

Simplification in Contemporary Self-help Literature

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Abstract. The present paper aims to critique the trend of oversimplification in contemporary popular self-help literature. It analyzes instances from works in this genre to demonstrate how certain authors attempt to package their interpretations of reality in simple, crystallized nuggets of “wisdom”. It then highlights the pedagogical and psychological implications of simplification for readers who are fed trimmed versions of psychological and spiritual concepts through generalizations and one-toned rhetoric. The paper finally emphasizes the need to subject works in the self-help genre to keen sociological scrutiny and to empirically evaluate readers’ responses to gauge their wider sociological influence.

Keywords: Over-simplification, Generalization, One-toned rhetoric.

1. Introduction

Researchers have developed a “readability formula” to determine if documents are written at the correct reading level for their targeted audience. Gunning’s Fog Index [1] is one of the best known and measures the level of reading difficulty of any document. The formula for the index is as follows: (average number of words per sentence) + (number of words of 3 syllables or more) * 0.4 = Fog index. Simplicity in written communication is commended as a virtue especially if readers belong to diverse backgrounds and are untrained in the art of reading literary works. The popularity of *The Readers’ Digest* can be attributed to the fact that it has a low fog index and is, therefore, easily readable. Simplicity does not make a work less effective or evocative; there exist examples of inspirational literature that have endured by virtue of an eloquent simplicity that captured popular imagination like the poem “Desiderata” by American poet Max Ehrmann [2]. Writers of inspirational works who cater to readers from different backgrounds need to ensure, like Ehrmann, that their ideas are couched in familiar and universal terms. Popular contemporary self-help literature that promises readers a better life uses accessible language to increase readership; however, works in this category often adopt a superficial approach to complex and subtle metaphysical notions that are ambiguous and open to a variety of interpretations; these cannot always be communicated accurately in simple language. For instance, the statement “Thou Art That” from the *Chandogya Upanishad* [3] has been variously interpreted by the different schools of Vedanta philosophy in terms of the “identity [That] expressed in this judgement”. Therefore, the overwhelming need to write in a language that is accessible may lead to over-simplification and unsupported generalization, or worse, misinterpretation. The present paper attempts to catalogue the dangers of over-simplification in popular contemporary self-help literature and its sociological and psychological implications.

2. Dangers of over-simplification

V. R. Ruggiero in *Elements of Rhetoric* (1971) [4] admits that simplicity is necessary because “the act of communication, spoken or written, demands even greater reduction, compression, and imposed organization for the sake of coherence.” However, he warns against the pitfalls of over-simplification stating that there is a point at which simplification becomes oversimplification, which unlike simplification, doesn’t scale down the realities retaining its real proportions as far as possible; rather, it blurs and omits proportions altogether. According to him, the attitude underlying over-simplification is that no matter how complex an issue may be, there may be a clear-cut, simple, “pat” answer.

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It is this very attitude that qualifies books as global bestsellers; Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (2006) [5] appeals precisely because she "presents the same old truths in a contemporary and uncluttered style". The book promotes the belief that merely visualizing what you want enables you to get it and gives the reader the impression that this is a simple, magical idea that has worked successfully for centuries.

In a bid to make motivational narratives interesting and easy to ingest for the busy reader, some contemporary writers tend to package subtle, metaphysical topics in superficial language. For instance, the lawyer-turned monk in Robin Sharma's *Family Wisdom from the Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* (2003) [6] advises his sister: "Start listening to your heart more. Begin to connect with the inner wisdom it carries. When you listen to that small voice that resides deep within you, you will know the right way to live". The conversation does not offer further explanation of terms like "inner wisdom" or "small voice". The writer assumes that the reader is familiar with these terms and that there is a universal, unambiguous interpretation that is shared by both. Certain therapists in popular psychology books present narratives of problems as condensed, crystallized versions of reality. For instance, M. Scott Peck [7] in *The Road Less Travelled* (1978) describes events that take place in the life of an unhappily married woman: "She became able to see that her loneliness while her problem, was not necessarily due to a fault or defect of her own. Ultimately she was divorced; she put herself through college while raising her children, became a magazine editor, and married a successful publisher".

The entire life-story of the woman is covered in a simplistic rendering of chronological events in a single paragraph and there is an apparent disconnect with reality in all its myriad, complex aspects. Stewart Justman [8] in *Fool's Paradise: The Unreal World of Pop Psychology* (2005) criticises the rigid pattern of such life-stories: "Self-help uses the rhetoric of liberation, telling of emancipation from oppression, not the details of freedom. It echoes the Declaration of Independence, not the Constitution" and further: "Neatly packaged and processed, the life-stories of the self-help genre go down easily, like coated pills". Sweeping generalizations are blended into the narrative to prevent complicating matters for the readers. For instance, consider this statement in *Beyond the Secret* (2009) [9]: "People use only ten per cent of their mental energy in an appropriate manner. The rest of it is lost in banal or negative thoughts or remains eternally asleep".

