

Exploring gendered professions in nursery rhymes: Implications for learning and social interaction

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Abstract: The significance of early childhood literature in development and perpetuation of ideas and concepts in the minds of toddlers and preschoolers is well-established. A large body of work talks about the impact and role of children's literature in the process of child development but very less or negligible importance is given to the way stereotypes are formed based on the reading and recital by children. Stereotypes generally serve as an underlying justification for prejudice. The formation and development of stereotypes and prejudices is based on the process of social categorization which is majorly related to personal experience and social learning. The paper argues that the language of early childhood literature, nursery rhymes in particular, plays a pivotal role in the perpetuation of stereotypes relating to gendered roles and therefore a reassessment of nursery rhymes is crucial to promote gender equality, the focal point being the professional roles. The Method of Critical Discourse Analysis is used to analyze the nursery rhymes taught at preschools and primary schools in the city of Ahmedabad. The analysis reflects a need for re-imagining rhymes for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

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Introduction

The early, foundational years of childhood, from prenatal to about eight years of age, are a formative period of development (Tayler, 2015) in which gender roles and identity are likely to start developing, primarily due to external influence such as family, educators, peers and media. The construction of gender identity in early childhood has been highlighted by Bussey and Bandura (1999) who proposed how one acquires gender schemas and stereotypes and how it shapes the notion of children's gender roles through the mechanism of social learning. Socialization in early childhood, in particular, is important to the formation of children's understanding of gender and can have long-term impacts on their future social roles and behavior. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the function of language and cognition in development processes and thus supported how early gendered language exposure was essential in the construction of identity. These early influences affect not only children's self-perceptions but also their career aspirations and interpersonal relationships in adulthood. Studies show that children begin to exhibit gendered behaviours as early as two years of age, majorly in response to the reinforcement from caregivers, educators, and cultural narratives (Fagot et al., 2000). Research by Halim et. al, (2016) further confirms that children's gender identity development is sensitive to environmental cues, reinforcing stereotypical gender preferences through repeated social interactions. While the choice of promoting stereotypes may not be a conscious one by parents and teachers, their choice of language, activities and even nursery rhymes can subtly reinforce traditional gender norms (MacNaughton, 2000). As essential components of early childhood education, nursery rhymes serve as a linguistic and cultural tool which facilitates cognitive and social development. Nursery rhymes are learning and socialization content, which supports linguistic and cultural norms. Opie & Opie (1951) describe how rhymes construct early cognitive associations. For instance, teachers and parents may encourage girls toward nurturing activities while boys are directed towards assertive or technical activities. This pattern is reinforced across diverse cultural settings, where girls are often discouraged from pursuing roles deemed "masculine" and vice-versa. Critical analysis of

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nursery rhymes is, therefore, crucial to evaluate their appropriateness for children, ensuring that they are devoid of stereotypes and biases that are unconsciously promoted through repetition. Traditional gender assignments in these texts reflect broader societal structures in which male roles are often perceived superior or more valuable than female roles (Davies, 2003). Such rigid assignment of roles promotes general stereotypical thinking about gender and limits children's perception of gender possibilities. Research has indicated that early exposure to gender stereotypes can significantly impact children's confidence in pursuing careers outside traditional gendered expectations (Eccles, 2011).

The International Labour Organization (2017) indicated that women continue to be underrepresented in corporate mindsets and are frequently subjected to gender based discrimination. The report points out "unconscious gender bias" as spontaneous mental associations based on gender, which are ingrained in cultural tradition, societal norms and personal experiences. UNESCO's report "To be Smart, the Digital Revolution Will Need to Be Inclusive" also emphasizes the importance of overcoming such biases for inclusive progress (Bello et al., 2021). Figures from the U.S Bureau of Labour Statistics (2021) also show that men make up only 3% of preschool and kindergarten teachers and 13% of registered nurses, demonstrating how gendered career norms still dominate. In order to overcome these biases, contemporary workplaces need to identify and challenge the cultural origins of gendered career norms.

Early childhood interventions can play a critical role in influencing the attitude of society by challenging dominant stereotypes, fostering a more inclusive atmosphere, and allowing children to explore a wider range of interests without the restriction of gender (UNICEF, 2022). Despite being defined by their simple structure and easy-to-understand language, nursery rhymes have the capacity to convey hegemonic messages that unconsciously reinforce dominant societal norms. This study, therefore, scrutinizes these seemingly harmless verses closely, as their influence on young minds is immense and cannot, in any way, be taken lightly. Through the adoption of gender-neutral language and syllabi that promote gender equity, early childhood education systems can deconstruct these stereotypes and promote equal opportunities. Such models of gender-transformative education allow children to develop a more advanced perspective, free from the shackles of societal bias, thus laying the foundation for more equitable social interactions in their adult life. The consequences of these early communications carry well into the later years, as deep-seated stereotypes in the school system reinforce wider patterns in the labor market.

