

## **Nursery Rhymes: ‘Common’ Ciphers of History – Opaque and Grey**

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### **Abstract**

Even with their apparent semantic frivolity and the informality of their usual application as a melodious implement of child care, nursery rhymes have, on a close reading, have never failed to attract attention of the reader to the corpus of commoners’ observations on the way of the world. With their obscure and yet mostly ‘common’ origin these nursery rhymes can be seen as history in enigmatic fragments written with candid perception of events by commoners who have never found it essential to live on through their creation and have ever been satisfied to vent their fear, joy, anguish or repulsion with a feeble wish for their posterity to remember a time they called “life”. The infantile aspects of nursery rhymes seem just the required camouflage that has ensured their sustenance by hiding innocent observations or commentaries which otherwise would have infuriated their contemporary authorities.

### **Key-words**

Pashtun landay; Class; Race; Sect; Collective consciousness; Metaphor; Allegory

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Out of the blue, a childhood nursery rhyme jumped into Sienna’s mind: *Ring around the rosie. A pocketful of posies. Ashes, Ashes. We all fall down.*

She used to recite the poem as a schoolgirl in England until she heard that it derived from the Great Plague of London in 1665. Allegedly, a ring around the rosie was a reference to a rose-colored pustule on the skin that developed a ring around it and indicated that one was infected. Sufferers would carry a pocketful of posies in an effort to mask the smell of their own decaying bodies as well as the stench of the city itself, where hundreds of plague victims dropped dead daily, their bodies then cremated. *Ashes, Ashes. We all fall down.* (Brown 154)

Dan Brown in *Inferno* makes Sienna reminisce about her memory of recital of a little rhyme which for her changed from a dulcet innocent recreation to what seemed a melodious raving about the trauma of potential annihilation. This is what Lucy Rollin calls ‘dreaming in public’. In her essay “Dreaming in Public: The Psychology of Nursery Rhyme Illustration” Rollin hints at the rather unpleasant nature of the origin of Nursery rhymes. Devouring, violent death, mutilation, the torture of animals, insults, crude jests, omnipotent and threatening mother figures are often the ‘disturbing’ themes of the apparently infantile nursery rhymes. (Rollin 105) Ian Harvey too points at the sinister aspects of this apparently innocuously rhythmic sub-genre of Literature. According to him

religious persecution, prostitution, medieval taxes, and the plague: these are not the topics that you would anticipate being familiar with as a new parent. Yet right now mothers of

tiny children around the world are senselessly singing along nursery rhymes that appear innocent. If you dig deeper, some of these songs unveil an appallingly sinister back story.  
(n.p.)

Considering such not-so-pleasant origin of nursery rhymes the obvious matter of conjecture would be as to how despite such highly specific contemporariness these nursery rhymes outlived the historical context of their origin and ironically enough, were later considered fit to be recited to children for their amusement. The factors that have sustained them are, as it may be presumed, their apparently bizarre semantics which acts as the right fuel for children's imaginativeness and uncomplicated rhythm or notation that encourages children to actively take part in their recital. But the composers of these nursery rhymes are the grownups. So expectedly, they often should contain substances that are close to the anxiety or grudge of a people of an age.

On consideration of certain aspects — in their originally being a part of the oral tradition of a culture; in their later being anthologized; in their being short and crisp — they could remind one of the Pashtun *landays*. Eliza Griswold in her essay “The 22 Syllables That Can Get You Killed” tries to trace the origin of these *landays* to the Vedic Slokas:

No-one knows for certain where *landays* came from — the most popular theory is that these biting little poems began as a form of communication within the Indo-Aryan caravans that arrived in the region millennia ago. They were born long before Islam and their closest cousins are the slokas, the two-line verses that comprise the ancient Hindu holy texts called the Vedas. A *landay*...must have 22 syllables, with nine in the first line and thirteen in the second. It must end in the sound ‘ma’ or ‘na’. It must take on one of the five subjects: *meena*, love; *jang*, war; *watan*, homeland; *biltoon*, separation; and, finally, *gham*, which means despair or grief. But *gham* does not mean grief in general, it speaks of the particular form of grief that belongs to a Pashtun woman.(N.p.)

