

REPRESENTATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHERING IN POPULAR SINHALA LULLABIES

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Abstract

Popular Sinhala lullabies passed down orally from generation to generation occupy an ambiguous and neglected space within Sri Lankan music. Nonetheless, when examined closely, these lullabies offer rich and nuanced interpretations of female experiences, particularly concerning motherhood and mothering. These songs either reinforce or challenge patriarchal concepts within their intertextual frameworks. The primary aim of this study was to conduct a feminist critical discourse analysis of selected Sinhala lullabies to explore how they portray the dilemmas faced by women who are mothers or who aspire to be, caught between traditional expectations and the realities of becoming biological mothers. The findings demonstrate how these lullabies capture the complexities of Sinhalese women's experiences, reflecting their frustrations, emotional and physical suffering, and joyful connections with their children. Although the singers of these lullabies remain anonymous, their voices continue to critically engage with societal ideals and standards, revealing the multifaceted nature of mothering and motherhood within the Sinhala community.

Keywords

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Motherhood, Mothering, Sinhala Lullabies

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Introduction

It has been argued that lulling babies to sleep has existed for as long as languages have existed. Predominantly sung by the birth mothers, lullabies, also known as cradle songs, capture timeless messages not only of personal origin but also ones that permeate the private sphere to enter the realm of public discourse. The main themes of these songs revolve around the relationship between the infant and his/her mother as she is almost always entrusted with the responsibility of becoming the primary child carer. This is because, from the time a new life is conceived in the mother's womb, until the moment of birth, the fetus is nurtured through the biological phenomena that a woman bearing the child is entrusted with. As a result of a woman's capacity to bear and nurture a child in her womb, patriarchal society assumes that the biological mother's role as the child bearer necessitates her role as primary child rearer as well.

Female rights advocates have argued that the dichotomization of the concept of nature vs nurture perpetuates gender stereotypes in a male-dominated system due to the preconditioned notion that the female gender is biologically programmed to imbibe traits such as submissiveness, passivity, powerlessness, self-sacrifice, nurturing behavior, and obedience. The notion that these character traits are biologically ingrained in women is challenged by the dominant feminist discourse that convincingly argues how these generalized traits are imposed on women by an inequalitarian system that does not acknowledge the fact that it is nurture, in other words, cultural and social upbringing that perpetuates such gender stereotypes and not some biological traits per se.

In such a system, the seemingly innocent act of singing lullabies to infants is to lull them to sleep through soothing rhythmic utterances, slow tempos, simple harmonies, steady rhythm, and repetitive lines, with themes conveying messages of love, affection, and care. According to Trehub (1990), there are certain universal features of cradle songs as these little poems, aimed at quieting babies still unable to articulate their helplessness, pain, or anger, must be common all over the world, both in cultures and without, a written tradition (Trehub 1990, p.135).

Literature Review

When considering the available literature, a significant number of studies focus on lullabies as an instrument for pacifying restless babies and putting them to sleep (Arnon et al 2006, Standley 2012, Loewy et al 2013). Nonetheless, these studies have been conducted from a medical or empirical point of view in terms of its therapeutic benefits. There are relatively

fewer studies that critically study their intertextuality. In the available literature, regarding the themes expressed by lullabies, it can be noted that different communities demonstrate different themes when creating the lyrics despite the common themes mentioned above. Literary analysis of lullabies such as in the studies conducted by Birgül (2015), Roy (2023), and Avanzini (2023) reveal that underneath the seemingly simple, and misleadingly straightforward utterances of these infant songs, themes of frustration, rebellion, anger, discontent, and dissent move beyond depictions of personal expressions to permeate social, economic, cultural, and religious spheres.

A doctoral study titled “Somali Women’s Poetry: Lullabies, Men and Politics” by Li (2023) analyzes the dilemma of Somalian women in their roles as mothers as they navigate the social and cultural pressures imposed on them as unquestionable designated caregivers of infants and children. Gupta et al (2022) also wrote about how women are placed in restrictive roles by virtue of their gendered status in a patriarchal social system in a study focusing on how the problematic context is depicted in traditional lullabies circulated within the Sumi tribe of Nagaland. Nonetheless, even in the available literature, there is a limited critical engagement with the lyrics of these lullabies, creating a research gap that needs to be addressed through studies that offer an in-depth analysis of the language used in cradle songs, moving beyond the superficial readings. Such studies should provide thorough evaluations that involve reading the lyrics of these lullabies against the grain. Hence, this study intends to unravel hidden messages that carry stories of female struggle and discontent, and the dilemma women face during the act of child-rearing.