Nursery Rhymes as building blocks of Gender Identity

Nursery Rhymes are short traditional songs that carry a message, tell a story, or consist of rhyming words. The rhythmic pattern created by the repetitive nature of these verses makes them engaging for young children between the ages of 0-7 years. Nursery rhymes are taught either formally at schools, informally at home, or learned through play, and the learning process usually involves memorization or imitation. The musical and repetitive nature of nursery rhymes is useful for adults aiming to calm and/or entertain children.

Historically, nursery rhymes originated as oral traditions before being written down and printed, and becoming ingrained in early childhood interactions (Millán Scheiding, 2019). Many of these nursery rhymes have roots in European folklore, particularly from the United Kingdom, dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries, although some were recorded even earlier. Collections like *Tommy Thumb's Song Book* (Lovechild, 1744) and *Mother Goose's Melody* (Barry & Newbery, 1765) contributed to the popularization of nursery rhymes in print. The content of these rhymes was influenced by the socio-political events, daily life and cultural norms of their time. Overtime, these rhymes were adapted and passed down across generations, solidifying their role in childhood education worldwide.

Gardner (1983), a Harvard psychologist, proposed the theory of multiple intelligences, which includes musical intelligence - a skill that can be nurtured in educational settings. Peterson (2000) conducted a study where children learned language and maths skills with the help of music, demonstrating that musical instruction would lead to notable gains in language and reading abilities. Therefore, listening to music can enhance pronunciation and strengthen the connection between language and learning. Additionally, the effectiveness of nursery rhymes in developing musical and phonological skills was

examined in a study where exposure to nursery rhymes along with music was found to yield significant improvements in learning (Bolduc et al., 2012). These studies collectively emphasize the educational value of nursery rhymes in reinforcing linguistic and cognitive skills through their inherent musical qualities. The word 'rhyme', means words with the same final sound, in itself clearly states the involvement of some sort of rhythm/music in the poem or song. There are many articles written on the use of nursery rhymes as a form of help at an early stage of the development of speech process, which is explored in *Learning Link: Helping Your Baby Learn to Talk* by Morrisset & Lines (1994). Wynne-Jones (2006) has also contributed the same through his article *How to put words into a Child's Mouth. The Importance of Nursery Rhymes* by Danielson (2000) faithfully connects Mother Goose nursery rhymes with the process of literacy acquisition. The development of learning of three R's is further spoken by Rogers (2003) in *Improving students Literacy through the Use of Rhythm and Rhyme* and by Hamner (2003) in *Growing Readers and Writers with Help from Mother Goose*. Partridge (1992) focuses on the use of nursery rhymes in reading through her article *Nursery Rhymes: A Pathway to Reading?* as referenced by Chhavi (2014).

The oral experience is made concrete with the use of written language. The documented experience takes a rebirth when it is read. That is how the knowledge bound experience is transmitted over generations. Additionally, the formulaic nature of these rhymes integrates language into community, reflecting shared ideologies and cultural values (Millán Scheiding, 2019). The findings of the study conducted by Peterson (2000) state that the students who are instructed through music / rhymes improved in language and reading. Similarly, study (Bolduc et al., 2012) shows significant improvement in the development of skills in music and phonological processing where nursery rhymes are used.

Theoretical Framework

The language used in nursery rhymes play a significant role in shaping gender identity and perpetuating ideas and perceptions. Goffman (1979) suggests that our society is populated not by individuals per se, but by sexed individuals. Gender identity is taught and enforced, not constructed by the individual, as emphasized by Butler (2002). The acquisition of gender identity involves conforming to socially defined standards of femininity or masculinity. As indicated by (Our Watch, 2018), research has validated that parents serve as the primary source of information and education concerning gender for children. The language patterns used by adults, however, can inadvertently communicate to children that 'boy' and 'girl' are distinct identities from that of a 'baby,' thereby sustaining gender stereotypes. Vygotsky (1978) likewise highlighted the importance of language in influencing thought processes, arguing that linguistic structures encountered in early childhood education have a direct influence on cognitive development. Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) suggests that individuals construct their understanding of reality within social groups over time. Social interaction is crucial to learning, arguing that children develop more fully with support than alone, and language is a crucial tool for cognitive development and helps shape thinking. He argued that knowledge is not individually constructed but co-constructed through communication and cultural context. The gender roles depicted in nursery rhymes reinforce these patterns and lead to the internalization of societal expectations of masculinity and femininity. Children become "normalized" to what they hear and read, and this becomes their "reality." Nursery rhymes contribute to the formation of gender stereotypes by using words that express bias against women, making them appear inferior to men. Men are shown in roles that are considered superior, while women do tasks that are considered menial, forming a stereotype and limiting our perception of thinking or perceiving anything otherwise. According to Hawkins (1971), these seemingly innocent verses reflect the worldview and its unique features. Research has established that children learn social norms of gender roles due to their exposure to gendered themes in such rhymes (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). The impact that exposure to stereotypes, whether in language, literature, or the media, can have on an individual's performance, goals, and identity development is further highlighted by Claude Steele's (1995) "stereotype threat" theory. According to Steele's (1995) research, people's performance may suffer when they are reminded of negative perceptions about their social group. Frequent reinforcement of established gender roles in nursery rhymes might lead toddlers to internalize gender expectations and shape their views of

