Chapter 1

Introduction

The topic of childhood, particularly, its representation, continues to generate a great deal of scholarly attention in the humanities. This interest is supported by broader theorising in the field of childhood studies since the 1960s. Childhood, in itself, has increased in significance and profundity over the last century. The figure of the child in twentieth-century fictional representations dons the roles of prop, victim, hero, and antagonist; shifts from the margins to the centre of the narrative; and sheds its aura of romantic innocence for more nuanced psycho-social dimensionality. In the rubric of child-centric fiction in the gothic mode, which includes horror-thriller literary works as well as film, the child even turns monstrous and continues to be so. The abiding existence of such radical representations across texts, media and eras appears as a cipher which cannot be decoded without contextual understanding of the philosophical, historical, and generic conditions that make these representations meaningful. The thesis is the result of an enquiry into the ideological milieu implicated in the long-abiding representational paradigm of the monstrous child.

I put forward three key arguments.

1. The emergence of the child as the new monstrous in twentieth-century narratives of the gothic mode is argued to be historically situated rather than a revival of medieval puritanism and its belief in childhood sinfulness; it is part of a larger socio-scientific discourse regarding criminality, human and natural evil, and modern scientific discoveries.

2. The child and his/her childhood in these texts are corrupted, profane, and specious; they are transgressions against three orders – the divine/religious, social and natural. The plurality of negative representations of the monstrous child is mapped

across texts and dissected along the three axes of evil, crime, and the monstrous.

3. The narratives, it is argued, build themselves within an ideological framework that advances a moralistic, degenerationist and retributive stance towards childhood 'perversity'. A key narrative strategy is the othering of the child as anti-human or even inhuman in order to create a narrative situation in which violence against the child is justified. The cautionary discourse within these narratives demands the purging of the monstrous (which may or may not succeed) from the sacred terrain of childhood.

1.1 Definition of Terms

Childhood here is used to mean the state of being a child, rather than the period of a person's life during which he/she is a child in politico-legal terms, (which, according to the UN definition, includes upto eighteen years of life). Childhood, literally meaning 'the state of being a child', connotes a period of play, of vulnerability, dependence and innocence of the world. The term 'child' is used here in chiefly three senses – to refer to the biological category of physically immature persons who are in the process of becoming fully-grown; or, the legal category of persons who do not enjoy the same rights and privileges as adults but rather require care and protection on account of their moral and mental immaturity; or again, the conceptual category denoting figures from the changing discourse of childhood, such as the Puritan 'sinful' child, the Romantic 'wild' child, and the Victorian 'innocent' child. I have chosen the age of ten as the upper limit of the childhoods taken for discussion (though the limit will not be treated as absolute and exceptions will be made wherever required). The choice is encouraged by a practical need to limit the focus of study to the social category seen as markedly distinct in terms of selfhood, knowledge, and capacity for action, from that of adolescence. More pertinently, the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) in the British and American cultural backgrounds taken for study is ten or less (depending on federal laws in the USA).[1]

Fiction is used here in the broad sense of narrative, and includes novels, short stories,

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[1] The global average of MACR is fourteen. In UK, it is ten, raised from the earlier seven. At the state level, 35 US states set no minimum age of criminal responsibility, theoretically allowing a child to be sentenced to criminal penalties at any age, though in most of these states a capacity related test is applied (Cipriani 117-118). In most commonwealth countries, including India, the MACR is seven.

films, and TV episodes of the twentieth century. But the specification of the period is not restrictive; owing to the nature of the historical representational paradigm under study, the late nineteenth and the early years of the twenty-first centuries are also included in the period for study. The texts chosen have the child as a disruptive, powerful force performing a pivotal role in the narrative. The focus is on childhoods that are univocally represented as objects of horror, as the exception to ideal childhood. The child is the antagonist, or in the case of horror narratives, the monster. The term 'monstrous' is not used as a term of value judgement or condemnation, rather it refers to the social construction of monstrosity around childhoods that violate social, moral and biological categories. It is a blanket term to refer to the narratives' own approach to the figure of the child at its centre. The monstrous child does not refer to real or fictional children, but is used in the conceptual sense as a violation of a norm. The many representations of this violation is the focus of the thesis.

