

Dr. Chhavi Kulshreshtha

Assistant Professor

Department Of Humanities & Language

Manav Racha University

Faridabad, Haryana, India

chhavikul@rediffmail.com

Nursery Rhymes: A Linkage Between Society and Culture

Abstract

Usually people think that children's literature is not a very qualitative type of literature therefore many aspects in this field remain unexplored. Same is the case with nursery rhymes which have been given a Cinderella treatment in research. Although the topic is quite broad one and widely comprehensive the efforts in the present piece of research have been concentrated on nursery rhymes available in English language.

As a human being child spends much of the time imitating the activities of other people. A growing child is a plastic creature who needs to be guided in learning those things that his society considers worthwhile and nursery rhymes motivate this process of learning.

Key Words: Heirlooms, Pivotal, Gender Discrimination, Socialization

Introduction

As it is natural for Birds to fly, Fishes to Swim so are Nursery Rhymes to Children.

Nursery rhymes as a genre of literature enjoy a long evolutionary relevance. Initially, rhymes originated to parody the British politics and royal persons as there was no other medium for spreading gossips or rebellious messages. Since most of the people in those times were not able to read or write so these rhymes were handed down verbally from one generation to the other. Therefore, they entail a long verbal tradition. The other reason for the origin of the rhymes might be assigned to the fact that people in those times were punished to death if they were found chatting or gossiping about the royal people so they conveyed their feelings and thoughts to each other with the help of rhymes.

If we go through these rhymes some questions linger in our mind like who was Humpty Dumpty and why he fell from the wall or why the mad woman ran after the three blind mice. Who wrote such lines and what was the reason behind writing these verses? But after studying the origins and history of the rhymes we are astonished to know that actually they were the royal and politically strong persons and our curiosity knows no end when we learn that these parodies, riddles are now treated as nursery rhymes just because they are simple and easy to learn and at the same time entertaining. The origins of the individual nursery rhymes reflect events that occurred in the nation's history. Despite their popularity their first impression can be deceptive. No one would accept that Humpty Dumpty was a cannon and not a boy. And the mad woman was supposed to be the queen Mary and the three mice she was running after were the three Oxford martyrs named Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer. Many fascinating stories have been woven around to suggest and reveal the events of that time. These rhymes made a remarkable contribution in increasing the corpus of knowledge. Many interpretations and explanations are revealed while studying their origins. It is better that children should remain unaware and ignorant about the origins of the rhymes and recite them as they are rhythmic, funny and entertaining.

Medium of Connection and Socialization

Nursery rhymes are valuable historical heirlooms. They are the key to connect past, present and future. Rhymes link us to the past and connect us to other people i.e. society and culture. Besides giving an account of the past through suggesting their secret origins, they also help in revealing the socio-cultural context. Society plays a pivotal role in our life. Nursery rhymes are the best medium for children to know the society and culture. The rhymes depict them well. They acquaint the children with relationships, mighty powers, values, festivals, ceremonies etc. The rhymes also help to get an insight into various cultures. With the help of these rhymes the children become capable of acting, reacting and interacting in and with the society as they have already initially learnt basic social norms and values through these rhymes. They learn how to adjust with peers, neighbours and with their siblings. Rhymes are the good medium of interaction between children and elders. Children learn companionship, cohesiveness and respecting elders. In a way rhymes help in accelerating the socializing process of children.

School plays an important part in a child's life. Rituals, festivals have great significance for social and cultural existence. The importance of nursery rhymes as a source of inculcating

socio-cultural values in children cannot be underestimated. Through these rhymes children assimilate the simple lessons in imbibing manners and etiquettes by way of fun.