Concerning the Sri Lankan context, research, such as the one conducted by Weerakkodi (2013) and Panapitiya (2023), is commendable for its efforts to document popular lullabies, which are ceasing to exist in the technologically driven 21st-century context where, more often than not, recordings of cradle songs often pacify infants and children. In contemporary society, it is difficult to find caregivers who are well-versed in these orally transmitted lullabies. As such, these studies provide a valuable foundation for researchers interested in this topic, as no extensively written corpus is available for reference. Based on my literature review, none of these studies on Sri Lankan lullabies move beyond the peripheries of descriptive and superficial accounts of maternal affection, childhood bonding, and communal support as they do not offer a nuanced understanding of the rich intertextual and intratextual implications embedded within these lullabies.

Moreover, the lack of publications written in English, and the confinement of studies to Sinhala or Tamil publications, have prevented a global audience from accessing them. Therefore, this

study is particularly significant as it addresses the scarcity of research work on Sri Lankan lullabies, especially from a feminist perspective and through textual analysis. Moreover, the findings of this study are accessible to an English-speaking audience due to the use of the English language.

Further research inspired by this research could expand the corpus to include not only popular Sinhala lullabies but also those from Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, and Veddha communities. Additionally, future studies can explore different contexts, historical periods, and theoretical frameworks, offering new perspectives and deeper insights into the cultural and social implications of lullabies.

Aim and Objectives

When examining the perpetuation of popular Sinhala lullabies across generations, a compelling dialectical relationship becomes evident between the mother - the primary caregiver - and the infant in her care. The paper explores the representation of motherhood within Sinhala folk lullabies and how intricate narratives in these songs unravel the layers of societal values, familial bonds, and gender dynamics sustaining this concept. This is done by engaging in a critical discourse analysis of selected popular Sinhala folk lullabies from the existing corpora whereby the language choices, metaphors, and gendered references are critically evaluated from a feminist lens to evaluate representations of Sinhala women in their roles as mothers, and social individuals.

Subsequently, the following specific objectives were reached:

- To scrutinize textual representations of motherhood and mothering in Sinhala lullabies.
- To identify the ambiguities, complexities, empowerment and disempowerment in such representations.
- To contextualize the findings within the Sri Lankan cultural framework.

According to Jeremaih (2010), maternal subjectivities as diverse, multifaceted, and shifting (p.22) for maternity is no longer seen as a fixed, static state; rather, it is viewed as a set of ideas and behaviours that are mutable, contextual (p.21). This highlights the concept of mothering which indicates the performative nature of the acts involved in rearing a child. In this study, such is the conceptualization of mothering. Motherhood, on the contrary, is representative of the system in operation and assigned to biological mothers by patriarchy: “Motherhood begins internally in the conflictual, intense cauldron of childhood sexuality and object relations,

especially in the mother-daughter relationship and its internal symbolic and fantasy transformation in the developing girl” (p.79). This quotation underscores the complexities and idiosyncrasies inherent in the conceptualization of motherhood, as well as the unrealistic demands imposed on women who strive to conform to this ideal.

Basing such interpretations of mothering and motherhood, this feminist critical discourse analysis of popular Sinhala lullabies attempts to shed light on the ambiguous spaces occupied by these well-known orally transmitted lullabies that have been in existence for generations to soothe Sinhalese newborn infants, babies, and toddlers. It depicts how the simplistic and seemingly straightforward narratives captured in verses unravel explicit and implicit meanings that capture a spectrum of female experiences concerning motherhood and mothering. By achieving these objectives, this study expects to guide other researchers in exploring the nuanced meanings embedded in popular Sinhala folk lullabies in addition to presenting an informed understanding of their societal and cultural implications.

Methodology

a. Research Framework

The methodological approach for the study was selected to fulfill the study objectives. As such, I decided to use Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) for purposes of tabulating the data. As per Lazar (2014), FCDA is a perspective that seeks to examine the complex, subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and power asymmetries get discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and contested in specific communities and discourse contexts (p. 182). Since this particular approach supports textual representations of the intersections of motherhood and mothering with social phenomena such as power structures, community engagement, social norms, parenting practices, and family relationships, it was considered the best tool for analysis. As such, the qualitative method using FCDA intends to exemplify how through these selected Sinhala lullabies, parenting, communal bonding, and sexuality impact the female psyche.

b. Sample Selection

The purposive sampling technique was used to select 17 Sinhala lullabies from the oral tradition form. They were carefully selected based on the presence of themes such as parenting, gender representations, community and family relations, and sexuality.

