

Gender Identity and Cognition in Bangla Nursery Rhymes

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Abstract

This paper examines the construction of male and female identities and gender cognition in Bangla nursery rhymes. Data include 34 selected rhymes, which were analysed following a qualitative content analysis method. The findings reveal both essentialist and non-essentialist gender constructions in the rhymes. On one hand, unlike men, women have less freedom of action, decision-making power, equal rights, and facilities for their physical and mental development, and on the other hand, there are also gender inclusive rhymes that acknowledge (young) women's physical mobility, agency, and socio-economic contributions. Mothers are essentially represented as diligently and positively responsive to both daughters and sons, while girls' health and creativity are highlighted in the modern rhymes. Thus, Bangla nursery rhymes reflect diversified gender identities and beliefs that encapsulate both traditional and emerging male and female roles.

Keywords

Bangla nursery rhymes, gender identity, gender cognition, gender inclusion, early/child marriage.

Introduction

Nursery rhymes are perhaps the first literature and music that children encounter and use for various purposes. Rhymes are historically claimed to play key roles in the formation of a people's identities, as it was, for example, in the case of constructing post-independent Canadian national identity in 1867 onwards by depicting the socio-political and economic issues of the new nation (Galway). Again, the reflections of China's political transformation in Chinese rhymes (Pellatt) or the parodies of racial English rhymes by Caribbean writers (Heap 27) illustrate the multifaceted functions of nursery rhymes for documenting history

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and resisting power hegemony. Similarly, the anti-colonial movement in the Indian subcontinent triggered the compilation of Bangla nursery rhymes to save a national cultural asset (Shahed 146). Nursery rhymes also serve a multitude of pedagogical purposes, as they are used to introduce children to literature, intrigue the behavioural changes of introverted and hyperactive young learners, build their “imagination and creativity” (Velankar et al. 19), develop their motor and social skills (Mullen), and teach them music (Harding) and language (Al-Ahdal). Therefore, it can be argued that nursery rhymes have socio-cultural, political, and pedagogical implications.

Eventually, the rhymes have received significant attention in the literature. An important area, among many other socio-cultural and political ideologies, that researchers are keen to examine is if and how the rhymes acknowledge or promote gender equity. Fairclough opines that texts embody social practices as they originate in the socio-cultural and historical contexts of a country and produce “social, political, cognitive, moral and material consequences and effects” (9). Hence, nursery rhymes can be defined as social practices as they are produced in various socio-political backgrounds and transmitted through generations. In this regard, nursery rhymes arguably propagate gender ideologies, fostering children’s gender cognition (Heap; Mo and Shen; Mushtaq and Rasul; Olayemi; Politis). Researchers define gender cognition as the “gender belief system” (Deaux cited in Eckes 38) encompassing descriptions of what men and women are and prescriptions of what they should be. For example, Politis interrogates the stereotypical didactic tone of the English rhyme “What little boys and girls are made of” which compares girls with “sugar and spice” while boys with “snips and snails” (131). Such generalised perceptions of women and men as respectively edible objects and “sinister” and “reptilian” creatures can negatively impact children’s cognition about “maleness” and “femaleness” (Politis 131).

Olayemi observes that many English rhymes, taught at primary schools in Nigeria, misrepresent Nigerian women and promote gender stereotypes. For example, the mothers in “The Old Woman in the Shoe” and “Hush-a-Bye Baby” fail to take care of their children due to poverty and/or negligence, whereas Nigerian mothers, as Olayemi argues, are always attentive to their children’s needs (409-410). By analysing children’s Urdu literature, Shahnaz et al. also show how children’s literary magazines and books impart gendered ideologies (10). Hawkins opines that children are taught through rhymes “the attitudes of [their] people and the times” because “these nonsensical, ear-pleasing, seemingly innocent verses of childhood soberly reflect much of the world-view of a society and its unique features” (617-618).

