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### Demonization of Children in Laurence Yep's "The Phantom Heart"

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#### Abstract

This article explores some cultural aspects that lead to the demonization of children in the post Chinese Revolution era (1945-1949) in Laurence Yep's story "The Phantom Heart". Based on the insights of Joseph L. Zarnado, Anfeng Sheng, John Clarke and some other critics, it uses children's perspective to examine the adult behaviors. It examines how dominant adult psychology makes children victim of injustice, poverty and insecurity. The Chinese Revolution, led by The Chinese Communist Party in 1946, ended with the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The change in political system still did not bring a positive change in the attitude towards children. This study ponders on the overall adult attitude of the time towards the children. It tries to excavate cultural and psychological aspects latent in the protagonist characters of the story. Analyzing the mutual relationship of the major characters with the children, it makes an endeavor to portray the impact of dominant adult ideology on children in the socio-political and cultural level. It tries to answer whether the adult ideology to socialize children strengthens their overall development or makes them weaker. It also answers why children are made victim of adult ideology. Its finding suggests that adult ideology has crippled the psychological development of children rather than helping them to develop their fundamental potentials and the children have always been the victim of poisonous images invented against them by the dominant culture to perpetuate dominance. This research offers a new interpretation in studying adult behavior within the context of existing scholarship.

**Keywords:** *children, demonization, dominant ideology, poisonous images*

## Introduction

Adult relationship with the children has always been debatable. The adults feel that it is their moral responsibility to civilize the children. They assume they must impose adult ideology to the children to make them better in their later lives. But Joseph L. Zarnado, in his book *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood* (2001) asserts, "Adult culture has long gone blind to the child and the child's most basic biological and emotional needs" (xiv). The opinions on both sides are ongoing. When we look back the history we have come across regarding the human relationship, children have always been behaved as if they are nominal creatures just to assist the adults obeying silently every errand they receive. The adult ideology has always been quite dominant regardless of children's concerns. Zarnado writes further:

The bourgeois adult culture believed they understand the most effective manner in which to rear the child reveals that colonialist ideology is at one and the same time the dominant ideology of Victorian culture. The child was savage, the adult civilized. Fathering meant exercise of Godlike authority followed by the child's slave like obedience." (107)

Zarnado does not hesitate to say that the so called "Golden Age" of children, i.e. the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was also tyrannical in its pedagogy. He claims that this age was an age of imperialism that had colonized the children's physical and spiritual development.

During and after the cultural revolution of China, children and their literature had not been given much attention. The state was inclined to neglect children's literature. The focus of the state was rather more on politics than on the education or literature. Anfeng Sheng, in a literary journal *Comparative Literature Studies* writes under the title "Children's Literature during China's Cultural Revolution: A Critical Review":

Politically children's literature had to firmly keep in mind the 'class struggle', following the numerous guidelines, and write for 'the masses', for politics, and 'for the proletariat revolutionary causes'. Thus, instead of promoting knowledge acculturation and science education, children's literature was deprived of interest and delight, descending to a stereotyped, dry and dull, and repetitive megaphone of politics or brainwashing instrument. (97)

The imperialist western power regarded the literature of the time as monstrous literature. The child rearing pedagogy of the time was still stereotypical. Hans van de Ven describes that during the Maoist period, particularly from 1960 onwards; Chinese society witnessed extensive militarization into civilian realms (352). The soldiery was taken as an instrument of social change. In the early 1960s, for instance, Mao Zedong called upon the entire nation to learn from the People's Liberation Army the image of military, orderly,

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disciplined and instantly mobilized force (Lee 407). It was regarded a paragon of production and it could bring improvement to socio-economic status. The children also participated in military training. The high school leavers were sent to rural hinterland to engage in manual labors (Naftali 88) that were parts of military training. Cultural Revolution publications inculcated students such education that taught them to obey the adult orders. The narratives published in the magazines reflected adult opinions rather than the children's voices (Naftali 93). The children had to shape them as per the adult desires rather their own. Their interests were understood as immatures daydreams based on mere fantasies.

The negative image of children had not improved in European or American literature as well. Even in the age of science and technology the writers revived the ancient black pedagogy which demonized the children. John Clarke, in his essay "Origin of Childhood: In the Beginning..." says, "In a sense, both the Romantic and the Puritan discourses construct childhood as a process of becoming (people or adults) in line with traditional developmental psychology. Both discourses, therefore construct negative images of children based on the concept of dependency, moral immaturity" (24). It shows that still the western societies perceived childhood as separate from adults and they needed to be tamed carefully. The supernatural interruption on human life frightened the children's mindset.

