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Child Ordination and Development: A Socioeconomic, Psychoanalytic and Linguistic Reading of Wijenaike's Select Short Stories

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Abstract: Although development scholarship often prioritizes material, infrastructural, and economic development, the child monk experience brings another form of development to the forefront - that of emotional, social and psychological development. Although this type of development may appear less visible than its physical counterpart through infrastructural advances, it is central to human wellbeing and has profound ramifications in social resilience and ethical values. In this regard, the emotional lives of children residing in monastic institutions are not simply personal but intersect with a larger societal context and the developmental imagination. In the case of Sri Lanka, child ordination is sanctioned by no less than policy and public endorsement as an ethically approved method of developing spiritual merit and character education. But beyond this explicit representation, when children are subjects of literary representations of ordination, we encounter complex and messy personal and social development trajectories. In this qualitative research study grounded in interpretive perspectives, we read Sri Lankan author, Punyakante Wijenaike's (1933-2023) two Anglophone short stories, “Retreat” (1979) and “Monkeys” (1992), with a focus on child ordination in the social contexts of poverty, illegitimacy and social convenience. By employing a triple-lenses framework – psychoanalytic (Freud), psychosocial (Erikson), linguistic (Lacan), and a critique of Marxist ideology – we argue that child ordination impedes emotional, cognitive, and social development. The limited development of individuals presents broader social implications for societal development and raises both ethical and developmental concerns regarding ordaining children.

Keywords: child ordination, development, psychoanalysis, Erikson, Lacan, Marxism, Sri Lankan English literature, identity

Introduction

Child development is influenced not just by material and infrastructural conditions, but also as a result of habitual socialization, emotional experiences, and cultural instruction. It is carried out by establishing a structure through which biological instincts can be gratified within a particular socialization context (Westlake, 1973). If, however, children have no parents or no caring adults, they may become emotionally dissatisfied and behave in deviant ways such as aggression, self-centeredness, or stress (Dharmakeerthi, 2004). In Sri Lankan society, socialization emphasizes both social responsibility and the cultivation of individual talent. In general, families try to develop a balance between social and personal/talented interests, meaning that children still fulfill many of their family obligations while developing unique abilities (Jayasinghe, 2013).

Institutional practices, such as child ordination in Buddhist monasteries, are a direct intervention into these formative processes. The tradition of ordination is valued for accumulating merit, maintaining cultural customs, and developing moral discipline. In the case of Sri Lanka, ordaining children is typically seen as a way to maintain Buddhist customs and to obtain spiritual merit for the family (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988; Abeysekara, 2002). Simultaneously, for some families, it is a way of practically addressing poverty and social insecurity (Ratnayake, 2025). Statistics illustrate the extent of this practice: there are more than 12,000 Buddhist temples throughout the island (Ministry of Buddhasasana Religious and Cultural Affairs, n.d.) and an estimated 60,000 children learning in temples (Keerthirathne, 2020, as cited in Ratnayake, 2025). However, as scholars have noted (Rathnayake, 2025; Seneviratne, 2014), discussions of Sri Lankan monastic life too frequently focus on numbers: how many temples, or how many boys are ordained; but not on the lived experiences of novices.

Moreover, reports from journalists and social researchers have drawn attention to instances of abuse in monasteries (Pathirana, 2012), but the public narrative still privileges discussions about tradition, cultural continuity, and the visibility of monks as a collective body. Rathnayake (2023) underscores that the hidden aspects of monastic conduct, especially concerning children, have often escaped scholarly inquiry, even from anthropologists who have otherwise critically examined Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka. This lack of sustained engagement with the internal lives of child monks points to a significant gap in both academic and social discourse.

This study, therefore, seeks to address an overlooked dimension of development. While mainstream development scholarship often privileges material, infrastructural, or economic progress, the experiences of child monks emphasize another dimension of development –emotional, social, and psychological growth. Such growth, though less visible, is foundational to human well-being and has far-reaching implications for social resilience and ethical values. In this sense, the emotional lives of children in monastic institutions are not merely private matters but are tied to the broader social fabric and the vision of development itself.

Besides, Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka have historically played influential roles not only in religious and cultural life but also in political arenas. As Wijesinghe (2011) notes, their authority as protectors of the faith and nation has often extended into the public sphere, including active involvement in electoral politics. For instance, in April 2004, on very short notice, a group of monks organized a political party based on Buddhist principles and successfully contested the general election, winning nine out of 225 seats in parliament. This positioned them as a crucial pressure group and an effective moderating force on both government and opposition. Significantly, even the appeal by the chiefs of the three main *nikayas* (sects) urging the public not to support the group went largely unheeded, as shown by the substantial portion of urban votes they received (Wijesinghe, 2011).Yet, despite this high visibility of monks in the public sphere, there remains little understanding of what unfolds within the monastery walls, especially in relation to child monks. This vacuum also includes the reasons for child ordination. Scholarly attention has long focused on monks as community leaders, ritual specialists, or political actors, but the psychological, emotional, and developmental realities of child monks are rarely documented.