occupations or professions that are appropriate for them. Steele's contention that stereotypes affect one's self-concept and involvement in society is supported by this implicit indoctrination.

While plenty of literature focuses on Western contexts, studies within the Indian framework are crucial for capturing localized influences on gender socialization. In the Indian context, gendered narratives in nursery rhymes are shaped by historical power structures, including the colonial education system, which privileged English-language literature. The British colonial policies that influenced curricula embedding Eurocentric values continue to shape the contemporary education material. Crenshaw's (1989) 'intersectional model' provides an analytic framework to view the ways in which language serves as a site of power and exclusion, as access to English education is often decided by socio-economic status.

Review of Literature

The construction of gender roles in early childhood has been extensively studied across disciplines, revealing how language, cultural narratives and socialization contribute to identity formation. However, Lerner (1986) argues that the issue lies in disproportionate allocation of social roles; women are often given supporting roles while men and women are equally important in the play of life. Men have written and directed the show, assigning themselves the heroic parts leaving women with supporting roles, despite the fact that neither gender contributes more or less to the whole. This disparity is reinforced in nursery rhymes which serve as early tools of linguistic and cognitive development. A study conducted by Crisp and Hiller (2011) compared the gender portrayal in Caldecott Award-winning children's picture books of 1938-2011. The result indicated that male characters were more likely to be allocated the professional occupations of scientists, lawyers, and doctors than female characters in such stories. The content analysis of children's picture books conducted by Cutler & Buell (2017), portrayed that women were frequently depicted in stereotypical domestic roles such as childcare and domestic work. Nasiruddin (2013) asserts that nursery rhymes play a significant role in shaping gender perceptions in Pakistani society, with many rhymes reinforcing gender discrimination and stereotyping. These ideas are internalized by children and can affect their attitudes and identities as they grow up. Aforementioned studies confirm that nursery rhymes reinforce traditional gender roles, thereby perpetuating stereotypes that limit children's comprehension of the multiplicity of gender identities and other gender roles. Al-Ramahi (2013) discusses the sexist bias present in the language of nursery rhymes, which reinforces the subordination of women through the use of masculine noun roots with feminine suffixes or prefixes. Women are often depicted from a male perspective as helpless and dependent. Furthermore, Fox (1993) in her work sighs over the negative conditioning women have been going through in society. She points out that young children around the age of 5 ascribe masculine gender to a lead character most often. There are no strong role models in children's literature for girls to look up to. A study by Nadesan (1974) shows that *The Real Mother Goose* collection heavily features masculine themes in nursery rhymes, with only a few rhymes featuring both masculine and feminine themes. The physical and mental weaknesses of women are talked about in most of the poems for children. Cook (2019) suggests rewriting rhymes from a woman's perspective can help fight this issue. Mukhopadhyay & Tanwani (2020) writes that the authors have the power to bring about a change in attitudes and promote 'gender appropriate' behaviours but have turned a blind eye to it. In most of the children's literature girls are depicted as passive creatures who allow things to be done to them. Not only women but men are also victims of these stereotypical expectations of society. Some professions, for example, ballet dancing, and those which are not economically viable are considered inappropriate for men. A study by Tuman (1999) on children's drawings in relation to gender roles found that boys and girls tend to focus on different aspects of gendered nursery rhymes, highlighting culturally learned approaches to the same subject. Moreover, the study conducted by Garcia Mayo and Garcia Lecumberri (2003) confirmed that male characters occupied professional positions significantly more than female characters in nursery rhymes. These findings align with the research study done by Eccles (2011) on gendered career expectations, which highlight how early exposure to stereotypes can shape lifelong ambitions and self-perception. wa Thiong'o (1986) offers a critique of linguistic imperialism, such that educational models set up in colonial times continue to shape ideas about identity and authority even within postcolonial

communities. The case is strongly argued in India, where curriculum frameworks for school-going children eschew nursery rhymes native to regions although the nation enjoys a rich oral culture.