Chris Jenks claims that the notion of children as violent and having lethal conduct has not yet vanished from post-World War-II public discourse in western Europe and North America, or indeed elsewhere in the world (123). The children are often supposed to be vulnerable and evils disturbing the peace of the adults. Orna Naftali finds that in the Cold War period, images of children were central to the government justifications for the expansions of national defense apparatuses on both sides of the conflict (85). As the children were major distracters of national security, similar government security policies were formed to control them. However, there were also debates about the spaces the children should occupy. As a result, the adults started to produce distinct images of children as the victims of war and military violence (Stephens 103). Children began to be symbolized for purity and innocence. Margaret Peacock asserts the socialist discourse began to embrace a vision of children as the revolutionary warriors who were already implicated in the politics of class struggle (15). Xu Xu claims that PRC media portrayed children as the fierce combatant rather than weak, angelic creatures. She found the Chinese publications had depicted children in the class and national liberation struggle against imperialism (381). However, the depiction of children in the positive light was still too scanty.

Quoting Thomas Hobbes's idea from his book *Leviathan* (1601), Laurence H. Keeley, in his book *War Before Civilization* (1996) says:

In his great work, *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes first established that, in practical terms, all men were equal because no one was so superior in strength and intelligence that he

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could not be overcome by stealth or the conspiracy of others. He found humans equally endowed with will (desire) and prudence (the capacity to learn from experience). But when two such equals desired what only one could enjoy, one eventually subdued or destroyed the other in pursuit of it. (5)

Keeley here asserts that there is no reason to behave any human being lowly. All humans deserve equal respect. In the case of children too, the adults are expected to be even humane as they are tender and in the process of being. They should be addressed with care. The literature they read should also be in accordance with their necessity. It should answer and satisfy their curiosity.

It should make them bold and confident to face the forthcoming challenges in their personal or collective level. This is what Rousseau asserted. Keeley further remarks, ". . . like Thomas Hobbes, Rousseau asserted the natural equality of mankind but saw humans in their natural state as being ruled by their passion, not their intellect" (6). Rousseau realizes the harsh reality that human beings are not yet in their civilized state and they are still guided by their primitive instinct of dominating others. This, according to him, is the root cause of violence. And when the violence takes place, it is the weaker ones who suffer from the tyranny of the stronger. It is what is taking place in the case of children. They are always being imposed the dominant ideology of the adults, used as workers for the benefit of others, forced to be involved in the crimes like theft, spying, suicide bombing, rapes, etc. Even in literature, the children are not presented in the positive light. They have been given some marginal roles like a conjuror's assistant on the street magic shows, circus or sales boys in the cinemas and theatres. They are portrayed as some insignificant creatures just in contrast to what Thomas Hobbes opines.

When we go through the medieval literature, the role of ghost or monster is dominant. Fairy tales written for the children are full of such spirits, soothsayers and monks, etc. claim that they equip the readers presenting before them a world of fantasy, heroism and social reality, yet they fill the children with fear, making them psychologically weaker on the one hand, and they teach them with black pedagogy.

Laurence Yep's story "The Phantom Heart" from the anthology *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* (1991), follows the Chinese stereotypical poisonous pedagogy. This has resulted in the impairment of not only the children but also the adults like the 'shopkeeper' in the story. This study concentrates on how supernatural belief leads adults to the expulsion of children from homes. Using children's perspective as the theoretical parameter, it examines the existing socio-cultural dimensions and pedagogy that push children to the margin. It observes the adult psychological mindsets that demonize children instead of glorifying their purity and innocence. It uses the insights of critics like Joseph L. Zarnado, Anfeng Sheng, John Clarke. The study uses Laurence Yep's story "The Phantom Heart" as a primary data

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and other scholarly articles published in different journals and critical texts as secondary data. Because this research paper falls under literary hermeneutics, it analyzes characters, connotative aspects of their behavior. It interprets the text with the insights envisioned by the above-mentioned theorists. The critics mentioned so far have claimed that human instinct and tradition are the causes why the adults demonize children. The psychological and socio-economic aspects impacting demonization of children have not received adequate attention. Exploring this gap of psychological and economic factors that lead the adults to ill-treat children, the present study claims that instead of facilitating children's all-round development, dominant ideology of the adult has made them weaker in socio-economic and psychological level only for continuing its privilege.