Griswold in her grand endeavor of collecting *landays* painstakingly from whatever source possible and systematically compiling them has revealed that with a rather gender-specific focalization these *landays* have as much encompassed modern themes like internet to harp on the

subject of relative deprivation of modern amenities as they have dealt with the age old themes of battles, homeland, love and languishment:

Daughters in America the river isn't wet  
Young girls learn to fill their jugs on the internet.

In the same essay Griswold shows how with the minimum of alterations in the same *landay* the singer hints at the change of regime, or to be more specific the change in the foreign occupation:

Because my lover is a British soldier,  
Blisters blossom on my heart.

It was sung in a changed scenario like the following:

Because my lover is a Russian soldier,  
Blisters blossom on my heart.

Later with a little bit of metamorphosis it assumed a different socio-political semantics:

Because my lover is an American soldier,  
Blisters blossom on my heart.

The reference to Pashtun *landays* might function just as much as to equate them to nursery rhyme on the basis of both of them being used to contain the spirit of a section of the society and that too, orally for a very long time. Ian Harvey in his essay points out that the earliest nursery rhymes appeared in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and “‘the golden age’ occurred during the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the classics that we currently hear today emerged and flourished. The first nursery rhyme collection to be published was the Tommy Thumb’s Book in about 1744.” (n.p.) But while *landays* are a women’s voice and apart from the specific identity of the composer nothing is intended to be hidden, nursery rhymes are often dichotomous in the sense that they don the apparel of childlike innocence but encrypt criticism of the society or the individual on issues ranging from class-deprivation to sectarian animosity with some amusing variations of some fleeting disparagement of individual idiosyncrasies. There have been occasions when things seemed just quite amusing and collective creativity of the commoners has preserved history in a rhyme-capsule.

The lion and the unicorn

Were fighting for the crown;  
The lion beat the unicorn  
All round about the town.

This rhyme celebrates, in a way, the age old bellicosity between the English and the Scottish that somehow does not wane even after both these creatures — an English lion and a Scottish unicorn have been accommodated in a single coat of arms following the accession of James I in 1603.

But predominantly, nursery rhymes provide us with an opaque perspective of common people who perceived things to be good or bad and did not have the courage to oppose the authority or the prevalent doctrines or conventions but ultimately proved to have contributed to changes.

The following nursery rhyme which is ascribed to John Ball, an English Lollard priest of the 14<sup>th</sup> century questions the relevance of social hierarchy by making it stand at a contrast against the Biblical parameter:

When Adam delved and Eve Span  
Who was then a gentleman?

This rhyme got especially popular after the obliteration of one third of the English peasantry owing to the Black Death. Before the wrath of the peasants broke out in a Revolt in 1381, this was an apparently innocent question that the peasants asked of the stratified English society.

One of the most widely popular rhyme —

Baa, baa, black sheep  
Have You any wool?  
Yes sir, yes sir  
Three bags full:  
One for my master,  
And one for my dame,  
And one for the little boy  
Who lives down the lane.

— is about the medieval wool tax which was enforced by King Edward I in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Ian Harvey observes “with the new rules, a third of the cost of the sack wool went to him (the King),

a third went to the church, and the rest went to the farmer. Black sheep were also considered to be bad luck for the reason that their fleeces, not able to be dyed, were less profitable for the farmer.” (N.p.) But as the rhyme clearly conveys the helplessness of the sheep-owner, it also seems to contain a suppressed and wry smile of the poor man at the thought of the diminished price (due to the colour of the wool) being equally distributed among all the parties, his exploiters included.

Such a tone of restrained complaint about the state of existence has been repeatedly heard in English nursery rhymes. But at time a purported ambivalence of semantics has made the obvious grudge about misery just a mask of something impish:

There was an old lady, who lived in a shoe,  
She had so many children she didn't know what to do.  
She gave them some broth without any bread;  
Then whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.