Research Gap

Gender is a very well-researched area and incessant questioning of the idea of gender identity has led to the formation of various interest groups in recent years. There have been attempts in recent times to highlight a few problematic areas by individuals but the attempt has not been of much impact due to a variety of reasons. The rewriting of some of the rhymes by Cook (2019) from the woman's perspective viz *The Old Woman who lived in a Shoe*, *Peter- Peter Pumpkin eater*, and *Georgie Porgie* gives hope for course correction in the future. 'The Old Woman' in the rhyme *The Old Woman who lived in a Shoe* had many children. It was difficult to take care of all of them for her. She 'fed them' all some 'broth' and 'whipped them to bed'. Cook (2019) rewrites the rhymes as:

There was a young woman who lived in a shoe
 Her man got her pregnant without an "I do"
 He ditched her and left her without any hope;
 So she tied a big knot at the end of her rope.....
 And COPED!

However, the introduction of such violent concepts to children seems inappropriate at such an age. Gender is a social construct that enforces positional power (Global Health 50/50, 2019) and the intersection of language and power structure within the Indian education further influences identity formation. English nursery rhymes are valued more highly in comparison to local poetry traditions in schools due to colonial legacies, which frequently marginalize stories that question prevailing gender standards (Kumar, 1991).

The neoliberal context has reinforced these biases by promoting globally recognized English materials over local, culturally relevant texts (Batra, 2020). Despite India's linguistic diversity, English language rhymes are ubiquitous in both private and public schooling, reflecting historical colonial influence and contemporary globalization. Mukherjee (2015) examines India's educational framework, emphasizing colonial impacts, globalisation challenges, and the necessity for a blended approach that combines local wisdom with international requirements for inclusivity. While viewing English as a global language tends to lead to linguistic imperialism, a compulsion to adopt the western discourse of ECE can be seen as forms of colonization (Gupta, 2019). While native language rhymes also form a part of the curricula in some places, their marginalization within the formal education system is evident. The institutionalized role of English nursery rhymes in Indian early education necessitates an analysis of the dominant material shaping gender perceptions. This study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on gender-equitable early education practices. By situating the analysis within the Indian socio-educational context and considering historical power structures, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how language, literature and social norms intersect to shape gender identity in early childhood.

Dataset and Methodology

This study attempts to stimulate the psychological interest in nursery rhymes through a Critical Discourse Analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emphasizes the contextual meaning of language, studying large chunks of language like entire conversations, texts, or a collection of texts examining how language functions and meaning is made in different contexts. It is an interpretative method of study that focuses on how people use language for a particular purpose and lays the groundwork for further study. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in examining the gender constructions in nursery rhymes. Fairclough (2015) has described CDA as a method of analyzing power relations inherent in language, while van Dijk (1993) has highlighted the effect of discourse on social knowledge. By examining the linguistic construction of gendered professional roles, CDA uncovers the ideological underpinnings inherent in these texts.

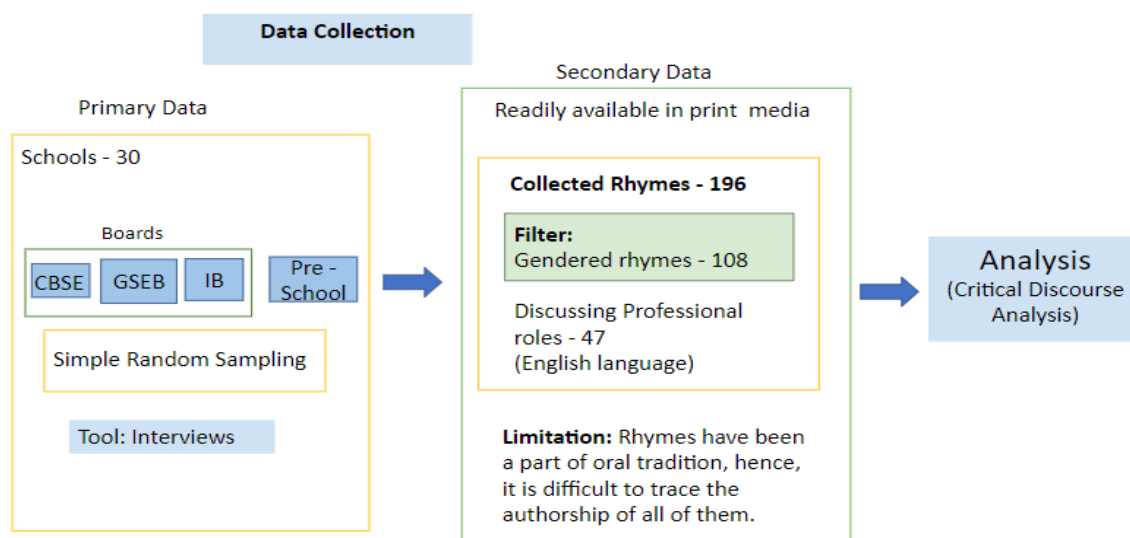
This study specifically targets English nursery rhymes, given their widespread application in typical school settings. A comparison of these with rhymes in Indian languages would offer additional evidence regarding the impact of cultural myths on gender presentation. Future research would need to investigate divergence between English and indigenous rhymes in order to ascertain variance in gender depiction. Contextual meaning is derived from the review of nursery rhymes in English. A cluster of words is studied in which gender bias emerges in a certain contextual framework which recurs frequently. Cultural correlation between practised gender roles in society and their depiction in a few nursery rhymes provide the platform to read other nursery rhymes with similar interpretations. As Wallowitz (2004) points out, "The critical reader understands that how we read is as important as what we read and asks questions about the construction of a text". Thus, the study undertakes the correlation between 'the word and the world'.