Bangla rhymes date back to the times when child marriages were a social norm or reality (Chatterjee and Chakraborty 11). Likewise, Mo and Shen observe that traditional Chinese rhymes depict women's "hopes and dreams" of a better future after marriage as well as their "fears" and "sufferings" of seclusion and discrimination relating to marital and family affairs (133). Thus, nursery rhymes carry socio-cultural significance by reflecting people's social practices, which transmit and build people's ideologies through generations. Prosic-Santovac posits that the rhymes, which present women as fragile or domestic and men as aggressive or uncooperative, intrigue children's gender cognition of exclusion and disparity (33-34). In a similar view, by reflecting on her personal experiences, Mukherjee argues that if little children are taught that girls are meant to be "invisible or less worthy of being seen from babyhood," women in real life would grow up as anything but "brave or empowered" (5 and 12). Wallowitz calls this influence a "cultural construct," which operates on people since infancy (26-28).

However, such claims lack sufficient empirical evidence because the existing studies that examined gender issues in the rhymes of different languages including Chinese (Mo and Shen), Urdu (Mushtaq and Rasul), and English (Heap; Olayemi; Politis) are based on a textual analysis of the rhymes. Soufineyestani observed the physiological effects of heart rate on her participants and their psychological reactions of happiness and disturbance during and after listening to the rhymes, but did not elaborate on the causes of the reactions or examine the features of the rhymes that created the impacts. Velankar et al. particularly studied how the positive and the negative "sentiments" associated with the lyrical and acoustic features of English rhymes influenced introverted and extroverted children of three to four years to become more engaged in class afterwards (20). Although these experiments provide implications for a possibility of impacting children's gender cognition by nursery rhymes, further research is required to examine if and how boys and girls are socially and psychologically affected by rhymes to develop their gender beliefs and identities.

The present study contributes to the literature on gender-oriented studies of particularly Bangla nursery rhymes. These rhymes are claimed to share "the thousand-year history of the Bengali language itself" (Shahed 145), which is the state language of Bangladesh and spoken by 98 percent of its citizens (Hamid and Jahan). The Bangla language also has the seventh largest world population of more than 230 million speakers, inhabiting Bangladesh, the Indian state of West Bengal, and different parts of the world, who use Bangla nursery rhymes at home and school. Nonetheless, the gender-based analyses of the rhymes remain relatively unexplored. Existing studies focus mostly on their origin and classification (Shahed; Sircar), compilation and editions (Ray and Hafiz),

translations (Sircar), geographical variations (Ahmed), literary features and values (Bandopadhyay), pedagogical applications (Harding), and (socio-)linguistic analysis (Chatterjee and Chakraborty) – very few address gender issues (Mukherjee). There are only random, brief, and occasional reflections on gender representations in some of these studies. Sircar, for example, observes that Bangla rhymes are dominated by the theme of marriage, a ubiquitous presence of mothers, and stereotyped definitions of female beauty which tie it firmly to long hair and fair complexions (83-84). Bandopadhyay (265) claims that “the saddest and sweetest” Bangla rhymes relate to female children’s marriage. These studies, however, did not concentrate on gender issues in their full length. In a newspaper article only, Mukherjee interrogated the marginalisation of young girls in Bangla rhymes, and argued that the rhymes, representing girls as either silent or entirely absent compared to boys, negatively influence children’s psychology. However, as indicated before, such claims require further empirical evidence. This paper analyses if men and women in Bangla nursery rhymes are portrayed with their typical essential characteristics or given space to develop their identities, and what gendered messages are spread through such representation. The analysis is based on the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh which is the main Bangla speaking country.

Essentialist and constructivist identities

Constructivists view identities as plural and “constructed, rather than fixed or innate” (Johnson and Meinhof 7) because people (re)form their identities as they develop their understanding of society, self, and others (Tanya). Essentialists, on the other hand, build on a patriarchal socio-political power structure that denies women agency and defines men and women as static binary opposites. For example, men are essentially perceived as empowering, rational, assertive, and outgoing and women, as vulnerable, obedient, dependent, emotional, voiceless, and bound to the domestic domain (Stephens). An inability to follow or perform these assigned attributes makes men and women “unnatural” or “deviant” (Politis 130). In other words, unlike essentialism, constructivism views men and women as more independent and equal and gives them agency to self-construct their gender values and ideologies.