Gender discrimination is also marked in the rhymes. Since a child's repertoire is very limited, even the knowledge given regarding different workmen in the society may be of great importance. For a young child, the professional distribution told through these rhymes is like revelation of a great secret of a life. Social structure like which profession, occupation is adopted by which particular class is reflected in the rhymes as our society is stratified in which different types of persons are associated with and responsible for different type of jobs. The role of mother in bringing up a child cannot be denied. She acts as the key figure in socializing her child through nursery rhymes and many other such means. She can make the child learn the rhymes and later on this activity can be done by his siblings, his peers, his teachers etc. As the child grows his siblings, peers and his teachers serve as a substitute for the role played earlier by the mother. So apart from the mother, the siblings, the peers and the teachers also play an important role. Many rhymes depicting school life and activities show the role of a teacher in a child's life. The child emulates the profession and wants to be like the teacher and also the favourite of his teacher. They help a child develop a social sense by encouraging and discouraging particular activities. For example, the rhyme:

“My Mom and Dad are So Much Fun, / They are best under the sun!/Grandpa and Grandma are so jolly,/We are all a happy family.”

Teaches a child about the relationships. It also acts as a remedy for loneliness. A child's exposure to the world around is very limited. The concept of the world is very limited for a child. He thinks that his family consisting of his mother, father, grandmother and grandfather alone constitutes the entire world. This is due to his very limited repertoire. He cannot imagine beyond it. Even the rhyme:

“These are Grandma's Spectacles/This is Grandma's hat/This is the way she folds her hands, / And lays them in her lap.”

Shows that a child is well aware with how the grandmother puts the articles in her lap and the way she folds her hands. Thus, a child's information regarding things and persons around starts getting enriched.

Later on his portfolio gets extended to other elder members in his family-- aunt, uncle and siblings etc. The oft- cited rhyme “Jack-n-Jill” is one in this category. Here Jack and Jill interpreted as brother and sister teach a child a lesson in mutual help and co-operation. According to the event described in the rhyme when Jack falls down in his efforts to ‘fetch a pail of water’, it's quite natural for his sister Jill to show her concern towards her brother. The

rhyme reveals that the child should have a feeling of concern and an urge to help and sympathize with his siblings.

Despite its historical significance this rhyme is a great source to make a sibling bond stronger as Jack- n- Jill were brother and sister. Cohesion and mutual co-operation in work like they 'together went to fetch a pail of water' is reflected in these lines and the quality of cohesiveness in working can be taught to children. They also learn that people of similar tastes and thoughts want to live together. They love each other's company. The rhymes like "Birds of Feather Flock Together / And so will pigs and swine / Rats and mice will have their choice / And so will I have mine" motivate a child to form his own peer group. Even in a play group he wants to share more with some kids while he feels uncomfortable with some others. Another feature of rhymes is that they introduce and carry children into the world of business, monetary interests, and other similar transactions of social give and take. The moment a child enters the playgroup or a school he is open to acquire many facts of behaviour as the ways of dealing with his friends, peers and schoolmates. He comes to know while going to school he ought to follow punctuality as the rhyme:

"Come to School, Just in Time, / Go for prayer, just in line, / Don't throw paper on the ground / Give to the teacher what is found." tells about his interactions in his family which not only remain limited to his relatives but he also shows a desire for going to school. He knows what drinks are to be avoided and which to be taken. He learns that taking milk will make him strong. This is what the rhyme

"Run Away Coffee" is all about. As "Run Away Coffee, Run Away Tea / Run away cola, run away from me / Milk, and cocoa come to me / me will drink you and then be strong / Off to school, marching in a form". Away from the activities from home, like avoiding tea and taking milk of cocoa, he makes himself mentally prepared for going to school as he says, 'Off to School, Marching in a Form.'

In school, the concept of uniform symbolises that the girls and boys wear different type of clothes. The child learns to differentiate the gender on the basis of the outfits put on by the girls and boys. The rhyme "Morning Break" makes him enlightened regarding the facts that girls wear white blouses, blue skirts and the boys blue trousers and white shirts and so on:

"Girls in White Blouses, Blue Skirts, / Boys in blue trousers, white shirts, / Singing, swinging, screeching, reaching, / Hooking wasps, riddle-saying, / Ring-playing-Bayhana, bayhana, bayhana, bay...."

