International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies (IJIRAS)
Volume 4 Issue 6, June 2017

ISSN: 2394-4404

Overtones Of Imperialism In English Nursery Rhymes: An Indian Perspective Of English Literature

Jean Dsouza, Ph.D.

Shilpa Indoria

Abstract: ***When English Nursery Rhymes are taught to Indian children, it is not only Oral Language, Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary, Fluency, Rhythm of Words, and Comprehension that is imparted, but these rhymes also bring with them a culture and ideology. Infact, significant and crucial fragments of imperialism is also passed on with these English rhymes. In different ways, British (or westernized) concepts are embedded in the English nursery rhymes. This paper will reveal the various western notions that are passed on to the children through subtle undertones, be it the concept of white superiority through "Baa Baa Black Sheep" or the concept of detesting monsoon rains because "Little Johny wants to play".***

The Indian alternatives to the British rhymes will also be discussed.

Keywords: Imperialism, Nursery rhymes, notions, phonemic awareness, undertones

"A nursery rhyme shapes your bones and nerves, and it shapes your mind.

They are powerful, nursery rhymes, and immensely old, and not toys, even though they are for children."

Katherine Catmull, Summer and Bird

The power of literature is in its poignant, permeating and permanent memory. Nursery Rhymes, embedded in childhood learning and kindergarten pedagogy, are perhaps one of the first literary works children encounter, one of the first books they own, some of the first music they engage with. In this primacy of nursery rhymes, they have the capacity to create not simply lasting impressions and images, but more significantly, strong stereotypes and mental constructs at a very malleable and formative stage in the life of an individual.

It is therefore interesting to look into the connection between nursery and English rhymes. Why are children taught nursery rhymes at all, is the first question that arises when one thinks of children's music and literature. In an article titled *Why Teach Classic Nursery Rhymes*? Sara Dickey writes about the many different reasons for the same. She discusses the importance of Nursery Rhymes in enhancing a child's capacity for the acquisition of learning skills, better pronunciation, the ability to follow instructions, the capacity to predict and anticipate action, and create better conversational skills:

Research has shown that there is a very strong relationship between a child's learning classic nursery rhymes and later success in reading and spelling. Of note is that children who are familiar with a variety of nursery rhymes when they are between the ages of three and six years of age have increased literacy abilities in the three years that follow (Maclean, Bryant, & Bradley 1987).

Teaching nursery rhymes also increases a child's ability to wait, listen closely, remember, anticipate and predict, as well as follow directions. The higher those skills, the more ready the child is to learn to read.

Learning nursery rhymes in English develops and improves extensive early literacy skills. These include Oral Language, Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary, Fluency, Rhythm of Words, and Comprehension.

Thus, Nursery Rhymes are a pedagogical tool to teach better pronunciation, better linguistic skills and better communication/interaction. In addition to this, Nursery Rhymes are also an exercise in provoking imagination and creativity in a child. The group activity, the music and the actions accompanying the rhymes heighten the imaginative

ISSN: 2394-4404

capacity in an already fanciful environment present in the child's mind.

Against this background, it is our premise that when English Nursery Rhymes are taught to Indian children, it is not only Oral Language, Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary, Fluency, Rhythm of Words, and Comprehension that is imparted. Also communicated together with these is an entire package, so to speak, of the culture and ideology that these rhymes bring with them. The rhymes cannot be isolated from their inherent cultural and ideological overtones. A significant and crucial overtone is also the notion of imperialism which is passed on with these English rhymes. In different ways, British (or westernized) concepts are embedded in the English nursery rhymes. This paper will go on to show through examples many such notions which the rhymes contain and convey on to an unsuspecting mind. The paper will conclude with the possibility of alternatives to such children's literature.

The concept of imperialism is defined as the practice or advocacy of extending power and dominion over a nation or people through military, political, economical or other means. In consequence, it emerges as propaganda to discredit or denounce an opponent, which may be promulgated through authority and control, it is true, but which may also be propagated through cultural, social and ethnic means. In the anglicizing of the Indian educational system, the British, in one fell swoop, imposed their dominion over India and obliquely downgraded the native, local language, culture and pedagogy. The nursery rhymes, in their hidden British superiority and inherent violence and their cultural overtones, also relegate the Indian ethos as unrefined and incapable. The rhymes bring out the patriarchal coloniser that dominates over the suppressed, feminized colony.

The idea of fair skin as beautiful, and therefore, dark skin as unpleasant, unattractive, is propagated, among other things, through nursery rhymes. With British (Western) superiority, came the idea of White superiority, not only in India, but in all colonies. These rhymes pass on this idea:

Chubby Cheeks, Dimpled Chin
Rosy Lips, Teeth within
Curly Hair, Face very fair
Eyes are blue, lovely too.
Mother's pet, is that you? Yes! Yes! Yes!
and
London Bridge is falling down, my Fair Lady

A fair face, blue eyes and rosy lips make for a conventionally beautiful face in England, in the western world. Though fair may be taken to mean temperate, as in Shakespearean metaphor, or nice to look at, yet, when this word is used in an Indian context, it somehow contains the connotation of white, bright, and hence, beautiful. The advertisements of fairness creams and beauty soaps are evidence enough to overshadow all other references. Not only does fairness and a pretty face seem attractive in the "Chubby Cheeks" rhyme, they also make the child a favourite – mother's pet – which is adapted into "teacher's pet" in kindergarten classrooms today.

Certain concepts passed on through these rhymes are purely English, and do not fit into the Indian context at all. For instance,

Here we go round the mulberry bush
On a cold and frosty morning.

