

The Implications of Simplification in “Inspirational Literature”

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Abstract—The present paper aims to critique the trend of oversimplification in contemporary popular inspirational literature. It analyzes instances from works in this genre to demonstrate how interpretations of reality are packaged 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 inspirational genre to keen sociological scrutiny and to empirically evaluate readers’ responses to gauge their wider sociological influence.

Index Terms—Generalization, one-toned rhetoric, over-simplification, pedagogical issues.

I. INTRODUCTION

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. 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 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. The popularity of the *Readers’ Digest* can be attributed to the fact that it has a low fog index and is, therefore, easily readable [2]. The simplicity of a piece of writing does not make it less effective or evocative; for instance, the following excerpt from a speech delivered by Winston Churchill to the House of Commons in 1940 is extremely simple but has high inspirational appeal: “We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France. We shall fight in the seas and oceans. We shall fight on the beaches, in the fields, in the streets, and in the hills. We shall never surrender” [3]. 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 [4] (please refer to Appendix). It was first published in 1927 and is still regarded as a classic example of inspiration. The poet takes care to cater to people of all religious sensibilities in the line “be at peace with God,

whatever you conceive Him to be” and admits the existence of a world that is ambivalent in nature: “With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world”. 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 has been variously interpreted by the different schools of Vedanta philosophy in terms of the “identity [That] expressed in this judgement” [5]. 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 inspirational literature and its sociological and psychological implications.

II. DANGERS OF OVER-SIMPLIFICATION

V. R. Ruggiero in *Elements of Rhetoric* (1971) warns against the pitfalls of over-simplification:

Given the complex nature of realities and the limited resources of human language, the human mind seems to be required to grasp in fragments or to reduce large unwieldy realities to manageable size. And the act of communication, spoken or written, demands even greater reduction, compression, and imposed organization for the sake of coherence. Simplification is therefore necessary. We have to live with it and accept it. [...] But 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. Underlying oversimplification is the attitude that no matter how complex an issue may be, there may be a clear-cut, simple, “pat” answer. [6]

It is this very attitude that qualifies books as global bestsellers; Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret* (2006) appeals precisely because she “presents the same old truths in a contemporary and uncluttered style” [7]. 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. The beguiling, simplistic style of self-help literature has invited criticism from Barbara Ehrenreich, a journalist

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who campaigns against such literature through her personal blogs. She states that the “delusional optimism” that has influenced the contemporary business culture in the United States is one of the factors responsible for the financial crisis that plagues the country apart from greed and speculation; since company chiefs were “absurdly upbeat” about the outcome of their business deals, no one was psychologically prepared for the financial meltdown [8]. She remarks that the optimistic rhetoric of self-help books has perpetuated a corporate training culture of heady motivation that has disturbing professional implications:

All the tomes in airport bookstores’ business sections scream out against negativity” and advise the reader to be at all times upbeat, optimistic and brimming with confidence – a message companies relentlessly reinforced by treating their white collar employees to manic motivational speakers and revival-like motivational events. The top guys, meanwhile, would go off to get pumped up in exotic locales with the likes of success gurus Tony Robbins. Those who still failed to get with the program could be subjected to personal “coaching” or of course, shown the door [8].

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) 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” [9]. The writer assumes that the reader is familiar with these terms and that there is a universal, unambiguous interpretation that is shared by both. Narratives of problems are presented by therapists in popular psychology books as condensed, crystallized versions of reality. M. Scott Peck 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” [10]. 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.

A similar attitude underlies internationally popular periodicals like *The Readers’ Digest* which is characterized by a pervasive sense of knowingness that is reflected in its articles. The tag line “Life well-shared” printed next to the title on the contents page of *Digest* issues sums up the philosophy of this category; amidst articles on health, political affairs and cultural trends, life is neatly crystallized into little knowledge-bytes and stories of courage during a crisis, endurance in sickness and unwarranted acts of kindness and compassion in the face of hatred and violence. Advice on a variety of topics ranging from time-management to psychological problems is numerically arranged; articles are titled “16 steps to a successful relationship” “14 good reasons

to exercise” and “Inside the Teenage Brain: Why Adolescents behave that way” [11]. Life-experiences are presented as lessons to be learned in order to ascend higher in the realm of human progress; there is a marked absence of any sense of bewilderment or a feeling that the truth, at the end of the day, is inscrutable.