These small distinctions evolve a gender consciousness and role consciousness in his virgin psyche. He comes to know that the boys are obviously different from the girls.

In the beginning the school is all fun for him. It is a place where all that he has to do is 'singing, screeching, swinging, reaching, hooking wasps, riddle saying, ring-playing.' By way of fun he knows different activities.

Gender discrimination is often seen in the rhymes. Rhymes with female characters describe a woman's home and looking after their children. Female characters spend most of their time in household work, cooking or selling food. Taking care of their home and domestic animals were their chief occupations, the job of a shepherdess was the only female occupation, and one that needs no special skill. As the rhyme beautifully describes this skill "Little Bo-Peep Has Lost Her Sheep". Thus, the women in the rhymes, cook and wash, sweep and dust, sew and darn, for the men and to their children.

May be this was due to the age when the industry was primitive and domestic in those times when these rhymes were written. Thereafter the woman was confined only to the domestic area. Male characters in the rhymes, on the other hand are shown performing a variety of jobs, working as barbers, masons, tailors, shoemakers, tinkers, millers, blacksmiths, merchants, doctors, scholars, priests, etc. for example in "Cobbler Cobbler" what a cobbler does is simply indicated. Most often, when men are mentioned in connection with food preparation, it is from a professional viewpoint, as bakers, piemen, or butchers like in the rhymes "Pat-a-Cake, Pat-a-Cake", "Simple Simon Met a Pieman". Men also seek work as sailors, venturing out into the world on their own.

Male physical power is contrasted by the representation of female as tender and their physical safety lying only inside their home. If viewed from a modern point of view the gender-neutral behaviour traits like smoking or drinking alcohol belongs to the male part throughout the rhymes. Having employment, earning money, possessing money and managing the family finances belongs to the male domain. "Sleep, Baby, Sleep, / Thy Papa Guards the Sheep" or "Bye, Baby Bunting / Father's Gone a-Hunting, / Mother's gone a-milking, / Sister's gone a-silking, / Brother's gone to buy a skin / To wrap the baby Bunting in".

But the time has undergone a vast change so the rhymes featuring gender discrimination are no more found in the modern nursery syllabi.

Society has also been an interesting subject for study since ages. There is patterned consistency within a given society which allows some accuracy in predicting how people in that society will think and feel. In each society, a whole series of normative attitudes about what is desirable and undesirable is prevalent. Stealing as a symptom may occur only in cultures where there is strong emphasis on property rights. Honesty is one of our most important moral ethical values by which we judge an individual's character.

Every child who starts learning rhymes is sure to cram, even without knowing its complete connotations. The rhyme “Johnny, Johnny, Yes Papa” makes him learn that telling lies is bad. Being obedient to one’s father is good as he should respond to whatever his father asks him. But his response also presupposes a truthful utterance. He is also taught that even by way of fun telling a lie is not a good habit. The expression in the poem Ha! Ha! marks the true climax because the child has already denied the fact that he was eating sugar but he is caught almost red handed with his mouth filled with sugar. Every child is not a Kanhaiya to reproduce entire universe instead of the mud (here sugar) as kanhaiya did to his mother Yashoda. This rhyme is a beginning towards making the child truthful and morally strong. A child also learns the importance of money that if he wants to purchase something he has to pay money for it.

One such rhyme that takes a child into the world of business, monetary interests and transactions is “To Market, To Market, To Buy a Fat Pig”.

A child now learns the importance of money that if he wants to purchase something he has to pay money for it. These rhymes very beautifully illustrate different professions of society, various artisans and their work. In the rhyme “I Don’t Want to go To Mexico” the work of a policeman is well illustrated. A child is always scared of a policeman. Parents use the name of policeman in order to get the work done by the child. Here is a lesson also that one should not indulge in unfair practices like thievery, robbery, burglary etc. otherwise he will be put in the jail.

He also learns that carpenter is one who furnishes our beautiful home. The table, the chair etc. we use is made by him, “I am a Carpenter, / I use a hammer and saw, / I make a lovely table, /For you to sit and draw”.

