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‘Hush little baby, don’t say a word’ and ‘Once I caught a fish alive’: A Symbolic Decoding

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Abstract:

The proposed study focuses upon symbolic interpretation of the nursery rhymes ‘Hush little baby, don’t say a word’ and ‘Once I caught a fish alive’ to canvass Nature’s essential role in human life. The poems embody the futility of sophisticated man’s addiction to the synthetic world apart from his prejudices against bio-heterogeneity and ethnic diversity. They encapsulate merits and flaws related to various political, social and economic propositions besides ecological justification of anthropocentric paradigms. They allude to civilization’s undue curiosity, materialistically ambitious endeavours and its fantasy of inflated pseudo-sovereignty. This allegorical reading equally emphasizes that the poems signify the urgency of mending unconditionally all baneful ruptures caused by materialistic orientation, and thus contribute to restoring equipoise and universal solidarity in the environment where they dwell.

Keywords: symbolic interpretation; nursery rhymes; eco-congenial integrity; human whimsicality.

I

Poetry, poems and songs belong to a unique genre of literary work since they possess compact form, complex meaning, rhyme and imagination. Every word and sentence have a veiled meaning, implications and suggestion that render them inspiring, age defying and universal. They are multidimensional, hence rich in symbolism. Poems do feature both concrete and abstract ideas, which represent something beyond the literal meaning. When a poet wants to suggest a certain situation, mood or emotion, s/he prefers using symbolism to express it, rather than stridently uttering it. Symbolism is used in literature when one thing is meant to represent something else. Metaphors, similes and allegories are literary elements that aid to create symbolism, which builds the essence of the story or the literary works.

Similarly, the nursery songs 'Hush little baby, don't say a word' and "Once I caught a fish alive" convey messages extremely significant, thus rendering themselves symbolical. This essay focuses upon symbolic interpretation of these two specified nursery rhymes wherein an attempt has been made not only to evaluate the relationship between civilization and Nature, but also among the different segments within the hierarchical society. That both the poems symbolize virtues, vices and limitations related to diverse political, social and economic theories, eco-feasible applicability of man-made norms, psychological inhibitions of civilization, grotesque ambitions that provoke man to become monopolistic and give birth to sinister projects hampering ecological system has been humbly delineated.

II

“'Hush, Little Baby' is a traditional lullaby, thought to have been written in the Southern United States. Like most folk songs, the author and date of origin are unknown. The lyrics promise all kinds of rewards to the child if they are quiet.”¹ This is a beautiful bed time nursery rhyme to lull a little one to sleep at night. 'Hush, little baby, don't say a word' is believed to have been composed by Mother Goose “often cited as the author of hundreds of children's stories that have been passed down through oral tradition and published over centuries.... Her work is often published as Mother Goose Rhymes. Despite her celebrated place in children's literature, the exact identity and origin of Mother Goose herself is still unknown. English publisher of children's literature John Newbery later focused on the nursery rhymes, publishing Mother Goose's Melody, or, Sonnets for the Cradle, which helped Mother Goose become further associated with children's poetry.”²

Hush, little baby, don't say a word,
Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird.
And if that mockingbird don't sing,
Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring.
And if that diamond ring turn brass,
Papa's gonna buy you a looking glass.
And if that looking glass gets broke,
Papa's gonna buy you a billy goat.
And if that billy goat don't pull,
Papa's gonna buy you a cart and bull.
And if that cart and bull turn over,

Papa's gonna buy you a dog named Rover.
And if that dog named Rover won't bark.
Papa's gonna to buy you a horse and cart.
And if that horse and cart fall down,
Well you'll still be the sweetest little baby in town.³