1.2 Review of Previous Literature

I begin with the assumption, derived from the French historian Philippe Ariès and later sociologists of childhood, that childhood is a concept that is "historically, culturally, and politically constituted" (Shanahan 419). The concept is fashioned with relation to adulthood or with reference to an ideal state of being, which may or may not be synonymous with adulthood. Childhood is vested with much ideological significance in the West. The French historian Philippe Ariès, in his trailblazing work, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), observes of Western culture, "Our world is obsessed by the physical, moral and sexual problems of children" (411). The nineteenth-century emphasis laid on childhood as a field meriting scientific attention, in the light of the degenerationist discourse, gained renewed traction in the twentieth century; the popularity of parenting manuals, the importance given to childhood by the revolutionary theory of psychoanalysis, the rise of new medical enquiries into childhood, and the birth of the inter-disciplinary field of childhood studies testify to this. As Ariès (1962), DeMause (1974), Zelizer (1985), Allison James and Alan Prout (1990), Cunningham (1998), and others have noted, there has been a marked shift in attitudes towards childhood and children in the last century. There has been increased sensitivity to the psycho-social problems of childhood, child welfare, all forms of child labour, and child abuse. The child has become a fragile

but precious project, the centre of the nuclear family, a key selling point of welfare programmes and government policies, and the end user of sundry children's products and services. This change, however, is not radical or disruptive but part of a historical continuum.

The idea of childhood in the West, writes Ashis Nandy, has undergone a "[d]ifferential mystification" by which "those aspects of childhood which are incongruent with the culture of adult life" are excluded from "the mythological idea of the child as a fully innocent, beautifully obedient, self-denying and non-autonomous being" (Nandy 67). Remarkably, the incongruent elements have solidified in cultural manifestations in the gothic mode into the stock figure of the child monster exemplifying the exception to the traditional "mythological" child. In the twentieth century, anarchical childhoods that wreck destruction on social institutions, traditional roles and sacred values are powerfully articulated through cultural narratives. Although publicly expressed anxieties around the deterioration or disappearance of childhood is not new–for instance, a seventeenth century writer declared: "The fact is, there are no longer any children, for people are beginning to have reason and cunning at an early age" (qtd. in Ariès 28) –what is peculiar to the twentieth-century anxiety is the sheer prolificacy of texts that nourish the discourse of the 'death of childhood'. The delinquent child is othered in this discourse; the otherness is attributed to either the inherent and specifically evil nature of the child or his/her adult-child compositeness (A. James and Jenks 323). The primary image of the 'good child' is restored by relegating all deviance to the other category.

Among the many analyses of the discourse of the child-as-threat since the late twentieth century, James B Twitchell's *Dreadful Pleasures* (1985) perspicaciously draws attention to an emergent horror motif, in which "the central image is a slithey [sic] embryonic creature who gets into the family by invading the female reproductive system and then by reappearing as the demonic, devouring child" (300). Judith Plotz, in the 1995 essay, "Literary Ways of Killing a Child" remarks upon the widespread image in popular culture of the child as a monster in postmodernity (5). The monstrous child has been interpreted variously as a continuation of a long historical or generic tradition (Ziolkowski (2001); Georgieva (2013)) or a subversion of romantic notions of childhood (Twitchell (1985)), of traditional parent-child relations (Douglas (1984)), of heteronomative modes of viewing (Scahill (2010)), and generally as symptomatic of a decline

of faith in futurity and progress.

Ann Douglas's 1984 paper "The Dream of the Wise Child" examines a subgenre of (American) horror texts of the late sixties and beyond that she dubs "family horror" for its theme of parenthood and the tribulations of the middle-class nuclear family split from within (294). Although the scope of the essay is too broad to illustrate the claim credibly, Douglas argues that the Freudian case study has a decisive influence on the narrative structure as well as on the delimited (usually, maternal) perspective, usually in written texts, that creates the desired effect of ambiguity on the events recounted. A key observation the paper makes is that the world of the text is "wildly pro-abortion" and that the parents, paradoxically, "committed right-to-lifers", may be forced to kill their monstrous offspring (310).

In her expansive study of the child in horror fiction, Sabine Büssing (1987) argues that the image of the child is virtually non-existent in early Gothic fiction (xii) but has become the staple feature in horror narratives since the 1920s (145). The representation of children in these narratives as "aliens in the home", argues Büssing, is the projection of "the fear of human children and the future they are about to shape in their own fashion" (120).

Eric Ziolkowski (2001) interprets the representational pattern of aggressive children by using a religious framework. He traces the development of the Biblical Bethel boys motif across literary history; the motif "involves a gang of anonymous urchins, usually male, who mock or assault, sometimes by stoning, a holy or eccentric person" (xi). Ziolkowski uses the first aspect of the motif to throw light on the two categories of the killer child and the violated child, in effect arguing that the bifurcation in Western attitudes towards children can be traced back to the Bible (4). The punishment or lack thereof meted out to the children who gang up on an adult constitute the second aspect. The universality of the motif, as is claimed, however, downplays cultural and historical differences and motivations.

