

Representations of Social Ideologies and Stereotypes in Selected English Nursery Rhymes

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Abstract. Nursery rhymes have been found to be a very important part of learning at the nursery and primary school levels of education in Nigeria. Pupils are exposed to these poems as part of the means of impacting to them, the ability to appreciate reading and rhythm. This study highlights some English nursery rhymes with the aim of identifying their ideological imports and the possible meanings they convey to pupils. Excerpts from the lyrics of randomly selected nursery rhymes served as data. These were analysed based on Halliday's (1985) systemic functional theory and Fairclough's (1993) Critical Discourse Analysis Approach which explores the relationship between texts and wider socio-cultural processes. Findings revealed that some English nursery rhymes denigrate motherhood, promote wickedness and covetousness in the boy-child, and present the girl child as frail and without a voice. These forms of representation and positioning of people have implications for the appreciation of social and moral values on the part of the children who are made to read and memorise the rhymes. If societies must produce civil members of their communities, care must be taken to censor what is being fed to children in their formative years.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Formative Years, Ideological Imports, Nursery Rhymes, Socio-Cultural Processes,

1. Introduction

Nursery rhymes are very essential parts of the curriculum at pre-primary and primary school levels. They are also mostly recited by children at home, in crèches and at playtimes. Most Nursery Rhymes are beautiful and sweet-sounding. Their authors strive to weave beautiful strings of expression aesthetically to produce verse forms that children can easily relate to. As recorded in Sosanya (1987:3):

The aim of teaching poetry to children is to stimulate their imagination and engender interest and thereby enable them to begin in delight and end in wisdom... Nursery rhymes and jingles have always been part of babyhood...

The children's interest is sustained by means of repeated rhythmical patterns and actions, and these they enjoy as they sing or chant the lines of the rhymes; the musical sound and rhythm produced when the lines are recited or read aloud distinguish this genre from other genres of literature.

2. Statement of the Problem

Children at the Nursery and lower primary school levels of education are still in their formative years. They therefore have the tendency to imbibe whatever values taught to them at this level of primary school education. It is widely believed that the mind of a child is like a tabularasa so that there is need for caution and carefulness in the process of imparting knowledge to children at this stage of their lives. Some of the nursery rhymes that Nigerian

children are exposed to have certain semantic and moral implications for the present time and for the future.

According to Maiti and Naskar (2017:27), *'it is hardly surprising that most nursery rhymes have meanings deeper than the reach of their intended audience'*. Maiti and Naskar (2017:28) further explain: that:

From Jack and Jill to London Bridge is Falling Down, almost most of the familiar and popular poems which are sung by innocent children bear toxic scars of history. Mutated and evolved through centuries in orally, they were first began to be recorded in the 16th century, yet they had to wait several centuries more before put into a collection titled Tommy Thumb's Song Book and a sequel, Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book (1744). Yet it took several centuries more before scholars probed into the deeper meaning of the poems, hence discovering the dark realm concealed within the gleaming surface. In modern age, though often laid under the scalpel of 'political correctness' and 'social justice', these rhymes continue to bear the lamentations and wound of the anonymous masses.

While these authors concentrate on the historical contexts – social, religious, political etc. - that gave rise to the creation of rhymes and the underlying meanings of such rhymes which the authors have deceitfully clad in seemingly mild linguistic garments, this paper examines the possible social ideologies and stereotypes represented in selected nursery rhymes, especially as these relate to the socio-cultural beliefs and practices of the Nigerian people.

3. Research Methodology

Seven nursery rhymes were selected for this study. They were taken from Sosanya's (1987) *Collected Poems for Primary Schools* (volume 1) which was purposively selected due to the inscription on it – 'licensed for sale in Nigerian schools', and its popular usage in Nigerian classrooms. These poems which are still being recited in schools were analysed based on the social ideologies they portend and the didactic values they communicate to the Nigerian child.