It is precisely this gap – the silence around the inner lives of child monks – that this study seeks to address by examining literary narratives that foreground their emotional struggles, identity conflicts, and long-term developmental consequences.

Introducing the Author and the Literary Texts

Punyakante Wijenaike (1933-2023), born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, is a pioneering writer in Sri Lankan English literature. Celebrated for her lucid yet powerful style, she first came to prominence with the publication of her debut short story collection in 1963. Over the course of her career, she produced six novels and four short story collections, with more than one hundred short stories appearing both in Sri Lanka and abroad.

The selected stories, *"Retreat"* and *"Monkeys"* – which first appeared in 1979 and 1992 respectively – offer a rare exploration of the inner worlds of children compelled into monastic life. In *"Retreat"*, the arrival of a young, educated monk at the temple located on a hill near an estate disturbs and annoys an elderly monk who has long resided there: the young monk arrives there for his retreat during the Vas Season. For the elderly monk, the young monk's arrival is a constant reminder of his painful, suppressed origins : "That writing table in the new priest's room was the final insult… a cruel reminder, a beginning to his end…"(Wijenaike, 2005b, p. 58). The afore-said estate is the plantation where old monk's mother once worked as a labourer when his biological father possessed it. Born out of wedlock, the old monk, then, was considered a source of shame. His mother, already struggling to support another family, could not raise him, and his biological father arranged for his ordination at the age of eight to conceal the scandal and remove the burden. In contrast to this temple setting, the story *"Monkeys"* takes place in a monastery, deep in the forest, far

removed from village life. Here, a six-year-old *samanera* (novice small monk) secretly befriends a group of monkeys, especially playful infant monkeys. His longing for affection and companionship contrasts with the monastery's teachings of detachment. When he eventually distances himself from the animals, it is not due to spiritual maturity but obedience to monastic duty. His natural instincts for warmth and play are suppressed to conform to religious expectations.

Together, these stories highlight the emotional costs of child ordination. By placing one narrative in a temple closely tied to community life and the other in an isolated monastery in the forest, Wijenaike underscores the varied context in which children experience such dislocation. She does not critique Buddhism itself but reveals how its practices may be misapplied—to mask shame, uphold social hierarchies, and erase the unwanted.

Literature review

Anthropological and sociological studies have long emphasized the cultural and religious dimensions of ordination. Tambiah (1976) and Gombrich (1988) discuss ordination as a vehicle for spiritual development and social integration. Abeysekara (2002) highlights how ordination reproduces institutional structures while silencing the voices of child monks. Seneviratne (2014) cautions that scholarship often privileges numbers and ritual over the lived experiences of such children.

Recent studies adopt a rights-based perspective, emphasizing child welfare. Rathnayake (2023, 2025) argues that ordination may contravene the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, while Ekanayake (2024) advocates for harmonizing tradition with child welfare. These studies collectively highlight a tension between cultural continuity and individual emotional development, supporting the relevance of literary representations to understanding psychological and social consequences.

From a psychological perspective, Freudian theory illuminates the impact of early repression, sublimation, and internalized authority on childhood desire and later adult functioning (Freud, 1905/2000; Freud, 1923, 1936). Erikson (1963) emphasizes that early experiences are critical for identity formation and social competence. Lacan's concepts of the symbolic order, mirror stage, and the Name-of-the-Father elucidate how language and institutional signifiers shape identity, enforce conformity, and generate alienation (Lacan, 1949, 1977). In this context, literacy, ritualized speech, and the imposition of monastic titles function as mechanisms that integrate the child into societal norms while suppressing personal autonomy.

Marxist and structuralist analyses further explain the interplay of power, class, and ideology. Althusser (1971) describes institutions as ideological apparatuses that reproduce social hierarchies, while Marx (1867) critiques absolute ethical systems that abstract human development from historical and material conditions. Mallikarachchi (2011) notes that religious institutions, including Buddhist monasteries, may operate as idealistic systems imposing absolute moral codes, subordinating individual growth to institutional authority. Jayasinghe's (2013) observations about Sri Lankan socialization complement these perspectives by showing how children are expected to internalize familial and societal duties, often at the expense of personal freedom.

