

## PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED: WHAT POSTCOLONIAL SOCIETIES CAN LEARN FROM FREIRE?

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Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
15 August, 2024	15 September, 2024	30 September, 2024	14 October, 2024

### ABSTRACT

*This paper highlights the importance of Freirean pedagogy in the context of postcolonial societies. The essay begins by dwelling on the Freire's liberation philosophy of education and its critical concepts. The second part contextualizes the education system in the postcolonial societies and problematize it in the light of critical pedagogy, while the final section focuses on Freire's concern about the first stage of liberation, where the oppressed are warned to resist the temptation of adopting the views of the oppressors, hence becoming oppressors themselves. The paper argues that this has actually happened in many postcolonial societies, where the oppressed have assumed the role of oppressor after formal independence. Thus, it is important to revisit the Freirean pedagogy of the oppressed and learn from its critical concepts in the postcolonial context.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### What postcolonial societies can learn from Freire?

I was first introduced to the podcasts as part of my class assignment. Listening to the interviews of the leading figures in the field of education was quite fascinating. Since then, listening podcasts have become a regular part of my daily routine, particularly during commute to university and my way back to home. In one of the podcasts, I came across the interview of Michelle Fine about her research work in a maximum-security prison in New York state. Her work seemed to me very unconventional. Unlike “normal” research where there are researchers and research participants, I was unable to figure out who are the researchers and who are the subjects of the research. This line between a “researcher” and “who is being researched” was simply absent. The people participating in the project were at the same time “research participants” as well as “researchers”.

It was unconventional in another sense as well. The research project (Fine and Torre 2006) seemed to be not only motivated in a desire of scientific

community to further the knowledge frontier or gain objective insights about social reality, but it was clearly aiming at more than that. The research had a clear agenda. It was aiming not only to understand the reality but to change it. Furthermore, the method adopted to change the existing situation was through raising the consciousness of the participants. And it is also important to note here that the researchers-cum-participants came from one of the highly marginalized and disadvantaged sections of US society. They were convicted of grave crimes, were mostly from racial minority groups, lower socio-economic status and they were all women. The reason behind citing Fines' work is its inclusivity of Freirean concepts of co-creation of knowledge, learning through problem posing in a dialogical form, and raising consciousness in order to change the objective conditions of oppression – all central themes of the “pedagogy of the oppressed”.

Fine's research project was my indirect introduction to Paulo Freire's “Pedagogy of the oppressed”. Freire's pedagogy is a foundational text in what is considered today as “critical pedagogy”. It is a short but highly influential book due to its rich content.

The book is in fact a manual for “humanization”. Both oppressors and the oppressed are dehumanized. Oppressors are dehumanized because of their actions which led to the denial of freedom to the oppressed. And oppressed are dehumanized because they are deprived of agency and freedom to act autonomously. Thus, the pedagogy of the oppressed aims to liberate both the oppressors and the oppressed. The liberation does not entail that the oppressed becomes the oppressor themselves, but to end this cycle of oppression. This cycle can only be ended by raising the consciousness of the marginalized people and by making liberation the primary purpose of education system. Thus, at the heart of education is the emancipation and humanization of both oppressors and the oppressed. This paper is aimed at highlighting the importance of Freirean pedagogy in the context of postcolonial societies<sup>1</sup>. The essay is divided into three parts. First part dwells on the Freire’s liberation philosophy of education and its critical concepts. The second part is an effort to contextualize the education system in the postcolonial societies and problematize it in the light of critical pedagogy. The final section focuses on Freire’s concern about the first stage of liberation, where the oppressed are warned to resist the temptation of adopting the views of the oppressors, hence becoming oppressors themselves. It is argued that this has actually happened in many postcolonial societies, where the oppressed have assumed the role of oppressor after formal independence. Thus, it is important to revisit the Freirean pedagogy of the oppressed and learn from its critical concepts in the postcolonial context.

Freire situates his ideas in the context of an unjust society, characterized by a “majority oppressed” and a “minority oppressor”. This is in fact the characterization of the twenty first century societies based on capitalist principles, where the small elite controls the lives of rest of the population. The denial of agency and freedom to the oppressed makes them de-human. While at the same time, the oppressors have also lost their humanity by the very act of denying others their freedom. The pedagogy of the

oppressed is a struggle on part of the oppressed to regain their humanity and also to liberate the oppressors by putting constraints on them. However, the pedagogy of the oppressed does not consists of a body of knowledge, which can be delivered to the oppressed as a liberation tool. But rather, it is something which the oppressed must do themselves. It is not a top down process of knowledge transfer from someone who is more knowledgeable to someone with lesser knowledge. This top-down hierarchical model of education, Freire argues, is a characteristic of oppressive societies. The pedagogy of the oppressed is not the transfer of knowledge but the co-creation of knowledge by the oppressed groups themselves.