Such a morning – frosty indicating extreme cold – would be difficult, even dangerous for an Indian child, used to a warm, tropical climate, and the cold bringing with it illnesses and an unwillingness to get out of bed, least of all going joyfully and happily, singing a song! On the other hand, Rain, a most welcome and much awaited season in India, is negated and rejected:

Rain, rain, go away
Come again another day
Little Johnny wants to play

Where people – children, adults and elders alike - throughout India await rain, revel in it and enjoy "playing" in it, this rhyme creates a negative image of the monsoon, making it a season when Little Johnny cannot play. In a monsoon-dependent economy and a culture which even has a Rain God, is not this rejection of rainfall completely alien and uncalled for?

Fear is an important aspect of imperialism. The dominator needs to assert 'his' authority, and one of the most effective ways of doing so is through negative reinforcement. In other words, anyone who tries to defy, resist or counter authority will be punished or struck down. This kind of message is communicated in the images and metaphors of apparently innocent rhymes, and children are taught the lesson of subjugation as toddlers. For instance,

Hickory, dickory dock
The mouse ran up the clock
The clock struck one
The mouse ran down
Hickory, dickory dock.
and
Oh, a-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go,
We'll catch a little fox, and put him in a box
And never let him go.

The enforcement of power and domination are plain for any adult to see. Not only is anyone who tries to take over the power threatened, but the permanence and intransience of sustaining the same power is also evident. The mouse who ran up the clock is immediately frightened into running down with the clock strikes. The pun on the work "struck" – indicating the thumping of the clock, as well as punching someone – are also, to stretch the pun further, striking. The mouse is perhaps trespassing or intruding on prohibited territory, and one may thus derive that trespassers are punishable, even if one ignores the coloniser himself as trespassing. The fox, on the other hand, is completely innocent, getting caught and put in a box forever for no good reason except that he was in "hunting territory", like the colonies taken over by the colonisers.

A very common rhyme – Jack and Jill – also demonstrates the same idea:

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

Jack fell down and broke his crown because he tried to climb up the hill, like the mouse in Hickory Dickory Dock. Jack only wanted a pail of water, nothing else. Yet not only does he have a small fall, he breaks his head. The moral seems

ISSN: 2394-4404

to be that Jack and Jill should have remained at the foot of the hill and compromised with whatever resources they had there. The pun on the word "crown" is also interesting. Equally, but differently, interesting is the fact that Jill also tumbled down even though she was not the one who tripped. The female follows the male even in a fall.

Pussy-cat, too, who went to London, frightened the little mouse there who was trying to find space for itself under the Queen's chair:

Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
I've been to London to look at the queen.
Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you do there?
I frightened a little mouse under the chair.

Besides these power-asserting notions that evoke fear, there are other rhymes that cause dread sadistically, it would seem. For example,

Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet
Eating her curds and whey.
There came a big spider and sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

Why would Miss Muffet have to be frightened away by a spider? Could not the composer/s of this rhyme have made Miss Muffet and the spider friends, perhaps? What makes this nursery rhyme likeable? Is it also communicating a concept that little girls or unmarried women are easily frightened by insects and animals? Take another example:

One, two, three, four, five
Once a caught a fish alive
Six, seven, eight, nine, ten
Then I let it go again.
Why did you let it go?
Because it bit my finger so.
Which finger did it bite?
The little finger on my right

Why did the fish have to bite off the little finger of the child? What kind of compositions are these rhymes which create a fear of nature and animals in children? Perhaps, one might argue, the child should not catch fish without purpose, and this is why the fish bit the finger in self defence. But why is there no line explaining this? Consider another such poem:

Goosey, goosey gander, where shall I wander?
Upstairs and downstairs, in My Lady's chamber
There I met an old man who would not say his prayers
I caught him by the left leg and threw him down the stairs.
The stairs went crack, and broke his little back
And all the duckies in the pool said "Quack, Quack".

How can a child be taught to throw an old man off of the stairs just because he did not say his prayers? And the end of the poem seems as if the ducks clapped their hands because the old man broke his back. The violence and sadism is such poems is shocking, to say the least, and when one realizes that these are for kindergarten children, they become even more so.

The divide between nature and human beings is taken to an economic level in a rhyme like this:

Baa, baa black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.
One for my master, one for his dame
And one for the little boy who cries down the lane.

The colonisers came in search of raw material. When they found it, they conquered the territory. They took most of the resources for themselves and their wives and children, and kept the leftovers for the little boy who cried down the lane. The ones who lived in the land of the resources got only the leftovers.

CONCLUSION

Today, it might not be possible, nor desirable, neither to eliminate the entire educational system which is based on British standards, nor to do away with the English Nursery Rhymes in kindergarten. But it would make a difference if we change our attitude towards these rhymes and towards the coloniser's language. In a country where parents show case children who study in English medium schools through their recitation of nursery rhymes by rote, English and the English language do not become merely a means of communication, but an aspect of glamour and means to flaunt fake progress. It still appears that the colony is trying to ape the coloniser, trying to live up to the joneses.

Is it possible to keep these rhymes as merely educational props, and nothing more? Would it be possible to create our own rhymes in a language we perhaps cannot avoid learning anymore? Perhaps this calls for an acceptance of the Indian self, primarily, irrespective of global perspective or acceptance. Or maybe it calls for a conscious re-reading of these rhymes. Could be contextualize our rhymes and indianise them like we have indianised food, music, clothing and so much else? Take this rhyme, for instance, created by us:

I want to have a chocolit
Cant I have a little bit?
A tinkled eye, a shake of head,
And mother looked at me and said,
Let us have some Kulfi instead!

REFERENCES

[1] 2009 Sara Dickey - TEACH TREC, LCC