For purposes of comprehensibility, some of the selected lullabies were translated into the English language and the researcher attempted to ensure that their subtleties, cultural significance, and metaphors were accurately depicted by using the expert guidance of a translator. Nonetheless, the original Sinhala cradle songs themselves were the foci for analysis and interpretation since translations, no matter how close they may be to the original version, cannot fully capture the intricacies of oral or written texts especially if they are literary ones. It should be noted that since these songs have been transmitted through word of mouth, in some instances, there were two or more variation to a selected lullaby. Furthermore, the origins of these cradle songs are untraceable, leaving their authorship anonymous.

c. Data Tabulation

As mentioned previously, the study involves a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of the selected songs to critically evaluate how linguistic patterns and their usage, thematic content, and variations within the specific discourse of lullabies conform or destabilize the existing gendered status quo assigned to men and women in relation to parenting and related norms within a largely patriarchal social system.

The orally transmitted lullabies were transcribed into written form to engage in the FCDA of this corpus-based study. It critically analyzes the linguistic subtleties, cultural contexts, and historical resonances in terms of the depictions of activities and emotions related to caring for and raising children within a largely Sinhala Buddhist community.

The qualitative data were evaluated to discern the intricacies of the portrayals of parenthood, specifically motherhood, from a feminist perspective to unveil the complicated gender dynamics represented in these lullabies.

The FCDA addressed the following research questions:

1. How is motherhood and mothering represented in Sinhala folk lullabies at a textual level?
2. What are the ambiguities and complexities in the representation of the power dynamics between the gendered identities concerning child-rearing activities and individual and communal contribution therein?
3. How can the findings be contextualized within the larger framework of the Sinhala culture?

Discussion

a. Mothering and Motherhood

Feminist discourse focuses on how concepts such as gender, subjectivity, parenthood, and sexuality are socially constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed in a male-serving social system. Feminist scholars like bell hooks² (1981) explain what unique challenges are present for women who become mothers because of their biological capacity to bear children but are subsequently compelled to also be the primary caretaker of a child as a result of this biological disposition. In her article titled “Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism”, hooks (1981) highlight the dilemmas of black women in their efforts to become “participants in the cult of true womanhood” that reached its peak in early twentieth century America. Biological mothers often endeavored to prove their value and worth by demonstrating that they were women whose lives were firmly rooted in the family. Nonetheless, the dilemma of trying to maintain a balance between the domestic and public spheres as they also worked diligently in service jobs to provide economically for their children, demonstrate their commitment to their family and occupations resulting in incredible self-sacrifices (p.70).

This same issue is reflected in the Sinhala lullabies where there are references to working women mainly engaged in agricultural activities such as paddy and chena cultivations and how they strive to maintain a balance between outside work-related activities and their roles as primary caretakers of infants and children:

අනට වෙරළ ඇතිද ගෙනේ

In her hands, there will be a handful of olives

ඉනට පලා නෙලා ගෙනේ

Tucked in her waist, there will be edible green leaves

බරටම දර කඩා ගෙනේ

Carrying a heavy load of firewood

එයි අම්ම විසකිනේ

Your mother will come home soon

Here, and in various other popular lullabies, the unpaid labour engaged by a woman which requires her to multitask while also attempting to babysit her infant child is well captured. There are constant refrains of mothers having to work in the paddy fields, getting involved in chena cultivation, gathering straw, weeds, or dried coconut leaves to produce items needed for household and/or mercantile purposes, gathering firewood, procuring edible foods such as

² bell hooks consciously spells her name in lowercase letters to shift the focus from her identity to the substance of her ideas. This stylistic choice is testimony to her commitment to highlighting the collective nature of the third-wave Feminist Movement.

vegetables, fruits and grains, bringing drinking water using vessels made of clay, etc. The hardships of rustic living that involve the demands imposed on females not limited to their household activities such as cooking, washing and babysitting demonstrates the inegalitarian system of labour distribution whereby they tirelessly work within as well as outside the domestic sphere. Interestingly, there is scarcely any mention of working males or providers in these songs, and this absence speaks volumes about the unfair expectations placed on women in the Sinhala community. Women are expected to shoulder the burden of sustaining the family through manual labor while also managing household tasks and caring for children, highlighting the significant imbalance in gender roles.