In this rhyme the tale of penury is obvious. But Albert Jack is of the opinion that the rhyme contains a rather disturbing political allegory. King George II who was nicknamed the “old woman” was dominated by his wife Queen Caroline who was in fact the real power behind the throne. Members of the Parliament are his “children” and they were very hard to control. The phrase “gave them some broth without any bread” may hint at the leash on expenses that the king imposed in context of the South Sea Bubble of 1721 to revive the country's finance.(Opie,522-4) But the implication becomes really gruesome through the commemoration of sectarian animosity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the popular nursery rhyme:

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,  
How does your garden grow?  
With silver bells and cockleshells,  
And pretty maids all in a row.

This rhyme is believed to contain the bloody history of persecution of the Protestants in the regime of Queen Mary of Scotts. “Queen Mary was a faithful Catholic, and her garden was a reference to the graveyards which were filled with Protestant martyrs. The ‘cockleshells’ were

thought to be devices of torture that were attached to the male genitals, and the ‘silver bells’ were thought to be thumbscrews.” (Harvey N.p.) Ian Harvey in this connection refers to another rhyme that encodes the history of persecution from the other end in the regime of King Henry VIII when the Catholic priests had to utter their prayers in Latin in secret:

Goosey goosey gander  
Whither shall I wander  
Upstairs and downstairs  
And in my lady’s chamber?  
There I met an old man  
Who wouldn’t say his prayers  
So I took him by his left leg  
And threw him down the stairs.

Most interesting of enciphering occurs in case of those nursery rhymes which intend to contain some political commentaries in the forms of almost undecipherable allegories. Undoubtedly one of the most popular nursery rhymes of the world is “Jack & Jill”:

Jack and Jill went up a hill  
To fetch a pail of water.  
Jack fell down and broke his crown  
And Jill came tumbling after.

But Jennifer Claire Hamilton observes a subterraneous stretch of Tudor history encoded in the eventful outing of a brother and a sister. In the Tudor times “Jack” and “Jill” were, in contemporary usage, the slangs for priests. And in the rhyme “Jack” and “Jill” can be identified with Cardinal Wolsey and Bishop Tarbes respectively.(14) Their climbing a hill can be interpreted as their attempt to secure a French match for King Henry’s daughter. But eventually both of them fell from their power. Wolsey was “attainted on a charge of refuting the king’s authority as spiritual head of England and faced execution” but he avoided execution by dying on his way to the Tower of London. The fall of both of them could be ascribed to the then royal stand regarding its attitude to Catholicism.

Again the rhyme “the three blind mice” refers to another event of history under the guise of apparent hilarity:

Three blind mice, three blind mice  
See how they run, see how they run.  
They all run after the farmer’s wife,  
Who cut off their tails with a curving knife,  
Did you ever see such a sight in your life,  
As three blind mice.

Andrew Whitehouse tells us how the origin of this rhyme can be traced back to the early part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Henry VIII made Thomas Crammer, an influential clergyman, the Archbishop of Canterbury. But Queen Mary, Henry’s successor, with her stringent Catholic initiation, could not approve of Crammer flying the flag of the Church of England. Consequently, she put him behind the bars. Two other Anglican Bishops, Hugh Latimer and Nicolas Ridley suffered the same fate. Afterwards all three of them were burnt at the stake.

‘Three blind Mice’ is thought to be a reference to Crammer, Latimer and Ridley. Mary I was married to Philip of Spain, who had vast land holdings throughout Western Europe, and thus ‘the farmer’s wife’, refers to Mary herself.... Bishops were not actually blinded ( which was a charmingly common form of torture in the sixteenth century). However, it is argued that the Bishops’ blindness may be a little dig at the Bishops’ Protestantism. (Whitehouse N.p.)

The important aspect is that ‘the farmer’s wife’ understandably served the unknown poet as an effective political allegory that he could burn as an effigy of words with every utterance to vent his disgust at the real ‘Bloody Mary’.

The popular rhyme “Humpty Dumpty”, however, explores the innate hilarity of an event that was a part of a bloody and long drawn conflict between the Royalists and the pro-parliament segment of the mass in the 17<sup>th</sup> century England:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.



All the King's horses and all the King's men  
Could not put Humpty together again.