The long-standing dominance of English nursery rhymes in Indian schools is an exemplary case of a larger colonial legacy, where Western texts dominate over indigenous texts. This is most evident in Ahmedabad (Ahmedabad is a metropolitan city in the state of Gujarat located in the western part of India.), a city renowned for its long-standing private education system, where English language teaching is the norm in early childhood education institutions. The origin of this trend lies in the British colonial education policy that instituted English as the superior medium of instruction, particularly in elite schools. Macaulay's (1835) "Minute on Education" was a seminal text in institutionalizing this paradigm by establishing English as the language of knowledge and progress and placing native languages and literatures at the periphery. Even post-Indian independence, the Anglocentric education system prevailed, and English-medium schools gained more social standing. In the present, the extensive use of English nursery rhymes in schools in cities like Ahmedabad is a witness to the endurance of these colonial paradigms, where English is seen as an essential vehicle for economic and social mobility. Prioritizing the English language over regional languages in early childhood education has powerful intersectional consequences, as it reinforces inequalities along class and gender axes. In Ahmedabad, children of wealthier communities are predominantly educated in private English-medium schools, where Western nursery rhymes form the heart of the process of early literacy. Children from poorer communities, or females, however, are more likely to be educated through government schools using regional languages and therefore lack access to the cultural capital of the English language. This division has material consequences, as linguistic privilege intersects with educational and professional pathways to further marginalize those who gain no exposure to English in early formative life. The habitual reinforcement of occupational gender roles embedded in nursery rhymes reinforces this educational divide, as professional ambition is often decided by initial exposure to literature and language. The system of schooling, therefore, operates to perpetuate colonial hierarchies, wherein success is all about mastery in the English language, with local tales having little space in mass teaching.

For this study (Figure 1), popular nursery rhymes taught formally at school in the English language were collected in the region of Ahmedabad. The nursery rhymes were readily available in the print medium. All the collected rhymes were screened in terms of gender. Out of the total number of rhymes (196) only those about gender roles at large (108) and professions/occupations in specific (47) were selected for the study. The selected rhymes were analyzed through the theoretical lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to study the portrayal of gender role stereotyping in terms of professions/occupations.

Figure 1

Research Design, Level: Pre- School, Pre – primary (Nursery, LKG and UKG) / Age group : 2 to 6-7 years.



Results and Discussion

Professional Roles Depicted in Nursery Rhymes

The research reveals how historical and contemporary power structures continue to shape gender socializations in Indian classrooms. For a long time, women have been made to believe that marriage is the only honourable goal for women which has been internalized in their psyche. It would be wrong to blame the women for such a mistaken idea. Poems like *I had a little husband* describe girls sitting at home dreaming of their wedding (Figure 2). The women have always been helpless and tired as the 'Old Woman' in the poem by the same name. In accordance with Oakhill et al. (2005), individuals who speak English tend to connect particular occupations or titles with a specific gender due to the influence of gender stereotypes on their cognitive frameworks. Furthermore, even in languages with natural gender distinctions, such as masculine and feminine forms, the usage of masculine generics may result in social discrimination, as emphasized by Stout & Dasgupta (2011).