To elaborate the hierarchical form of knowledge transfer, Freire gives the example of current education system prevailing in most parts of the world. He argues that the present schooling system is based on the banking model. This model assumes that that the children lack the capacity to think and know nothing. It is considered a duty of the teacher, by virtue of his/her superior knowledge, to deliver the knowledge to the children. In this model, students act merely as empty vessels, which are filled by the more knowledgeable teacher. Thus, it becomes a duty of students to store that knowledge and regurgitate whenever they are required to do so, particularly in the exams. In this banking model, children are deprived of their ability and freedom to do anything. Everything is imposed on them from above, including syllabus, textbooks, lessons plans and exams. It leaves no place for inquiry, critical thinking and experiential learning.

The pedagogy of the oppressed is completely different. It is not hierarchical, neither it treats people as empty containers in need of filling. It is based on students and teachers taking control of their own education and learning. They have ability to decide what to learn and talk about, in accordance to their own realities and experiences. Classrooms are not the places where some detached and irrelevant transfer of knowledge takes place in a coercive manner, but are places where both students and teachers involve

<sup>1</sup> Although, ‘postcolonial’ is a broad category which includes the societies of Latin America and Caribbean, but here, I am using it in a more restrictive sense to

denote the later period of colonialism. Thus, it mainly refers to societies in Africa and parts of Asia.

in a debate about their everyday realities and problems. Two things are crucial to the pedagogy of the oppressed. First, it is *problem posing education*, and second, it is conducted in a *dialogical form*. Problem posing education means that learning is directed not by some discreet and unrelated reality, but, it must be motivated to understand the problems of oppressed people. Thus, the central theme is to discuss the problems and raise consciousness about the causes of the oppression. The process of gaining consciousness cannot be achieved unless learning takes place in the form of dialogue. Both teachers and students are involved in dialogical activity in order to co-create knowledge and raise their consciousness about their practical problems.

Freire rejects what he calls the *duality* of the banking model of education. The duality entails the division of objectivity and subjectivity. He argues that subjectivity and objectivity comes together in a dialectical unity to produce knowledge. This can be better understood through Freire's succinct description of duality in the oppressor's pedagogy as: "(a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught; (b) teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about; (d) the teacher talks and the students listen – meekly; (e) the teachers disciplines and the students are disciplined; (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply; (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher; (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adopt to it; (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students; (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects;" (Freire 1972, 59)

Freire rejects this duality and replaces it with the concept of Praxis. By praxis he means the continuous process of learning through action and action through learning. It is the "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed." (Freire 1972, 126) Through praxis, Freire contends that the oppressed groups acquire a consciousness of their own condition in their struggle for liberation. Thus, the duality which is so characteristic of oppressive system of education has to be dispensed with and

replaced by dialectical and dialogical form of learning. In this form, teachers and students are sailing in the same boat. Both are involved in the process of knowledge creation and consciousness raising by collectively participating in dialogue, problem posing and co-intentional activities. Thus, Freirean education is an act of cognition not the transfer of static and irrelevant information.

Freire delineates two stages of liberation and humanist pedagogy. The first stage has to do with the identification of the oppressors and their means of oppression. This is done through praxis – action and reflection in cyclical form. In the second stage, when the oppressive structures have already been identified and done with, the pedagogy of the oppressed is transformed into a "pedagogy of all men in the process of permanent liberation." (Freire 1972, 40) However, during the first stage, Freire warn of the dangers when the oppressed are unable to liberate themselves due to internalizing oppressive ideas, adopting fatalistic views or fear of freedom. They may also act as oppressors of the oppressors, and keep the oppressive structures intact. This I will discuss in the third section of the paper.

What pedagogy of the oppressed informs us about the education systems in the postcolonial societies? Is it relevant in any ways to learn from Freirean ideas to transform schools in the former colonies of European empires? Should postcolonial societies look towards western model of education, which is said to have contributed to the economic development and scientific achievements of the western world? I argue that although the current education model has its utility in terms of its role in socialization, skills development and citizenship formation, but it also has serious shortcomings. It is not directed towards the big problems of collective humanity like neocolonialism, imperialism, racism, gender discrimination, environmental destruction, unlimited capitalist growth, growing inequalities globally and nationally, refugees and human displacement, wars, climate change etc. However, these issues are beyond the scope of the current paper. I think Freirean ideas do not belong to bygone time and but are more relevant than they were forty years ago, particularly in the postcolonial contexts.