The website of the Colchester Tourist Board tells us that “Humpty Dumpty” was the colloquial name of a cannon which during the siege of 1648 the Royalist defenders set on the wall of St Mary's Church. In the article “Putting the ‘Dump’ in Humpty Dumpty” (*The BS Historian*) we find that “a shot from the Parliamentary cannon succeeded in damaging the wall beneath Humpty Dumpty which caused the cannon to tumble to the ground”. (N.p.) Obviously the originator of this rhyme was visibly amused at the sudden set back of the Royalists and tentatively revealed his Pro-Parliament attitude. But his political choice could be communicated only through the use of the cannon as a metaphor.

There are rhymes which have fleetingly dealt with topics as sensitive as apartheid. Jennifer M.Wood in her article “The Dark Origin of 11 Classic Nursery Rhymes” explores the implications in a well-known nursery rhyme, “Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Mo”:

Eeny,Meeny, Miny, Mo  
Catch a tigger (= tiger) by his toe;  
If he hollers let him go'  
Eeny, Meeny,Miny Mo.

M.Wood says “ there is nothing inflammatory about the lines ‘Eeny,Meeny, Miny, Mo / Catch a tigger by his toe.’ But there is when you consider that the word “tigger” (or “tiger”) is a relatively new development in this counting rhyme, as a replacement for the ‘n-word ( i.e. “nigger”)). Even with the lyrical switch-out, any reference to the poem still has the ability to offend.” (N.p.) She then refers to an incident where in 2004 two passengers sued the Southwest Airlines “for intentional infliction of emotional distress and negligent infliction of emotional distress” after the flight attendant sang during the take-off “Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Mo / Please sit down it's time to go”.

In *A History of Nursery Rhymes* (1899) by Percy B. Green one comes across the famous ‘Lucy Locket’ rhyme. In this rhyme the fate of the elite-circled and yet, in a way, marginalized women has been suggestively presented with the briskness of curtailed brushstrokes:

Lucy Locket lost her pocket,  
 Kitty Fisher found it;  
 Not a penny was there in it,  
 Only ribbon round it.

According to Green “two of the courtesans of Charles II’s time were Lucy Locket and Kitty Fisher.” The above lines suggest that “Kitty Fisher supplanted Lucy Locket in Charles’ fickle esteem”.(N.p.) Most importantly, the absence of any other character apart from these two heightens their solitude against the implied presence of an indifferent, aristocratic, patriarchal society. This is hardly an ideal subject matter for a nursery rhyme. And yet with a certain degree of estrangement commoners, with apparent playfulness, seem to sympathize with the unstable fortune of ‘Lucy’ and ‘Kitty’.

In another rhyme the sense of social seclusion has been melodiously masked. The origin of the rhyme is apparently lost in the childlike exuberance in a seemingly idyllic setting:

Here we go round the mulberry bush,  
 The mulberry bush,  
 The mulberry bush,  
 Here we go round the mulberry bush  
 So early in the morning.

Historically, this song is linked to the Wakefield prison in England where the female prisoners were compelled to exercise early in the morning about a mulberry tree within the prison yard. Local historian R.S.Duncun lets us know that “a sprig was taken from Hatfield Hall in Stanley, Wakefield and grew into a fully mature mulberry tree.” The female inmates, however, in addition to being socially ostracized, were subjected to the arbitrariness of the correctional mechanism. And the melody, they generated, stood in paradox with the suppression they had to deal with.

Pashtun landays and nursery rhymes are similar in how both of them encourage the common people, the subaltern population to focalize on events taking place around them. Their difference between them lies in the *landays* being, essentially, the perception of women with all their

desires and miseries in a male chauvinistic society and the nursery rhymes being evidently more versatile in dealing with an overall existence of common people in societies governed by distinctions of classes, races, sects, gender etc.. Both of them thrive in the condition of anonymity and remain faithful observers of the time of which they are products. In both of them there is the element of willful disowning of the honour of creation and contentment in being a microcosmic part of a pervasive macrocosmic collective consciousness. The nursery rhymes, in particular, are often critical of the prevalent paradigms of the society, based on different parameters of differentiation and transmit, in the guise of an innocuous sweetness, stories of oppression with the intent of protest being innate in them as an intrinsic component, imprecisely and suggestively presented through the deviation of rhythm and an apparent, queer semantics.

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