Integrating these frameworks with sociological insights on child development strengthens the interpretive paradigm of this study. Westlake (1973) highlights how habitual cultural training cultivates sociality and independence, while Dharmakeerthi (2004) shows that parental absence or childhood loss produces emotional dissatisfaction and behavioral challenges. Together, these theories support the examination of literary texts as rich sources for understanding how institutionalized practices shape emotional, social, and moral development, highlighting the broader societal implications of child ordination.

The Marxist Perspective: Poverty, Class, and Institutional Power

A Marxist analysis of Wijenaike's narratives indicates that ordination of children is not simply spiritual or religious behavior, but a tool that is connected to, and entangled with, class relations, economic marginalization, and the reproduction of social inequality. In both "Retreat" and "Monkeys", ordination serves as a case study that illustrates how poverty, family conditions or institutional authority coalesce to shape children's work, emotional development, and social locations. While the family circumstances may differ, the structural issues of exploitation, social subjection, and ideological control are constant: powerful institutions, social ideology and religion work together to reproduce existing institutions of power and authority (Marx, 1867; Althusser, 1971).

In "Retreat", the older monk recalls that the ordination was agreed to be possible on account of a 'bad star' or 'bad horoscope'; however, this kind of mystical explanation portends concerns of protecting the family's reputation, and possibly because of illegitimacy. The innocent boy born of a wealthy estate owner and a poor laborer woman is defined

by the circumstances of his illegitimacy because the nature of the estate owner's identity shapes the context of ordination. As the text notes, the desk – which belonged to the wealthy estate owner – here serves as a symbolic object of class power.

"His mother was poor. He lived with her in a crowded labourer's hut, but his father lived alone in the big house upon the hill. His father had reading and writing in the same manner as the young priest, but with a pen of gold, the day he and his mother confronted him. He had not been pleased to see them. He had given his mother some money, and then they had gone back to the hovel they lived in. And the next day his mother had told him with sad eyes that she would have to offer him to a temple, as an astrologer has predicted that he would suffer an early death. In her simple ignorance, she would have believed that people would accept a lie, that she could save him from death if she had him ordained" (Wijenaike*, 2005b,* 63).

From a Marxist perspective, this exemplifies the process of proletarianization where the boy's labor – ritual action, cleaning, chanting, and submission – is being commodified by the monastery while at the same time the boy is left socially and economically disoriented (Marx, 1867). Where the mother is economically trapped, the father has elite status, further reinforcing structural subordination and highlighting the intersectionality of poverty, class and exploited labor. The writing desk, indicating one's education and status of authority, exhibits the material and symbolic exclusion: this phenomenon highlights an institution as a structure of social reproduction that produces class stratification by creating and regulating access to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Later, the monk also reflects on the limitations imposed by institutional and social hierarchies:

"Just before his father died, …he had built this lonely temple upon the hill, and had asked the superintendent to look after him, and make him a monthly allowance. But he had not been happy with the superintendent. No one had asked him to go. Yet he knew well how they thought of him. Never once had they made him feel a priest, thought outwardly the people and the superintendent showed veneration to the robe he wore. Only a couple of old women climbed up the hill to see him, his aged mother one of them" (Wijenaike*, 2005b,* 64).

This excerpt illustrates Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatus (ISA), in that religious institutions lead to consent and maintain hierarchical norms through the use of ideology, not coercion (Althusser, 1971). The monk receives financial sustenance and symbolic recognition, but neither provision leads to agency or capacity for social power. The laborer is productive in maintaining the monastery, while reifying the illusion of spiritual order, representing the effects of exploitation on both material and ideological levels.

Again, this similar structure of control is evident in "Monkeys", although much about the boy's family background is omitted: it is noted that the young monk's mother dies during childbirth, and while not much else is known about the boy's father: the Head Priest determines that the boy's background is consistent with "bad horoscope:"

"He shaded his eyes with his hand and wondered about his own mother. She had died at his birth. The Head Priest of the hermitage had told him so. His grief-stricken father had gifted him, as a babe, to the hermitage to be trained as a monk. 'His horoscope must be very bad to have him kill his mother at birth'. And so, he had lived in the hermitage in the forest, knowing only the yellow robed hermit monks, and now he was six years old" (Wijenaike*, 2005a,* 71).

Astrology here acts ideologically, legitimizing the boy's ordination and rendering subordination as functional. Even in the complete absence of familial pressure, the institution surpluses labor and obedience through ideological consent. The institution offers food, clothing, and rudimentary education, and this can be viewed as surplus value, or equivalent to the supposedly free labor power after a return of labor for, as Marx writes, organizational and social reproduction and the alienation of children (1867).

