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## Lullaby: A Prelude to Initial Learning

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### Abstract

*The tradition of lullaby is found in almost all cultures. Everyday interaction with different sounds and the features of the singer generates a psychic comfort for the young child. The amount of time spent with the child proportionately increases familiarity. In other words, lullaby can situate a scope for affiliation outside biological mandate. Lullabies can prove to be a rich resource for enhancing multi-cultural breadth in an early childhood programme. This is all the more relevant in cases of transitional distress experienced by some young children, or to provide support to children from various linguistic backgrounds, or to make children welcome to schooling.*

### INTRODUCTION

School education today takes place in a multilingual setting. This is particularly true of pre-school and the first few grades of schooling. This fact has been acknowledged at all levels— from the local to the global. As a UNESCO document states, there is currently a strong commitment to the inherent value of cultural diversity and the need to maintain it (UNESCO,2003).

Several research studies have shown that learners learn best in their mother tongue. In earlier times, babies and young children around, would listen to lullabies, cradle songs and simple rhymes in the mother tongue, sung by the mother and other family members. These were, inter-alia, the precursors to cognitive development, specifically, language learning. The term used in academic discourse, 'Emergent Literacy Skills' are the foundational

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skills that children develop in the early years of their lives, which prepare them for reading and writing. These skills include oral vocabulary, comprehension and phonemic awareness.

An infant's first exposure to language is the lullaby, sung in the mother tongue. As a functional song, the lullaby has strong associations with an intimate and affectionate maternal affiliation and parental dreams. The content of the lullaby is generally a description of food, nature or playthings, in which the expectations of the baby are given subjective priority.

### **OBJECTIVES OF LULLABY**

The objectives of lullaby singing are:

- (i) To comfort
- (ii) To please
- (iii) To entertain
- (iv) To develop mental faculties
- (v) To educate

These objectives, although varied, tend to overlap, as in inevitable in most human activity.

### **RELEVANT FEATURES**

A critical review of lullaby-practising cultures reveals that they share some common features.

#### **Contextual Flexibility**

Since singers are mostly adults or elder siblings, lullabies often exhibit the underlying subjectivities of performers. Hence, it encompasses the following elements

- (i) Anthropomorphised animal world;
- (ii) Orientation to family, domestic animals and;
- (iii) Introduction to a larger social system and culture.

Most effectively, voice (if not smell or sight) tends to bridge familiarity through repetitive reception. When the child receives comfort and feels safe with the voice, there develops a psychological rapport. This rapport is often with the mother or the caregiver. The person who sings most often or more comforting controls psychological proximity with the child the most. Once this proximity is bridged, registration of details of the lullaby takes place. Details include names or gestures of normative domestic or social establishment.

A few lullabies seem to have been created just for fun. Some of them are quite short, which seem to have no logic or reason. Yet they are not less popular than others. This is because the poetic element and the fun aspect are predominant, as the following example will illustrate:

*My son is very clever.*

*He looks at a pile,*

*He takes a path to climb the pile,*

*He tries sitting on pile,*

*The pile slips away,*

*My son fell.*

As an ancient work states, the purpose is not to educate the child, or to induce the child to sleep, using *naad* or *dhvani* (Rajyaguru,2007).

## **Sleep and Security**

The motif of sleep is dominant in lullabies. Generally the description centres around sunset, darkness, stares and so on, introducing the concept of sleep. Additionally, the underlying theme is safety and security, which is essential for sound sleep. An extensive study on the effect of lullaby (both performed and recorded) on children has revealed the following therapeutic measures:

- (i) Positive reaction in heart-response on listening to the parent's or caregivers's voice.
- (ii) Attainment of optimal level of oxygen.
- (iii) Vocal familiarity accelerates the child's quiet-alert state rates.
- (iv) Frequent focus on a familiar theme can have positive physiological balance (Lowey, 2015).

If one looks closely, then it becomes clear that the major concerns to be found in lullabies are regarding the matter of safety. The little infant is constantly informed by different kith and kin that they were not alone. In fact, it reveals the concerns of safety and security the mother has. Hence, it recurs as the major theme.

Apart from sleep, lullabies that mention visits of the child's maternal uncle and aunt, and the best wishes of all relatives for the infant's bright future endorse a sense of security. Lullabies are simultaneously part of the

public set of symbols that constitute Indian expressive culture and private practices that link this culture with an individual's personal history.

## **Musicality**

Sung in ballad forms, couplets or quatrains, the lullaby uses repetition of words and phrases.

### *Tone*

Musical quality of lullaby strongly adheres to its variation in tone. Maintaining a soothing impact, variation in tone or volume effectively gets responded by the baby's heartbeat or physical response. Tone holds a kinesthetic quality.

### *Rhythm or Repetition*

Repetition results in rhythm. Systematic repetition results in ordered rhythm. Repetition of endearing phrases at the end of each quatrain or every couplet brings rhythmic quality in the performance. Oftentimes, the repeated endearing phrases are rendered through extension. Extension of repetitive phrases by mentioning the child's name or comparison with some supreme figure is very common phenomenon.