Here, the baby manifests not absolute innocence, but predominantly man's ever-demanding mind full of unending materialistic aspirations, which drive him insane. Papa denotes the imperialist man himself who is trying to pacify and quieten his prodigally desirous mind by offering a number of provisions which do not conform to any ethics of the Universe. The rhyme suggests how civilization cherishes the habit of pampering itself at the cost of integrity. Also the phrase "don't say a word", an instruction to the baby insinuates one's attempt to silence and trample his uncontaminated angelic conscience by nurturing instead, through wrongful encouragement, the impassive devilish facet of his mind wherein paltry acquisitive cravings playing the role of contagious pollutant germinate and mature. The first deal he makes to calm the baby is buying a mockingbird because he expects it to sing to their tune for the purpose of entertainment. Here the mocking bird has been viewed as a possible puppet and flatterer. The first two lines adequately exhibit ensnaring and enslaving of non-human creatures by man who wants to exploit their special abilities, a necessary mechanism Nature has furnished it with for biological reasons. The bird equally epitomizes commonplace people whose natural endowments and competence get victimized by hegemonic monopoly, which intentionally programmes them to communicate in a distinct ciphered language. Here the mockingbird and the slave have been construed by civilization's conniving mind, as those vulnerable entities, who under the burden of pretentious obligation imposed by their buyer or hirers in disguise of protector, will keep on satisfying his gluttonous appetite for praise and pleasure as an act of gratitude by learning and singing eulogies dedicated to the owner. The existential crisis of the bird and a slave remains intertwined, when manipulated by deriving temporal and trivial mercenary purpose born of a dictator's contumacious obsession with self-supremacy and superiority. Next, Papa switches over to buying the baby a diamond ring and abort/dump the mockingbird in case it does not sing. So the bird here has been commoditized and reduced to the status of a lifeless toy, which, when fails to accomplish human objectives is held futile and hence callously either discarded or replaced by some other object catering profitable prospects.

Papa is ready to dispose the diamond ring if it changes into brass. In these lines, civilization's fascination for diamond gets highlighted because its crystalline lustrous magnetism eclipses the significance of corrosion free brass (an alloy of other metals) in an anthropocentric world due to the latter's metallic plainness, though both of them are organically related to the womb of earth directly or indirectly. The diamond ring typifies a gird of flamboyant mirage, which benumbs penny-pinching man to the extent of his not realizing that he is heading into a ruinous wasteland alienated from the basic values. Industrialization, being the base of civilization's socio-economic milieu, the diamond also epitomizes capitalism and veneer of elegance, while the brass represents the proletarians, whose contribution in the form of labour though indispensable, is ignored, diluted, diminished, suppressed and deprived prejudicially. The margin drawn between diamond and brass allegorically highlights racism, class consciousness and descent related vanity that predominantly persists in the human civilization. Changing of diamond into brass, though practically impossible, has been scowled insanely. This indicates not only man's insecurity born of his incertitude, but also his denunciation and denial of constitutive integrity and functional equality. Simultaneously, it also implies how the transformation of man's fanatic grossly materialistic temperament into organic sensibility against the rigidities of the social hierarchical system, is flouted as a distasteful event. Papa's expending diamond and brass for wasteful causes illustrate man's glacial and profligate attitude in his insensible frivolling away with non-renewable treasure trove of the planet.

In the sixth line, Papa typifying an industrial man offers to console the baby representing his materialistic appetite by buying a looking glass (mirror) in case something absurd as diamond's conversion into brass happens. The infatuation with looking glass suggests man's abounding narcissism and also his obsession with the virtual world. He does so to gain synthetic pleasure through self-elation by looking into the mirror recurrently. Again, when in the same mirror man encounters the reflection of his irrefutable nefarious ego, the peremptory devastating force blameable for all chaos, disproportion and disintegration in the entire environment, he fails to endure it as he is soaked in the fallacy of unsurpassable excellence, the total phenomenon, thereby exteriorizing a subliminal element. His inability to accept his ugly visage imaged in the mirror either horrifies him to the extent of discovering cracks in the mirror or his confidence gets shattered so much that he starts hallucinating wreckage in the mirror and hence turns away from it. Thus, here "if the looking glass breaks" exteriorizes withering restlessness and void caused within him beyond his

realization. Thus, the entire “looking glass” episode refers to a subliminal element, which, the human ego ignores, tramples and strangulates apathetically, thereafter moving ahead for future corny ventures.

