

The Making and Mechanism of Self-help Books: A Reader Response Critique

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Abstract: An iconic feature of popular culture is a non-fiction genre called the self-help book, which has become a global publishing success. These books have managed to create a huge impact on its reader base and the market for these books are currently quite immense. It is thus essential for both mental and health professionals to have at least a working knowledge of the above. In the present post-pandemic scenario, people are trying to find solace in daily living while trying to ensure the best in life. In such a competitive world, there is a need for good leadership quality and people are hence in a constant struggle to improve their management capacity while also trying to win more friends and influence people. For this purpose they turn to self-help books. The fact is that these books help people become more effective and psychotherapists often suggest such a supplement to psychotherapy. To ensure more sale and wider reach, the author adopts certain techniques or strategies to make the book more appealing as is often visible in the opening pages.

This paper aims to explore the making and mechanism of self- help books, and the various techniques that authors are adopting to make such books best-sellers. The books under consideration are Dale Carnegies' *How to Win Friends and Influence People* published in 1936 and Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* published in 1989. Carnegie's book is basically about human influence and leadership psychology. This book serves exclusively the objective of winning and well- liked by people. Covey's book is written on the belief that the way we see the world is entirely based on our own perceptions.

An analysis of these books will be done using Reader Response Criticism – a theory based on the assumption that a literary work takes place in the mutual relationship between the reader and the text and the meaning is constructed through a transaction between these two within a particular context. The paper will explore the techniques adopted by self-help book authors and their influence on the reader, as well as how these books culminated in becoming bestsellers.

Keywords: Reader response, self- help, techniques and strategies, bibliotherapy

INTRODUCTION

The self-help book which is celebrated as an iconic feature of popular culture is a non-fiction genre which has become a global publishing success. These books have created a huge impact on its readers and the market for these books are enormous- a phenomenon about which both mental and health professionals need at least a working knowledge. In the present post-covid scenario, everyone is trying to find solace in his or her daily living and all are trying to earn the best from their life. In this competitive world, people are trying to get good leadership quality and they are in a constant struggle to improve their management capacity and they also try to win friends and influence people and for this they depend on the self-help books. They practise certain skills in life in order to become effective believing that these books can help them out. And the fact is that these books win in making people effective and psychotherapists often suggest this as a supplement to psychotherapy which aims at a

process called Bibliotherapy. For this the author adopts certain techniques or strategies to make the books appealing. One can see that in the introductory pages itself, the author gives a clear idea that this book will help its readers certainly and if not, they can stop reading the book.

Matthew E. Archibald, in his book *The Evolution of Self-help* observes:

The popularity of the self-help book as a publishing category is reflected, even amplified, in its own social critique. A rising body of critique has problematised the popularity of self-help literature, focusing its attention on the deceptive “undertow” with which the genre is afflicted. The self-help book market, it argues, has deluded the reading public by creating in its members a co-dependency; rather than helping themselves, readers have become reliant on the self-help book for the satisfaction of their needs. Interestingly, this critique has had a “popularising” effect on the self-help book market. (85)

Self-help books have potential advantages over the psychological treatment for mind related problems. Self-help books are inexpensive and the price is very cheap compared to psychological treatments, they are quickly and easily accessible at anywhere at any time, and they are convenient to use (available day or night, seven days a week).

The books under consideration for analysing are Dale Carnegies’ *How to Win Friends and Influence People* published in 1936 and Stephen R. Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* published in 1989. Both these books are the best-selling ones and they are also popular in the corporate world. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is one of his best best-selling books and over 30 million copies have been sold worldwide making it a best-selling book of all time. This book is basically about human influence and leadership psychology. Next to health, people’s next biggest interest is human relationships: to understand and get along with others, be well-liked and win people to their way of thinking. This book serves exclusively that objective. The second book is written on Covey’s belief that the way we see the world is entirely based on our own perceptions.

In this research paper an analysis is done from the perspective of readers by applying Reader Response Criticism. Reader-response theory is based on the assumption that a literary work takes place in the mutual relationship between the reader and the text. According to this theory, the meaning is constructed through a transaction between the reader and the text within a particular context. Readers assume multiple roles when responding to a variety of forms of literature. The process of developing responses facilitates active and meaningful reading and increases emotional and intellectual participation in the text, which ultimately provides learners with better comprehension and awareness of the text.