"The Phantom Heart" a science fiction published in 1991 by Laurence Yep, a Chinese American (1948), comes under the anthology *Tongue of the Jade* (1991). This anthology is retelling of Chinese folktales. Yep introduces supernatural elements in the story. These phantoms reflect the ways the adult world exploits the children pushing them to destitute. The story depicts how a little girl is made victim of adults due a frightening vision of a man in his

dream. She is forced to run here and there for her security but she ultimately turns destitute due to adult behavior. In the story, a shopkeeper, who dies of a monster's attack, is brought to life again. The writer imagines implanting a new heart in the dead man's body that gives it a new life again. The story, which is mainly targeted for the young readers, however, portrays children in the negative light. They have become the victim of poverty, social injustice, supernatural intervention, ill fate or adult cruelty. Even after many years of their marriage the shopkeeper's couple has not had a baby. The wife first proposes to her husband to adopt a child. But the shopkeeper is of the opinion that children are very nasty and they are to be utilized as their helpers in their old age only. He calculates profit-loss in keeping them. Yep says, "When you are alive, there is no profit in children. They're dirty, noisy, wasteful creatures. When you're dead, you're lucky if the ungrateful little things remember their duty" (330-31). The shopkeeper's attitude toward children is problematic here. He seems to have been so superstitious that he keeps the children reserved only to extend their prayers and offerings for the peace of his soul after his death. This is a typical stereotypical representative Chinese characteristic of adult impulse towards children even after the great Chinese Cultural Revolution. Through the shopkeeper as a representative adult, the scenario of the adult relationship with the children comes ahead. The shopkeeper hates children and it is the reason why he does not get attracted to adopt any child in spite of the fact that the couple had had no babies for so many years after their marriage. He marginalizes children only as his helpers. Like the shopkeeper, his wife also regards the little girl as an evil creature that might disturb her marital life. This study also examines the mindset of the shopkeeper's wife who proposes her husband to accept her idea of adopting a baby at first, and reject the idea of accepting the maid at the end.

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The little girl becomes the victim of adult world because of Electra-complex. The term 'Electra complex' was first used by Carl Gustav Jung who modified the Freudian model of Oedipus complex though later Sigmund Freud rejected it as psychoanalytically inaccurate. He said, "What we have said about the Oedipus complex applies with complete strictness to the male child only, that we are right in the term 'Electra complex', which seeks to emphasize the analogy between the attitude of the two sexes" (Scott 8). However, Jean Laplanche and

J.B. Pontalis write, "In Neo Freudian Psychology, the Electra complex, as proposed by Karl Gustav Jung in his Theory of Psychoanalysis, is a girl's psychosexual competition with the mother for possession of her father. In the course of her psychosexual development, the complex is the girl's phallic stage; a boy's analogous experience is the Oedipus complex" (152). The shopkeeper and the maid's relationship can be seen from the Jungian model of Electra complex.

When the shopkeeper comes across a sad female child repeatedly around his shop several days, he intends to know why she is around his shop every day. As she was running out of his fear, he holds her hand and wants to help her. He comes to know she is deeply stressed due to her master's behavior to her. She tells him she is like a caged bird. He then promises to help her make free of her cruel master and mistress. His hatred towards children is overcome for a moment. His profit-oriented mind becomes paralyzed by the presence of the little girl who desperately needs some help from him. Yep writes:

"Just as she was leaving, the shopkeeper ran out of this shop. 'Wait', he called. The little girl would have run like some fright deer, but he caught her hand. "I have watched you for three mornings now. What's troubling you?" She gazed at the shopkeeper and clasped her hand as if she were drowning. "You have such a kind face; I think you truly want to hear". (Yep 331)

The girl wanted him to help her but she could not express it due to aggressive behavior of the adults. After the shopkeeper helps her financially, she is freed. She then comes again to ask him help her. The little girl persuades him to convince his mistress to accept her as their maid. She does not go to convince the shopkeeper's wife by herself. The same person, who first regarded the children as dirty, noisy and wasteful, convinces his wife to accept the little girl to their house as a maid. He manages a room for the girl in his house. He says, "There's a long, narrow closet that I have been using as a storeroom. She can sleep there" (Yep 332). Interpreting this event can be best understood from Neo-Freudian psychoanalytical perspective and the notion of Electra complex, or the father /daughter relationship.

As the shopkeeper is ready to accept the girl as a maid, his wife hesitates to do so now. She works out with every intention to fire the little girl. The same woman who had proposed to her husband for adopting a child earlier is so hard-nosed and afraid of keeping her in.



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She is worried about no any socio- cultural factors. Now she is suspicious of her husband's possible entanglement with the little girl. Though they are childless and desperately in need of a baby in their house to make a company for now and for their old age, she wants to possess her husband solely to herself. She might have consented to adopt a boy easily. But she cannot take the maid easily. It makes her despise the girl. Again, the little girl becomes a victim of the adult world for a psychological reason.

