

FROM INNOCENCE TO IDEOLOGY: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF GENDER ROLES IN ENGLISH NURSERY RHYMES

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ABSTRACT

Nursery rhymes are widely regarded as simple and entertaining texts used in early childhood education; however, they also function as powerful cultural tools that transmit social values and norms. While often perceived as innocuous, these texts play a significant role in shaping early understandings of social identity. This study investigates the representation of gender roles in English nursery rhymes, focusing on how such seemingly innocent texts contribute to the construction and reinforcement of gender ideologies. Grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and informed by a social constructionist approach to gender, the study adopts a qualitative research design. It analyses a purposive sample of widely circulated nursery rhymes using thematic analysis and CDA. The findings reveal that traditional gender stereotypes are consistently embedded within these texts. Male characters are predominantly portrayed as active, dominant, and authoritative, whereas female characters are depicted as passive, dependent, and confined to domestic or emotional roles. Linguistic features such as gendered pronouns, evaluative adjectives, and narrative structures play a crucial role in encoding and reinforcing these distinctions, often naturalising asymmetrical power relations. Furthermore, the repetitive and rhythmic nature of nursery rhymes facilitates the internalisation of such representations, thereby contributing to early childhood socialisation. The study argues that nursery rhymes are not neutral or purely innocent texts; rather, they function as ideological instruments that subtly shape children's perceptions of gender roles. It underscores the need for critical awareness and pedagogical intervention to challenge stereotypical representations and to promote more inclusive and equitable narratives in children's literature. By foregrounding the role of language in the construction of social identity from an early age, this research contributes to the fields of sociolinguistics, gender studies, and discourse analysis.

Keywords: Nursery Rhymes, Gender Representation, Ideology, Socialisation, Critical Discourse Analysis, Children's Literature

1. Introduction

Nursery rhymes are usually viewed as easy and fun texts aimed at entertaining and teaching young children. Nevertheless, there is a more serious purpose behind those texts, which lies in their ability to convey social values and norms. From an early age, children hear rhymes and learn from them what kind of person can be considered socially acceptable or undesirable, which includes perceptions of gender. The lack of explicit ideologies and apparent innocuousness of nursery rhymes make those texts a good tool for the naturalisation of ideologies without any critical analysis. According to the current research, early childhood texts have a huge effect on socialisation, which includes perceptions of gender (Nikolajeva, 2010).

Concerning the issue under consideration, the representation of masculinity and femininity in English nursery rhymes is very common. As a rule, males are presented as active and dominating, while females are described as passive and dependent figures. Those perceptions represent gender stereotypes and traditions. Moreover, studies have shown that in children's texts, including nursery rhymes, there are many sexist messages aimed at conveying the idea of inequality between genders, where male superiority and domination prevail over female subordination (Opie & Opie, 1997). The above-mentioned examples illustrate not only certain tendencies but also represent part of the general process in which literature is involved in setting social expectations.

Nursery rhymes serve as a means of introducing children into society by providing a context for gendered representations. Children can memorise these representations and have an impact on how they will think about genders and act accordingly. According to studies, children's literature is one of the primary sources of information for the development of one's identity and gender awareness (Davies, 2003). Moreover, feminist literary criticism demonstrates that literary discourse reproduces patriarchy through certain language and narratives and restricts female autonomy (Weitzman et al., 1972). Studies concerned with gender representation in literature reveal that female characters are either absent or limited in traditional roles in the children's literature domain (Sunderland, 2004). The current study attempts to identify the ways in which the English nursery rhymes are used as ideological constructs that progress from innocence into gender expectations. This objective is achieved through the analysis of specific rhymes and the identification of ideologies regarding gender issues, roles, and expectations.