Similarly locating the 'evil' child in a historical continuum, Margarita Georgieva in *The Gothic Child* (2013), argues that the figure of the child has always been central to gothic fiction – with childhood behaviour mirroring the future hero, heroine and villain – and that the postmodern manifestation of villainous children in horror cinema is a continuation of the same heritage. Gothic child characters are either victims or objects;

in the latter case – in the doll-and-child motif or adoption horror – the child is treated as an object by the text, to be 'circulated' from family to family (186). The ambiguous characterisiation of the child as a liminal being, representing becoming, "on the threshold of death, on the margin of society" (197). Georgieva posits the child figure as the foundation of the gothic genre (199). Although acknowledging the roots of the new paradigm in the gothic genre is indeed insightful, it is essential to discover the points of divergence between the old and the new. The child's conventional gothic liminality is warped in twentieth-century narratives by foregrounding the staticity of the villainous child-adult, always already its destination, located at the centre of the narrative as exception to normative childhood as well as adulthood. The twentieth century child of the gothic, rather than being circulated as an object, orchestrates his/her environment and often actively seeks out his/her next 'saviour-victim'.

Steffen Hantke (2011) focuses on the monstrous infant in horror cinema. Hantke argues that the representational apparatus is under pressure to convincingly portray what he describes as "one of *the* most preposterous monsters in horror film" (emphasis in the original, 106); lacking the possibility of representing monstrosity in action or personality, the texts, such as *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968) and *It's Alive* (Cohen, 1978), construct the physical body of the infant as the site of abjection or, if nothing else works, render pathological even the absence of overt physical markers of monstrosity (111-112). The historico-social triggers behind such narratives, particularly in the late twentieth century, is attributed among others, to the male paranoia of women's rising socio-economic and reproductive agency and the increasing public attention on reproductive technologies and their social consequences (110).

Dominic Lennard (2014) argues that the representation of child villains in horror film stem from adult paranoia regarding the child and that this representation in turn leads to the "demonization" of children's culture (*Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors* 2). The book touches upon class, changing parental roles, the gaze of the child, and cultural anxieties surrounding the influence of consumerism, television, and child abuse. Lennard remarks on the surprising lack of politicisation and critical interrogation in popular culture regarding the children of horror.

Karen Renner's *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* (2016) puts forth a more sustained conceptual study. It argues that both the Child as well as the Evil Child are

impossible constructions which can exist only as fantasy; narratives are efforts to exculpate the child from the category of evil and preserve childhood innocence and hence, ironically, evil children do not really exist in the popular imagination. Renner too points out the dangerous influence of iterative narrative patterns on actual lives and practices (13). The evil child narrative is claimed to be "essentially humanistic" because evil is proposed to have a source and is thereby remediable by tracing its roots in childhood (8). Contrary to this argument, while it is indeed the case that 'childhood' is strategically rescued from the abjection of monstrosity, the narratives appear to emphasise the essential and innate monstrosity of certain childhoods. Genetic taint, supernatural powers or psychopathy are irremediable sources of evil located in the child's body and in its ancestral body; the child-as-aberration is then treated as an anomaly, a freak of nature or as atavism.

Alyson Miller's 2019 analysis of the child-as-killer trope finds evil inhering in the child and, echoing Renner's argument that the maternal is often inculpated as the source of evil offspring, argues that the "genetics of evil" is "persistently identified as female" (10). Mothers are represented as "harbingers of evil", responsible for the crimes of their offspring while fathers are absolved (5). Motherhood in these narratives is punishment for female transgression, for breaking gender conventions, either for being too maternal (*Fifth Child*, *Rosemary's Baby*) or lacking in maternal desire (*We Need to talk about Kevin*) (8). While in some cases criminality is shown to be inherited matrilineally (*The Bad Seed*, *The Brood*), the representation of motherhood is more nuanced and ambivalent than Miller's argument makes it to be; father figures, rather than being absolved of blame, appear redundant, are often absent and inconsequential in the face of a primal bond between the mother and her offspring. Parental roles in the gothic is a multi-layered subject that has extensive potential for study and could illuminate the research area of this thesis further; however, for the reason that childhood is the point of emphasis of this study, the representation of maternal and paternal figures is analysed only to the extent of the significance it bears on the child character's life.