This kind of portrayal represents women in rural Sri Lanka as being resilient and hardworking, burdened with the responsibility of sustaining their families by extending their roles beyond the domestic sphere into the public sphere—a domain traditionally reserved for men in a patriarchal society. Thus, in such instances, these women do not appear to be striving to “break the glass ceiling” by accessing the lucrative job market or becoming financially independent. Instead, they appear to be constantly struggling in their roles as wives and mothers, while also bearing the weight of being the primary breadwinners. The conspicuous lack of male contribution as the primary provider in these lullabies can be seen as a radical move by the women who are predominantly singers, subtly challenging traditional gender roles. These lullabies convey the message of the strength and resilience of Sinhala women while simultaneously highlighting the unfairness of the male-serving system they endure. Even when there is any mention of the father, he is often depicted as a secondary figure, who mostly loiters around or is a drunkard who shares no joint responsibility in household-related tasks nor is seen as a person providing adequately for the family's sustenance.

අප්පා සිහ රජු වන්නේ / රූප්පාවල ඇවිදින්නේ

තැප්පා ගිනි උසුලන්නේ / අප්පා එයි නාඩන්නේ

Your father, as if he is the king of the Sinhalese/ is wondering around in
Ruppawala

Bearing the heat of the fire/ your father will come so stop crying

Here, Ruppawala refers to a village near the city of Kandy in Sri Lanka. It seems that instead of working, the father is depicted as walking or possibly roaming around this village while the mother looks after the child. References to fire likely allude to the hearth that Sinhala village women use for cooking, as they often do not use gas or electric burners. Thus, experiencing the heat from the fire is nothing new to these women, despite its discomfort. The word *උසුලන්නේ* (ususlanne) indicates that it is a burden that must be tolerated. This suggests that while it is not

preferable, it is perceived as inevitable by these women to be confined to domestic activities while their male partner seems to be away, quite aimlessly in this case.

When examining popular Sinhala lullabies, there are hardly any references to working fathers. In fact, their absence is almost conspicuous. In the patriarchal culture, it is often men who are heard and given space to voice their opinions in socially respected and recognized spheres. The very act of excluding the father figure in these lullabies is a radical subversion of the recognition and importance typically given to men, as the presence of the female voice is dominant and empowered in these songs. In a community that attempts to silence women into subjugation, female subjectivity becomes empowered. The fact that these lullabies are transmitted without temporal or spatial barriers makes them potent yet subtle instruments that educate women within and across generations about a system that favors men and restricts women. The constant refrain of the lullabies, as they are sung by mothers, prompts reflection and awareness of the reality—one that is not always justifiable to their gendered existence as lesser beings, the “second sex” (Beauvoir, 1953).

b. Maternal Instinct

Simone de Beauvoir (1953) in her work titled "The Second Sex," critically explores the concept of motherhood as it relates to women's societal roles. De Beauvoir (1953) subverts the notion that women are defined by their reproductive capacities. One of her most well-known quotes: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” depicts the socially constructed nature of concepts such as womanhood and motherhood that are established to restrain rather than empower women in such roles.

When critically observing the textuality of Sinhala lullabies, it is clear that many attempts to subvert the status quo are made by overtly or covertly critiquing the social practice of assigning females the role of primary caregiver based on their biological capacity to bear and give birth to children.

මන්න බබෝ අනිනිනියා / ගල් අරබේ සිටිනිනියා

ගලින් ගලට පනිනිනිනියා / බබුට බයේ දුවනිනියා

Look, baby, the elephant that lives on a rocky terrain

Is jumping from one rock to another/ But runs away after seeing you

The above lines from a lullaby, which is one of the most popular among Sinhala women, refer to an *athinniya*, the Sinhala term for an adult female elephant who is said to be living on rocky terrain. According to the creator of this lullaby, upon seeing the baby being lulled to sleep, the

elephant runs away. When engaging in feminist critical discourse and analyzing the textuality of this song, fascinating implications emerge beneath the surface.

References to an adult female elephant in the lullaby could be interpreted as symbolizing the strength and majesty of women who are, incidentally, navigating a harsh environment shaped by a male-centric social system. The elephant, living under challenging circumstances, must navigate a path fraught with obstacles, much like the societal obstacles women face. These barriers represent the male-serving patriarchal norms imposed on women, such as restrictive definitions of femininity, motherhood, and female sexuality. Despite these struggles and discrimination, women, like the powerful female elephant, have the potential to demonstrate resilience and endurance, embodying strength in the face of adversity.

Additionally, the fact that the elephant resides in such a rocky place suggests a sense of isolation and marginalization from mainstream society. However, the implications behind the use metaphorical parallelism between the female elephant and a woman underscores the latter's sense of resilience and untamed spirit. This interpretation subverts the traditional depiction of females as delicate and fragile, instead highlighting their strength and defiance in the face of adversity.