1.1 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it highlights the hidden ideological dimensions embedded in English nursery rhymes, which are often overlooked due to their association with childhood innocence. By examining gender representation in these rhymes, the research brings attention to how early exposure to language and literature contributes to the formation of gender identities and social roles. It helps educators, parents, and curriculum designers become more aware of the subtle ways in which gender biases are transmitted to children. Furthermore, the study contributes to the field of gender studies and sociolinguistics by demonstrating how discourse at an early stage of life can reinforce societal norms and inequalities. It also encourages critical engagement with traditional children's literature and promotes the need for more inclusive and balanced representations. Ultimately, this research supports the development of gender-sensitive educational materials and fosters a more equitable learning environment.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To analyse gender representation in selected English nursery rhymes.
2. To identify linguistic and thematic patterns that reinforce traditional gender roles.
3. To examine how nursery rhymes contribute to the socialisation of gender identities in children.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How are gender roles represented in English nursery rhymes?
2. What linguistic and thematic features contribute to the construction of gender stereotypes in these rhymes?

3. In what ways do nursery rhymes influence children's understanding of gender roles and identities?

2. Literature Review

Nursery rhymes have long been regarded as an essential component of early childhood learning, functioning as tools for linguistic development, memory enhancement, and cultural transmission. Traditionally viewed as harmless and entertaining, these rhymes are now increasingly examined through critical lenses that reveal their role in shaping social ideologies, particularly gender roles. Scholars argue that children's literature, including nursery rhymes, plays a crucial role in early socialisation, influencing how children perceive identity, relationships, and societal expectations (Nikolajeva, 2010; Hunt, 2006).

From a sociocultural perspective, language is not merely a means of communication but a medium through which social norms and ideologies are constructed and maintained (Fairclough, 1989; Halliday, 1978). Nursery rhymes, as repetitive and memorable forms of discourse, contribute to this process by embedding cultural values into easily internalised narratives. According to Stephens (1992), children's texts often serve as ideological tools that normalise dominant cultural assumptions, including those related to gender. This suggests that nursery rhymes are not neutral but are deeply embedded within the sociohistorical contexts in which they were created. Gender representation in children's literature has been a subject of extensive scholarly attention. Early studies, such as that by Weitzman et al. (1972), revealed a significant imbalance in the portrayal of male and female characters, with males occupying more active and dominant roles while females were confined to passive and domestic spheres. These findings have been consistently supported by later research, which demonstrates that gender stereotyping remains prevalent in children's texts (Sunderland, 2004; Davies, 2003). In nursery rhymes specifically, such representations are often subtle but persistent, reinforcing traditional gender norms through repetition and familiarity.

One of the key ways in which nursery rhymes construct gender roles is through characterisation. Male figures are frequently depicted as brave, adventurous, and authoritative, while female figures are portrayed as nurturing, obedient, or dependent (Opie & Opie, 1997; Tatar, 2002). For instance, male characters often engage in action-oriented roles, whereas female characters are associated with domesticity or emotional expression. This dichotomy aligns with broader societal expectations and contributes to the internalisation of gender-specific behaviours among children (Bem, 1981; Martin & Halverson, 1981). Linguistic choices in nursery rhymes also play a significant role in shaping gender perceptions. The use of gendered pronouns, descriptive adjectives, and occupational labels often reinforces stereotypical associations (Mills, 1995; Sunderland, 2004). For example, males are frequently described using terms that connote strength and leadership, while females are associated with beauty and gentleness. Such linguistic patterns not only reflect societal attitudes but also actively participate in constructing and perpetuating them (Cameron, 2003; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a useful framework for examining how power relations and ideologies are embedded in language (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Through CDA, researchers have demonstrated that even seemingly simple texts like nursery rhymes can carry implicit messages about hierarchy, authority, and gender roles. These messages are often normalised through repetition, making them less likely to be questioned by

young audiences (Van Dijk, 2008). As a result, nursery rhymes can function as subtle instruments of ideological reinforcement.