Reader Response and Self-Help

Reader Response, primarily a German and American offshoot of literary theory, emerged prominent since 1960s in the West. According to Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womank: Reader Response Criticism wholly repudiated all these notions; instead, it focuses on the systematic examination of the aspects of the text that arouse, shape, and guide a reader’s response. It designates multiple critical approaches to reading a text. According to Reader Response criticism, the reader is a producer rather than a consumer of meanings. (53)

Reader response theory identifies the significant role of the reader in constructing textual meaning. The theory maintains that textual meaning occurs within the reader

in response to text and recognizes that each reader is situated in a particular manner that includes factors such as ability, culture, gender, and overall experiences.

The readers of self-help book usually read the book a single time and they could use the ideas they got from these books for further uses. The ideologies put forward by these books are highly recommended in corporate fields and they are also highly accepted. The readers devote particular attention to what occurs during the actual reading process; they internalize what is written in the text and they could easily connect it with their lives. They develop a kind of intense tendency to be like what is written in the text and also, they would like to be like the person whom the author has given as the example.

For every problem in the life one can depend on these books and it is psychologically proven. These books mentally help its readers to overcome life situations and its use is clearly seen among the workers of corporate fields and those who work under high pressure from the superior officers. Roland Barthes argues that the “goal of literary work is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (6). The readers while reading a text creates their own meaning and interprets it in their own way. The author has put forward many techniques to overcome life situations and the reader could easily capture it by reading it. The readers can examine the interconnections between their lives and the literary works that they consume and the author also expects such things. For e.g., Dale Carnegie writes “I knew from experience that this statement was true, for I myself had been searching for years to discover a practical, working handbook on human relations” (9). He also points out the eight things that will help the reader to be successful in life. After quoting these eight points, the author

claims that this book will help us to “Get out of a mental rut, think new thoughts, acquire new visions, discover new ambitions” (9). He also asserts that “this book has done all these things for more than ten million readers in thirty-six languages”. (9)

Carnegie, in the preface of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* notes that:

If by the time you have finished reading the first three chapters of this book – if you aren’t then a little better equipped to meet life’s situations, then I shall consider this book to be a total failure so far as you are concerned. For ‘the great aim of education, ‘said Herbert Spencer, ‘is not knowledge but action.’ And this is an action book. (16)

The author’s confidence level is seen here. In a way it focuses on the mental stability of the reader. According to the Reader Response Theory, the author can create as many meanings using the signs and symbols the author has either intentionally or unintentionally put forward in the text. Similarly, such claims that the author put forwards also attracts the reader to read the text. Authors especially the authors of the self-help books use many such techniques and this in turn psychologically applies to the mind of readers since everyone aims at a highly successful life. The weak points of the readers are focused and these books aim at certain people who would like to create huge success in their life.

The self-help books in a way introduce us to our real life or day to day problems and also find out a solution to it where the solution is easily applicable to the problem. The general, third- person plural form has now disappeared and the first-person pronouns are widely used.

Substituted is an individual, singular form, a specific person referred to as “you”. This pronoun shift introduces the self-help book as a form of engagement to an

individual reader as against categories of people to which any single reader belongs. However, this pronoun usage, in itself, does not specify its reader in any axiomatic fashion. The interpretative work carried out by readers as a general practice of reading that is, to think in terms of identity and similarity is implicitly being invoked and the readers are being asked to make the connection between the encoded reader addressed and the “actual” person who is reading the book. The authors use the pronouns like I, We, You, and Us widely in these books and this helps the readers to find themselves in the narrator’s stand.

Carnegie writes, “The value of sharing is one of the most basic things we believe in” (46). Here also those who do not believe in the value of sharing get easily adapted to the value of sharing when they read this. It is easily acceptable. Similarly, the author has used the first- person pronouns in many situations. The title, quality and relevance of the content, number of pages, size of the book, cost of the book etc., will definitely affect the use of book among the readers. The wellness magazines, beauty magazines etc., play similar role like the self-help books. Everyone is in a hurry to win friends and influence people. If one can suggest the tips for that, the people will definitely turn their attention toward such books. Carnegie has intelligently put the title to his book. One will always develop a tendency to be like the effective people and always develop a curiosity to find out their life principles. Covey has included the most outstanding principles of highly effective people and named it after that which helped him in a way to reach to many readers. The readers of self-help books are able to give personal responses from their successful life and it is sometimes or always the success that they achieved from reading such books. For them, these books act as a motivator, psychologist or pole star. The role of an active reader who could achieve maximum from a book is very important in the case of this genre.