Besides, the habitual and cultural training outlined by Westlake (1973) foreshadows the institutions' effort to shape not only the labor of the boy, but to shape his very personality. In "Retreat", the old monk's compliance and rituals serve the structure of hierarchy, elsewhere in "Monkeys", the young monk's personality has been socialized and normalized through continued repetitive practice, ritualized behavior, and institutionalized socialization. What Dharmakeerthi (2004) explains as the 'psychic cost of parental absence' includes the repercussions of stress, aggression, and internalized anxiety.

In "Retreat", these stresses are compounded by illegitimacy and social marginalization; in "Monkeys", maternal absence is interpreted ideologically, framing grief as destiny rather than structural oppression. In both cases, labor, emotional regulation, and cognitive development are subordinated to institutional imperatives, illustrating multidimensional exploitation. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony clarifies these dynamics, showing how monasteries normalize obedience, ritual labor, and hierarchical subordination, encouraging internalized consent

among young monks (Gramsci, 1971). In "Retreat", ordination preserves elite reputation while appropriating labor, and in "Monkeys", astrology and ritual provide moral and spiritual justification for subordination. Ordination thus represents material and ideological exploitation: autonomy, emotional fulfillment, and personal development are exchanged for survival, instruction, and institutional accommodation.

The Sri Lankan socio-cultural context further entrenches these processes. Jayasinghe (2013) notes that children are socialized to balance their talents and creativity with moral and familial expectations. In this process, they internalize community norms that prioritize collective development over individual growth. Both narratives show that ordination institutions discipline children to meet socially accommodated institutional expectations while reinforcing social hierarchies. The material and spatial aspects provide additional control: in "Retreat", the estate-based temple mediates childhood labor and ways of accessing cultural capital, while in "Monkeys", the forest-based hermitage regimented the child's body, time, and labor. In both instances, these contexts exemplified an institutional form of value extraction from children operating in multiple contradictory dimensions; each was present in their own mode of community and labor practice. These value extractions resonate with aspects of each Marxist position on exploitation within institutions (Marx, 1867).

As Mallikarachhi (2011) notes, religious institutions often claim moral virtue, but, in reality, abstract individual development from their historical and material conditions. In "Retreat" and "Monkeys", ordination is framed as an ethical virtue; however, the process is transactional: children's labor and obedience are essential to sustain institutional and familial authority. The claims of spiritual ideology disguise economic and social logic and reveal the conflation of class, labor, and ideology.

When examined through a Marxist lens, child ordination, as practised in Wijenaike's narratives, is demonstrated as a tool of economic exploitation, ideological hegemony, and reproduction of classed identities. In "Retreat", illegitimacy, poverty, and marginalization shape the means of parents and institutions procuring a child's labor but maintaining the reputation of the elites. In "Monkeys", regardless of largely unknown family situation, astrological ideologies lend legitimacy to institutional accountability that finalizes work, obedience, and emotional development to the ideologies of astrology. Astrology is considered 'an excuse' for child ordination in such monasteries, followed up by child labour . In these two narratives, the internal desires of children, emotional needs, and intellectual intellect are subordinated to rule, illustrating how sociocultural and religious institutions are instruments of social control that reproduce systemic inequalities in material, ideological, and psychological spaces. Using the combined lens of proletarianization, surplus extraction, ideological state apparatus, and cultural hegemony (Marx, 1867; Althusser, 1971; Gramsci, 1971), Wijenaike's narratives demonstrate the capacity by which institutions authorize and reproduce class hierarchies, all while appearing to support spiritual and moral development.

The Psychoanalytical Perspective: Emotional Detachment and Loss of Childhood

"When the sun grew stronger, he [knew] it was time to return to the hermitage, to return home. He got up reluctantly, and the monkeys scrambled back to their mothers. How he wished he could follow them, up into the cool of the treetops, swinging from branch to branch as on a giant trapeze, naked yet warm with love, carefree and happy. He wished he could make the treetops his home because the sun only filtered in there through green leaves, not like the scorching of the earth:" (Wijenaike*, 2005a,* 72).

As evidenced in the above excerpt, in "Monkeys", the child's innate drives for play, connection and bodily freedom are evocatively symbolized through his attraction to the monkeys while contrasting it with the limitations imposed by his monastic attire: "the robe did not allow free movement" (Wijenaike, 2005a*,* 70). The robe has a dual existence as both literal and symbolic: it inhibits movement in a literal sense and an instrumental source of repression that inhibits instinctual drives in a figurative sense. From a Freudian perspective, the robe suppresses the id's drives (curiosity, play, bodily contact) and signals the dominance of an internalized superego that demands renunciation and self-control (Freud, 1923). The boy's desire for the treetops illustrates this idea perfectly. He articulates the desires of the id: freedom, warmth, attachment to the mother, and play. The image of being naked yet warmed by love, without care and happiness, encapsulates affective needs and bodily needs which the ordination is requiring him to renounce.