Instantaneously he pounces upon various other alternatives to placate his insistent cupidity. He decides to purchase a billy goat, then cart and bull, and finally horse and cart, all of which are categorically depreciated as merchandise. Here we observe not only man’s impatience and inconsistency but also his frosty tendency to annihilate animal rights by harnessing them through domestication. He doesn’t mind freezing their freedom and intends to blatantly identify them with the downtrodden as far as their oppression through thralldom is concerned. Billy goat becomes Papa’s pick as goats are one of the primeval cultivated species of animal, and have been used for milk, meat, fur and skins across much of the world. Moreover, goats are accounted to be agile and curious creatures, which are inclined to ingest almost anything without much inhibition or fuss, for instance, tin cans, clothes, cardboard boxes and browse on vines, shrubbery, weeds etc. unless it is absolutely inedible. So, for penny-pinching man, the maintenance of goats and expenditures involved in its rearing are much manageable, economic, feasible and advantageous. Papa’s idea of buying a billy goat as an animated plaything to serve the interest of baby’s merriment is a microcosmic manifestation of the mercantile strategies designed to squeeze out accessible bio-resources for accomplishing a prosperous enterprise at a macrocosmic level. But “if the billy goat don’t pull” indicates a sort of uncertainty Papa undergoes regarding the magnitude of tameness upon which, depends its congenial performance usually expected of a domestic animal. Since the innate swiftness and inquisitiveness of goats evoke and reinforce their well-known ability to climb and stabilize in perilous places, they are naturally prone to “escaping their pens by testing fences and enclosures, either intentionally or simply because they are used to climbing.”⁴ This primal jaunty instinct of theirs anthropocentrically marks them as mischievous creatures, but it actually asserts the privilege of zoo-centric life forms dismantling inflated man-made constructions metaphorically. Hence, Papa, being highly suspicious and irrationally anxious of such consequences (“if the billy goat don’t pull”, i.e. it declines to get harnessed), has kept other avenues open, for instance, “Papa’s gonna buy you a cart and bull”. Generally, the bull symbolizes industriousness, rusticity, plainness and endurance of peasants and plays a substantial role “in beef ranching, dairy farming, and a variety of other cultural activities, including bull fighting and bull riding”⁵ besides impregnating cows. Bulls are often castrated into ox, as castration makes animals easily

controllable and docile. "Oxen are used for ploughing, for transport (pulling carts, hauling wagons and even riding), for threshing grain by trampling, and for powering machines that grind grain or supply irrigation among other purposes. Oxen may be also used to skid logs in forests, particularly in low-impact, select-cut logging." ⁶ Thus, here the bull represents immensity of natural energy exposed to rapacious man's ravaging and exploitative endeavours while the cart defines all the burden of labour thrust upon it by man to achieve his prehensile objectives. But, if the bull turns out to be too reluctant to be yoked or collapses due to being over-worked, it remains of no use to selfish man ultimately. Hence, the very haunting thought "And if that cart and bull turn over" suggesting the fear of failure in the undertaken business makes Papa (man) switch over to another handy option, which is a barking dog named Rover. The association of the name Rover with the dog has a figurative implication here. Rover has multifarious literary meanings, for instance, "a random or long-distance mark in archery; a sort of arrow; a pirate; a player who is not assigned to a specific position on a team and who plays wherever needed; a vehicle for driving over a rough terrain and exploring the surface of an extra-terrestrial bodies; a roamer, wanderer or a gypsy who leads a wandering unsettled life and has no permanent residence or visible means of support".⁷ So the man desires his dog to possess all merits of a Rover and perform like the same, i.e. the dog is expected to be skilled enough to pounce upon the target like a master archer, to be sharp and deadly like an arrow while attacking the target, to adapt amidst all adversities and aid man in exploring the unknown through its sniffing technology, to have strength, patience, agility, swiftness and experience of a gypsy or a stray entity. Usually a gypsy or a roamer (rover) is innately bucolic, gullible and transparent, hence brims with a sense of gratitude towards the minimal generosity shown to them. Thus, a rover and a dog bear idiosyncratic similarity in naively venerating hypocrisy in disguise of saviour. Man's inclination to grab this opportunity of manipulating the dog named Rover's obedience, loyalty and docility born of gratefulness depicts shrewdness and despotism juggling with virtues. Papa broods upon natural traits like intelligence, memory skills and diagnostic abilities of his dog Rover, since he yearns to employ all its abilities to investigate and solve problems, though scientifically it has been proven that dog once domesticated may lose much of their natural riddle resolving aptitude. Papa wants the dog to communicate and reciprocate through vocalization and gestures comprehensible to him, to be vigilant, and to drive away trespassers or thieves when necessary besides functioning as siren of alert by barking. Symbolically, Papa personifies consumerism which always seeks to flourish upon merits of others. "And if that dog named Rover won't bark" indicates that in case it fails to prove itself