Feminist literary criticism further highlights the ways in which children's literature marginalises female voices and limits their agency (Moi, 1985; Butler, 1990). According to Butler (1990), gender is not an inherent trait but a socially constructed identity that is performed through repeated actions and representations. Nursery rhymes contribute to this process by providing scripts for gendered behaviour that children may imitate and internalise. Similarly, Davies (2003) argues that children actively engage with these texts, using them to construct their own gender identities within the boundaries set by cultural norms. In addition to reinforcing traditional roles, nursery rhymes often reflect patriarchal values that prioritise male authority and female subordination. This is evident in narratives where male characters hold positions of power, while female characters are depicted as dependent or subordinate (Tatar, 2002; Zipes, 1983). Such representations not only perpetuate gender inequality but also limit the range of identities available to children, particularly girls (Walkerdine, 1990; Gilbert, 1998).

The concept of socialisation is central to understanding the impact of nursery rhymes on gender development. Socialisation refers to the process through which individuals learn and internalise the norms and values of their society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In early childhood, this process is heavily influenced by language and storytelling, making nursery rhymes a powerful tool for shaping perceptions of gender (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Through repeated exposure, children come to accept the gender roles presented in these texts as natural and inevitable. Research in developmental psychology supports the idea that children begin to form gender schemas at a very young age (Bem, 1981; Martin & Ruble, 2004). These schemas influence how children interpret information and guide their behaviour in gender-appropriate ways. Nursery rhymes, with their repetitive and rhythmic structures, reinforce these schemas by presenting consistent patterns of gendered behaviour (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). As a result, children may develop rigid notions of what it means to be male or female.

Recent studies have also explored the potential for children's literature to challenge traditional gender roles. Some contemporary adaptations of nursery rhymes aim to present more diverse and inclusive representations of gender (Evans, 2015; Crisp & Hiller, 2011). These efforts reflect a growing awareness of the need to address gender bias in early childhood education and promote equality. However, traditional rhymes remain widely used, and their influence continues to shape children's perceptions (Meyer, 2010; Sunderland, 2006). The role of educators and parents is crucial in mediating the impact of nursery rhymes. By encouraging critical thinking and discussion, adults can help children question and reinterpret the messages conveyed in these texts (Luke, 2000; Walsh, 2001). This aligns with the principles of critical literacy, which emphasise the importance of analysing and challenging dominant ideologies in texts (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010). Through such approaches, nursery rhymes can be transformed from tools of ideological reinforcement into opportunities for critical engagement. Moreover, cross-cultural studies reveal that gender representation in nursery rhymes varies across different societies, reflecting diverse cultural norms and values (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993; Tsao, 2008). However, the persistence of gender stereotypes across cultures suggests that these representations are deeply rooted in global patterns of inequality. This highlights the importance of examining nursery rhymes within their specific cultural contexts while also recognising their broader implications.

In conclusion, the literature clearly demonstrates that nursery rhymes are far from innocent forms of entertainment. They function as powerful cultural artefacts that contribute to the

construction and reinforcement of gender roles. Through characterisation, linguistic choices, and narrative structures, these rhymes embed ideologies that shape children's understanding of identity and social relations. While recent efforts have been made to challenge traditional representations, much work remains to be done to ensure that children's literature reflects the values of equality and inclusivity. This study builds on existing research by providing a focused analysis of gender roles in English nursery rhymes, highlighting the need for critical awareness and reform in early childhood education.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore gender representation in English nursery rhymes. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, patterns, and underlying ideologies embedded in language and discourse rather than measuring numerical data. The research is primarily descriptive and interpretive in nature, aiming to uncover how gender roles are constructed and reinforced through textual elements.

3.2 Research Approach

The study employs a textual and discourse-analytic approach, drawing on principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how language reflects and reproduces social power relations and gender ideologies. CDA is particularly useful in analysing seemingly simple texts like nursery rhymes, as it reveals hidden meanings, assumptions, and cultural norms embedded within them.