Unconsciously the child knows the importance of labour. Washerman is another workman who washes our clothes and keeps us clean. The following rhyme is presented in Indian context but makes a child aware of the profession, “I am a Washerman. / My name is Ganga-deen, / I wash your all dirty clothes, / Till they are neat and clean”.

Dignity of labour can be well promoted by such rhymes. A sense of cleanliness, hygiene, and equality and Gandhian philosophy of eradication or avoidance of untouchability can be taught through these rhymes, “I am a Sweeper, / This is my broom, / I sweep away all dust, / I clean every room”.

Feelings of self-dependence and respect for menial jobs are promoted through such rhymes. In some of the European countries training like fire-fighting is given at a very early stage.

Self-defence can be enhanced in the child by these types of training. The following rhyme can provide a sort of background for a child:

Four Little Fireman, Sleeping in Arrow, / Ding-dong goes the bell, in a wink they go, / Off to the engine, Ho! Ho! Ho! / Using their hose pipes, So! So! So! / When the fire is out, home they go, / Back to the bed all in a row.

The rhymes also describe people belonging to middle class society. A child learns about a doctor through the rhyme “An Apple a Day Keeps a Doctor Away”. One who cures the disease and gives medicine is known as a doctor. Nobody likes being ill and visiting doctor, “I do not like thee, Doctor Fell / The reason why I cannot tell, / But this I know, and know full well / I do not like thee, Doctor Fell”.

Young ones come to know about such festivals through popular rhymes like “Jingle Bells”. Here the child gets familiar with the character of Santa Clause and enjoys his appearance and fun and feels content to receive lovely gifts from him.

Giving the gift initiates the child into the habit of charity. He learns that all his possessions are not meant for himself only but should be shared with others. The same lesson of charity is suggested in the rhyme “Christmas is Coming” in which the child is expected to give a penny, halfpenny or even a farthing in ‘Old man’s hat’. It implies that the feeling of giving is important, amount doesn’t matter.

Christmas is supposed to be the most important festival in Europe. The children are filled with a cheerful mood with the arrival of this festival. The entire community gets involved in welcoming the festival by making best possible preparations. Mood of cheerfulness, gaiety and festivity is shared not only within the community of men but even the animals are happily involved in it is beautifully illustrated in the rhyme “When Christmas Comes, / Elephant Dear, What Will You Do?” They are happy to co-operate and contribute to the fun of the festival. Here the elephant, the tiger, the cat even the sly jackal are shown participating in the fun of the festival. The jackal is so overwhelmed that he wants to steal the cake to eat it all and he does not even want to share it with his friends. Such rhymes are quite helpful in making the kids familiar with various rituals and festivals. The spirit of fun is very peculiar to the festival of Holi in Indian culture. It is a festival where people forget their grudges and ill will towards others and get tied up into bonds of love and fun. Children also enjoy the fun of this festival through their loud chanting of rhymes like “Dum, Dum, Dum, Holi Has Come”.

It is through these rhymes that children assimilate the simple lessons in imbibing manners and etiquettes by way of fun. “Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear” includes many activities and the bear runs errands received by the child. He is ordered to show the shoes, turn around, run

upstairs, say prayers, blow the light and say good night. Through such simple activities the children lovingly learn that before going to sleep they ought to say their prayers. Thus, a child is introduced to God and his belief in God's grace gets confirmed. He develops a faith that all his prayers will be granted by God. Some of the rhymes make a fine effort in hammering and emphasizing his belief in God. "Two Little Eyes to Look to God" is one in this vein. Here the lesson of serving God by listening his words with ears, walking in his way with feet, singing his praise with lips and doing his will with hands culminates into becoming one with God with a loving heart.

In the rhyme "God Bless Mummy, Daddy Too" the child not only seeks blessings for himself but for the whole family and for everyone as he is now acquainted with the mighty power. He also learns to imbibe the humanitarian feeling and acknowledges the importance of prayers.