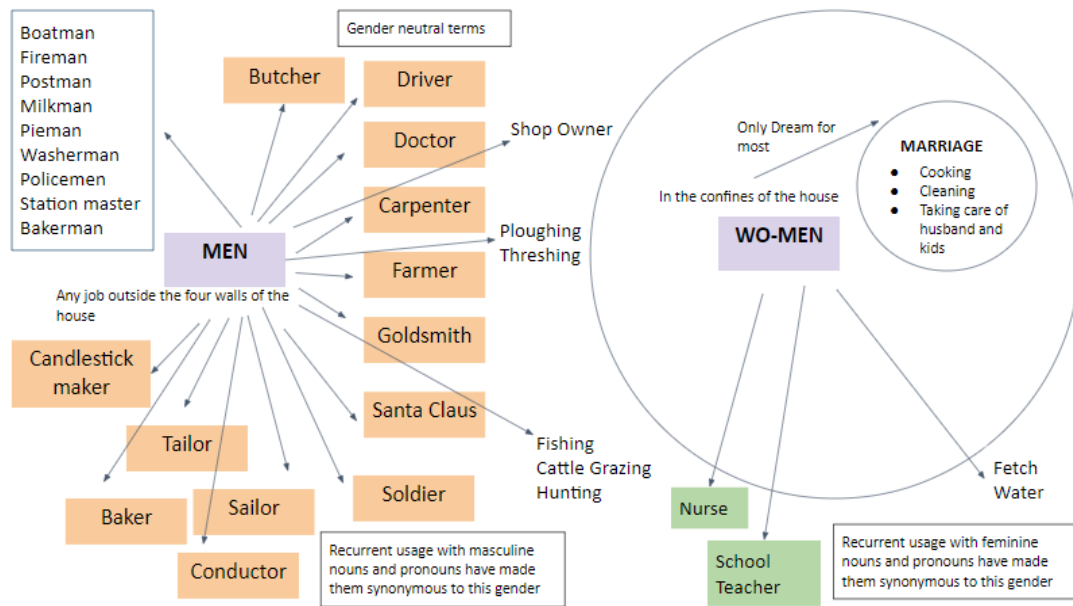
Stereotyping of professions/occupations concerning a specific gender is common in these rhymes. Any work that requires physical strength or a longer duration of hours outside the four walls of the house is typically deemed fit for a man and is considered manly (Figure 2). Initially, the common nouns like Doctor, Farmer, Goldsmith, and Carpenter would have been gender neutral but the recurrent association of masculine pronouns with them has made them to be perceived as fit for men. It is difficult for people to imagine a woman as Santa Claus who has always been portrayed as a man in all cultural manifestations. Consider the famous rhyme *Jingle Bells*; the absence of an alternate depiction of these roles has led to the formation of such stereotypes. On the other hand, any work that was done indoors was associated with women since they would spend the majority of their time indoors. This limited women and their work to the confines of the house. And a repetitive depiction of the same developed into rigid and stereotypical molds of gender role portrayals. (Figure 2 represents this analysis) The term 'Doctor' has almost become synonymous with the gendered category of 'man' due to a repeated depiction of doctors as men. This stands true for all the nursery rhymes which are the subject of analysis here. The poems *Doctor Shane went to Spain*, *I have a doll dressed in blue*, *Doctor Foster*, *Miss Polly had a Dolly*, and several others describe a doctor who is a 'man'. The use of masculine pronoun 'he' makes this ascertain. The same is the case with the term 'Farmer'. Farming is considered an activity done by men and men have dominated this field for a long time. A farmer is typecast as a man wherever the term is used. Whether it is 'a farmer' of *A farmer went Trotting* who 'went trotting upon his grey mare' or the 'Old Macdonald' who had a farm in the poem *Old Macdonald had a farm*. The use of masculine pronouns 'his' and 'him' in these poems highlights this fact. If we look at the poem

Bread for my Baby, it is clear from the use of the pronouns 'he' and 'his' it talks about a man who is responsible to get the bread/food for the baby. The 'Soldier' by definition means a member of an army. However, the depiction of the soldier in all these rhymes is always in terms of a boy/man like in the rhyme *Ten little soldier boys*, where the work of a soldier is deemed fit only for 'soldier boys' and not for soldier girls.

In all the rhymes considered for study here, the working professionals are 'man'. The poem *Ferry me across the river* has a 'boatman', the poem *Rat-a-tat* mentions a 'postman' the person delivering the post in the poem *Eight O'clock* is a 'postman', there is a 'milkman' in the poem by the same name and all the firefighters in the poem *Ten little firemen* are men. Even the person selling the pie in *Simple Simon* is a 'pie man'. The bus driver in the poem *Hail to the bus driver* is a man. It is very rare to have heard or come across a vocabulary that is inclusive of other genders, especially about these jobs. Whether it be a 'washer man' or a 'policeman'.