Furthermore, the child's challenges of monastic discipline manifest in the psyche as a resistance to the demands of the superego. "He tried to sit down to his meditations but found it difficult to concentrate on the breath coming in and out of at the tip of his nostrils. He kept falling asleep" (Wijenaike, 2005a, p. 72). This is not simply inattentiveness; psychoanalytically this reads as an ego mediating between the incessant instinctual demands and severe moral expectations. The sleeplessness encountered during meditation could be read as a bodily compromise: the body represses what the mind cannot reconcile, and the ego seeks to protect itself from intolerable inner conflict via

dissipation or withdrawal (Freud, 1923). These difficulties seem to emerge again as the six-year-old monk in "Monkeys" is asked to forego his sleep: "he was tired. He had been up from four in the morning…" (Wijenaike, 2005a, p.72).

Erikson's psychosocial approach provides an additional, Freudian interpretation for tracking the way exposure to an early period of institutionalization interrupts important social-emotional work. For a six-year-old child (the boy in "Monkeys"), Erikson's initiative vs. guilt stage introduces a child away from individualistic toys toward cooperative play with peers (Erikson, 1950). Ordination curtails free play and explorative initiatives, i.e. the activities that are central to a child learning agency, competence, and social role-taking. The boy's desire to follow the monkeys (a spontaneous initiative) is foreclosed by monastic tasks and restraint. Where Erikson predicts the development of purposeful action and a growing sense of efficacy, the monastic regimen substitutes ritualized obedience and suppression of initiative; the likely psychosocial outcome is a sense of guilt about assertive impulses, progressing toward feelings of inferiority when opportunities to practice competence are limited. In short, Freud explains the internal psychic conflict; Erikson shows how that conflict maps onto stalled, stage-based social development.

The older monk in *"*Retreat*"* offers a longitudinal view of these processes. His early experiences of institutional discipline and the denial of educational access appear in the narrative as lasting deficits: "He remembered how he had cried and clung to her, and yet they had taken him away and shaved his head and put the yellow robe upon his scrawny body. He had been but eight years old then, he remembered. The priest in the temple had tried to teach him letter and to read and write, but in the end, he had let him alone" (Wijenaike, 2005b, p. 63). This captures an exploration of the child's opportunity to develop competencies (Erikson's industry) and an erosion of the ego's capacity to integrate aspirations into a stable identity. Freud's notion of the ego ideal helps explain the monk's resentment: he measures himself against an internal image of the literate, admired young priest and experiences chronic inadequacy when he fails to attain that ideal. The older monk's reaction – envy, bitterness, an ongoing sense of being discarded – tracks both the psychic wound of repression and the psychosocial failure to resolve early stages positively.

"The sight of books reminded him of his father, who had discarded him as if he had been an unfit object" (Wijenaike, 2005b, p. 63). Here books are more than educational tools; they are signifiers of belonging and recognition that were denied. Under Erikson's framework, recognition of competence from meaningful adults is essential to the child's sense of industry. Thus, the lack of this recognition leads to an ongoing sense of inferiority and difficulties resolving later stages, particularly identity versus role confusion in adolescence and adulthood. Thus, the lack of nurturance and denial of skill development leads to Freudian repression and interrupts psychosocial tasks leading to stable identity formation (Erikson, 1950).

To support this synthesis, empirical developmental research indicates that structured, responsive play and company by caregivers' scaffold autonomy, initiative, and industry (Westlake, 1973). Dharmakeerthi (2004) links early parental absence to higher risks of stress, aggression, and maladaptive behaviors in later life, patterns visible in both short stories. Jayasinghe's observations about Sri Lankan socialization (2013) indicate that cultural norms valorizing collective duties can intensify the pressure to subordinate individual development to social obligations. In monastic settings these pressures are institutionalized, turning a culturally sanctioned practice into a mechanism that can prematurely channel psychosocial development toward compliance rather than competence. Freud diagnoses the psychic mechanism (repression, id–ego–superego conflict, somatic manifestations), while Erikson diagnoses the social–developmental consequences (interrupted stages, guilt/inferiority, later identity disturbance). The boy's issues with meditating reveal an ego stuck between the id (play, attachment) and superego (ritual, renunciation). Ultimately, denying initiative and industriousness becomes hardened into a lack of self-efficacy and identity crises, as shown in the older monk's resentments and relationship to literacy and his father.

Finally, to place this psychoanalytic–psychosocial reading into its Marxist institutional context strengthens the argument: ordination serves institutional purposes (labour, symbolic reproduction, legitimization) and the cost of reproduction is the psychic/psychosocial cost of being human. Westlake's work on habitual socialization, Dharmakeerthi's evidence of early loss, and Jayasinghe's cultural examination together show that individual psychic wounds and developmental gaps are produced and maintained by wider social structures.

