

Lack of Inclusivity Due to the Various Colonial Ideologies and Social Biases in the English Nursery Rhymes Taught in Postcolonial India

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Abstract

Education is one of the vital factors of an individual's life. It helps an individual to shape one's perspective towards life and various different aspects of life. This makes it very important for the education imparted in the individuals, especially the children, to be a highly inclusive one without promoting any social biases. But English rhymes often treated by the parents as the best source to introduce children to the outside world in the modern times do not seem to be the right choice to begin with the child's education. As the deeper analysis of the English rhymes brings to us some shocking findings which forces us to rethink about the inclusion of English rhymes in the curriculum for the children.

Keywords: English, Rhymes, Biases, Colonial, Inclusivity, Social

Introduction

The life of an individual can be roughly divided into three stages namely childhood, adulthood and old age. Childhood is the most vital stage amongst the above mentioned three stages as it is the stage on which the entire life of an individual depends. Childhood plays a vital role in shaping the perspective of an individual for the rest of his life. This stage develops a lens of looking at life and understanding it. As Wordsworth famously wrote in the poem "My Heart Leaps Up" that the "Child is father of the man" (Wordsworth). Education undoubtedly plays a major role in shaping the perspective of the child. The English rhymes are a major source of education for the child in the early stage of childhood when the child is introduced to the Educational world. But the English rhymes are a problematic source of education when it comes to the postcolonial countries of the world. As Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his work "The Language of African Literature" writes that in his view language is "the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner" (Thiong'o 287). This statement by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o makes it evident how language plays a major role in controlling and manipulating things which could affect the perspective of an individual.

The use of English rhymes somewhere promotes the English language and culture as superior amongst the children. The problem does not end here. The teaching of English rhymes does not only instill the notion of superiority of English language in the minds of the children but a deeper analysis of English rhymes highlights many other problematic beliefs and ideas which we will look at in a detailed manner in this paper.

Literature Review

In the postcolonial stage the primary requirement for the country and the individuals of the country is to decolonise. Fanon writes that in order to understand his own self and to decolonise in real sense a native needs to “turn backwards towards his unknown roots” (175). One can turn back through the roots in multiple ways. One of the easiest ways to turn back to the roots is the language. As Emerson in his essay “The Poet” says that “language is the archives of history.” Postcolonial thinkers like Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o in the work *Decolonising the Mind* have also come forth with the opinion that the language plays a major role in the “people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe” (4). Education plays a vital role in shaping an individual. The English nursery rhymes play a major role in shaping the perspective of an individual as these rhymes are one of the primary sources that introduces the child to education and also to the world around them. Kakkai and Dave are of the opinion that “Nursery rhymes possess the potential for modification to align with the comprehensive learning needs of children” (16). Thus, a closer analysis of the English nursery rhymes by researchers has brought forth multiple problematic areas which highlight the English nursery rhymes as an unfit choice for imparting knowledge amongst the young minds. As Raviya and Joshi aptly point out that “rhymes perpetuate a narrative of white superiority” (1542). This paper further adds to the discussion regarding the English rhymes by highlighting how these rhymes create a lack of inclusivity in different aspects of life due to the various colonial ideologies and social biases in the English nursery rhymes taught in postcolonial India.

Methodology

This Study adopts a qualitative, textual, and postcolonial analytical approach to examine English nursery rhymes taught in postcolonial India. The research involves the purposive selection of commonly prescribed English nursery rhymes from primary-level textbooks and widely used rhyme collections. These texts are analyzed through close reading and discourse analysis to identify colonial ideologies, social biases, and patterns of exclusion embedded within them. The theoretical framework draws on postcolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Homi Bhabha, particularly their views on language, identity, and decolonisation, alongside ideas on language as a repository of history. The analysis focuses on how nursery rhymes shape children’s perceptions of race, gender, culture, and power. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles on children’s literature, education, and postcolonial studies, are used to support and contextualize the findings. The study aims to

assess the suitability of English nursery rhymes within the postcolonial educational framework.