The Bangla rhymes discussed in this paper were selected in two steps. Initially a list of 40 rhymes was made following a purposive sampling from three edited books of Bangla rhymes by Ahmed, Riton, and Ray and Hafiz, published by the leading national publishing houses of Bangladesh, namely Bangla Academy, Biswasahitya Kendra, and Anupam Prakashani, respectively. Ahmed provided region-based different versions of the rhymes, while Ray and Hafiz

categorised them into traditional and modern rhymes. Most of these rhymes are anonymous because they had been originally composed and recited by Bengali-born poets before they were first edited and published in book form – under the title of *Khukumonir Chhara* (girl’s rhymes) – by Jogindranath Sarkar in 1908 (Ray and Hafis). Riton included modern rhymes written/published mostly between 1948 and 1989 by, among others, Jashim Uddin (1903-1976), Rokanuzzaman Khan (1925-1999), Kartik Chandra Dasgupta (1884-?), Khalek Bin Joyenuddin (n.d.), and Hasan Jan (1927-1974). Other data sources include national primary school textbooks (Gibran et al.) and children’s books (Sarkar). Based on the themes of marriage and treatment, family relationships, friendship, indoor and outdoor activities, 40 rhymes were primarily selected from the above-mentioned books.

Later, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with 44 parents/guardians/elders/grandparents and care givers of various educational levels from the researcher’s neighbourhood, office, and one childcare centre of the same locality in Dhaka. They were first asked which rhymes, if any, they used to recite or sing to children. Next, they were provided with the list of 40 rhymes, initially selected by the researcher, to identify the rhymes that they used, and were asked to provide reasons for their choices. Later, the number of responses against each rhyme was counted. Finally, 34 rhymes, used by the participants, were selected for analysis and ordered according to the number of their users. For example, rhyme 1 (“Ai re ai tiye”) was used by 38 participants, while rhyme 34 (“Aar kedo na jadumoni”) by only 1 parent/guardian.

An inductive (qualitative) content analysis was employed to analyse the rhymes by exploring both their manifest and latent features. Because identities and cognition are concerned with people’s beliefs, words, and actions, each rhyme was constantly read to identify who was talking, to whom, about what, when, where, how, and why. Descriptive codes such as “kinship terms for sons” and “motherly concerns” were used at this stage to “decrease the risk of missing essential content” (Lindgren, et al. 4). Next, similar codes and themes were compared and grouped to reduce the possible number of categories. Finally, two broad categories were developed through abstraction and interpretation namely, space for children, and essentialist and non-essentialist voices and agencies.

Space for male and female children in Bangla nursery rhymes

The distribution of space among boys and girls is almost equal as they appear in respectively 16 and 11 out of 34 rhymes, but the nature of their presentation is somewhat disproportionate. The independent outdoor activities such as rowing boats, fishing, riding horses and playing sports are always associated with the

boys, showing their freedom as well as vigour. Contrarily, even if only once and in the late twentieth century rhyme, girls are shown practicing the creative skills of drawing pictures (rhyme 31), thereby exhibiting their artistic qualities. They are allocated only two outdoor tasks/activities of fetching water from the river (rhyme 29) and bathing in the river (rhyme 22), both of which, again, reflect women's space on the margins. First, although boys and girls perform important chores of fishing (rhymes 24, and 26) and fetching water (rhyme 29) for the family, the jobs are stereotyped as respectively men's and women's. Secondly, only girls (rhyme 29) are warned against their vulnerability to natural phenomena such as rain and evening darkness. The warnings, however, require closer inspections to understand why the mother in rhyme 29 forbids her daughter to go to the river at dusk or get her long hair wet in rain. The mother is either worried about her daughter's catching cold by wetting her hair in the evening or facing physical violations by wicked spirits or humans, because women's hair in Bangladesh is traditionally believed to be attracting bad spirits and used by sorcerers for evil intentions (Karim 277). In either case, social restrictions, rather than familial discriminations, on women's mobility are emphasised. Although this interpretation seems to explain why the male sibling/relative in rhyme 22 cannot allow the girls drying their hair on riverbanks, it should be noted how the male relative in rhyme 22, unlike the mother counseling her daughter in rhyme 29, humiliates the girls by hitting them. Woman is thus portrayed as more patient and composed than man. The other variant of this rhyme (5), however, does not show any threat or danger to children, as both boys and girls happily swim together in the river in the very presence of their elder sibling/relative, who rather concentrates on catching fish than castigating the children's splashing around the water. Yet, girls in other rhymes are seen enjoying outside freely only while they visit their maternal uncle's house and/or are accompanied by male children or relatives such as siblings, uncles, and grandfathers (rhymes 4, 5, 15, and 20), thus reinforcing women's restricted individual mobility and dependence on men for their (women's) safety. But the rhymes 4, 5, 15, and 20 are also the rhymes that can be termed gender inclusive because they emphasise gender equality by showing all children sharing similar fun activities including going on holidays, plucking flowers, wearing garlands, picking mangoes on stormy days, and fishing and bathing in the river.