The fact that the *athinniya* runs away at the sight of the infant starkly contradicts the stereotype of maternal instinct, which suggests that females are inherently programmed to care for and nurture their children. This idealized version of motherhood, which portrays women as naturally predisposed towards selflessly caring for their children, imposes complex challenges and pressures on them. Just as some female animals in the animal kingdom may reject or even consume their newborns, women, too, have been known to withdraw from their children. Such behaviors may stem from psychological factors, including mental health issues, anxiety, and depression—particularly postpartum depression—which can significantly impact their ability to nurture their children.

According to Mughal et al. (2022) and numerous other related studies, postpartum depression can affect as many as one in seven women. This is a striking statistic, revealing how childbirth can significantly impact a large number of women, even as patriarchal literature glorifies maternal instinct, motherhood, and the ideal mother as a self-sacrificial, loving, and fully committed caregiver. Ironically, depictions of mothers' struggles during childbirth or enforced child-rearing—justified by the notion of "mother's pure love"—are rarely mentioned in these popular Sinhala lullabies despite this kind of love being considered a given.

In the lullaby verse above, there is a clear subversion of the expectations of mothering imposed on women, which assume that all women are innately programmed to nurture and love their children unconditionally. On the contrary, a woman's biological capacity for childbirth does not necessarily obligate her to become the primary child-rearer. Various psychological, emotional, economic, and social factors can influence a biological mother's ability to raise her child in the way society expects. Mental exhaustion, financial constraints, heavy workloads, and emotional and physical burnout can lead to a rejection of these imposed roles.

Just as the *athinniya* runs at the sight of an infant, in reality, some women cannot or will not conform to the idealized notions of motherhood and mothering that impose high expectations. This act of running away represents a strong assertion of female autonomy, rejecting the societal conventions that provide little choice for women regarding such constructs. The lullaby subtly conveys that such expectations are not universally applicable, and there are alternative female experiences of resistance and refusal to conform to imposed duties. It delivers an implicit message to women that personal choice is available to them—to either embrace motherhood and mothering willingly or reject male-serving norms that demand such expectations. Either way, the presence of choice is important as it supports the creation of female subjectivity that does not strive to conform to normative expectations. The motherhood myth argues that the duties and burdens of motherhood have been emphasized over its pleasures in social discourses. This perspective suggests that having a child provides a woman with emotional security, and that men are attracted to women because of their maternal capacity (Blumenthal, 1975).

c. Sustaining Mothering

In many societies, a woman is often seen as failing to fulfill her primary purpose in life if she does not give birth to a child. Societal expectations assume that a woman is born to get married, have children, and raise a family. The burden of these expectations is deeply ingrained and can be vividly expressed in lullabies that capture the emotional suffering and sense of helplessness a married woman feels when she is unable to conceive. In Sri Lanka, there is a widespread misconception that infertility is solely the woman's fault, despite advances in medical science that have disproven this notion, especially in urban areas.

එගොඩ ගෙදර දරු සුරතල් අම්මා / මෙගොඩ ගෙදර අදුරැයි කිරි අම්මා

නෙතේ කදුළු සල්වෙන් පිය දැම්මා / මටත් පුතකු දෙනවද කිරි අම්මා

In the house next to mine there is an adorable child/ in this house there is darkness, *kiri amma*

I wipe the tears away from my eyes with a cloth/ *kiri amma*, could you also
give me a child

Here, the singer is almost beseeching *Kiri Amma* to grant her wish of conceiving a child. In Sinhala culture, there is a practice linked to the Buddhist concept of *dana*, which means giving, whereby merit is acquired. As such, when a woman wishes to conceive or has conceived but is seeking protection and good health, she provides delicious meals to pregnant mothers to gain merit for herself and her unborn child. Moreover, lactating mothers are also regarded as *Kiri Amma*, which literally means "milk mother." This practice is also connected to the worship of the local goddess Pattini, who is venerated by many Sinhala people, especially women, as she is considered the goddess of fertility and the protector of women and children. Interestingly, goddess Pattini is also referred to as *Kiri Amma* by rural folk. As such, the song, while intended to lull a child to sleep, exemplifies the emotional suffering of a woman who is unable to conceive and who feels pressured to have a child when she witnesses other women engaging in the act of mothering around her.

It cannot be excluded that conventional notions of a mother's love are not depicted in these lullabies as there are a considerable number of them that actually do so.