4. Theoretical Framework:

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse. It involves the analysis and understanding of language – written or spoken text – as a social practice. CDA relates discourse to socio-political contexts such as power, bias, inequalities and abuse. Critical discourse analysis is slightly different from discourse analysis because it can be used to highlight issues of power asymmetries, manipulation, exploitation, and structural inequities in different domains *Blommaert and Bucean (2000)*. CDA is a field that is concerned with studying and analysing written and spoken texts to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality and bias. It examines how these discursive sources are maintained and reproduced within specific social, political and historical contexts. Major contributors in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis are Fairclough and Van Dijk. Fairclough (1993:135) describes critical discourse analysis (CDA) as:

...discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony.

He perceives language as a phenomenon which is inextricably connected to other aspects of social life so that any analytical exercise on social life and research must consider language use as a very important resource. From the conception of (Fairclough 1989:2), discourse is a product of social ideology within a social context. This ideology is shaped by the society and it also shapes the society. Fairclough highlights the crux of all discourse analysis research as the commitment to a systematic, text-based exploration of language to reveal its role in the workings of ideology and power in society. According to him, CDA aims "to

explain existing conventions as the outcome of power relations and power struggle”, and as explained by Rogers *et al.*(2005:365), it aims “to answer questions about the relationships between language and society”.

vanDijk (1998a) describes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a field that studies and analyses written and spoken texts. This is with the aim of identifying the discursive sources of inequality, power, dominance, etc. CDA examines how certain ideologies are explored by means of linguistic components. It addresses how these discursive sources are engaged in specific social, political and historical contexts. Halliday’s (1985) Systemic Functional Linguistics forms the basis for this critical analysis of discourse, particularly due to his perception of language as a social act, and his identification of the three meta-functions of language which are the textual, interpersonal, and ideational functions. By these means, it serves as a suitable tool for exploring both linguistic and extra-linguistic or deeper nuances of meaning in texts.

Discourse is multidimensional and multimodal in nature and this is informed by the different dimensions in context, which are linguistic, inter-textual, historical, socio-cultural political. The nature of discourse gives discourse analysis a legit ground to function. Functionally, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) opine it is used to represent, evaluate, argue for and against, and ultimately to legitimate or delegitimise social actions. Therefore, discourse is both socially constitutive and conditioned. It is social constitutive because it revolves round social institutions, situations and social structures and discourse itself forms the relationship between participants in relation to the social institutions, situations and social structures and it is socially conditioned because it is a product of social structure which condition acceptance of ideologies promulgated by social discourses. Therefore, the goal of discourse analysis is to show how social structures determine properties of discourse and how discourse has effects on social structures.

5. Social Ideologies and Stereotypes in the Selected English Nursery Rhymes

The nursery rhymes selected for this study are analysed linguistically and extra-linguistically, using the Critical Discourse Analysis approach in order to unravel the social ideologies represented in the rhymes and classify the various stereotypes appropriately.

5.1 Rhymes that Denigrate Motherhood

Sample 1: The Old Woman in the Shoe

*There was an old woman, who lived in a shoe,
She had so many children; she didn't know what
to do.*

*So she gave them some broth without any bread,
And whipped them all soundly and put them to
bed.*

This kind of rhyme provides information about the socio-economic situation of London at the time it was published in 1794. It usually tries to portray the tale of a typical English woman of lower economic class with large families. In the poem, the old woman represents the females who had large families at this time and their experiences at the time.

As recorded by Maiti and Naskar, women in the 18th century Britain engaged in prostitution because it was a means by which they could improve their standard of living; proceeds from the business helped them to overcome the challenge of poverty. This act of prostitution which was not frowned at in the society at that time became the theme of most publications. ‘The phrase “who lived in a shoe” depicts the shanty-towns that had sprung up during this period and served as brothels’.

Most teachers who teach this rhyme to Nigerian children are not aware of the historical details of this poem. They pick a book on rhyme and teach their pupils to chant the lines after them.

*There was an old woman who **lived in a shoe***

The reference to the woman in the poem as living in a shoe downgrades her. Children are likely to wonder why the old woman should live in a shoe. A shoe is a footwear and shoes are often dirty and smelling because of the use to which they are put. They are worn all over the place and they also protect the feet from injuries

and dirt. It is this same object that serves as shelter for the old woman!