While the male children make adventures, their female counterparts prepare for or are already in marital relationships. Ten rhymes (2, 6, 11, 12, 14, 17, 27, 28, 30, and 34) tell the stories of marriage of mostly children and a few adults, which are filled with matrimonial references including *bije* (wedding), *bou* (wife/bride), *bor* (husband/groom), and *shosburbari* (in-laws' house). Birds and

animals are also associated with marriage when it comes to female species. Rhyme 12, for example, symbolically describes a pigeon bride, wearing a traditional Bengali bridal ornament of tiara on her wedding and going to her in-laws' house by palanquin. The end rhymes of the traditional vehicle *palaki* (palanquin) with *kalki* (tomorrow) convey a sense of immediacy of a girl's marriage. Similar emotions are evoked in rhyme 14 in which, as Bandopadhyay observes, "even when the girl-child is just a baby, the mother rocks the cradle and in a sing-song voice laments" (265-266): *Bor ashbe ekbuni/ Niye jabe tokbuni* ("in no time will come the groom and take you away"). The mother is apparently sad about parting with her female child due to the latter's early marriage (rhymes 12, and 14), but her sadness also echoes her socially imposed inability to control the temporal dimension of her children's marriage. She can only make promises to her baby boys and girls a suitable match (rhymes 27, and 34), and look forward to their jovial wedding (rhymes 6). Although marriage has utilities of their own and should not necessarily threaten one's identity, the persistent emphasis on marital themes and women's lack of agency in marital issues may be interpreted as encouraging child/early marriage and/or documenting women's lived experiences and apprehensions of domestic life. Researchers opine that the rhymes of marriage were not originally produced for children, but eventually became so due to the repetitive recitation by elders through generations (Scheiding 37).

Essentialist and non-essentialist voices and agencies

Female children including brides are remarkably silent and gentle in the rhymes. For example, the daughter in rhyme 32 is marked for her gentle demeanour as she is presumably present at home and readily responds to her mother's calls, whereas the sons are located too far outside to answer their mother's calls (rhymes 9, and 21). Consequently, it is the girl child with whom mothers are seen more cuddling and kissing, possibly because girls are more available than their brothers at home. Nonetheless, except for the four chorus rhymes, mentioned above, young girls' voices are significantly absent whereas boys speak in three more rhymes (3, 16, and 26). Like the girls in Chinese rhymes (Mo and Shen), the Bengali bride is essentially treated as "a silent object" (Politis 132) because she is too shy to either speak to her husband (rhyme 2) or disclose her feelings about marriage to her family. The speakers of the rhymes on marriage include a husband (rhyme 2) and little boys and girls cheering at uncle's wedding (rhyme 11), and mothers in the rest, but never a bride herself.