The Linguistic Perspective: Loss of Identity through Language

Child development is affected by biological and social factors, and habitual socialization and cultural practice. Westlake (1973) explains that basic socialization into culture will create particular human qualities such as sociality, autonomy, and self-regulation through the arrangement of biological gratification in a social context. But, within the ordination practice of the young child, this relatedness pertains to institutional arrangements that privilege obedience

and conformity over individuality. In Wijenaike's "Monkeys", the child's individual identity has been supplanted by *samanera*, effectively erasing his individuality. He is no longer called by name, but had simply become the little monk, one of many that had the same generic name. The renaming marks a moment of initiation into Lacan's symbolic order – the organized, structured domain of language, law, and social framework that underpins, produces, and sustains human subjectivity. Likewise, the monastic title and speech codes not only regulate his behavior; they work to reconstitute the child's sense of self to align him to the authority of the institution while dissociating from the identity of family and self (Lacan, 1977).

Wijenaike's narratives also highlight the complexities that linguistic and disciplinary practices introduce to the path of child development. For instance, in "Monkeys", "[h]e memorized the stanzas for the day rapidly enough, but, once again, meditation was difficult. He found it difficult to keep his mind on his breathing,…" (Wijenaike, 2005a, p. 73). The mental effort of monastic formation provides a contrast with a child's natural drive for play and attachment.

"We are trying to withdraw from life itself, not to be born again. Time will pass and you will become a young monk and a true son of Buddha. Your family will be the *Sangha*, the brethren, not the chattering monkeys" (Wijenaike, 2005a, p. 76).

This suggests the symbolic severing of kinship connections. 'Sons' cease being sons; the love and affection bound lexically and emotionally to kinship are lost as sons are reconstituted as sons to a larger and more expansive religious collective in which the individual does not have much opportunity to exist.

Lacan's mirror stage reveals the depth of this alienation. An identity that is originally formed through juxtapositional identification with outside representations is always mediated and mis-recognised. For the child monk, the ego does not emerge through the satisfaction of parental recognition but very much through the discourse of the institution it belongs to, and through the discipline of monastic life: "The *mirror stage* [italics in the original] is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation" (Lacan, 1989, p. 3). The outcome is a divided subject, caught between the ties of its humanity and the expectations of the monastic curriculum. However, this subjectivity is not just individual; it is a social and cultural rupture. Jayasinghe (2013) points out that Sri Lankan children frequently contend with experiencing a duality that is both obligations to their families and moral and social accountability, and this double-obligation often strained an individual's personal autonomy. Although the responses of the child monk marginalizing parental care, paired with pressures generated by the coercive nature of institutional discipline, further complicate the situation by inflicting alienation and producing internal struggle embodied in the pupil monk (Dharmakeerthi, 2004).

The story of "Retreat" illustrates another way of being alienated: being excluded from literacy. For Lacan (1977), literacy is more than just a technical ability. It is also how one enters into the symbolic order, through which one signifies, communicates, and achieves social recognition: Literacy is the means by which the subject enters the symbolic order, gaining the skill to signify and be known(Lacan, 1977). In "Retreat," the older monk's illiteracy inhibits an entry, leaving him both institutionally silenced and socially marginalized . His isolation is magnified when, "The hard shell he (the old monk) had built around himself, the permanent retreat he had sought in loneliness of the hill, would be shattered..." (Wijenaike, 2005b, p. 57). This suggests the vulnerability of an identity maintained by seclusion, not relations of belonging or recognition.

Language plays a role in this process as it organizes thinking, encodes identities, and constructs belonging. Scholars have long recognized that language is not just a way of communicating but is laden with important symbolism, embodying social and psychological content in individuals (Norton, 2013). Bourdieu (1991) explains how language practices reconstruct social hierarchies, while Hall (1997) highlights the socially created nature of meaning. Similarly, in Wijenaike's stories, terms such as *samanera* or *podi hamuduruwo* are more than a term of reference, they are markers of an identity defined by the monastic system, indicating both membership and subordination in the religious paradigm. Moreover, the application of these names creates an identity shift for the child; at that moment, the child is no longer simply a son or sibling but is now a semiotic member of a collection that necessarily excludes individuality. This identity transition shows how important different words are to convey emotional, cultural, and social significance. With this, when children become monks, they are not merely relinquishing personal names but also disregard the emotional attachments that accompany that name. Therefore, they let go of not only linguistic identity but simultaneously the familial love and intimacy that inevitably inspire the name.