Education in the colonies of former European empires assumed very different role vis-a-vis parent

countries. The function of education and its role in colonies took two distinct forms – assimilation and adoption (Heggoy 1984). The British colonial education system, which is characterized as “adaptive” in its nature, was aimed at creating loyal colonial subjects and provision of skills which were required in carrying out the daily tasks of colonial administration. The French assimilative model was more geared towards acculturation of natives and recasting them in the French image of subjects. Both these forms of education played a crucial role in the developmental trajectories of postcolonial societies. From a Freirean perspective, the most salient feature of colonial education system is its *duality* of form. It represents a perfect model of education which Freire was so critical of. The colonial power assumed to role of all-knowing teacher, while the natives were relegated to the status of ignorant children. The knowledge of the teacher (colonizer) was superior in every respect, while children (colonial subjects) had only the illusion of knowledge. Thus, the teacher, who enjoys an absolute position of authority, has a duty to deliver this knowledge to the ignorant children. It is important to note here that in this mode, teaching simply means the transfer or delivering of information rather than implying a process of critically thinking of teachers and students collectively. Therefore, the teacher deposits his knowledge into the empty containers of colonial subjects.

From Freirean perspective, it is a classic case of oppressive education system. It has all the dehumanizing features inherent in it. The colonialist, by virtue of its control over sheer coercive mechanisms and possession of authority, deprives the children from their agency and autonomy, thus becoming de-human itself. The teacher delegitimizes even the capacity of the children to learn and think. Whatever the children already knew is considered as worthless, including their languages, cultural and religions. This is nicely captured in the Lord Macaulay’s educational dispatch to British government, which says that a “single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” (1835). Thus, it dehumanized both teacher and students.

At the school level, the situation in the colonies was not very different from what Freire has described as

the Banking model of education. However, there were few notable differences as well. In western model of education, the teacher enjoys a certain level of respect and social status. However, this respect of a teacher to a great extent is absent in the colonial context. In colonies, respect and status are associated with the jobs which colonial master performed – administering, policing, and adjudicating. Teaching is considered a profession of a last resort, fit for those who have failed in life, thus, not worthy of respect. Secondly, they also have virtually no autonomy when it comes to curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, lesson plans and even language of instruction. All these a pre-decided by a centralized colonial administration. Teachers role is only to make this information available for children to deposit it in their memory for some future use. Thus, devoid of any formal authority over the students, teachers resort to other options to establish their authority inside class, which often times takes a shape of corporal punishments and other coercive techniques. Unfortunately, this dehumanizing form of education still permeates in most of the postcolonial societies. This perverted form of banking system of education continues to play an integral role in shaping societies. It plays an important function in perpetuating neocolonialism and postcolonialism despite these countries being formally decolonized. Thus, Freirean ideas has lot to offer these societies regarding educational problems based on duality, banking system, and social change through praxis.

Now I turn towards the last issue i.e. Freire’s concern about the attitude of some of the oppressed people during the process of liberation and its relevance to the postcolonial contexts. Freirean liberation must start with the oppressed people. It is

“only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. The latter, as an oppressive class, can free neither others nor themselves. It is therefore essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught; and the contraction will be resolved by the appearance of the new man.” (Freire 1972, 42)

It is a profound rebirth of a “man” which no longer takes its former existence. Praxis has radically transformed his consciousness. However, Freire is not engaged in a utopian project but is fully aware of



the difficulties and problems of humanization process. He warns us that during the first stage of liberation process, certain people are unable to eject the image of the oppressors, which they have internalized through their exposure to continued sufferings and violence. They adopt fatalistic attitude towards existing situation and doubt their capacity to change the reality. Fatalism, for Freire, is a guise of docility and has never been an integral part of the behavior of the people, but a result of prolong social and historical conditions. It is the attitude which converts their objective oppression into the will of God. These people are more prone to inflicting violence on their fellow oppressed people. Freire also warns that there are always people within the oppressed group, who develop an irresistible desire to become like their oppressors and also adopt the oppressor's lifestyle. It becomes their uncontrollable desire, particularly in the middle-class oppressed, to "resemble the oppressor, to imitate him, to follow him." (Freire 1972, 49)

On other hand, the oppressors can also be generous. But, it must also be remembered that, it is beyond the ability of the oppressors to change the condition of oppression. Oppressors cannot liberate themselves neither the oppressed. Thus, their generosity is a disguise – a false generosity. This false display of generosity is motivated by the oppressor's need to maintain a status quo, rather than changing the objective situation of exploitation and violence. Therefore, the oppressor's generosity is not directed towards the change of conditions that contributes to the dehumanization of oppressed and the oppressor alike. True generosity, Freire argues, "consists of precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity." (Freire 1972, 29)

This insight about the temptation in the oppressed people to become oppressors themselves and the false generosity of the oppressor group, provide a window to look into the conditions of postcolonial societies and their education systems. I am arguing that in the postcolonial societies, this internalization of the image of oppressors by the oppressed has actually taken place in many guises. Through prolonged exposure to colonial violence and its forms of institutions and governance, the oppressed did succumb to the temptation of becoming just like their oppressors. Thus, we see a continuity of both

form and substance of oppression, even after gaining independence from the oppressors.