She had so many children; she didn't know what to do.

The reference to 'so many children' is not out of place in the traditional Nigerian setting although civilisation (by means of the family planning system and constant orientation about same) has helped, to a certain level, in curbing the act of bearing children without control. However, the fact that 'she didn't know what to do' is not true about the average Nigerian woman who is known to be very caring, extremely affectionate and compassionate towards her children. She plays her motherly role in such a way that she would prefer to experience hardship for the sake of her children. She is a 'sweet mother'. The above poem does not depict her in this light. Her roles in the home towards her children as one who cares for them, prepares their meals, gets them cleaned up and neatly dressed, counsels and comforts them in trying times are being eroded in this rhyme.

She didn't know what to do

presents her as being naive, confused and irresponsible – one who is not fit to be a mother. *So she gave them some broth without any bread*

One may not question the fact that the old woman gave her children some broth (soup) without bread. That was what she could afford at the time. This is in line with the disposition of the Nigerian woman who will not send her children to bed on empty stomach. She must surely, however hard, look for something her children would eat at all cost.

However, her effort at ensuring that the children had something to eat is being downplayed. *Without any bread* implies that she did not do anything or that what she did was insignificant. By this, children may be influenced to despise the efforts their mothers are making to ensure that they are comfortable. They (the children) must be taught to be more appreciative and grateful for whatever they are being given. A Yoruba proverb talks of the benefits of having this kind of disposition.

Yoruba: *Bi omode ba dupe oore ana, yoo ri omiran gba.*

English: If a child is thankful for a previous good deed done towards him/her, he/she will be treated to yet another (*translation mine*).

The line that follows portrays the old woman in the rhyme as a wicked mother:

And whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.

The children could not have been satisfied because they were only served some broth. They also got sound whipping in addition. This kind of behaviour is not expected from a responsible Nigerian woman. She would rather sing the children's praise and put them to bed amidst eulogies.

This nursery rhyme poorly represents motherhood.

Sample 2: Old Mother Hubbard

Old Mother Hubbard

Went to the cupboard

To get her poor dog a bone;

But when she got there,

The cupboard was bare,

And so the poor dog had none.

Although there are some assumptions regarding the historical origin of "Old Mother Hubbard's" character, this nursery rhyme was written and illustrated by Sarah Catherine Martin (around 1804) – mainly to amuse her sister's children. When the illustrated book was first published in 1805 it was very successful and the poem became one of the most popular nursery rhymes of all times (Online source <https://allnurseryrhymes.com/old-mother-hubbard/>).

Although there are conflicting assumptions about the historical details of the poem 'Old Mother Hubbard', the most common appears to be that reported by Kidd (2019). According to her:

The rhyme is said to refer to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey and his unsuccessful attempt to get an annulment for King Henry VIII. Old Mother Hubbard is Cardinal Wolsey. The cupboard is the Catholic Church. The doggie is Henry VIII. The bone is the annulment Henry wanted in

order to end his marriage to Katherine of Aragon.

There are other verses of the rhyme but the most popularly published is the first. Again, this rhyme presents Mother Hubbard as one who is incapable of caring for her pet. No information was provided regarding how the bone disappeared. Had there been any bone in the cupboard in the first place? If there was, who took it away? Was Mother Hubbard sincere? Did she ever keep any bone in the cupboard for her dog? This rhyme ends on a sad note:

*The cupboard was bare,
And so the poor dog had none.*

The poor dog had to go hungry. Mother Hubbard could not feed her pet. This is sad. The woman in this rhyme can be said to be nonchalant. She allowed the poor dog to go hungry without seeking other alternatives that could bring about food. The rhyme portrays the woman as incompetent, nonchalant and uncaring. This again is not a true reflection of the Nigerian woman. In traditional Nigerian settings, men and women eat while their pets are by their sides and at intervals; they throw morsels at them (the pets) or serve their food on a separate plate. In modern contexts, meals are specially prepared for the pets. This poem undermines these values.