The child also gets an insight into various cultures through nursery rhymes like English, Indian, Caribbean etc. The introduction of cultural dimensions allows him to develop vocabulary related items that include food, pets, home, festivals, means of transportation, clothes, family etc. and also provides a link to cross- cultural activities.

They are also made acquainted with the English environment and surroundings. The concept of farm, garden, home etc. is learnt through the nursery rhymes. The description of a typical European farm is given in "Old MacDonald Had a Farm". Chanting it the children not only enjoy the onomatopoeic appeal of the sounds created by various birds and animals but they also come to know about how the farm looks like.

There are rhymes which include the description of the grandmother's house and how does a child reach there. "Over the River and Through the Woods". It is across the river and beyond the forest. The child makes his journey on a sleigh driven by a horse. The description typically depicts the English countryside and common means of transportation, the sleigh.

Conclusion

Through these nursery rhymes children from one community and culture are exposed to rituals and customs of other communities and culture. Nursery rhymes play a significant role in making a child a good citizen and help him survive in the modern world that is full of complexities, violence, stress, frustration and insecurities. Rhymes are helpful in eliminating such fears. Thus, nursery rhymes preserve a culture that spans generations, providing something in common among parents, grandparents and kids – and between people who do not know each other. They serve as a great social, group activity where the world becomes one home.

In an era of advancing civilization, the values of charity and helpfulness are vanishing and instead the vices of harshness and cruelty etc. are augmenting. Some rhymes give lesson in teaching what traits should be encouraged among the children to be adopted. In some nursery rhymes the human weaknesses, vices and foibles are indicated and also mocked at and are meant to be discouraged.

Most of the theories in education begin with the concept that imitation is the foremost method of learning. A French philosopher M. Gabriel Tarde went so far as to use “imitation as the basis of a whole theory of how human society develops and changes”. He also assumed that “the human beings are imitative by nature.”

This suggests that if a child is to be made cultured according to the norms of society he should be given something good and ideal to be imitated and followed. A child inculcates the civic sense or imbibes the cultural traits on his own spontaneously either from the society or from the immediate social institutions around him. In a way this civic sense is not likely to be enforced on a child by the society in a didactic manner through indoctrination. This purpose is best served by the nursery rhymes because a child is indirectly initiated into assimilating civic sense. Nursery rhymes serve this purpose very well in an indirect manner. Many rhymes indirectly give him easy lessons regarding the social give and take. He is also initiated to accommodate his small interests with those of others around him and thereby his socialization is facilitated.

In the socializing process of a child the various socio-cultural institutions like the family, the community, the neighbourhood, the crèche, the play group, and the school, playgrounds, community get-togethers play a vital role. Certain behaviour patterns covertly taught through the interaction of a child within and outside these institutions are recognized and accepted in the wide circumference of the society. Some conventions prevalent in the society also help socializing a child by way of imitation. They chisel his raw figure into a personality moulded according to the standards and norms of the society.

Through these acceptable or conventional behavioural patterns of society a child learns to fit in with manners and customs of the family, the neighbourhood, the community and the society within which he acts and interacts. This gradually leads the child to grow into an amicable and amiable member of the society. Nursery rhymes are the best means to imbibe the features of socialization.

References

List of Nursery Rhymes, Alphabetically Nursery Rhymes.org Retrieved from <http://www.nurseryrhymes.org/nursery-rhymes.html>

ii. Nursery Rhymes, lyrics, origins and history. Retrieved from www.rhymes.org.uk/

iii. [www.brocku.ca/MeadProject /Ellwood/Ellwood_1901.html](http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Ellwood/Ellwood_1901.html)

Anti-plagiarism declaration:

I have read and understood the rules on plagiarism. I hereby declare that this piece of written work is the result of my own independent scholarly work, and that in all cases material from the work of others is acknowledged, and quotations and paraphrases are clearly indicated.

No material other than that listed has been used. This written work has not previously yet been published.