3. Pedagogical issues

The use of simplistic language in contemporary self-help literature raises pedagogical issues, especially since print media like the 'The Speaking Tree' supplement of *The Times of India* also includes nuggets of spiritual wisdom "made easy to understand" for children. The issue of popularizing religion in a public domain in a country like India is a contentious one because of the multifarious context in which it is projected and the manner in which religious stories are trimmed and simplified to suit the needs of children. For instance, a comic strip 'God's Promise to Abraham' [10] in a supplement presents the message of the Bible to children: "God knows we have done bad things, which he calls sin. The punishment for sin is death, but God loves us so much He sent His Son, Jesus, to die on a Cross and be punished for our sins. Then Jesus came back to life and went home to Heaven! If you believe in Jesus and ask Him to forgive your sins, He will do it! He will come and live in you now, and you will live with Him forever".

In the absence of an empirical study, it would be difficult to objectively evaluate the influence of the passage on impressionable minds; however, it is possible that simplified, trimmed versions of religious stories may lead to uninformed perceptions of spirituality and a confused, erroneous notion of the nature of the self. Sayeed Ayub [11] in his article titled 'Secularism' in *Change and Conflict in India* (1978) explicitly voices his objection to imparting religious instruction to children in any form. He believes that our religious experts are not agreed upon whether God means "a majestic power to be dreaded, a loving father in whom we can put our trust, or an impersonal Absolute," or whether "He receives offerings and grants favours, or is only a name for all our ideals or a transcendent mystery". He avers that these issues are "unquestionably beyond the grasp of little boys and girls" and that "religion is too profound a thing for them to learn as easily as they learn arithmetic, cricket or etiquette; it comes at all, after years of heart-breaking travail and desperate quest".

4. The One-toned Rhetoric of "ease"

The view that it takes a lifetime to arrive at a personal understanding of religion, spirituality and the self is evidently not shared by writers of self-help books. Sub-titles like '30 days to a perfect life' on book covers indicate that it is not only easy to improve one's life but also that it is not necessarily a painstakingly long, lifetime process. The use of the word "perfect" is typical of a rhetoric that views the conduct of life and the solving of problems as simply a matter of practising techniques and making checklists.

The psychological effects of following "easy" techniques like repeating affirmations and self-help mantras have been studied by Canadian psychologists Joanne Wood and John Lee of the University of Waterloo, in Ontario, and Elaine Perunovic [12]. According to the study those with low self-esteem who repeated self-affirming statements actually ended up feeling worse; a second experiment found that repeating negative statements instead could actually have a beneficial effect. The psychologists suggest that unreasonably positive 'self-statements', such as 'I accept myself completely' simply remind individuals with low self-esteem how much they believe the opposite to be true. They conclude: "Repeating positive self-statements may benefit certain people such as individuals with high self-esteem but backfire for the very people who need them the most".

Self-help manuals cater to psychological needs at two levels: instilling a positive attitude in readers to help them reach higher levels of achievement which more often than not translates into greater material prosperity and secondly, helping "sufferers" overcome problems through easy-to-follow solutions. Understandably, the rhetoric of authors resembles that of church pastors, mentors, and friendly sages who invariably address readers directly in the form of a monologue. A continual use of the first person and a sense of talking to the reader directly, cajoling him, convincing him, reasoning with him, necessitates a style that is uniformly imperative. Most inspirational literature is, as it were, a recorded speech, imagining a monologue with the reader listening keenly and not reading. The speaking tenor rather than the objective tone of writing in absentia is evident. Justman [8] quotes M. M. Bakhtin's reflection on how modern languages themselves have broken away from "high, proclamatory genres – of priests, prophets, preachers, judges, leaders, patriarchal fathers, and so forth" and argues that the generic language of self-help literature is proclamatory, repetitive and one-toned. Like "the original Utopian literature" stories of pop psychology tend toward closure".

The narrative of the stories is saturated with promises and reassurances; and the tone is one of gentle nurture. There is a marked absence of literary devices like irony, satire, paradox or ambiguity; it is perhaps feared that these would complicate the narrative and would only deflect the readers' attention from the sole purpose of the author which is to render advice that is totally free from the uncertainties that are a feature of real life. Justman [8] asks: "Why is it that irony is missing from pop psychology? Possibly because irony hints at resignation, at acceptance of the inconceivable [...] and such acceptance runs contrary to the genre's can-do spirit. [...] Inasmuch as irony is not what we would expect, *it causes us to think [...]*" (emphasis added). The nurturing spirit of the self-help author does not leave any space for the reader to think. In Barbara Ehrenreich's words [13], it does not allow the reader to understand that "negative is not the only alternative to positive" and to take a more realistic view of life by "seeing the risks, having the courage to hear bad news and being prepared for famine as well as plenty".

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, popular self-help literature, in general terms, does not distinguish itself as a literature characterized by rhetorical ingenuity or complexity; its Utopian nature forces it to use strategies that seek to widen, not restrict its readership. To the spiritual seeker, it offers language that is sanctioned by "divine" authorship and embellished with the metaphorical imagery of transcendental experiences; to the sufferer, it offers the rhetoric of consolation; to the ambitious, a magical formula for realization of desires. In India, the flourishing spiritual and self-help publishing segment consistently broadcasts the message that books have become a vehicle of transformation. To credit all best-selling self-help books with bringing about a dramatic change in readers' lives would be to surround the whole genre in a halo of credibility. It is necessary, therefore, to subject works of a derivative and vacuous nature to keen sociological scrutiny in the light of the discussion of over-simplification; it would also be instructive to objectively evaluate the responses of the reading community to inspirational works.

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7. References

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