Research Gap

Though the researchers have highlighted the various problems in terms of culture and hegemony in the English nursery rhymes. But very few papers discuss the lack of inclusivity promoted in different aspects of life due to the various colonial biases and other social biases such as gender, appearance, hierarchy, racism, physical disability etc in the English nursery rhymes taught in postcolonial India. Thus, this paper seeks to unravel the various hidden connotations in the form of colonial and social biases and deeply analyse the English nursery rhymes to examine whether or not they should continue to form part of the school curriculum.

Research Questions

1. How do English nursery rhymes taught in postcolonial India reflect and perpetuate colonial ideologies and social biases?
2. In what ways do these nursery rhymes influence the construction of identity, worldview, and inclusivity among young learners in a postcolonial context?
3. To what extent are English nursery rhymes suitable for contemporary Indian school curricula, considering the need for decolonisation and inclusive education?

Lack of Inclusivity in Terms of Gender

In the present day world equality in all facets of life has become one of the most vital things. The world today is about inclusivity to the highest possible extent. But the English rhymes taught in the schools do not seem to promote the ideals of equality. The rhymes like “Jack and Jill,” “Rain Rain Go Away,” and “Chubby Cheeks” are unknowingly promoting the ideals of inequality in different aspects of life. For instance in the rhyme “Jack and Jill” we find the following lines that read

Up Jack got, and home did trot,
As fast as he could caper,
To old Dame Dob, who patched his nob
With vinegar and brown paper. (“Jack and Jill”)

Through the names mentioned in the poem we understand Jack is a young boy whereas Jill is a young girl. And these lines highlight how Jack is capable of protecting himself without any external help. Whereas we don't exactly know what happened to Jill after she fell down. This somewhere promotes the idea that men are more capable of handling situations by themselves whereas women need external support and couldn't tackle situations by themselves. Rhymes

like these unknowingly promote gender inequality amongst the young minds. In the rhyme “Rain Rain Go Away” we find the following lines that read

Rain, rain go away
Come again another day.
Rain, rain go away
Little Johnny wants to play. (“Rain Rain Go Away”)

In this rhyme we find that an omniscient speaker is asking the rain to go away. The reason the speaker states for the rain to go away is that a little boy named Johnny wants to play. It is a definite fact that the name Johnny is a masculine name. Thus, this rhyme establishes the notion that only the male figures are bound to have an access to the outside world whereas women are only subject to the homely environment.

Lack of Inclusivity in Terms of Appearance

Lack of inclusivity in terms of the appearance is also something that seems to be promoted through the nursery rhyme. As seen in the following lines from the rhyme “Chubby Cheeks.”

Chubby cheeks, dimple chin
Rosy lips, teeth within
Curly hair, very fair
Eyes are blue – lovely too.
Teacher’s pet, is that you?
Yes, Yes, Yes! (“Chubby Cheeks”)

In the above rhyme we find a description of a child. Though the gender isn’t mentioned, we find a detailed facial description. The close analysis of this facial detail when heard or read by the child on a repeated mode for a longer period of time might make this description an ideal one for the child. The word “fair” used in the rhyme can even later take a form of preference over the black creating a space for racism or colonial bias in the minds of a child. Thus, the rhyme could be seen to promote inequality in multiple respects and aspects.

Lack of Inclusivity in Terms of Hierarchy

The obedience to hegemony is the next problematic idea found in a child. The children are hardly given a chance to explore the world. The children become the victims of “civil society”(12) as called by Antonio Gramsci and of the “ideological state apparatuses”(75) as proposed by Louis Althusser. The rhymes become one of the major sources of “ideological state apparatuses” as they seem to normalize hegemony. As seen in the rhyme “Baa Baa Black Sheep.”

Baa, baa, black sheep
Have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.
One for the master,
And one for the dame,
And one for the little boy
Who lives down the lane. ("Baa Baa Black Sheep")

In these lines it becomes evident how the wool from the sheep is distributed. Firstly it reaches the master. Then it is given to the dame, an individual representing the church. Lastly it is given to the little boy "who lives down the lane." The sequence in which the wool is distributed speaks a lot in itself. When the child listens to this rhyme again and again the sequence almost gets normalized for him or her, thus normalizing the idea of hegemony. The rhyme has also been associated with the connotations of racism.