1.3 Significance and Scope

The study depends exclusively on textual material without recourse to a 'lived' cultural ethos. It is instructive and illuminative to perceive cultural artefacts from the perspective

of an outsider, informed by my lived experiences in both Indian and Middle-Eastern diasporic milieus, that on many counts, differ from the western attitude to childhood. However, this is not to say that cultures as well as its products are radically opposed to each other; the borders are perforated and any differences between the two are subtle. The Western model of childhood is exported across the world through cultural texts as well as by socio-political activism and conventions of international organisations such as the UNO; moreover, fiction–particularly horror films–that characterise monstrous childhoods has a global market.

Nonetheless, while evil-criminal child characters are ubiquitous in many cultures, the specific form of representation that marks the twentieth-century Western child villain of the gothic is singular. Compared to previous ages, the twentieth century saw the birth of a new monstrous–the deviant child–in representations of the gothic mode and across genres. Moreover, this motif has significantly declined in frequency of occurrence over the twenty-first century. The paradigm reflects the cultural climates which have produced it and simultaneously it produces and, therefore, cannot be separated from attitudes toward real children and real childhoods. The fictional worlds of the texts touch upon real issues and anxieties including modern parenting, youth violence, genetic abnormality, psychopathy, and species' extinction. The narratives are too interspersed across genres and media to allow interpretation of the paradigm as simply a generic formula solidified into myth through repetition. The narratives speak not only to a culturally-rooted moral panic but one which has global outreach; their strategies and conclusions in dealing with aberrant childhoods have an impact much beyond the scope of their contemporary audiences or genres. An interdisciplinary approach that ties in issues of ethics, euthanasia, death penalty, the science of psychopathy, degeneration discourse, eugenics and political philosophy into the production and reception of the paradigm, in fact, its very possibility, is adopted by the present study.

There is a tendency in both sociological accounts and the critical studies of narratives surrounding childhood to follow a 'dualistic' conceptualisation. There are the Romantic or the Puritan concepts of childhood (Renner), the Apollonian and the Dionysian child (Jenks), or the true child and the false child (Kincaid). The preponderance of 'evil' or 'monstrous' childhoods in postwar representation is generally seen as a return of the medieval or the puritan notion of the sinful child (in opposition to the Romantic 'di-

vine innocent'). While similar in terms of manifestations and reactive attitudes, the twentieth-century 'monster' child–this thesis holds–is a historically situated, culture-specific conception, rather than a revival or continuation of a seventeenth-century discourse. The notion of monstrous childhoods, even when linked to evil or crime, is made possible only within a quasi-scientific discourse bolstered by pervasive media visibility. Studies that follow a non-binary approach come up with even more categories and species of instances in the genres taken for study. Büssing, for instance, identifies three types of threatening children in horror: victim, evil innocent, and victimizer (xvii). Scahill (2010) develops a taxonomy of fictional childhoods that admits of overlap – the innocent, child of nature, dreamer, wise child, trickster, watcher, the feral child, destroyer, alien and demon. The classificatory approach is methodologically effective, provides clarity and neatly compartmentalises manifestations into self-contained, precise groupings. However, such an approach is vehemently inappropriate to the study at hand; the conceptual division of evil, crime, and the monstrous that I have employed is merely a strategy of approaching the notion of monstrosity as a three-fold transgression.

1.4 Methodology

Although I am influenced inevitably by an Indian conception of childhood, undefined as it may be, the thesis strictly refers to the Western discourse on childhood, and focuses non-comparatively, on Western representations. The knowledge/power circularity of discursive ideas in and around representation forms a key point of focus. The primary interest of the thesis lies in discovering the ways in which narratives construct children as monstrous, and how this discursive trend is historical, linked to shifting conceptions of childhood, criminality, humanity, and the future. The psychodynamics of the representations is not the concern of the thesis; therefore, no psychoanalytic interpretation of narratives, characters, audiences, will be engaged with. The broader philosophical, historico-political context in which such representations are possible and become meaningful is the target of this study.