රුබර මගේ පුතුනුවනේ / ගෝමර සැම තැන ඉසුනේ

නාමර මගේ කිරි දෙනනේ / කිරි බීජන් පුතුනුවනේ

My gorgeous son/ your body, sprinkled with skin patches

From my swollen lactating breasts/ suck milk, my son

These lines vividly exemplify the mother's overflowing love for her suckling baby, illustrating how deep affection naturally leads to lactation, nourishing the infant. The reference to ගෝමර (*gōmara*), a fungal skin condition that, in rural Sri Lanka, is perceived as endearing rather than repulsive, highlights how some individuals react positively to the baby's cuteness, finding beauty even in imperfections.

While verses in folk dramas like the Sokari tradition and other Sinhala rituals, such as Shanthikarma, express immense adoration for babies, such references to the overflow of maternal love are less prevalent in popular Sinhala lullabies that have been passed down through generations. The following is an example of a lullaby that represents the extent of a mother's love:

මගේ පුතා රුවට රුවයි / දැක දැක ඉන්නට පිරියයි

මට ඇති එක මනික නමයි / මගේ පුතු එය දැක නැලවෙයි

My child you are so good looking/ I keep wanting to look at you

You are my only precious gem/ seeing that you are soothed

When considering the corpus, the positive as well as negative emotions that are evoked in a mother upon giving birth to a child, are explicated in the Sinhala lullabies; thus, giving expression to the web of complex emotions that are not unique to all mothers in general.

d. The Absent Mother

The invocation of the dead or absent mother trope is yet another prevalent theme in popular Sinhala lullabies. For instance, consider one of the most popular lullaby presented below:

නුඹේ අම්මා කිරට ගියා / කිරි එරවා එන්න ගියා

කිරි මුට්ටිය ගහේ ගියා/ ගහට උඩින් කොක්කු ගියා

Your mother went in search of milk / trying to lactate and bring back some milk
The pot containing the milk floated away in the river/ while storks flew over the river

The lullaby singer refers to the absence of the biological mother, which suggests a two-fold interpretation: the mother may be absent due to death or because she is away from home due to outside commitments. When considering the context, there seems to be a stronger implication of death. This premise can be validated by the following argument:

Firstly, the soothing role is performed by someone who is not the child's biological mother, highlighting the societal expectation that a mother should be the sole nurturer of her child. This underscores the pressure placed on mothers to fulfill these social obligations. The reference to lactation in the lullaby is also significant. The verb *erava* means to lactate, while *kiri* means milk. It is evident that the mother did not seek alternative milk products; instead, she is trying to produce milk on her own. However, her efforts are portrayed as futile, just as the pot of milk floats away in the river. This narrative contains multiple layers of interpretation.

It illustrates the unrealistic societal expectations placed on mothers to produce breast milk despite physical or emotional challenges. The idealization of breastfeeding adds to the burden of mothering, resulting in anxiety and guilt for women struggling with lactation issues. The mother's desperation in seeking milk while leaving her infant at home invokes a sense of helplessness. Ultimately, she is unable to procure any milk.

The symbolism of the pot of milk is also notable. In Sinhala culture, a pot of milk symbolizes prosperity, nurture, abundance, and good fortune. However, this positive symbolism is subverted as the pot of milk flows away in the river. This could symbolize the setbacks women

face as mothers due to societal norms, undermining their contributions and burdening them without support from their partners. The flowing river may metaphorically reference the impermanence of life, as expressed in Buddhist philosophy. Many Sinhala villagers are Buddhists and are aware of life's transience, often likening it to a river's flow. Thus, the floating pot could symbolize the cycle of life and death, reflecting the ongoing cycle of samsara.



Figure 1: Image from Daru *nalavili* or lullabies, 2021

This interpretation suggests that the lullaby might be referring to the death of the biological mother. Her absence could be due to a tragic death, possibly during childbirth. A few decades ago in Sri Lankan villages, women gave birth at home with the assistance of a *vinnambu amma*, an experienced woman in childbirth. The lack of formal healthcare facilities and adherence to home birth traditions often led to maternal deaths. The absence of the mother could indicate a permanent or temporary situation. The references to milk and storks—both white—could symbolize sadness, death, and mourning, as white is traditionally associated with mourning in Sinhala culture. The ultimate sacrifice of the mother, giving her life to bring forth a new one, reflects the tragic reality of women pressured by societal expectations to become mothers. In Sinhala culture, a woman's inability to bear children is seen as a severe insult, known as *wandha geni*. In poverty-stricken contexts, marginalized communities face higher risks of maternal mortality due to inadequate healthcare. Interestingly, storks, which symbolize motherhood and the arrival of a newborn in Western culture, here represent sadness and despair as they fly past the floating pot of milk, reflecting the harsh criticisms of a patriarchal society towards mothers who fail to meet societal expectations. This also highlights the high-risk women face in becoming self-sacrificial while bringing forth new life.