by remaining silent or unwilling to bark during the anthropocentric need of the hour, “Papa’s gonna to buy you a horse and cart”, thereby highlighting his search for another substitute for entertaining and profiting himself. Horse, being sensitive, energetic, quiet, calm, efficient in cognitive tasks on a daily basis, capable of confronting mental challenges that include identifying individuals within a social structure and foraging, has been a favourable and dependable creature worth lucrative domestication constantly for man (Papa). Horse’s natural curiosity and aptness to examine unfamiliar territories renders it commercially popular. Enduring man-made environment that suppresses their instinctive behaviour, learning factitious tasks, responding satisfactorily to regimentation, conforming to monotonous routine against bio-diversity, giving joyrides, being jockeyed in races and sports, dragging carriages and making the groomers proud by competently reflecting their intelligent training techniques through performances and displays represent in reality the burdensome cart stuffed with unending fanatic ambitions of man. Papa strives to see the horse consistently productive, “And if that horse and cart fall down”, i.e. if the horse crumbles due to being overworked or it shows strong symptoms of resistance, Papa (man) discards it and moves ahead without being compassionate towards it. Papa’s such extravagant cravings and callousness towards the horse manifest cultivated authoritarians’ selfish, rapacious, opportunistic and capricious deportment towards zoo-centric forms of life and industrious others who are constant subject to marginalization and repudiation in their throttling hands. Papa’s deep-seated vanity, self-love and absolute preoccupation with the illusion of superiority to others get evinced in his statement “Well you’ll still be the sweetest little baby in town”. It amply suggests arrogant averting of pristine primordial reality as a result of being drenched in frivolous pride.

Thus, ‘Hush, little baby, don’t say a word’ allusively acquaints us with manifold facts: acrimonious man’s ego, prejudice and haughtiness renders him too narcissistic to admit his helplessness, frailty, triviality and defeat in front of the organic world; man’s disgraceful tendency of justifying his sinister activities in the name of experimentation and evolution; his remark that he should not be chided under any circumstances asserts his escapist temperament in shrugging off his accountability for any hazard; man’s immature, flawed and irrational perception that he will be always counted as and continue enjoying the ultimate sovereignty amidst all pitfalls; pathetic subjugation and commoditization of the non-human entities and subaltern others by covetous imperialist ; bio-centric domain’s refusal to be yoked attesting its triumphant protest against atrocious civilization and dismantling man’s

robotic enterprises driven by glittery superficial worldly affairs simultaneously, thereby privileging the natural over the anthropocentric and the oriental over the occidental.

III

'Once I caught a fish alive' is a traditional English nursery song belonging to an indefinitely ancient age. "'One, two, three, four, five" is a popular English language nursery rhyme and counting-out rhyme. It has a Roud Folk Song Index number of 13530. The rhyme is one of many counting-out rhymes. It was first recorded in Mother Goose's Melody around 1765. Like most versions until the late nineteenth century, it had only the first stanza, and dealt with a hare not a fish, with the words" ⁸:

One, two, three, Four and five,
I caught a hare alive;
Six, seven, eight, Nine and ten,
I let him go again. ⁹

"The modern version is derived from three variations collected by Henry Bolton in the 1880s from America." ⁹

One, two, three, four, five,
Once I caught a fish alive,
Six, seven, eight, nine, ten,
Then I let go again.
Why did you let it go?
Because it bit my finger so.
Which finger did it bite?
This little finger on the right. ^{[9] [10]}