Lacan's idea of the Name-of-the-Father clarifies the ways in which these transformations occur. The Name-of-the-Father is the signifier that introduces the law into the symbolic order, structuring desire and subjectivity (). Ritualized language, hierarchical titles, and disciplining practices, loaded with political function, are vehicles of the Name-of-

the-Father in Wijenaike's stories, coercively imparting obedience and conformity, while hampering natural inclinations. Language thus behaves as both a vehicle for integrating individuals into religious structures and a tool for alienation from emotional and individual identity.

From these psychoanalytic and sociolinguistic standpoints, we can see how child ordination impacts and limits individual identity formation. The symbolic order allocates children into roles that are socially permissible; the mirror stage articulates the fragmented and misrecognized nature of such identities; and the Name-of-the-Father reveals how institutional authority is internalized, not through mere obedience, but through language. Wijenaike's stories map these processes and express the emotional and psychological burden of early ordination. More broadly, they propose that beyond the walls of the monastery, the denial of personhood and natural attachments in children directly affects cultural sustainability, emotional resiliency, and, by extension, societal functioning.

Development Denied: Intersections of the Three Lenses

Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate how economic disadvantage, institutional authority, and linguistic control extend to mediate constraints on childhood development. In "Monkeys," the young *samanera* is required to disassociate and distance themselves from play, familial bonds, and identity to fit and conform to the monastic regime; in "Retreat," the older monk reflects on how the natural ways, stage and pace of individual development is impaired through early ordination: psychological trauma, illiteracy, emotional unavailability, and social isolation. Both are straightforward narratives that illustrate the significant emotional and social costs associated with practices that have, in part, some cultural legitimacy based on spirituality or moral education. What otherwise might be described as discipline or devotion to religiosity is simply a conscious and coercive mechanism of burying the natural impulses and producing both disaffection at the time of childhood and emotional vulnerability at the time of adulthood.

A Marxist perspective highlights the social and structural pressures that lead to ordination. Families suffering from economic poverty, social illegitimacy, and distress have no option other than to place their child into a monastery and sacrifice them (their child) to labor and obedience in the name of devotion to religion. Ordination becomes a spiritual practice associated with survival or being produced out of blatant differences in resource reproduction. Various objects and places, such as a writing desk in “Retreat”, or the embodied structure of a temple in “Monkeys”, function as tools of exploitation, creating social and class reproduction economic dependency in the lives of their child novices. Gramscian cultural hegemony reflects this: the ways through which moral and religious discourse ensure the benefits associated with conforming to domination. This occurs by inducing and legitimating gains from less than ordinary behavior and romanticizing the normative transactional and exploitative practical political manifestation of ordination. Thus, ordination at a young age becomes a cultural mechanism with respect to how economic needs and religious ideology shape a political means for accumulating institutionalized forms of power, while also producing habitual reproductions of inequality of wealth.

Psychoanalytic theory provides an understanding of the emotional and developmental ramifications for children and for their personality systems. Freud's structural view of the psyche - the dynamic of id, ego, and superego - illustrates how children's instinctual drives and urges (e.g., playfulness, curiosity, attachment), are subject to repression as a result of the demands of the institution as a social expectation. The example of the young monk's fascination with the monkeys demonstrates this repression, as the tensions between the robed expectation and the monkeys, which also present him with responsibilities, maintain the enfants fixation. The older monk represents his conflict that arises from early emotional deprivation, as his feelings of jealousy, frustration and consequences of early literacy demonstrate the impact of early disillusionment on his emotional development. Repression at such formative years can undermine the development of sturdy and functioning personality causing neurotic and psychosocial challenges, throughout life processes. In these two, the stories demonstrate the deep effects it has when unresolved childhood conflicts do not become resolved, thus manifesting as the (i)rigidity of emotional expression, (ii)feel good sense of isolation and loneliness, and (ii)loss of feelings of agency and self-efficacy.

Lacanian theory helps illustrate how language and the structures of the symbolic ensure conformity and alienation. Through the symbolic order, monastic titles, ritualized language, and practices of literacy, all combine in the mediation of identity. The idea of the mirror stage and the Name-of-the-Father show how an individual internalizes the authority of an institution while accepting the distortion inherent in the identity imposed on them. It also exposes the costs of renaming and reidentifying, as the child is forced to radically distance himself from his non-monastic identity by abandoning linguistic and emotional attachments to the family. The older monk's importance as a member of the symbolic order or community, and hence social identity, is marked by his inability to participate fully because of the removal of literacy as a practice or access into the order, leaving him socially incomplete as he is rendered both silent and dependent.