Reader response theory is very significant in analysing the strategical move of the authors. Textual reader response approaches admit to the fact that the text does influence the way readers read and construct meanings. Thus, the reader and the text interact in the process of formulating a meaning of the text. The text is like a sculpture and the reader must bring the finished form to the work by interpreting the idea conveyed by the author. The author can create as many meanings as they wish. In the case of self-help books, the author gives the reader advice to be followed in life to succeed. The readers read these books when they are mentally disturbed or in a traumatic situation and reading these books in such situations helps the readers in creating their own meaning appropriate to their life situations. An advice given by the author creates greatest impact on the readers and this impact helps them in creating accurate meanings. The reader activates the work through reading and it becomes an active work by the meanings created by the readers. The self-help book gets meaning only when the reader engages in the text. The reader response theory is highly significant in this aspect and also for analysing the form and content of the text.

Self-Help Books: Potential Readers

Several surveys have revealed that women purchase and read self-help books more than men do, especially books pertaining to love and relationships, weight control, and emotional problems. Recent decades have seen a proliferation of psychological self-help books, widely consumed by the public and used in the context of treatment by mental health professionals. Self-help reading attitudes would reflect certain underlying personality traits.

The leadership quality which the corporate firms aim at creates a kind of mental pressure in the minds of workers and by analysing the latest data collected by

analysing the mental pressure of these workers, it is clear that they all are facing similar situations in their work space. Work space is always considered as a place which they can relax and do their job. But the present situation does not guarantee such a free space and they have to depend on these books to find solace. They always consider these books as a success formula which enable them to succeed in their career.

From analysing the books under consideration also, it is clear that these self-help books mainly aim at the people who are in better search of a good position and career in the society. The importance of self-help books is especially seen in corporate fields. The people who work there will not get enough time to read long books which are written in a manner which is difficult to read in a single stretch. But the formula that the authors of such books follow enable them to find it easy and accessible to read and adapt the ideas whenever they are in need of its help. The age group that these books mainly aim at is between 22 and 45 because according to human psychology the people of that age are struggling to find better position in the society as well as in the family and career. So, they are in intense urge to succeed in the life and these books are the perfect option for them. The books are written in a very crisp and precise manner which is time saving. They are cost effective and reading them will only help them to live with flying colours in life. This particular age group needs money, home, good career and everything that the society has labelled for an individual as mandatory.

When we go to a book shop and when we normally see a book name titled as *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, we have a tendency to buy the book only by seeing the title of the book. Actually, the title has been successfully given by the author to attract readers to buy and to read it. This is a special tactics of the author. The titles of most of the self-help books attract the readers at the first sight of them. The selection of self-help books is not random, but it is encouraging that the reviews are predominantly positive. Nineteen percent of the books are considered very helpful and one percent is rated negative. Another indication for the quality of self-help books is the fact that about eighty five percent of psychotherapists recommend self-help books to clients. Self-help books are unlikely to be effective if the topics they address have little relevance for the happiness of most people.

In self-help the role of the reader is even more important. Most readers will not follow the book page by page, but will study parts of the. In a similar way self-help books seem to enhance the freedom of choice in an individualistic society. The reader's situation in choosing self-help book is very important and the same way it is their situation that creates meaning to the text. One can see that self-help books are available in a variety of categories. The best-selling will be always from the 'Growth' category because it is about the improvement of the self. Personal efficiency, self-management, art of living and ways to reach our goals deserve much importance in our daily life and hence people are very much interested in buying and reading self-help books. The meaning of self-help books is created by the readers according to Reader Response Critique. These books aim at the readers who are facing troubles in life situations and also at those who feel difficulty in moving forward. So, it is their interpretations to the solutions provided by the author that gives life to the text. If the reader is passive, there will be no life to the text and only if the reader is active the text will get a meaning and thereby a life and popularity. So, the reader's situation in choosing self-help books deserves great importance according to Reader Response Critique.

Self-Help Books: Strategies and Techniques

Self-help's most valuable secrets are not about getting rich or winning friends but about how and why people read. All self-help, even Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, advances a textual pedagogy. Dealing with people is the biggest problem we will ever face said Dale Carnegie, and it is true. We deal with people daily for a lot of things and if done correctly can enhance our lives for the better. This book's principles and insights are timeless and are still powerful today for any situation that involves people.

In the beginning of the book, Carnegie points out the eight things this book will help you achieve. After pointing out all these things the author claims that "this book has done all these things for more than ten million readers in thirty-six languages". This book has got great public demand and so the copies were increased. The author in the author's note claims that, "If by the time you have finished reading the first three chapters of this book – if you aren't then a little better equipped to meet life's situations, then I shall consider this book to be a total failure so far as you are concerned". In the end of every chapter the author tells the readers that to be the leader of one thing one has to follow the instructions given in the chapter and since everybody wants to be the leader of everything, this principle can be applied successfully to suit one's needs.