Sample 3: Hush-a-Bye Baby

*Hush-a-bye baby
Daddy is near;
Mamma is a lady,
And that's very clear.*

The words and origin of the 'Hush-a-bye baby' rhyme are said to have originated from America. It can...be correctly described as both a nursery rhyme and a lullaby. The words to the 'Hush-a-bye baby' song were first published in 1765. (http://www.rhymes.org.uk/hush_a_bye_baby.htm)

'Hush-a-bye, Baby' is one of the lullabies around the world usually meant to calm children and lull them to sleep (<https://www.mamalisa.com> online source).

In this rhyme, the baby is being rocked to sleep and is being assured of daddy's presence.

Daddy is near

The implication is that daddy's presence will naturally make the child stop crying. This is because mamma is not capable of calming the child. After all, she is only a lady (a woman).

*Mamma is a lady
And that's very clear*

The rhyme suggests that mamma is slack in the business of child caring. The baby is being informed of daddy's presence and that alone is enough to calm him/her. It suggests that mamma has been trying to calm the baby all to no avail. The question that arises here is whether daddy, above mamma, is a master in the act of caring for babies. This kind of song denigrates motherhood.

What is *clear* is that daddy is better, stronger, perhaps more caring, more loving with a kind of expertise in rocking babies to sleep. This is not the true picture of the Nigerian family. While I do not completely disagree with the Nigerian daddy helping with caring for babies, I am not well disposed to the fact that women cannot do it better. The Nigerian culture emphasises that a woman should care for her children. She knows what the child needs every time a sound is made. She can interpret the sounds appropriately and attend to the baby's needs almost always correctly. She has the instinct which guides her actions as she cares for her children.

5.2 Rhymes That Promote Wickedness and Covetousness in the Boy-Child

There are some poems that encourage wickedness and covetousness in the boy-child. Below are some of one of them

Sample 4: As I was Going to Sell my Eggs

*As I was going to sell my eggs,
I met a man with bandy legs,
Bandy legs and crooked toes,
I tripped up his heels, and he fell on his nose.*

The above is one of the rhymes from England. 'This rhyme and its illustration can be found in *The Real Mother Goose* (1916), illustrated by Blanche Fisher Wright' (<https://www.mamalisa.com/?t=es&p=1973>).

The rhyme talks about a boy who was on his way to sell eggs. He met a man with bandy legs and crooked toes and all he could do was to trip up his heels! This is an act of wickedness in the sense that the boy was supposed to help the man with bandy legs if there was any need for it. All he did was to make him fall on his nose! The age difference between the boy and the man in the rhyme ought to make the man earn some degree of respect from the boy. To worsen the matter, this rhyme is organised and published in a way that seems to celebrate the boy's wicked act. What is there to be celebrated? Of what moral value is this rhyme? The Nigerian culture promotes courtesy and respect for elders, mutual love, peace and harmony etc. This rhyme is far from doing this. One can imagine how children will laugh and get excited when they get to the last line because the man 'fell on his nose'.

Sample 5: Simple Simon

*Simple Simon met a pieman,
Going to the fair;
Says Simple Simon to the pieman,
'Let me taste your ware;'
Says the pieman to Simple Simon,
"Show me first your penny;"
Says Simple Simon to the pieman,
'Indeed I have not any.'*
Regarding the origin of 'Simple Simon' it is recorded that:
The verses used today are the first of a longer chapbook history first published in 1764. The character of Simple Simon may have been in circulation much longer, possibly appearing in an Elizabethan chapbook and in a ballad, Simple Simon's Misfortunes and his Wife Margery's Cruelty, From about 1685
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simple_Simon_\(nursery_rhyme\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simple_Simon_(nursery_rhyme)).

In the days before fast food and convenience stores were invented food was sold from street sellers from trays of food. A fair was an extremely popular place to sell 'your ware' The tradition and history of fairs dates back to Medieval England... The modern day version of Simple Simon can be found in the song and a game where children have to do exactly what Simple Simon says!
(http://www.rhymes.org.uk/simple_simon.htm).

In this rhyme, Simple Simon met a pie man on his way to the fair. On seeing the pies, he wanted some. This could be regarded as covetousness, especially because he never had any plan to eat pies until he met the pie man. Children ought to be taught to be contented with what they have. There was a display of arrogance in the manner Simple Simon requested for the pie.