Here, I am drawing from the work of Jalal Al-Azm's (1981) "Orientalism in reverse". Al-Azm builds upon the original thesis of Edward Said's (1978) "Orientalism", and argues that the "orientalist" views about the existence of ontologically different "East" and the "West", and their descriptions according to the "essential natures" rather than seeing them as a product of socio-historical factors, has been appropriated by the "orient" itself. From Al-Azm's perspective, the "orient" has adopted the "oriental framework" and inverted the "essential natures" of the two "ontological realities" to its own advantage. Thus, "orient" is projecting itself from the orientalist perspective. He calls this orientalism of the orient as "reverse" or "retaliatory orientalism."

From this insight, I am arguing that in many postcolonial societies, the internalization of oppressor's image and the desire of the oppressed to imitate the oppressor has actually taken place. In the field of education, it has taken many forms. Nowhere this irresistible tendency, on part of the oppressed to caste themselves in the mold of their oppressors, better seen than in the issue of the language selection. There is a certain sense of prestige and privilege attached to the language of oppressors in the former colonies. It also becomes a government's instrument for distribution of resources, including the most important ones i.e. army, bureaucracy and judiciary. The language issue has profoundly affected the education system in postcolonial setups. The native languages are relegated to lower status and their speakers are marginalized. From Freirean perspective, the oppressed are even deprived of the basic tool of thinking and they are left with no means to engage in the activity of critical thinking. Instead, an alien language is imposed in a most dualistic fashion by non-other than oppressed themselves.

Furthermore, the leaders of the oppressed did not dismantle the structures of exploitation, but continued with it. They only assumed the role of former oppressors. Thus, the functioning of the schools, characterized by banking model, continued to be directed to produce docile subjects. Further, from the perspective of Al-Azm thesis about "reverse orientalism", the oppressed groups adopted the Manichean views about history and society. These

views based on the relationship of superiority and inferiority, right and wrong, which were formerly embedded in the psychology of oppressors, now have become part of oppressed worldview as well. These views are strongly reflected in the textbooks of postcolonial societies. Thus, school textbooks, particularly that of history, social studies, language and geography, have become a contrivance of the oppressed to project itself in the image of their oppressors. The only difference being that the new oppressors are glorified and the old ones are condemned, but the structure remains intact.

However, we should also be aware of some of the limitations of Freirean perspective, which can hamper our understanding of postcolonial societies. One thing which is quite obvious in the pedagogy of the oppressed is its tendency to fall into the trap of the binary division. This however, does not explain the complexity of any society. This view of dividing social groups into the oppressors and the oppressed is too simplistic, rather than simple. Societies, particularly the postcolonial ones, are very complex organizations, which cannot be captured by binary mode of thinking. Postcolonial societies were not only evolving through its "natural" historical course, but this natural progression was interrupted by external forces of colonial powers. Thus, the external intervention in the societies further complicated the postcolonial condition. There are no sharp boundaries and people are not arranged in a mutually exclusive groups, and we also have to be aware of other factors like race, gender, ethnicity, religion etc. Therefore, it is better to be mindful of limitations which the pedagogy of the oppressed, which it has a potential to impose on complex realities. But its overarching thesis of imperialism, capitalist mode of production and exploitation of the majority by the minority has not lost its explanatory power.

To conclude, the pedagogy of the oppressed has much to offer the postcolonial societies in their effort to understand the oppression and to guide the process of humanization. Through its emphasis on the rejection of banking model and replacing it with problem posing education, which is conducted in a form of dialogue, postcolonial societies can better cope with their issues and problems. Here, I argued that Freirean ideas can equip us to better understand the conditions of postcoloniality and its form of

education system. I stated that education in postcolonial context assumed duality on two fronts. First, the colonizers took the form of all-knowing teacher, and the colonized as children who know nothing. Second was the duality at the school level, which Freire described as a hallmark of oppressive education system. Finally, the paper highlighted the importance of Freirean warning during the first stage of liberation, in which the oppressed are lured into the trap of acting and behaving like the oppressors. This, I argued has already taken place in many postcolonial societies. Thus, Freirean insight has lot to offer the oppressed communities in postcolonial societies in their effort to liberate and humanize themselves.

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