Carnegie starts by stating a pre-requisite to getting the most from this book, which is "a deep, driving desire to learn, a vigorous determination to increase your ability to deal with people"

(17). His methods represent a way of life that can be achieved through practice, and will only work when they are applied sincerely from the heart, rather than used as techniques to cajole others. The core idea of his book is to always consider things from the other person's point of view, as well as your own.

Carnegie conveys his ideas using examples and stories from English kings, Civil War generals, and other famous personalities like Benjamin Franklin, Teddy Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln and John D. Rockefeller. There are many powerful situation-specific tips and useful phrases embedded in his case studies that can be applied in our day-to-day dealings with people. He also remarks about famous personalities. Carnegie successfully portrayed all the techniques and ideas to win a better life and also to take a better position in the career. It is clear that the success formula has been clearly introduced to the reader through crisp words and everything is described precisely. While doing a linguistic analysis, it is visible that the author has used words which perfectly suit the occasion.

The 7 Habits mentioned by Covey provide an incremental, sequential, integrated approach to the development of personal effectiveness. The messages of the self-help authors are very straightforward. They always put the title in a very effective manner so that the readers can always get attracted to it. While analysing the title of our two books under consideration it is clear from the title itself that the author has very brilliantly and tactfully put the title so that the readers will prefer to read it. In this competitive world everyone is trying to get good mark in their career and life and those who are in need of some proper guidelines and principles can easily get attracted to these books.

In Dale Carnegie's book the title refers to the effective ways to win and influence friends and family and this title really helps the book to attract readers. The title of the second book which reads the seven principles also attracts the readers. The number seven itself is a small number and it also symbolises that the techniques that they

should follow is a small number. It is clear after analysing these books that the author has adopted many great techniques to make the book a success. The title itself is eye catching and it prompts the readers to buy the book. The writing style of the authors are very elegant and each and every word is used in a crisp and precise manner. Readers are addressed using the pronoun “you” which makes them feel that the author is addressing the reader directly and particularly. The ideas are represented very clearly and the points are introduced carefully and thoroughly. The authors have put forward some points to ponder to be successful in life and these points are easy to handle principles.

CONCLUSION

Globalisation influences our cultural identity and affinity groups and in the scenario of globalisation one can find a cosmopolitan culture where people are settling distant from their native places and this has created a situation of an individual to help oneself out of any crisis. A life away from relatives and a job filled with competition and stress have increased the use of self-help books because they have no one to lean on when they are mentally unstable.

Also, people tend to be more competitive and individualistic, hence they are seeking individual remedies. One can identify this on analysing the two books under consideration.

When one person is in depression or in any sad mood, there is no need to call a psychologist or a doctor, but the solution is got by reading a self-help book. The number of people who depend on self-help book is getting increased day by day. Since it is cost effective, it can be accessed by any reading public. The cost of these books is comparatively very low but at the same time they have very good quality in healing the human mind. The content of the book is very clearly and precisely written in simple language in a concise form so that this helps the readers to grasp the meaning within a short time. When one is mentally depressed or struggling in the family, society or in their job fields they could easily get these books and they can read accordingly by adjusting the time.

In the genre of self- help also, it is visible that the materiality or the content of the text is focused more than the biography or the history of the author. The meanings or interpretations created by the reader are a reflection of the reader as well as the text. This dynamic reading process will enable the reader to evoke a response to events and characters of a text involving his/her emotions and thoughts. It is worth noting that active reading, emotional and intellectual participation in the text, construction of meaning and elicitation of responses are major aspects of literature discussions.

The ideologies put forward by these books are highly recommended in corporate fields and they are also highly accepted. The readers devote particular attention to what occurs during the actual reading process; they internalise what is written in the text and they could easily connect it with their lives. They develop a kind of intense tendency to be like what is written in the text and also, they would like to be like the person whom the author has given as the example. The reader also focuses attention upon the traces of knowledge and data that will remain after the event. The title and content of the book applies to the dismantled minds of the reader and while psychologically analysing this, one can easily identify it. One can easily identify that self-help books work with a ‘one-size fits all’ approach. The advice is not to be tailored to the personality of the reader, diagnosis or personal circumstances. An important common factor that is shared by virtually all self-help books is the message

that one can improve a lot. The belief that one can improve is a powerful factor in actual improvement, and cannot easily be dismissed.

The language and content of most self-help books are congruent with the mental processes and values. It is written in a very crisp and precise manner which is time saving. The materiality or the content of the text is focused more than the biography or the history of the author. Every word in the text is reader oriented and it is the reader who finds meaning to the text.

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