Here, "I" represents innate human ego-centrism and man's rigid adherence to a chimerical world of unabated self-supremacy, authority and autocracy. The child's meticulous counting in numbers from one to ten implies man's grotesque submission to robotic ciphering techniques which do not comply with the harmony and rhythmic synchronization of Nature. The 'fish' metaphorically denotes the vulnerable others who have been recurrently swindled and often obliterated by the mindless, manipulative segment of the civilization in sick pursuit of accomplishing its superfluous missions. The purpose of the human child who is trying to catch the fish is not very clear here. This leads one to chance

upon different assumptions, for instance, perhaps he is doing it for mere enjoyment or the sprightly movement of the fish evokes a sort of inquisitiveness in him or entranced by its traits, he desires to preserve it in an aquarium for displaying it as his prized possession, a matter of pride and ownership indeed, or he wants to relish it as a succulent treat to appease his appetite. This seemingly playful microcosmic episode hints at the veiled eco-antagonism at a macrocosmic level. “Once I caught a fish alive” highlights self-endorsement and bears a boisterous tone testifying imperialistic obnoxious craving to vanquish Nature and serene others for ostentatious manifestation of paramountcy. Thus, man has been proving his incongruous and knavish propensity against bio-diversity since his pupillage. In the line “Then I let go again” the tone appears as if the fish has been let free unconditionally out of mercy, but the answer to the following interrogative line “Why did you let it go ?” reveals the actual incident regarding how the fish managed to escape, through counter-attack, the jeopardy in disguise of alluring man-made bait. Actually, the fish forced the boy to let it go by biting the little finger of his right hand. Once again, man’s ceaseless tendency of not missing any opportunity to play the role of a pseudo-messiah and to become the centre of attention gets mirrored. Also, he is a hypocrite to the extent of employing devious devices of pretence, deception and ambiguous representation of events, if necessary, to translate and justify his success or failure as per his own terms and conditions. This demeanour itself reflects terrible eco-animosity. The chased fish, here, personifies divested Nature and native others in its attempt to rescue itself from the deadly clutch of acrimonious colonialism. The fish’s biting the child’s finger is a spontaneous reaction denoting a very natural act of remonstrance and self-defence on a victim’s part against a series of catastrophic possibilities such as being suffocated to death, getting displaced from its natural habitat into an artificial unknown confinement, being forcefully quarantined from its school, if got entangled in a snare woven with the yarn of greed and self-indulgence, though it is practically ignorant of the consequences it would inescapably suffer. The incident may appear infinitesimal, yet huge eco-implications are underlying beneath. Any natural water-body being the habitat of fish, the child’s hands meddling into it trying to catch fish for self-merriment symbolize plundering hands playing an instrumental role in engineering and concretizing filthy aspirations and designs that get incubated in their mind, thereby imprudently trespassing into an aboriginal entity’s territory for the fruition of his trivial delight. The injury caused to the child by the fish thus can be paralleled with Nature’s slamming of obstinate civilization for undermining and marring its idyllic integrity inordinately. The event allusively demonstrates the rebellion of the downtrodden and the oppressed against colonial imperialism after

confronting afflictions and intolerable torment imposed upon them. Once again anthropocentrism gets quashed as a fragile figment and that all life on earth has an elemental importance irrespective of conceited human perception gets featured. "I" represent sadist predominance and absurd assumption of obtruding upon and smothering others' natural freedom as universal and undisputable right. The poem epitomizes an eco-rational fact that life outside human habitat prospers and that the natural environment is always more prodigious than the man-made. The victimized agents embodied by the fish counterattack and shatter intolerant aristocracy's semblance of sovereignty by rendering it helpless and paralyzing all its abilities intended to surmount and swipe enigmatic powers of Nature.