As an illustration, let us consider a typical instance of an article that appeared in the February 1986 issue of the *Digest* [12]: “The Lesson of the Cliff.” The author Morton Hunt recollects how he overcame the physical and mental terror of climbing down a cliff with the right “technique”: “one step at a time.” He links this lesson to certain events in his life when he was on a similar symbolic precipice: when he was to fly into enemy territory as a war pilot, when he won a contract to write a difficult book and developed jitters thereafter, and when he took the decision to move out and separate from his wife and eight-year old son. There is a sanitized “distillation” of reality in such articles; it is as if this is all there is to be known and understood about life’s challenges and nothing more. If we contrast this singularly “linear linkage” of this episode in the author’s childhood that displays a simplistic faith in the truth of its own version with the complex vision of “nothingness” that Mrs. Moore has in the caves in Forster’s *A Passage to India* [13], we realize that inspirational writing is not bound to, but also needs to be free of a pluralistic and ambiguous approach to experience. Mrs. Moore is also, in a sense, permanently changed by the experience in the caves. But unlike Hunt, the glimpse of the abyss compels her to retreat from life and go nearer death; the caves thus come to symbolize the ineradicable evil, the negation that lies at the heart of the universe. But this is conjectured only vaguely by the discerning reader who realizes that she becomes more irritable, even irascible and rude after the event; Forster does not reveal what exactly transpires inside the caves. The author of “The Lesson of the Cliff” can resort to no such literary complexity as he caters to the demands of the formulaic presentation of the inspirational genre.

The sub-title preceding the *Digest* article reads: “The secret to meeting Life’s most frightening challenges;” in these as well as other like-worded articles, there is a sense of “revelation”, of a “secret” being revealed, an unspoken truth finally unearthed. There are exceptions to this especially in the case of Richard Bach whose *Messiah in Illusions* (1977) declares on the last page that “everything in this book may be wrong” [14].

Stewart Justman in *Fool’s Paradise: The Unreal World of Pop Psychology* (2005) criticizes 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” [15]. Sweeping generalizations are blended into the narrative to prevent complicating matters for the readers. For instance, consider this statement in *Beyond the Secret* (2009): “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” [16].

III. PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES

The use of simplistic language in contemporary inspirational 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' 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" [17]. 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 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 favors, 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" [18]. Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* (2006) is equally emphatic about the dangers of indoctrination of children. He points out that "words could have a more long-lasting and damaging effect than deeds". He argues that when children are encouraged to believe in something like the punishment of unshriven mortal sins in an eternal hell, it is tantamount to 'child abuse'. His argument is scientific rather than philosophical; he points out that child brains are built by natural selection to believe whatever their parents or tribal elders tell them and that this trusting obedience may lead to slavish gullibility. According to him, if propositions about the world, about the cosmos, about morality and about human nature come from a trusted source and are "delivered with a solemn earnestness that commands respect and demands obedience" then the child will naturally pass on the same to future generations [19].

IV. THE ONE-TONED RHETORIC OF 'NURTURE'

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 practicing 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 [20]. 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 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"[15].

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 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) [15]. The nurturing spirit of the self-help author does not leave any space for the reader to think. In the words of Barbara Ehrenreich, 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"[8].

IV. THE FINALITY OF 'MAXIMS'

Let us now consider the case of maxims and one-liners that appeal by virtue of their apparently simple and cryptic nature; when the 19th century philosopher Schopenhauer says, "We forfeit 3/4th of ourselves in order to be like other people" [21], there is a sense of finality about this judgment of human nature; the statement is unquestioningly registered as a precept in domains like school curricula where it will be treated as a "nugget of wisdom" or environments where it will be converted into a poster or a plaque for public viewing. Jon Elster who comments on the nature of maxims in *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions*, points out how "a maxim accentuates one aspect of human experience often contrary to the accepted or conventional wisdom. To make an impression, the author may state it as a universal truth, whereas in reality, it is only intended to counterbalance popular opinion [...]" [22]. He quotes the eighteenth-century author of *Reflections: or Sentences and Moral Maxims*, Le Rochefoucauld, as an exception to this practice because he "attenuated his formulaic statements by inserting qualifiers such as "often" "usually" or "most people;" the reason may be that he wanted to avoid giving the impression that virtue was impossible but it could also be that he realized that the aesthetic requirements of the maxim might conflict with the demand for accuracy" [22]. And so it is that Rochefoucauld comments on a virtue of human nature which is actually a foible: "What we call generosity is *usually* only the vanity of giving" (emphasis added). However, most pronouncements, unlike Rochefoucauld's are posited as ultimate bearers of knowledge that do not brook contradiction. For the researcher with a cultural and functional interest in how these proverbs actually "work" for the reader, they are an interesting example of how truth is dispensed with authority and received with unquestioning acceptance.