According to a study (Bonner, 2015), the following aspects contribute to the musicality of a lullaby:

- (i) Rhythmic consistency.
- (ii) Imitable repetitive structure.
- (iii) Compelling melody.
- (iv) Short, brief but complete.

It is interesting to note that various cultures use a voice palette of different dimensions along with bodily gestures and sounds produced using objects. For instance, a lullaby can have speaking interspersed with singing (in the same rhythmic tempo), whispering, humming or hushing. Explicit body gestures include soft clapping, tapping the toes, bouncing the knees, etc. Nuer mothers in southern Sudan, Kurer women in Columbia, Adivasi (tribal) women in India have been observed to strike a musical string instrument, or create a soft repetitive sound with domestic appliances to lull the child to sleep. Along with natural sounds, for an infant, the mother's voice or soothing sounds are effectively consoling. Music psychotherapists' best practice strategies reflect that live music that imbues the cultural practices of the patient's life-world may have the greatest efficacy in fostering a sense of containment and resilience, as it represents what is safe and familiar,' (Loewy, 2015). The use of onomatopoeic sounds reinforces this aspect.

### **Subjective Experiences**

It is interesting to note that, while traditionally the singing of lullabies is by the mother, aunt or elder sister, a few cultures have examples of male participation as well, for instance, rural Vietnamese grandfathers, Mindanao community of the Philippines, etc.

Advocating that lullaby has a tremendous potential to strengthen

the affiliation between the child and the caregiver; it need not necessarily be the mother who sings the lullaby. The latter being overtly hegemonic has underplayed the validity of the former. The former has a more independent scope, e.g., performances of nanny's, of baby-sitter's and other such caregivers.

Performance of lullaby inherently conditions evocative assertion of the performer's affection to the addressee. Mechanism of the genre obliges the performer to build psychological rapport and a personal attachment. Lullaby singing requires the performer's surrendering to the child's emotional requirement through verbal and psychological nourishment. A mother has the requirements ready or naturally inbuilt, other caregivers can also function successfully.

Since the singers of the lullabies are mostly elders or siblings, subjective experiences are also found in its narration. These may not be what are traditionally considered as subjects of a lullaby, but would encompass elements such as:

- (i) Anecdotes steeped in culture.
- (ii) References to myths.
- (iii) Magical activity.
- (iv) Motif of ethical obligation towards family or society.
- (v) Nostalgia over lost past and ancestral memory. One example is given below.

*Sleep, O my dear child, sleep,  
 Your mother is singing an elegant  
 song for you to sleep,  
 The song is fraught with her  
 innermost love,  
 Let me sing melodious lullabies for  
 you.  
 Sleep, O my dear child, sleep...  
 A journey of remaining wakeful is  
 very long,  
 You sleep today and tomorrow will  
 come with a new Sun.  
 Sleep, O my dear child, sleep...  
 My dear child, may you become great  
 soul,  
 The kingdom of great rulers will  
 shower their blessings.  
 Sleep, O my dear child, sleep...  
 May you take care of poor and needy  
 And make your name perennial  
 globally,  
 Sleep, O my dear child, sleep...  
 (Comp. by Shraddha Trivedi)*

As may be noticed, in the second stanza, the meaning becomes spiritual as well as, endorsing the duties to society and to humankind.

A research study poses an interrogative stance towards the conventional assumption of the performative content of the lullaby. The study analyses two aspects:

- (i) Melody
- (ii) Statements

The study discovers that lullaby can also serve to reflect the singer's mood. (Emeksiz, 2015). The study

explores some content which may be categorised as 'non-sleep-inducing' such as:

- (i) Expression of suffering of the singer.
- (ii) Expression of desires of the singer.
- (iii) Satiric expression of unjust circumstances.
- (iv) Nuances of threat or frightening nature.
- (v) Temptation through harmless baits.
- (vi) Eulogising ancestors.
- (vii) Promise of fidelity to the child.

The study concludes that such content is more often found among non-mother singers of lullabies.

### **Gendered Representation**

Some of the content of lullabies, when analysed, reveal a distinct gendered representation. In other words, the difference between the lullabies of male and female child become evident, as the following two samples indicate:

*O sweet slumber, kindly you climb  
 down and make my dear girl asleep,  
 Spread the peacock feathers over her  
 lotus-like fluffy eyebrows,  
 My dear girl is tired, kindly make her  
 feel relieved.  
 Make my dear girl...  
 By becoming an angel wearing white  
 clothes  
 Take her with you to visit the world in  
 blink.*

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\* Usually attributed to Confucius, this quote at times also gets ascribed to one of the Confucian scholars. Due to lack of clarity regarding the original author/speaker, it has been quoted as such.