The recurring theme of the absent mother in Sinhala lullabies highlights the biological mother's physical absence, either due to her involvement in labor-intensive activities outside the domestic sphere to support her family or as a result of maternal mortality. This reflects a broader cultural narrative about the dilemma and unjustifiable burden imposed on women through socially constructed roles of motherhood, which often fail to consider the reality of their circumstances. The following examples illustrate instances where the songs refer to the missing mother:

- නුඹේ අම්මා කිරට ගියා (Numbē amṁā kirəṭa gi'yā) – "Your mother went to get milk"
- නුඹේ අම්මා දියට ගියා (Numbē amṁā diyāṭa gi'yā) – "Your mother went to the water"
- නුඹේ අම්මා දරට ගියා (Numbē amṁā daraṭa gi'yā) – "Your mother went to gather firewood"

The constant refrains of the missing mother, due to her various obligations, may superficially suggest practical reasons. However, at a deeper level, these songs reflect the frustration that mothers experience when they are entrusted with the role of primary caretaker without sufficient support. The narratives and hidden connotations of these lullabies provide a safe and subtle means for mothers to explore the complexities of their roles, offering insight into their experiences within the confines of a lullaby.

e. Familial Bonding and Child Rearing

In many Sinhala lullabies, there is often a reference to another female who takes care of the baby while the biological mother is temporarily or permanently absent. This caretaker, whether a step-mother, aunt, or another female relative, does not express resentment about the mother's absence. Instead, she rationalizes the situation through explicit and implicit explanations, reflecting a strong sense of female bonding among Sinhala women. This bonding is particularly evident in rural contexts, where extended families often live in the same house or nearby.

Notably, the term කුඩම්මා (kuḍammā) can refer to either a step-mother or an aunt. While step-mothers are often portrayed negatively in Western literature, in Sinhala lullabies, they are depicted as nurturing and caring. Historically, in Sri Lanka, social traditions sometimes involved the practice of wife-sharing by two blood brothers to ensure property remained within the family. This practice, known as එක ගේ කෑම (eka gē kǣma), literally means "sharing food from the same house," and signifies that one woman might be shared between two men. In rural Sri Lanka, it is not unusual for a lactating mother to feed a child that is not her own, either from her family or a neighboring household, if the biological mother is absent or unable to lactate.

ඉනන් බිනන් නොකරන්නේ

වඩන් කුමරු නලවන්නේ

කුඩම්මා මොනවද දුන්නේ

කුඩම්මයි කිරි දුන්නේ

Without making you feel any lack

Pacifying you by carrying you, little prince,

What did your aunt/stepmother give you

She was the one who gave you milk

The above lyrics illustrate the deep sense of sisterhood among Sinhala women, to the extent that they are willing to share their breastmilk with children who are not their own. Such instances of female bonding have been prevalent both in the past and present within the Sinhala community. This reflects the influence of Buddhist philosophy, which emphasizes generosity, whether it involves material goods or intimate acts like sharing breastmilk or offering blessings. These meritorious deeds, rooted in a religious context, have fostered a culture of giving and benevolence among the Sinhalese women.

Apart from references to older sisters and aunts soothing the baby and justifying the mother's absence, there is also mention of strong communal bonds during childhood. Grandfathers and uncles are depicted as visiting the baby, bringing gifts, and giving financial aid, although no direct instances show males as primary caretakers.

f. Mothers' Hardships

Many lullabies reveal the pathos of women who are not only the primary caregivers but also contribute to their families through unpaid labor. The father or husband is often portrayed as a useless, aimless, and irresponsible figure, sometimes depicted as a drunkard or a failed pretender to royalty.

For example:

- වචනේ දැන් රැවටීමයි / රචනේ මගේ කරුමේමයි - "Words are now deceiving / the essay is my unfortunate fate"
- නෙන්නේ පිය පැමිණීමයි / නාඩන් දොයි දොයි යාමයි - "Your father won't come / go to sleep without crying"

In these lines, the term කරුම (karuma), loosely translated as "fate," is used idiomatically in මගේ කරුමේ to express one's unfortunate fate or misery. The mention of "words" and "essay" conveys a nuanced meaning, indicating the frustration of women who feel trapped by a system

that subjugates them socially and culturally. This frustration is compounded by the discourse of patriarchy, represented by language that stifles the female voice (Cixous, 1976).