3.3 Data Collection

The data for this study consist of a purposive sample of ten well-known English nursery rhymes selected on the basis of their popularity, frequent use in early childhood education, cultural familiarity, and accessibility. Purposive sampling was employed because the selected rhymes contain clear male and female characters, social roles, and linguistic patterns relevant to the analysis of gender representation. The selected nursery rhymes are *Jack and Jill*, *Little Miss Muffet*, *Georgie Porgie*, *What Are Little Boys Made Of?*, *Old Mother Hubbard*, *Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater*, *Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary*, *Little Bo-Peep*, *Sing a Song of Sixpence*, and *There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe*. These rhymes have been widely transmitted across generations and continue to be used in homes, schools, children's books, and digital learning materials, making them appropriate texts for examining traditional gender ideologies. The data were collected from authentic secondary sources such as published nursery rhyme anthologies, children's literature collections, educational materials, and reputable online literary archives to ensure reliability and textual accuracy. Multiple versions of each rhyme were cross-checked, and the most commonly recognised English versions were selected for analysis. After collection, the rhymes were compiled into a textual corpus for close reading and qualitative examination of character roles, lexical choices, actions, and thematic patterns related to gender representation.

3.4 Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique is used to select nursery rhymes that contain identifiable male and female characters, roles, or gendered themes. The selection criteria include:

- Presence of gender-specific characters or pronouns

- Representation of social roles or behaviours
- Cultural relevance and popularity

This method ensures that the selected data are rich in content suitable for gender analysis.

3.5 Theoretical Framework

This study, *From Innocence to Ideology: Gender Roles in English Nursery Rhymes*, is grounded in three major theoretical perspectives: Liberal Feminist Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Gender Schema Theory. These theories provide a comprehensive framework for examining how nursery rhymes construct, reinforce, and transmit gender roles through language, characterisation, and repetition. Since nursery rhymes are introduced in early childhood and widely accepted as harmless educational texts, these theories help reveal the hidden ideological messages embedded within them. The primary theory used in this research is Liberal Feminist Theory, which focuses on equality between men and women and challenges stereotypical representations that place women in subordinate positions. Liberal feminists argue that literary and cultural texts often portray men as active, rational, and dominant, while women are represented as passive, emotional, and dependent (Showalter, 1979). This perspective is highly relevant to the present study because many nursery rhymes portray female characters in limited domestic or helpless roles. In contrast, male characters are shown as adventurous, authoritative, and central to the narrative. Through Liberal Feminist Theory, the study examines how nursery rhymes reproduce traditional patriarchal assumptions and unequal gender expectations.

The second theory employed in this research is Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995). Critical Discourse Analysis argues that language is never neutral; rather, it reflects and reproduces systems of power, dominance, and ideology within society. This theory is useful for analysing nursery rhymes because their simple and repetitive language often conceals deeper meanings about authority, hierarchy, and gender norms. Through naming patterns, descriptive vocabulary, action verbs, and narrative structures, nursery rhymes subtly privilege male characters and marginalise female voices. Critical Discourse Analysis, therefore, enables the researcher to uncover how these texts normalise gender inequality through discourse. The third theory guiding this study is Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981). This theory explains how children develop mental frameworks about masculinity and femininity through repeated exposure to cultural messages. According to Bem (1981), children organise information about gender into schemas that influence their attitudes, behaviour, and self-perception. Nursery rhymes play an important role in this process because they are repetitive, memorable, and introduced during early childhood. When children repeatedly hear that boys are rough, adventurous, or dominant and girls are sweet, fearful, or domestic, they begin to internalise these traits as natural gender roles. Gender Schema Theory is, therefore, significant in explaining the psychological impact of nursery rhymes on identity formation and early socialisation. Together, these three theories create a strong analytical framework for the present study. Liberal Feminist Theory examines unequal gender representation, Critical Discourse Analysis reveals hidden ideology in language, and Gender Schema Theory explains how children internalise these messages. By combining these perspectives, the study critically investigates how English nursery rhymes move from innocence to ideology and contribute to the construction of traditional gender roles.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Since the study is based on publicly available texts, there are no direct ethical concerns involving human participants. However, proper acknowledgement of sources and academic integrity are maintained throughout the research.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Representation of Gender Roles in English Nursery Rhymes

The ten selected nursery rhymes reveal a consistent pattern in which male and female characters are assigned traditional social roles. Male characters are usually represented as active, dominant, authoritative, adventurous, or economically powerful, whereas female characters are shown as passive, fearful, nurturing, decorative, or domestic. These repeated portrayals construct a gendered worldview for young listeners. In *Jack and Jill*, the opening line “*Jack and Jill went up the hill*” places the male character first, symbolising leadership and priority. The next line, “*Jack fell and broke his crown, / And Jill came tumbling after,*” further centres Jack as the main actor, while Jill is represented as secondary and following him. This suggests that males lead while females follow.