This research is legitimized for scholarly and social reasons. From a scholarly perspective, it bridges an important gap in literature. While the historical, religious, and philosophical aspects of Buddhism in Sri Lanka have been given a fair amount of attention, to date, there have been few inquiries into the lived emotional experiences of the child monk. As Rathnayake (2023, p. 87) noted, "the hidden realities of monastic life, relating to monastic practice, seemed to have evaded even the generally more critical eye of the well-known anthropologists." Through exploring literary representations, this research framed the hidden realities of ordination, revealing the psychological costs of monkhood: psychological trauma; suppression of identity; and compromises either emotional autonomy and/or community. Extending the debate for a broader audience, it is within the interdisciplinary discourse of religion and psychology and cultural studies.

On a larger scope, the societal dimension of this issue is unavoidable as it is focused on child ordination, socially accepted within cultural acceptance; child ordination prioritizes institutional practices over children's emotional, intellectual, and social development. The implications of these accounts exhibit the conflict between spiritual values produces and realities of child development: children separated from families and free play lose the fundamental conditions for safe identity and emotional wellbeing. This link extends beyond just the family and child. Reduced emotional development in childhood implies reduced adult capacities for empathy, social connectedness, and creative thinking in adulthood. When systems of institutions repeatedly violate the feasibility of singular identity or group identity there is risk of breeding generations of individuals with emotional challenges: autonomy, critical thinking, and emotional expression. These consequences represent real risk and relevance in the context of development discourse. Though dominant thought is mostly concerned with material, infrastructure or economic progress, these narratives remind us once again, that emotional and psychosocial development are equally important in growing human capital. By marginalizing the value we place on human and social capabilities in making decisions, societies have the potential of jeopardizing the very social connectedness and ethical values they are working to sustain.

By drawing attention to these themes, the research demonstrates that childhood emotional development is important to the process of social development, beyond material or infrastructure, the dominant focus in literature and policy. In Wijenaike's stories, the psychological and social realities mentioned act as an indicator against the risks of cultural practices that over time becomes normative, not only generating individual harm and distress but structural barriers for society to engage generationally and in ways that society is kept from encouraging future generations to engage with the past.

Conclusion

Punyakante Wijenaike's works "Monkeys" and "Retreat" provide an examination in literature of the truths of ordination as a child in Sri Lanka, exposing the emotional, psychological, and social toll of institutions often prized for their spiritual and cultural worth. The narratives depict established norms associated with monastic lifestyle, types of speech that were ritualized, the limitations of literacy, and family ties (Westlake, 1973). Relationship breaches and identity ruptures lead to isolation and inner conflict (Dharmakeerthi, 2004).As such, here institutional authority operates, at least in the actions described in Wijenaike's stories, not as a spiritual record, but instead as a disciplinary institution that reinforces conformity, controls desire, and reproduces social class structures (Mallikarachchi, 2011; Althusser, 1971; Marx, 1867).

The psychoanalytic standpoint explained by Lacan's symbolic order, mirror stage, and Name-of-the-Father concepts delineate the means, by which identity is constructed through linguistic and ritual signifiers, while also alienating the child from its natural attachments (Lacan, 1949, 1977). Freud's repression theory, and Erikson's psychosocial stages, notionally emphasize the unintended consequences of interrupted play, curiosity, and autonomy during childhood (Freud, 1905/2000; Erikson, 1963). The analytic lens of psychoanalysis connects with sociologic norms in Sri Lanka:

By engaging in a series of anthropological, psychoanalytic, Marxist, and rights-based perspectives (Tambiah, 1976; Samuels, 2004, 2010; Rathnayake, 2025; Ekanayake 2024), this study has demonstrated that child ordination relates to far-reaching implications regarding social reproduction and national development beyond an individual's own subjective or religious experience. As Rathnayake discusses, the buried realities of monastic life should be unearthed. (2023). The scholarly works considered in this examination highlight these unseen truths by demonstrating how institutional childhood can be recognized not just as the source of trauma, illiteracy, alienation and emotional deprivation but that normalizing childhood must yield to the less worthy cultivation of human capital and bond the greater social good.

This supports the idea that the way we think about development cannot again simply be confined to material and infrastructural conditions of society. There is equal weight to be given to the emotional, psychological, and social

conditions of childhood as well. We must consider the costs related to ordination as part of the practice that affirms child rights and wellbeing in cultural situations, and this should not diminish its symbolic value. There is even greater future scholarship that will build from this engagement across the psychoanalytic and critical social theoretical bases previously outlined to inform more productively social policies, pedagogies and ethical practice that persist in asking us to balance the imperatives of cultural continuity with wholistic development of children. Therefore, literature is a device for not just asking social scientists to think about the lived experience but to imagine more democratic and humane possibilities for social growth.

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