දිනේ පටන් මා උපන්න / මව විදි දුක් බැ කියන්න

දොහොත් මුදුන් තබා ඔන්න / වදිමු මව්නි පව් අරින්න

From the day I was born / There is no telling the amount of pain my mother suffered

Placing my hands together in prayer / I worship her to appease my sins

In this verse, the lullaby singer illustrates the cyclical nature of the suffering endured by mothers in a society that imposes the burden of all domestic affairs, including child-rearing, on women. It highlights the extent of the boundless suffering faced by women due to the maternal instinct myth, which dictates that they must love and nurture their children unconditionally and selflessly.

g. Language Choices

Further examination of language choices in these lullabies reveals subversive elements that challenge the existing status quo. For instance, the terms used to refer to a baby/child in the Sinhala language include:

- බබෝ (babō) - /bə'bo:/
- පුතා (puthā) - /pu'ta:/
- දෙයියෝ (deyyō) - /'dejjo:/
- දුවේ (duvē) - /'du:we:/

Among these terms, *puthā* is the most frequently used, typically referring to a son but often used generically for both male and female children. This usage suggests a degree of gender neutrality in common practice, challenging traditional gender dichotomies.

On the one hand, referring to both genders as *puthā* promotes a form of linguistic gender neutrality, which can foster an egalitarian view of gender. This is akin to how modern language sometimes marks female professionals with additional descriptors (e.g., “lady doctor”), reflecting an inherent bias that assumes the default is male. On the other hand, the preference for *puthā* over *duwa* (which specifically means daughter) could subtly reflect a cultural bias favoring sons. Historically, sons were preferred due to social, economic, and inheritance factors. This preference is reflected linguistically, indicating a subtle partiality toward males. In addition, *babō* (baby) can be seen as a gender-neutral term, highlighting flexibility and inclusivity within the Sinhala community. It reflects a cultural attitude that promotes gender equality through language that avoids rigid patriarchal categorizations. This use of gender-

neutral language fosters identity formation independent of socially constructed notions of femininity and masculinity.

Analyzing language choices and metaphors in Sinhala lullabies unveils how language shapes perceptions of motherhood and reinforces cultural norms. By examining these subtleties, we gain insight into the complex dynamics of gender, societal expectations, and the role of language in challenging or perpetuating cultural ideologies.

Conclusions

Lullabies, much like in other cultures, have been orally transmitted across generations, primarily sung by women to soothe infants and children. However, these lullabies often contain overt or covert messages with multi-layered, nuanced communications that subvert rather than conform to societal norms imposed on women within a male-serving system.

Looking critically at these popular Sinhala lullabies, we can note that they are not mere unsophisticated musical expressions; they carry messages of resistance, empowerment, strength, dissent, and resilience. They also illustrate the pathos experienced by women living in patriarchy, pressured to conform to normative definitions of passivity, subservience, fragility, and helplessness.

By focusing on the female voice and subjectivity, these lullabies empower Sinhala mothers across generations. They convey the dilemmas and complexities of their roles, making them therapeutic not only for the children who hear these soothing melodies but also for the mothers singing them. The therapeutic aspect of these lullabies lies in their purgatorial nature, offering a form of catharsis to the women who sing them.

Universal themes such as maternal lament, worries, postpartum depression, maternal mortality, hardships, and the injustice of unpaid labor are well-captured in these cradle songs. This study advances previous research, such as that by Panapitiya (2023) and Weerakkodi (2013), by engaging in a feminist critical discourse analysis of Sinhala lullabies. It offers a nuanced analysis through feminist discourse, an approach that, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has not been extensively explored in previous studies.

When examining popular Sinhala lullabies passed down through generations from a feminist perspective using critical discourse analysis, it becomes evident that these songs both stabilize and destabilize standard notions of motherhood. The "motherhood myth," which refers to idealized depictions of motherhood, unconditional maternal affection, and the portrayal of women as the primary caretakers solely responsible for raising their children (Chodorow, 1978),

is presented in these roles. However, in many cases, the blurred lines between the singer of the lullaby and the references to the absent mother create a figurative and literal distance from such expectations.

The Sinhala cradle songs exemplify the unrealistic expectations placed on mothers, who often struggle to cope with them, and those who endure them because their love for their child surpasses their suffering and resentment. There are frequent implications of the mismatch between traditional expectations of women as mothers and wives and the reality of becoming biological mothers, leading to frustration, despair, and both emotional and physical suffering. These Sinhala women appear to have recognized this reality. Instead of elevating the status of mothers and placing them on a pedestal of unattainable idealism—which could restrain them and prevent them from becoming empowered individuals in their own right, independent of their roles as exemplary wives and mothers—these lullabies present a radical multitude of female voices. Though anonymous, these voices question societal ideals and standards as they depict the experiences of mothering and motherhood in all their glory and woes.

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