The antiquated nature of proverbs also helps; especially when these deal with basic psychological characteristics and not sociological trends and are therefore relevant across ages. So, for instance when Confucius, who lived in the 5th century BCE says, "To be wronged is nothing unless you continue to remember it" the reader subscribes to this more readily than he would to the maxim "Spare the rod and spoil the child" in contemporary times where society has put a firm hold on any punitive corporal punishments for children. One-liners like those in Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* are simpler and eloquent: ("When you're in bed, you are dead", "Love each other or perish", and "Death ends a life, not a relationship") but these are nevertheless aphorisms in potentia [23]. It is possible that the passage of time will reinscribe them further as little crucibles of truth simply because they belong to antiquity.

A refreshing exception to this style, however, is provided in the works of Richard Bach, the author of the inspirational classic *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. In *Running From Safety* (1994), which is based on a dialogue between the author and his nine-year old self, the latter asks the former to give him some maxims to use every day. Richard complies willingly as he has always felt that it is in a maxim that very few words carry "so much freight". He shares so many maxims that Dickie begs him to stop; when Richard does not, he screams in frustration [24]. The resultant touch of self-deprecatory humour lends a touch of realism to the narrative and reminds

us that an overdose of inspirational advice can exhaust the listener beyond a certain point. Bach provides a hint of irony as well as sober practicality in his latest novel *Hypnotizing Maria* (2010) [25]. The book explores the powers of auto-suggestion and optimism. At a point in the novel when his hero is airborne amidst a thunderstorm, he forgets about suggestions for a while: "Hypnotized or not, when flying small airplanes one doesn't mess with thunderstorms, and the monsters had his attention". Bach -subjects his own techniques to attain a spiritual state of calm to a little self-effacing mockery in times of stress: "His prayer didn't quite materialize, but the mosquitoes did" [25].

V. CONCLUSION

The review of inspirational writing suggests that all such texts guarantee success and happiness through theological, psychological or metaphysical means. The evident absence of any negative emotions like despair, anxiety, frustration, hopelessness or doubt gives inspirational writing a Utopian quality; on the other, the simplistic surety and certainty with which its philosophy is communicated lends it a one-dimensional nature. Inspirational writing is thus different from imaginative literature in an important respect: the latter depicts life with all its contradictions and antinomies and is not motivated by any purpose in the pragmatic sense of the term, whereas the former is motivated by a single goal – that of transformation and alteration of human life through an improvement in personality. While genuinely mystical and religious literature that promotes a sense of universality has been upheld by philosophers because of its pragmatic value and its potential to cure the spiritual anguish of civilization, the bustling self-help industry with its quick-fix remedies has been criticized because of its derivative nature. With its repetitive rhetoric urging readers to discover their hidden potential and infinite powers, it is accused of being a "vast echo chamber of reproduced ideas" [15].

In conclusion, popular inspirational 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.

APPENDIX

Desiderata

Go placidly amid the noise and haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence.

As far as possible without surrender
be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others,
even the dull and the ignorant;
they too have their story.
Avoid loud and aggressive persons,
they are vexatious to the spirit.

If you compare yourself with others,
you may become vain and bitter;
for always there will be greater and lesser persons than
yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.
Keep interested in your own career, however humble;
it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.
Exercise caution in your business affairs;
for the world is full of trickery.
But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;
many persons strive for high ideals;
and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself.
Especially, do not feign affection.
Neither be cynical about love;
for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment
it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years,
gracefully surrendering the things of youth.
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.
But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.
Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline,
be gentle with yourself.
You are a child of the universe,
no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.
And whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God,
whatever you conceive Him to be,
and whatever your labors and aspirations,
in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams,
it is still a beautiful world.
Be cheerful.
Strive to be happy.

Max Ehrmann

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