IV

The nursery rhymes sufficiently connote through Papa's and the child's selfish enterprises ignoring the employed others, a discriminatory capitalist system, in which private owners intend to govern trade and industry for self-serving profit, rather than benefitting all alike. Also, Papa's and the child's proprietorial approach towards non-human beings and their habitats epitomize totalitarianism and Stalinist ideologies. In the rhymes, sympathy for the undermined entities has been connotatively presented not only to emphasize the necessity of dissolving hegemony but also to suggest that the entire biosphere belongs to every living being alike, and each one should contribute and receive according to their ability and needs, thereby exemplifying healthy socialism wherein all will be accommodated into an impartial unified community. They illustrate through the decaying relationship between the exploitative human characters and the harnessed, rebellious zoo-centric entities, the notable struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat due to unequal distribution of wealth and privileges, thus allegorizing Marxism. They symbolically confront us with the exhausting predicament of the marginalised workers and their sickening downtrodden status, thence prompting one to seriously advocate Leninist policies enhancing concentration of power into the hands of the proletarians instead of the imperialists. Both the nursery rhymes give a panoramic view of the zoological terrain, illustrating profound ecological truth. For instance, the goat symbolizes balanced inquisitiveness, courage and sense of independence apart from nimbleness, fertility, productivity, sociability and ample vitality. Its gestures are associated with looking up, moving forward, one's emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being. The horse signifies overcoming handicaps, enduring adversities with poise, unrestrained freedom and energy. Dogs emblemize guidance, protection, loyalty, fidelity, alertness, patience,

reliability, obedience, nobility, amicability, selflessness and unconditional love. Bulls portray level-headedness, stamina, provision, stability, virility, strength, helpfulness, determination and confidence. A fish typifies fertility, feelings, creativity, rebirth, transformation, health, abundance, serenity, intelligence, happiness, strength, and endurance apart from representing a deep awareness. The analysed rhymes record civilization's remorseless trammelling of animals as a gruesome activity since it not only indicates decimation of eco-centric immunity of the non-human entities emblematically but also demonstrates metropolitan hypocrisy in the name of Nature-fixation. They simultaneously reveal that man-made enclosures are actually sepulchres that have been maligning sanctity and serenity of the environment incessantly. They show paucity of human understanding of the fact that, in the process, the fascinating and vivifying brilliance of non-human creatures suffer a premature decay following their displacement from their natural habitat as an aftermath. The poems connote man's communistic approach regarding commoditizing and obliterating Nature instead of adoring its role as his mentor, protector and life-force despite the latter's incessant tutoring, advising and alerting man through magnanimity and forgivingness since times perennial regarding the necessity of harmony in Man-Nature relationship. So, this redundant conflict of the civilized domain with the colossal creation in which it has a microscopic existence continues and reflects the former's moronic oblivion towards indispensable, indomitable and omniscient aspects of Nature, although environmental resources are the ultimate boon in human lives for their survival and revival.

V

Both the nursery songs portray how humans lull themselves ludicrously in an extravagant cradle of totalistic consumerism and material driven intellectual excellence conceived as surpassing the potentialities of other life-forms, thus flaunting their absurdity without even realizing it. They imply that non-human life forms cherishing the open realms of Nature jovially, when chance upon humans or any of their tools, the former's integral essence gets imperilled, exhausted and thronged eventually. Both indicate fragility and lethality of man-made sites claimed as secure shelter. That, the organic energies in man have become crippled and dehumanized due to man's divorce from Nature has been depicted here. They portray how man's pursuit of frivolous ambitions make him so prejudiced that he ignores the intrinsic significance of bio-diversity, necessity of replenishing the verdure turned into wasteland due to virulent enterprises, duty of rehabilitating the affected destitute others, and tries to justify his egotistic intentions as prudent actions towards progress instead. The

poems equally typify how man's ravenous appetite for power is culpable in blinding and alienating him from being ecologically rational, compassionate and liberal. They eco-symbolically voice for a just deliverance of the nonhumans and the equally afflicted minorities, underprivileged and subaltern by revealing their predicament and misery. The urgency of incorporating eco-congenial integrity into anthropocentric ventures has been proposed explicitly in the songs, since harmonization with heterogeneity is indispensable for reviving our sense of equipoise substantially to shield the world from getting blighted by the hemlock of human whimsicality and prejudices.

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