miss my parents even though I see them everyday...The

thing is, they're not drifting away from us but we are drifting away from them."

Not all readers will agree with the climax of the novel. Jas' growing years could be compared to that of *Lolita's*, hence creating controversy immediately after publication. The novel portrays Jas being continuously haunted by her brothers and father, sometimes the ghost of the dead cows on the farm and at times herself. This child's raw cynicism moves the modern reader caught in the midst of disillusionment and chaos. As Jas says – "There are no good times here, and if we have we only know them later."

The book can be assumed to be set in the 'Foot and Mouth' outbreak of 2001 in the Netherlands. A future edition can add background information about this point to assist readers unfamiliar with the context of the book. The family in the novel owns a farm and the children grow up sensitive to the cause of animals. The narrator's consciousness keeps drifting back and forth to the hamster in the room, cows mooing with hunger and toads mating. The stream of consciousness of Jas admirably progresses that of Mrs. Ramsay or Leopold Bloom. It could be seen in many scenes, such as when the shopping list reminds her of the temporary existence of man.

Unlike Jas in the book, the novel's author doesn't believe in any form of binary ideas. In contradiction to its author, Jas could be seen as a traditional girl, who entertains the ideas of mutiny against the patriarch and God. Jas tries to be loyal to the two masters that she serves-God and Dad throughout the novel. She believes that another master could make matters worse. Nonetheless, she ends up going against the codes of the Bible towards the end of the novel.

The novel can be of huge interest to scholars interested in trauma literature. One point that resonated with me personally was the comparison between Jews and Cows. Now that humans have gone through many epidemics, one can comprehend at the end of the novel, the threat epizootics pose to cause epidemics and how much care and love the animal kingdom deserves from us.

" 'Murderers! Hitler!' Obbe shouts afterwards. I think about the Jewish people who met fate like hunted-down cattle, about Hitler who was so terrified of illness that he started to see people as

bacteria, as something you can easily stamp out. The teacher told us during the history lesson that Hitler had fallen through the ice when he was four and had been saved by a priest, that some people can fall through the ice and it's better if they're not rescued. I wondered then why a bad person like Hitler could be saved and not my brother. Why the cows had to die while they hadn't done anything wrong."

Also ever wondered what will happen if your God actually listens to you? This is a novel that could be suggested to pessimist readers and their disbelief in God. One might wonder from the first chapter to the last of the novel how that ever absent God plays a vital role by just listening to Jas for once. This part of the novel resonates with that of *Hayavadanna* by Girish Karnad, where Kali listens to Padmavati's demands, which invites a twist in the peaceful married life of the characters in the novel.

Despite the lack of a complete biographical insight into the novel, this review ends with a recommendation that the book would be worth adding to the library of anyone who is interested in animal life, child psychology, religion and trauma literature or translational studies or just wants a deeper understanding of the world one lives in.