Let me taste your ware

If children need anything, they should make their requests politely. These are the values that the Nigerian child is expected to imbibe. Simple Simon was unable to buy the pies because he had no money.

Indeed I have not any

He was well aware of this before he requested for the pies. Children are to be taught to be honest in their dealings with others. If Simple Simon had first tasted the pie without the seller asking for money, how would he have paid for it? This would have generated a row between Simple Simon and the pie man. Children are not to present themselves as trouble makers. They should be taught to respect elders and be contented with what they have.

5.3 Rhymes That Present the Girl-Child as Frail and Without a Voice

Sample 6: Whistle, Daughter, Whistle

*Whistle, Daughter, Whistle
Whistle, daughter, dear.*

*I cannot whistle, mammy,
I cannot whistle, clear.*

*Whistle, daughter, whistle,
Whistle for a pound.
I cannot whistle, mammy,
I cannot make a sound.*

The origin of the poem ‘Whistle Daughter Whistle’ has been traced to Latin America. It is recorded that:

This song, of the impatient girl who suddenly finds she can whistle when invited to whistle for a man, is known in many traditions, including Yiddish and Latin American. It has been suggested that the song means more than meets the ear, and that whistling is part of the witch's technique to summon the powers of darkness when she wants to realise a desire (akin to this belief is the sailor's horror of whistling for fear of raising a storm
(<https://mainlynorfolk.info/lloyd/songs/whistledaughterwhistle.html>).

Whatever is the case regarding the origin of this rhyme, ‘Whistle Daughter Whistle’ suggests that the girl in the rhyme was weak and feeble.

*I cannot whistle, mammy,
I cannot whistle, clear.*

Despite the encouragement she received from her mother, she still maintained that she could not whisper.

*Whistle, daughter, whistle,
Whistle for a pound.
I cannot whistle, mammy,
I cannot make a sound.*

She declared that she could not make a sound! Everyone has a voice (except in cases of dumbness and even in this case people can still express themselves). Every female child or adult has the right of speech. No female should be shut down. No female should be afraid to express herself. The rhyme depicts the female

child as weak and frail; as one who cannot speak for herself or one whose expressions are unclear, incoherent and unconvincing. Today, there are mechanisms in place to ensure fair treatment and gender equality in Nigeria. There is the increased participation of women in governance. The girl-child should not be made to believe that she is insignificant in matters of the nation. Her voice counts.

Apart from the categories of rhymes discussed above, there are some other rhymes that are dangerous for the reading of the Nigerian child. One of them is shown below:

Sample 7: Monday’s Child

*Monday’s child is fair of face,
Tuesday’s child is full of grace,
Wednesday’s child is full of woe,
Thursday’s child has far to go,
Friday’s child is loving and giving,
Saturday’s child works hard for a living,
But the child that’s born on the Sabbath day
Is bonny and blithe and good and gay.*

*As found online,
The words and lyrics of Mondays Child poem are used to associate children with the pattern and different names to the days of the week. Mondays child is a very popular poem but the actual words of Mondays child are not well known! We have all learnt the days of the week as Mondays child intended but we cannot seem to remember the qualities of being born on individual days! Sunday was traditionally referred to as the 'Sabbath day' so there is no specific reference to Sundays child.*
(http://www.rhymes.org.uk/mondays_child.htm)

In the rhyme ‘Monday’s child, there are misrepresentations, particularly with reference to Wednesday’s child, Thursday’s child, and to an extent, Saturday’s child. Children born on other days have something pleasant said about them. Consider the line below:
Wednesday’s child is full of woe

This kind of description of the Wednesday's child in this rhyme is very dangerous and could result in costly implications for the child later in life. If coincidentally, a 'Wednesday's child' finds himself in unfavourable circumstances as he grows up, he may come to connect the harrowing or traumatic experiences he has been going through to his being born on a Wednesday – a day of woe! This might be suicidal. There is the need to keep this kind of rhyme away from children. These are days in which suicide is on the increase in Nigeria.