Lack of Inclusivity in Terms of Racism

Racism has been one of the widely discussed terms across English literature especially when it comes to the colonial and the postcolonial literatures. Somewhere the English rhymes could also be seen to normalize racism. It could be understood better if we take as example the two English rhymes namely "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Baa Baa Black Sheep" and read them side by side. In the rhyme "Mary Had a Little Lamb" we find the following lines that read

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow;
And everywhere that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go. ("Mary had a little lamb")

In the above lines we can see how the lamb is a pet of Mary and it keeps following Mary everywhere it goes. The Lamb is described as "white as snow." The fact that in "Baa Baa Black Sheep" a black skinned animal is considered for exploitation by taking away its wool for public consumption. Whereas a white skinned animal like the lamb here is treated as a pet of Mary in itself seems to speak a lot about the idea of racism. On one hand where the Black Sheep is stripped of its wool on the other hand the white animal is treated as almost a member of the family. This unconsciously promotes the idea of racism in the children, whose intensity keeps on growing as they grow up. This also results in children being favourable to white skinned people and white culture whereas they detest the black skinned people and their culture.

Lack of Inclusivity in Terms of Physical Disability

The rhyme “Ten Little” mentioned below includes the following lines that read

I have ten little fingers and ten little toes,
Two little arms and one little nose,
One little mouth and two little ears,
Two little eyes for smiles and tears,
One little head and two little feet,
One little chin makes me all complete! (“Ten Little”)

This rhyme might create an image of a seemingly ideal person in physical terms in the minds of the children. As a result of which the children might find it difficult to include other children with physical disability in their group. It might make the physically disabled child feel left out and inferior, making him or her realise that he or she is not normal as they don't conform physically to the definition of the ideal individual in physical terms. Thus creating a lack of inclusivity on the basis of physical features in the children.

Lack of Inclusivity in Terms of Culture and the Continuation of the Colonialism

Culture remains one of the most vital things for an individual. But in several cases people might find it hard to associate themselves with their own culture only because some other culture is promoted as an ideal one which almost clashes with their own culture. The nursery rhymes do the exact same thing to the children. When they read rhymes where there is a constant use of English names, English skin tones and even English architecture as seen in case of the rhyme “London Bridge is falling down.” They develop a favourableness for the white way of living. As seen in case of Jean Rhys work “The Day They Burned the Books” where the children of Caribbean islands, the acquaintances of the central protagonist Eddie are mostly fascinated by England and the English way of living as they are often seen talking about “London, the beautiful, rosy-cheeked ladies, the theatres, the shops, the fog, the blazing coal fires in winter, the exotic food (whitebait eaten to the sound of violins), strawberries and cream” (Rhys 39).

But what is important here is that these children have never visited England. This fascination is generated by merely listening to how the place is from their parents who too might have never visited the place but have only heard about it. Thus, things like this marks the continuation of the colonialism and ultimately when they couldn't visit the place and are only assuming about it ultimately leads to their rejection or negligence of their native soil and increasing fascination towards the English soil and they start to feel an identity crisis which creates a state of “ambivalence” as according to Homi Bhabha “This ambivalence is emphasized when we realize that there is no way that the content of the proposition will reveal the structure of its positionality; no way that context can be mimetically read off from the content” (36). But by the time they understand that they can never be English enough or

that they would never be accepted by the whites, they have become a hybrid of their own culture and the English culture and ultimately this ambivalence leads to hybridity.

Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of the English rhymes highlight how they are not a good choice for the children as they could create an identity crisis in the children by promoting the values, ideas and cultures of the whites along with that these rhymes also promote several social biases in terms of gender, appearance, hierarchy, racism, physical disability etc. The aim of education should be to promote equality by challenging and eradicating the social biases but the above mentioned rhymes seem to teach values which do not lead a society towards making it a happy and healthy place to live rather they promote various differences which are harmful for the society and need to be eradicated as soon as possible.

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