On the one hand, the socio- cultural political factor that pushes the little child to a pitiable state is quite condemnable. Her parents sell her to some rich parents. The new parents are also not kind to her. They always send her out to bring fruit and flowers which she obeys in spite of her difficulty. The little girl says that they give her physical punishment. The parent child relationship is not based on love and compassion here. The little babies become the scapegoats at hard times. The little girl becomes the victim of poverty from her parents. It is not the parents who suffer from poverty first; it is the little girl who is sold to some rich people.

After a monk says that the shopkeeper is being killed very soon by a monster that stays in his home, he starts to see a demon in the maid. Though she had served the couple to their satisfaction, yet the shopkeeper violently dumps her out of his house immediately. The girl goes out of the house helplessly, as a victim of her poor fate. Looking at it from the psycho cultural perspective, the act of demonizing the girl takes place as a reaction to anxiety. As the monk says that the shopkeeper is going to die soon, he is so hopeless that he cannot think straight. He visions the monk's prophecy will surely come true after his shaken soul feels a real monster moving in a room of his house. When he finds the girl standing where the monster in his illusion had been earlier, he takes the girl for a real monster. The trauma makes him behave so wildly in chasing the girl out of his house so violently without even asking her and letting her have an opportunity to make her say on the event. Later even after the girl leaves the house, he is afraid of the storm. The monster haunts him. He behaves so abnormally he rolls over and puts his arms around his wife. He cannot utter a squeak. Here, the conflict in the mind of the shopkeeper occurs because of a cultural context that has shaped his way of critical thinking and taking things. The culture he has lived in has transmitted to him certain values and behaviors that have led him to be so cruel to the girl. Here the small children are demonized in spite of the fact that they are innocent. They are, for no reasons, blamed to be some evil spirits challenging the fate of the adults if any unpredictable disaster is to take place in the adult world.

### **The Monster as a Black Metaphor**

When we examine the most influential narratives, there is often use of dark metaphors that demonize children. The fairy tales that we prescribe in school curricula cripple children

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more than strengthen them. Jack Zipes pointed out that debates over the value and influence of fairy tales have been ongoing since the eighteenth century (138). Marcia Liebermann writes:

If we are concerned about what our children are being taught, we must pay particular attention to those stories that are so beguiling that children think more as they read them 'of the diversion than of the lesson'; perhaps literature is suggestive in direct proportion to its ability to divert. (184)

Both Jack Zipes and Marcia Liebermann are of the opinion that the metaphors used in fairy tales are not doing any good to children. They are beguiling and diverting children's real enthusiasm of the age to worthless stories that weaken their strength. In "The Phantom Heart", the 'monster' is a dark metaphor that inspires the shopkeeper to behave the little girl rudely. He begins to see the image of a monster in the little girl and this makes him pretend to kick the little girl out of his house.

### **Adult's Thirst for Power: A Cause of Children's Victimization**

Because children cannot protest the adult, they are made the first victim during the hard times. Children have often been heard of being the sacrificial objects in case a draught, famine epidemics took place. Similarly, the little girl in the story is suspected to be a monster in the form of human to kill the shopkeeper, even in the twentieth century literature. The image of the monster here is a black metaphor. It is an adult tool to subdue the world of innocent children and a way of victimizing the girl in the story. But it backfires the adults killing the shopkeeper and making his wife run here and there begging help of the monk and his master who lives in the mountain. It is the monster that ultimately makes the wife surrender before the monk and the dirty master who makes her eat the ball of dirt that he took out scratching his body. After getting new life, the shopkeeper is still haunted by the same monster until the Master Monk tells them the way to kill it. It is not only the shopkeeper who is to be blamed for treating the girl in an ill manner here; the so-called holy men like priests and monks are also responsible persons who make a prophecy that scrutinize a beautiful family that has lived in harmony for years. They are the poisonous images carefully invented by the adults to perpetuate their power over the children. Such people who claim to have their connections with supernatural powers are also victimizing the weaker children. The ultimate acceptance of the couple to adopt a new baby is a good example of their utmost selfishness. They do not need a baby as long as they are powerful. They need it now as they are weak. The shopkeeper's wife, knowing that her husband might die at any time as he suffers from heart problem, feels that she needs to adopt a baby. Her repressed fear of her husband's relationship with the new baby is also erased as she knows the shopkeeper is now sexually inactive. This is nothing more than a commoditization of the baby.



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These arguments lead to conclude that the children have always been the victim of the adult world's repressed social and psychological desire.

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