Again, boys sound cordial with each other (rhyme 26), but dominating and demanding to their female counterparts (rhymes 3, and 22). For example, in

rhyme 26, the cheerful invitation of boys to their fellow male friends to go fishing and later their composed response to fish bites demonstrates male solidarity and resilience, and shows that young boys are trained to conquer their physical and emotional pains and act rationally. Similarly, the younger brother (rhyme 3) who owns, rides, beats, and controls a toy wild horse with a whip, or the son (rhyme 25) who conquers the challenges during his imaginary adventures on a horse, displays men's assertive and outgoing qualities. The horse complements their male strength and courage. Conversely, the sister passively watches her brother playing and follows his commands to move away before she is hurt by his horse (rhyme 3), which shows how Bengali women are sidelined and directed by men since childhood. Yet, it could also be assumed an act of the siblings' role-play or the brother's honest attempt to protect his sister from possible harm. Men are, thus, shown as leaders and risk-takers, while women as the subjects to be supervised and taken care of by men.

The only female characters allowed to speak and ask questions are the mothers, but their words revolve around only their children's whereabouts, such as *kbokon moder kaar bari* ("where is our baby boy?" [rhyme 9]), *kbokon gecbhe kader nai* ("which boat is my baby boy rowing?" [rhyme 21]), *songe jabe kee* ("who will accompany my son?" [rhyme 17]), *ke merechbe ke bokechbe* ("who beat and scolded [my son]?" [rhyme 18]), and *kothai aamar chandmoni* ("where is my darling girl?" [rhyme 32]). Although the mothers love chatting and cuddling with their daughter, as discussed earlier, they appear more concerned about their sons' whereabouts and welfare than about their daughters'. For example, in the four-line rhymes of 9 and 21, the kinship term *kbokon* (baby boy) is repeated four times by the mother who anxiously and lovingly awaits her son. In contrast, rhymes 14, 32 and 33 are the only rhymes in which the mother looks for and/or converses with her daughter. The son's eating, sleeping, and contentment are highlighted in nine rhymes (8, 9, 10, 13, 18, 23, 30, 28, and 34) whereas the daughter's in only three (rhymes 27, 30, and 33). The mothers frequently invite and offer traditional Bengali food, clothes, and ornaments to imaginary moon uncles, aunts, and birds in their attempt to comfort and/or sleep mostly their sons, but daughters only a few times (rhymes 7, 27, and 30). The repetitive emphasis on son's wellbeing reflects Bengali social preference for male children, who are traditionally held responsible for earning for the family and supporting their parents in their old age till death (Chen et al. 66).

The only male adults found in the rhymes include *Dada* (elder brother or conversely grandfather, [rhymes 4, and 22]), maternal uncles (rhymes 5, 7, 11, 15, and 20) and a husband (rhyme 2), but the brothers and the uncles are only mentioned or addressed by mothers and little children, and are never given a

voice. The voices of fathers or other men such as paternal uncles are remarkably absent, too. Sircar describes this as a depiction of patriarchal social systems, in which men perform outdoor jobs and women make home and raise children, while almost staying at home (84). Consequently, mothers' calls are marked by verbal and nominal deixis such as *ai* (come) and *ghor* (home): *aire kbokon ghore ai, kbokon re tui ghore ai* ("come home my boy" [rhymes 9, and 21]).

Despite their limited presence, the grown-up men are comparatively more compassionate to children than their female counterparts except mothers. Mothers address their children with various affectionate terms showing love and care: boys as *jadumoni* (charming boy), *chboton* (little child), *chbele*, *kboka*, *kbokon*, *kbokonmoni*, and *beta* (all meaning son), while girls as *kbuku*, *kbukumoni*, and *meye* (daughter) and *sonamoni* and *chandmoni* (darling child). The sisters of both parents also perform the typical feminine roles of comforting their nephews/nieces (rhyme 7), but the brothers' wives are rude to the children of their sisters-in-law. Let us examine the two versions of rhymes 15 and 19 (edition dates are unknown) on children's visiting their uncle's house. The uncle in both rhymes is equally warm and hospitable, while the aunt-in-law is cold, bitter, and unwelcoming. It is notable that the participants in the present study perceived the aunt with a stick as a negative and offensive portrayal of uncle's wives. Ahmed (cited in Elita Karim 6) claims that the rhyme's original version did not have the children driven away by anyone; "[h]owever, with change in time, location, economy and many other social and economic elements, the nursery rhyme went through several changes as well" [English original].