In *Little Miss Muffet*, the female character is introduced in a domestic and passive position through “*sat on a tuffet, / Eating her curds and whey.*” Her reaction to the spider, “*frightened Miss Muffet away,*” portrays femininity as fearful and emotionally weak. In *Georgie Porgie*, the male character dominates the female characters through “*Kissed the girls and made them cry.*” Here, girls are passive and voiceless, while the male controls the action.

The rhyme *What Are Little Boys Made Of?* directly assigns identities. Boys are “*Snaps and snails, and puppy-dogs’ tails,*” while girls are “*Sugar and spice, and all that is nice.*” This creates a stereotypical contrast between rough masculinity and gentle femininity.

Women are associated with domestic labour in *Old Mother Hubbard*, where the female repeatedly performs caregiving tasks: “*went to the cupboard, / To give the poor dog a bone.*” Similarly, in *There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe*, the woman is overwhelmed by childcare responsibilities: “*She had so many children, she did not know what to do.*” In *Sing a Song of Sixpence*, the male character is economically powerful: “*The king was in his counting-house, / Counting out his money,*” while female figures remain in domestic settings: “*The queen was in the parlour*” and “*The maid was in the garden, / Hanging out the clothes.*”

Finally, patriarchal authority is explicit in *Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater*: “*He put her in a pumpkin shell, / And there he kept her very well.*” The wife has no voice or agency. These examples demonstrate that nursery rhymes repeatedly present men as active and women as passive, reinforcing traditional gender ideology.

Table 4.1

Representation of Gender Roles in Selected Nursery Rhymes

Rhyme Title	Male Representation	Female Representation	Gender Message
Jack and Jill	Leader, active	Follower, secondary	Male priority
Little Miss Muffet	Absent	Fearful, passive	Female vulnerability

Georgie Porgie	Dominant	Emotional, passive	Male control
What Are Little Boys Made Of?	Rough, energetic	Sweet, gentle	Binary identities
Old Mother Hubbard	Absent	Caregiver, domestic	Female service
Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater	Controlling	Submissive	Patriarchal authority
Mary, Mary	Absent	Decorative	Female beauty
Little Bo-Peep	Absent	Helpless	Female dependence
Sing a Song of Sixpence	Wealthy, powerful	Domestic	Public male/private female
Old Woman in a Shoe	Absent	Overburdened mother	Maternal duty

4.2 Linguistic and Thematic Features That Construct Gender Stereotypes

The nursery rhymes use language strategically to reinforce gender stereotypes. Male-first naming order, active verbs for men, emotional or passive verbs for women, domestic imagery, and descriptive labels all contribute to the construction of gender ideology.

Male-first naming appears in “*Jack and Jill*” and “*Peter, Peter*.” This ordering symbolically prioritises male identity. It subtly suggests that male presence is primary. Active verbs are mostly linked with male characters. In *Jack and Jill*, Jack “*went*,” “*fell*,” “*got*,” and “*did trot*.” In *Georgie Porgie*, the male character “*kissed*” and “*made*” the girls cry. In *Sing a Song of Sixpence*, the king is “*counting out his money*.” These verbs represent movement, control, and authority.

In contrast, female characters are described through passive or emotional reactions. Miss Muffet is “*frightened away*.” Jill “*came tumbling after*.” Bo-Peep “*does not know where to find them*.” These phrases imply confusion, dependence, and weakness. Descriptive nouns and metaphors are strongly used in *What Are Little Boys Made Of?* Boys are linked with “*snails*” and “*puppy-dogs’ tails*,” which symbolise roughness and playful disorder. Girls are linked with “*Sugar and spice, and all that is nice*,” symbolising sweetness and obedience.