Even the work of cattle grazing or fishing is shown to be carried out only by young boys or men. In the rhyme *Little boy blue*, the 'boy' tends to the cows and sheep. In the short rhyme *Little Tommy*, fishing is done by 'Tommy'. The 'sailor' in the poem *A sailor went to sea* is described using the pronoun 'he'. The owner of the store in the poem *Shel's Store* who sells goods is a man. The 'tailor' in *A Carrion crow* is a man shaping 'his cloak'. In the poem *Down by the station*, both the 'conductor' and 'station master' are men. In the rhyme - *Lavender's Blue*, all the people working in the kingdom are men - those who 'plough', carry the 'cart', 'make hay', and 'thresh corn'. All these jobs are always depicted to be carried out by men. This to a great extent highlights how the picture of the world is painted by the gendered category labelled as 'men' where they give themselves the most important parts to play. The story is narrated by them and the spotlight always belongs to them. The hypocrisy is evident in the way the same work is perceived in a different manner depending on whether it is done by a man or a woman. Certain work is deemed to be feminine when done at home and is not given a fair amount of importance, compared to when the same is done to earn money at a professional level. It is only the men who are shown doing work to earn a living; like the 'Baker's man' of *Pat-a-cake* or 'the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker' of *Rub-a-dub* who are 'three men'. In the poem, *Little Tommy Tucker* 'Little Tommy' 'sings for his supper'. However, if cooking/baking is done at home for the family, it is not considered worthy of being labelled as 'work'.

There are certain professions, however, especially related to care giving which are stereotypically deemed fit for women. Nursing and Teaching are two such areas. Similarly, the activity of collecting / fetching water for the house is considered fit for a woman only and is an unpaid labour activity. The rhyme *The teacher song* goes on about narrating the positive qualities of a primary school teacher. The use of feminine nouns and pronouns make it evident that the teacher is a 'woman - Mrs. Appleberry'. This has been true for all the schools considered for this study; all the pre-primary and primary teachers in the 30 schools were women. When it comes to the medical profession where a doctor is always shown/portrayed as a 'man', the word 'nurse' has become synonymous with women. The rhyme *Nurse song* effectively depicts this. The hegemonic superiority of men has hardwired the brain to put 'the man' in more powerful positions than the woman, always. A major concern at the base of women's empowerment is the unacknowledged work done by women at home.

Figure 2*Gendered Professional Roles Depicted in Nursery Rhymes*

Nursery rhymes and children's songs are commonly used as a fun and engaging way to teach children about numbers, letters, and animals. However, upon closer examination of the language used in these rhymes, it becomes apparent that many contain hidden, negative meanings that have been unconsciously internalized over time. While these rhymes may seem harmless, they can perpetuate irrational ideas and biases that persist for generations. As young children, we absorb the concepts, values, and beliefs that are communicated through the language of these verses. In fact, a study by Al-Ramahi (2013) analyzed several rhymes from *'The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book'* and identified sexist language that reinforces negative stereotypes about women. Women are often portrayed as helpless and dependent, while men are depicted as the providers who go out to earn a living. This creates a binary distinction between the roles of men and women, which is unhealthy for society. It is important to scrutinize the language used in these rhymes and ensure that they promote equality and positive values. For instance, the depictions in the rhymes *'The Old Woman who lived in a shoe'*, the lullaby *'Hush' thee'*, and *'Papa's going to buy a mockingbird'*. Majority of these rhymes including the ones mentioned above focus on the father's ability to earn and on a woman's reproductive duty. Thus, a binary between the work done by men and women is created. Such stereotypes are unhealthy for society and require being on a thorough check.

Neoliberal education systems have solidified the dominance of Western literature in early childhood education, influencing children's aspirations regarding their future professions by seeding gendered ideologies within commonly used educational materials, such as nursery rhymes. The focus on English-language curricula within private and elite schools, particularly in urban centers like Ahmedabad, favors Western literature over local storytelling, thereby sustaining linguistic and cultural hierarchies in favor of specific career choices over others. In this context, nursery rhymes serve as an influential tool of socialization, familiarizing children with vocational roles that frequently symbolize gender distinctions. These depictions do not merely mirror existing gender disparities; they actively promote their reproduction, subtly reinforcing the idea that some professions are better suited for one gender than another. English-language nursery rhymes' hegemony in India disproportionately benefits high socio-economic group children who go to elite schools, while the lower-income group children in regional-language schools are denied the cultural capital of English. This asymmetrical access to language not only perpetuates class-based disparities but also affects employment opportunities, as English language competence is a determining factor for accessing high-paying employment in India's competitive job market. The gendered classification of occupations in the system guarantees perpetuation of structural disparities, truncating the available chances for women and marginalized communities while perpetuating

traditional occupational functions. Thus, nursery rhymes, far from being neutral pedagogical tools, are steeped in larger socio-economic and cultural contexts with a deep impact on children's understanding of gender, work, and social mobility from a young age.