*Roam in your cloud-chariot and  
Show our home from above.  
Make my dear girl...  
Tell her sweet stories  
by taking my sweet girl into dreams,  
Let her hold the moon,  
In her soft small palm.  
Make my dear girl...*

*Her eyes may search me in bemusement,  
You better disguise as me and come,  
Set her free to fly in the sky,  
To feel the thrill of wind.  
Make my dear girl...  
My girl is sleeping in the cradle,  
Suddenly a smile comes on her face.  
May the blessing of thirty-three crore  
gods,  
Makes her future brighter.  
Make my dear girl...  
(Comp. by Shraddha Trivedi)*

Here, one sees the process of gendering as well. The metaphors used continuously reiterate the female identity. The difference between the lullabies of male child and female child becomes evident here. A hypothetical figure has been entrusted with the responsibility of making the dear girl happy. Holding conventional physical signs or symbols of delicacy through peacock feathers bed, blooming lotus eyebrows, angelic provision, the child has been defined into a gender. Every line of the song purposefully pleads allowances for the girl. Every single thing has to happen to her, to be given to her, to be done to her, primarily because she is a girl, a proud representative of the feminine.

Although it appears to be a casual epitome of patriarchal narrative, there are references to various culturally rooted metaphors in this song. This song upholds the passivity of the protagonist brightly without ever realising the prejudiced pattern of domestic-cum-social behavior prevalent at the time, though not rare even today.

The following lullaby is addressed to a boy:

*Sleep, O my dear prince, sleep!  
My beloved one, sleep.  
Your cry will bemuse your mother,  
My beloved one, sleep.  
Your cry will cause pain to your  
grandpa,  
My beloved one, sleep.  
Your cry will perturb your uncle,  
My beloved one, sleep.  
Your cry will make your aunt tense,  
My beloved one, sleep.  
Lord Ram and Lakshman will play  
with you,  
My beloved one, sleep.  
Sitaji is making you sleep,  
Yashodaji is swaying your cradle,  
My beloved one, sleep!  
(Comp. by Shraddha Trivedi)*

In this cradle song, one can see the extensive use of cultural idioms. Moreover, the act of a child's cry can cause so much disturbance, also gets highlighted here. This song depicts that situation aptly. This song alludes to two epitomes of mother of femininity in the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, specifically the legends



of Krishna. Sita has a reputation of rearing two children by herself and Yashoda for bringing up Krishna despite not being the birth giver. The latter endorses the maternal affection and commitment as an epitome of feminine virtue without being the birth giver. Legends about her stature oftentimes regarded as deconstructing the definition of motherhood. Giving birth doesn't certify motherhood but living up to the responsibilities and commitments of care giving. The song emphasises the singer to imbibe both the characteristics of Sita and Yashoda. Such figures receive domestic participation through cradle songs or folklore.

### **THE TRADITION OF LULLABY ACROSS CULTURES**

The tradition of lullaby is not alien to any culture. In fact, it can be traced down in different cultures. However, the echo of their lived experiences becomes an integral part of it. For instance, the tradition of 19th century slave narratives of today's USA are fraught with their collective pains revealed in their songs. Similar was the situation of Jews in medieval Europe which can be traced down in their lullaby tradition as well. In the lullaby tradition of the Red Indian community, the story of the collective woes they suffered due to the onslaught of colonisation can be traced. Tusharkant Dave notes that the thematic elements recur in a highly pluralistic mode in different communities, and hence, the primary themes match at a greater

degree in different cultural traditions (Dave: 199).

More importantly, lullaby contains a private voice, besides having cultural inputs, familial vocabulary and stories of human civilisation. Under the patriarchal hegemony, repressed female self finds opportunity to express through lullabies, perhaps to emancipate the pain and agony. Maybe that is why the lullaby singer inspires the baby to a distinguished person, hoping for better care from the child. Federico García Lorca, a 1920s poet who studied Spanish lullabies, called them 'depth of sadness' and believed that lullabies acted as a kind of therapy for new moms. They allowed them to vocalise their hopes and fears. To secure a convenient passage to the world, lullaby singers pass on mythical narratives, historical events and cultural knowledge to their children by solidifying the bridge of inter-generational solidarity.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLING**

An interpretation of the data shows that a sustained study of lullaby as a concept would have positive spill-overs in schooling and associated aspects such as overcoming the initial apprehensions of the child in a new space. The following points are of relevance vis-a-vis schooling:

#### **Lullaby as Music Therapy**

Along with natural sounds, for an infant mother's voice or soothing

sound is effectively consoling. Similarly, musical quality or quantity of lullaby inevitably exerts its effect upon the child or the listener. According to Joanne Loewy's NICU Music Therapy: Song of Kin as Critical Lullaby in Research and Practice (2015), clinical trials in NICU and early infant research reflected that live singing has therapeutic benefits in comparison to speaking but did not specifically include the mother, father, or families' song of kin in neo-natal care. Furthermore, the musical quality exerts a long-term neural effect on children. Medical science has found constructive potential of music, particularly lullaby, in the treatment of cases such as psychological disorder

or trauma. Extensive application of recorded lullaby in psychiatry has seen optimal growth and benefit.

### CONCLUSION

Lullabies provide a rich resource for enhancing multi-cultural breadth in an early childhood programme. Along with knowledge about customs and costumes, ethnic foods and folktales, there is a felt need to emphasise on more inclusion of cradle songs and lullabies from various cultures and regions. These may be introduced as part of the ECCE curriculum for teachers to use in an appropriate manner, and as supplementary activities in mother tongue language textbooks for early grades.

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