Domestic imagery is also common. *Old Mother Hubbard* uses cupboards, bread, coats, and household items. *Sing a Song of Sixpence* places the queen in the parlour and the maid hanging clothes. Such imagery ties femininity to the private sphere. Beauty-related language appears in *Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary* with “*pretty maids all in a row*.” This suggests that women are valued through appearance rather than action or authority. These linguistic choices repeatedly naturalise stereotypical roles for men and women.

Table 4.2

Linguistic and Thematic Features Constructing Gender Stereotypes

Feature	Example	Gender Effect
Male-first naming	Jack and Jill	Male priority
Active verbs for men	kissed, counted, went	Male agency
Passive verbs for women	frightened, crying	Female weakness
Domestic imagery	cupboard, parlour, clothes	Female home role

Beauty labels	pretty maids	Female appearance focus
Contrasting metaphors	sugar/spice vs snails/tails	Fixed gender traits

4.3 Ways Nursery Rhymes Influence Children's Understanding of Gender Roles and Identities

Nursery rhymes influence children because they are rhythmic, repetitive, memorable, and introduced in early childhood. Their playful form allows ideological messages to be absorbed unconsciously. Through repetition, children may begin to associate certain behaviours with masculinity or femininity. When children repeatedly hear male characters leading, acting, or controlling situations, they may connect masculinity with strength and authority. For example, Jack climbs the hill, the king counts money, and Peter controls his wife. These roles teach that men belong in public, active, or dominant spaces.

When girls hear female characters represented as fearful, decorative, or domestic, they may internalise femininity as submissive or home-centred. Miss Muffet runs away from a spider, Mary is linked with “*pretty maids*,” and Mother Hubbard is constantly serving others. The rhyme *What Are Little Boys Made Of?* is especially influential because it directly defines children's identities. Boys are rough and playful, while girls are sweet and nice. Such repeated labels can shape self-perception and expectations. In *Little Bo-Peep*, the girl “*does not know where to find them*” and is told to wait passively. This may teach girls that dependence is acceptable and initiative is unnecessary.

In *There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe*, the woman's identity is entirely maternal. Children may learn that women are naturally responsible for child-rearing and discipline. Because parents and teachers often teach nursery rhymes in enjoyable settings, children rarely question these messages. Instead, they absorb them as natural truths. This demonstrates how nursery rhymes function as early tools of gender socialisation.

Table 4.3

Influence of Nursery Rhymes on Children's Understanding of Gender

Repeated Message	Example Rhyme	Possible Child Interpretation
Boys lead	Jack and Jill	Boys should guide others
Men control resources	Sing a Song of Sixpence	Men hold power
Girls are fearful	Little Miss Muffet	Girls are weak
Girls are sweet	What Are Little Girls Made Of?	Girls must be pleasant.
Women care for others.	Old Mother Hubbard	Women serve family
Women raise children	Old Woman in a Shoe	Motherhood is a female duty

5. Findings

The analysis of the ten selected English nursery rhymes reveals that these traditional childhood texts contain consistent patterns of gender representation that reinforce conventional social roles. Although nursery rhymes are commonly viewed as harmless and entertaining, the findings indicate that they function as subtle ideological tools through which children are introduced to patriarchal beliefs, gender stereotypes, and unequal expectations.

A major finding of the study is the predominance of male-centred narratives and authority. Male characters are generally portrayed as active, powerful, and central to the action. In *Jack and Jill*, Jack receives primary narrative attention through “*Jack fell and broke his crown,*” while Jill remains secondary. In *Georgie Porgie*, the male character controls female characters through “*kissed the girls and made them cry.*” Similarly, in *Sing a Song of Sixpence*, the king is represented as financially powerful in “*The king was in his counting-house, / Counting out his money.*” These examples suggest that masculinity is linked with leadership, movement, and public authority.