Nevertheless, unlike many English nursery rhymes (Maiti and Naskar), mothers and wives in the Bangla rhymes are not depicted as degraded. The mother of the Mother Goose rhyme "Old woman who lived in a shoe," for example, lives in a destitute condition and fails to properly feed or raise her children. Maiti and Naskar note that the socio-economic crisis of then England compelled many families to adopt unethical means to meet the family's needs (29). Bangla rhymes in this respect reflect more prosperous and stable socio-economic conditions of rural Bangladesh (then Bengal). The mother's repetitive invitations and offers of food and clothes to imaginary uncles, aunts, and birds apparently reflect the family's economic prosperity and/or the mother's satisfactory performance as a caregiver. The only rhyme (rhyme 10), which narrates the stories of economic and political exploitation of Bengali farmers by Marathas, still invokes positive attitudes of the parents, who hope to regain economic stability through farming. Both young and grown-up men are shown as economically aware and decisive. Unlike the boy in rhyme 16, who is firmly determined not to give away his fruits for free, the women are usually shown as

unmindful of financial matters. For instance, the bird in rhyme 19 is symbolically stereotyped as a woman who keeps on demanding clothes, red ribbons, combs, and a mirror to attend her beauty, and whose constant *baina* (insistent demand) implies that the female is more concerned about fulfilling her material wishes than considering the cost or her actual needs. Even for the mother in rhyme 27, who imagines her daughter getting married and wearing various kinds of jewellery, female happiness is equated with marriage and ornaments. However, the speaker of rhyme 10, if taken to be a mother, shows her economic awareness and involvement as she broods over the financial predicament of her family caused by bad harvest and economic exploitation by their feudal or colonial lords, and hopes for a better settlement with the lords.

To sum up the discussion, Bangla nursery rhymes cannot be labeled as purely essentialist or constructivist because on one hand, there are instances of gender stereotyping and discrimination, almost similar to the rhymes of English, Chinese, and Urdu, with regard to women's freedom, marriages, decision-making power, and physical mobility; on the other hand, gender inclusion and equity are highlighted in many other rhymes. Mothers are always presented as caring, patient, supportive, and responsible, demonstrating essentialist female character traits. While boys' eating, sleeping, playing, and making adventures are repetitively emphasised, girls are shown to be attending beauties, and/or getting married, thus, promoting women's traditional roles. Girls are also warned about the potential dangers in the outside world. Nevertheless, daughters' creativity is appreciated, and their pains and needs are carefully addressed, thus, giving the young women space to express themselves. Moreover, the beating of children by both male and female relatives shows that children can be vulnerable to abuse by people around irrespective of their gender.

Conclusion

Gender identity and cognition in Bangla nursery rhymes are more constructed than given. The only concern is perhaps the degree of representing men more in a constructivist spectrum *at times* than their female counterparts: girls' world is essentially limited to the in-house territory, compared to the boys' playful and adventurous life both at home and outside, which reflect men having courage and physical strength on one hand and familial and social support on the other.

Nevertheless, the rhymes also illustrate how Bengali women can transcend their domestic space by actively supporting their husband in socio-economic affairs and sharing their financial burden. Particularly, the rhymes that somewhat emphasise girl's sleep, cuddles and creative skills, happen to be written between 1948 and 1989, which indicates a gradual change in gender

representation. Again, the mothers may be more attentive to feeding and sleeping their sons, but they do not ignore their daughter's sickness, although studies suggest that women's health in Bangladesh is neglected since childhood (Chen et al. 66). Moreover, despite being concerned about their daughter's prospect of early marriage and separation from her natal family, the mothers look forward to the wedding, that demonstrates how Bengali women, similar to those in the Chinese nursery rhymes (Mo and Shen 133), perceive marriage with both "hopes" and "fears." Overall, Bengali mothers secure comparatively more respectful social positions because, unlike those in English rhymes, their actions are promisingly bent on their children's welfare, and because, unlike their male counterparts, they prefer counseling to shouting at or beating their sons and daughters when feeding and guiding them.

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