The primary sources for research include British and American literary works and films in the gothic mode: novels, novellas, short stories, feature films, and TV series, selected on the basis of popularity measured through reviews, box office returns, adaptations, and remakes. The texts are taken as representative of the paradigm. The fictional

narratives chosen for study do not belong to a single genre. Nor do they share similar artistic merit. Narratives across genres (novel, short story, film, TV episode) and subgenres (psychological thriller, domestic melodrama, horror, detective fiction, sci-fi) are considered. This thesis does not intend a definitional approach to genre, or commit, as Andrew Tudor calls it, "the fallacy of generic concreteness" (Tudor); it does not approach the set of works with the intention of defining and compartmentalising them into a new sub-genre, but, rather, reveal the scope and breadth of an emergent, predominant representational paradigm across time and genres. The interpretational approach is structuralist and constructivist, combining both semiotic and discursive approaches to representation. Close reading of the texts is followed paying attention to plot patterns, diction, character delineation, and particularly for filmic narratives, the mise-en-scene. Metatextual sources such as interviews, reviews, biographies, and news reports have also been consulted wherever required.

The study is interdisciplinary, interlinking the disciplines of childhood studies, film studies, fiction studies, moral philosophy, sociology, and legal studies. A magpie approach to theory is adopted, making use of a critical framework that incorporates Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Václav Havel, Mary Douglas, and René Girard. Ideologically, the thesis is positioned against the effects of the power of popular scientific discourses, being critical of the metanarrative of ideal childhood. In reading the texts, an inductive, reverse hierarchical strategy is adopted, by focusing on the perspective of the child character who is positioned as antagonist or the other. The thesis is structured conceptually, rather than in the form of a chronological survey: the mode of organisation is fundamentally based on the Foucauldian definition of the monstrous as a transgression of human, divine/religious and natural laws and the chapters adhere to this conceptual differentiation.

1.5 Chapter Summaries

Titled 'Concept, History, and Genre: Representations of Childhood', the first chapter examines the evolution of the concept of childhood and its radical representations in literature and film, primarily in the gothic mode. In order to attain conceptual clarity, the nature of childhood is examined with reference to sources from sociology, history, philosophy, and anthropology. The power nexus between childhood and adulthood that

gets translated into moral panics and fears over delinquency and precocity is explored. The impact of late nineteenth-century scientific theories and twentieth-century cultural shifts in the conceptualisation of childhood are probed. The chapter concludes with a chronological overview of fiction that depict child figures as objects of horror.

The second chapter, 'The Axis of Evil', explores narratives from the horror/thriller genre to probe the links between childhood and evil. It examines childhoods that offend some kind of moral-religious-divine order, such that the transgression from the norm implies sin or hubris. The problem of the sacred turned profane is at the heart of the moral panic that the narratives build their plots on. Alongside cases of demonic possession, I examine references to childhood evil treated as a (supernatural) force too powerful and arbitrary in its manifestation and heinous in terms of its effects.

My focus in the third chapter, 'The Axis of Crime', is on narratives that rely upon a secular, legal, or scientific discourse to depict the offending child. The child character is positioned within a quasi-legal and quasi-medical discourse in the texts. While my approach to childhood crime is Foucauldian – in that crime is a discursive notion whose contours are in flux –, I will also be using the Czech philosopher Václav Havel's theory of power to throw light on the specific threat to the system posed by the 'rebel' child. Foucault's concepts of the dangerous and the abnormal individual, and Agamben's reworking of the Foucauldian concept of biopower, are used to make the argument. The chapter begins with a historical overview of the concept of crime and the juvenile delinquent; an account of the historical background behind the medicalisation of crime is also explored. The rest of the chapter deals with the nature of criminal childhoods as represented in the texts is dissected and critiqued with reference to its textual, conceptual and historical contexts.

The fourth chapter, 'The Monstrous: Liminality and Expulsion', relying heavily on Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, and Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, focuses on the monstrous child as a category violation, a transgression of a natural order, and as abjection. The narrative actively seeks to construct the presence of the child as monstrous, which is further emphasised by the child's ruthless wielding of an unbalanced power that positions the reader/spectator as complicit in the construction. The chapter is the culmination of the previous two, in which both religious and socio-legal violations meet in the offense against nature itself.

The monstrous child's expulsion from categories of the human and childhood, and in extreme cases of the genre, from life itself is examined. The violence against the body of the child and the dehumanisation of his/her identity are interpreted first in the light of René Girard's theory of mimetic rivalry and ritual sacrifice. The annihilation of the child is warranted in a divine/moral narratival scheme of things, whose violation may be appeased only through the means of the sacrifice of a scapegoat. The killing of the child supposedly restores moral order and universal harmony. Secondly, the narrative's condemnation of the death penalty on the child is examined in the light of the juridical notion of public safety and order. Finally, the offending child's depiction as a monstrous exception to childhood and humanity is examined.