Current Challenges and Self- Reflexivity

While all attempts have been made to eliminate any personal bias, there is still a possibility of over-reading the rhymes and the gendered connotations marked in them on account of confirmation bias. The gaps in interpretation may arise out of modifications or transformations in conjectures over a period of time. The meaning thus may be relative to the socio-cultural fabric of times in which these rhymes are placed for review (Ferenczi, 1956). Although the exact connotation may have variations, a high level of probability may emerge when the frequent use of words and their context are analysed. There is a universal agreement that there will be a greater degree of probability if associations are forthcoming (Mintz, 1966). The sample size for data collection is justified by the fact that the secondary data received from these sources is sufficient in number for analysis vis-a-vis its repetition in in-class teaching at various educational institutions considered for the purpose of this study. Many of the rhymes are anonymous and there is not much clarity about the exact time of their production and publication. As language is in a constant state of flux, evolving with time, certain words might have been used in these rhymes inappropriately due to a mere lack of vocabulary. Hence, one of the aims of this research is to contribute to making language more gender-fair by pinpointing problematic areas to highlight the need for more gender-neutral terms and usage of language.

Implications of the Study

The Pollyanna hypothesis states that positive words are prevalent, quickly learned, and used across languages. People usually vouch for positive language, even when the main content of the communication is harmful. Studies of large text corpora have supported this hypothesis using translations across languages. The results of a study by Defranza et al. (2020) show that not only gender prejudice is more prevalent in gendered languages but it is caused by a higher association of male words with positive words. Positive words are semantically more associated with males than females, providing evidence of prejudice. It also illustrates that gender prejudice exists cross-culturally. The research, therefore, lays the groundwork for further research not only in the education sector per se but in areas wherever the language is used, primarily, focusing on the urgency of critically examining the language taught to and used with the children. Timely investigation of such stereotyping is crucial for the development of positive gender attitudes in children and in society at large. With the changing times where AI-enabled devices are rendering nursery rhymes and stories for children, it is pertinent to check and avoid such stereotyping to multiply at an astounding rate. Overall, the relevance and unique contribution of research that studies the impact of nursery rhymes on stereotyping of professions lies in its potential to inform interventions and policies that promote gender equality, challenge gender stereotypes, and support children's development of positive attitudes towards different professions and genders.

Conclusion and Discussion

Though language is in the process of constant evolution as our societies create new ideas, these rhymes remain unchanged and unquestioned. Rhymes should aid children to learn about a society that offers equality to all individuals and not supporting and masquerading one set of stakeholders as the superior group controlling the other, especially in terms of gender roles.

The purpose of this research is not to critique how the rhymes came into existence and are circulated in the society but to show an alternative sense in which these can be re-imagined eradicating knowingly or unknowingly the perpetuation of biases that these propagate.

Research on gender representation in professional occupations has repeatedly discovered widespread underrepresentation of women in the STEM fields—i.e., Science, Technology, Engineering, and

Mathematics—and in executive positions, a gap that can be traced back to powerful forces on career choice from a very early age. Identification of men with careers like medicine, law, and science in nursery rhymes serves to reinforce actual gaps in access to these careers, thus confirming assumptions that some careers are masculine in nature. Kahn and Ginther's (2017) study on Women and STEM concludes that arguments for early biological differences are not conclusive and do not affect ability at kindergarten entrance. There are only small differences in mathematics test scores at early ages and the gender gap widens by middle and high school. Moreover, these differences are mutable and can be influenced by family, teacher, culture, stereotypes and role models throughout the schooling process. In addition, an intersectional approach, as described by Crenshaw (1989), needs to be understood to comprehend the intersection of gendered professional stereotypes with other social hierarchies like class and language. The purpose is as Mead (1970) says "Children must be taught how to think and not what to think." Although nursery rhymes serve as a form of communication, their traditional usage has caused many educators to overlook their underlying messages which may not align with modern society. It is imperative for educators to be more cautious and consider revising or replacing the content and themes of such rhymes to prevent children from developing perspectives that conflict with contemporary society. It is important to recognize the impact of these rhymes and their influence on society in spreading positive messages. Thus, the power of language should be harnessed to update our social values. Nursery rhymes could be well edited to suit the holistic learning of the children. The study highlights the potential adverse impact of nursery rhymes, including the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and the exclusion of alternative gender identities and roles. It suggests that educators and parents should carefully consider the messages conveyed by nursery rhymes and choose materials that promote positive values and respect for diversity.

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