Another important finding is the passive and dependent portrayal of female characters. Many female figures are shown as fearful, helpless, decorative, or domestic. In *Little Miss Muffet*, the female character is frightened and runs away. In *Little Bo-Peep*, she “*does not know where to find them,*” indicating helplessness. In *Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary*, the phrase “*pretty maids all in a row*” reduces female identity to beauty and order. These portrayals reinforce the idea that femininity is associated with weakness, passivity, and appearance.

The study also finds a strong association between women and domestic or caregiving roles. In *Old Mother Hubbard*, the female character repeatedly serves and cares for her dog through household tasks. In *There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe*, the woman is burdened with childcare responsibilities and domestic discipline. In *Sing a Song of Sixpence*, the queen remains in the parlour while the maid hangs clothes. These examples suggest that nursery rhymes repeatedly confine women to the private domestic sphere.

A further finding is the use of linguistic devices that normalise gender stereotypes. Male-first naming patterns, such as Jack and Jill, symbolically prioritise men. Action verbs like *went*, *kissed*, *counted*, and *kept* are mostly linked with male characters. In contrast, female characters are associated with passive or emotional expressions such as *crying*, *being frightened*, and *not knowing*. The rhyme *What Are Little Boys Made Of?* explicitly constructs binary identities by describing boys as “*snaps and snails, and puppy-dogs’ tails*” and girls as “*sugar and spice, and all that is nice.*” Such language presents stereotypical traits as natural and unquestionable. The findings also reveal instances of patriarchal control and female subordination. In *Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater*, the wife is treated as an object to be controlled: “*He put her in a pumpkin shell, / And there he kept her very well.*” This reflects traditional assumptions of male ownership and authority over women.

Finally, the study finds that nursery rhymes have the potential to shape children’s understanding of gender because of their repetitive and memorable nature. Since these rhymes are introduced in early childhood, the messages they carry may become internalised as normal social truths. Boys may learn to associate masculinity with strength and dominance, while girls may learn to associate femininity with obedience, beauty, caregiving, and fear. In summary, the findings show that English nursery rhymes reproduce traditional gender ideologies by portraying men as active and powerful and women as passive and domestic. Through repeated language and imagery, these rhymes contribute to the early socialization of children into conventional gender roles.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the representation of gender roles in selected English nursery rhymes in order to uncover the ideological meanings hidden beneath their playful and innocent surface. The analysis demonstrates that nursery rhymes are not neutral forms of children’s entertainment; rather, they are cultural texts that reflect and transmit traditional beliefs about

masculinity and femininity. The study concludes that male characters are consistently represented as active, authoritative, dominant, and economically powerful, while female characters are portrayed as passive, fearful, decorative, dependent, or domestic. Such repeated representations reinforce patriarchal values and unequal power relations between men and women. The rhymes also employ linguistic strategies such as male-first naming, active verbs for men, passive descriptions for women, and symbolic contrasts that normalise stereotypical gender identities.

Furthermore, the research concludes that nursery rhymes play an important role in children's early gender socialisation. Because these texts are rhythmic, repetitive, and memorable, children are likely to internalise their messages unconsciously. As a result, nursery rhymes may shape children's understanding of what is considered appropriate behaviour for boys and girls. The study, therefore, supports the idea that nursery rhymes move from innocence to ideology. While they appear simple and entertaining, they carry hidden assumptions about power, identity, and gender roles. These findings highlight the importance of critically re-evaluating traditional children's literature in modern educational contexts.

It is recommended that parents, teachers, and curriculum developers become more aware of the gender messages present in nursery rhymes and encourage critical discussion of such texts. There is also a need to promote inclusive and balanced alternatives that represent boys and girls in diverse, equal, and empowering ways. In conclusion, English nursery rhymes remain culturally valuable, but their ideological influence cannot be ignored. A critical understanding of these texts can help create a more gender-aware and equitable learning environment for future generations.

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