The reference to Thursday's child also calls attention to the danger of being born on a Thursday.

Thursday's child has far to go

The Thursday's child may have to go the extra mile before he can attain success in life while his counterparts need not go far.

Saturday's child works hard for a living

Hard work pays. A Yoruba proverb says *ise ni oogun ise*, meaning that *hard work is the remedy for poverty*. This virtue is expected to be possessed by all irrespective of the day of birth. The particular mention of Saturday's child suggests that while he works hard for a living, others also earn a living without much stress as he (the Saturday's child) would go through.

6. Discussion

The rhymes analysed in this study communicate meanings that can negatively impact on the Nigerian child. It is sad to note that the need to achieve rhyme or rhythmic patterns in the nursery rhymes led to the creation of 'dangerous' lines or expressions in the poem. Some of these are:

*There was an old woman who lived in a shoe,
She had so many children, she didn't know what
to do.*

*Daddy is near;
Mamma is a lady,
And that's very clear.*

*I met a man with bandy legs,
Bandy legs and crooked toes,*

I tripped up his heels, and he fell on his nose.

*Wednesday's child is full of woe,
Thursday's child has far to go,*

Today, we hear of mothers who, having no food to give their children serve them sedatives so that they are asleep for several hours. Records have shown that some of these children never wake up again! There are mothers who dump their babies in toilets because they have no means of caring for them. Some others place their babies by the roadside so that they can be picked by someone else who will take good care of them. These are not good enough. The society can be better informed through rhymes that are didactic. Future citizens – mothers, fathers, leaders, counsellors etc. can have proper orientation about life while in their formative years.

One is tempted to modify some of the lines in the poems to make them conform to the norms and socio-cultural beliefs and practices of the Nigerian people so that the Nigerian child can benefit maximally from such rhymes. For instance, consider a re-reading of the poem as 'As I was going to Sell my Eggs' shown below:

*As I was going to sell my eggs,
I met a man with bandy legs,
Bandy legs and crooked toes,*

*I moved very fast and soon we were close
I carried his load and we crossed the road
He looked at me and said 'thank
you'
Then I knew what great things I could do.
(Additional lines mine)*

The Nigerian child is not exposed to the historical backgrounds of the rhymes the teacher teaches him or her. Therefore, he/she is likely to interpret the meanings using the linguistic and socio-cultural resources at his/her disposal. Whatever meanings these rhymes convey to the child, now or later in life, will go a long way in shaping the life of such a child since most of the rhymes people learn as children live with them until they are old.

The lyrical contents of nursery rhymes must be carefully selected to match the moral values and socio-cultural experiences of the Nigerian people. Rhymes that portray women as being economically weak and inexperienced in the act of mothering should be kept away from Nigerian classrooms. The Nigerian child must never be exposed to rhymes that encourage waywardness in children or those ones that make them feel inferior or think they are never-do-wells.

7. Conclusion

Culture differs from context to context. Therefore, forcing rhymes of western origin whose historical details are unknown (and which convey no moral lessons) on our pupils may be inimical to the all-round development of the pupils. It is against this backdrop that this study recommends that we should not just transfer all manner of rhymes from the Western culture into Nigerian classrooms. We should be conscious of the cultural beliefs, practices and moral values of the Nigerian people. Teachers, parents, care-givers and guardians are to pay close attention to the content of what children are taught. This is necessary if we must produce responsible citizens capable of influencing their immediate communities and the world at large.

This poem below is my advice to parents, teachers, guardians and care givers. I think it fit to end this paper on this note.

What we Teach our Children

*What we teach our children matters a great deal
If we teach them what is bad
Surely for them it is a bad meal
And that for all is very sad
When they feed on what is bad
No doubt they will grow up lean
Then we must do all that we can
To make them grow healthy and clean
Do we care if they turn bad
Or become misled and wayward?
Or do we pray that they all learn
To turn from the way that leads downward?
If we must have a healthy nation
We must begin from every station
Let us create our nursery rhymes
That can stand the test of time*

*And lead our children to pathways of right
Then we can say we have showed them light
And then our nation will surely stand
With her citizens faithful and grand.*

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