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CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND DIALOGUE IN PEDAGOGY – PAULO FREIRE’S APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Paulo Freire’s approach to the philosophy of education stems from the thoughts of philosophers, including Plato, Hegel and Fromm, and has also been influenced by the works of Frantz Fanon, a postcolonial philosopher. Especially, he tried to understand the pedagogical structure through the convergent theoretical framework of categories such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, language and culture. In this way, his philosophy of the sociology of knowledge is distinct and it explains how the oppression is over determined by the social and cultural categories through the pedagogical means. Being situated in the post-colonial context, he underscored the affective investment and the logic of domination perpetrated through education by the coloniser and the native elites, to program an individual to a rigid conformity to the oppressive conditions. Understanding that history is all about possibilities and not merely determined inexorably, he advocated reflective praxis as a means to emancipatory pedagogy. Explaining the process of oppression through cultural invasion through such a dialectical process between the conditions of oppression and the subjects of oppression, Freire maintains that the oppression is maintained, regulated and reified through the pedagogical structures. Here, he names such a pedagogical structure as ‘banking concept of education’. Though he does not rule out the possibility of emergence from suppression even within this model of education, he underscores the importance of critical consciousness as a means of emergence.

Key Words: Paulo Freire, Pedagogy, Critical Consciousness, Cultural Hegemony, Banking Method of Education.

INTRODUCTION

Paulo Freire (1921 - 1997) was a Brazilian educator and philosopher. His famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, became the foundational text for ‘Critical Pedagogy’. Though he was born in a middle class family,

he experienced hunger and poverty during the great depression of the 1930s. He understood the relation between poverty and its effects on the ability to learn. In his *Preface to The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he says, “Thought and study alone did not produce *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; it is rooted in concrete situations...” (PF 2005: 37). It was theorised out of his lived experience *with* the people of Brazil, Chile, and the African Portuguese colonies such as Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique, and not *of/about* the people. Out of this dialectics of experience was born his philosophy of the pedagogy of the oppressed¹. He remarked that "I didn't understand anything because of my hunger. I wasn't dumb. It wasn't lack of interest. My social condition didn't allow me to have an education. Experience showed me once again the relationship between social class and knowledge" (PM 1999: 5)².

His approach to the philosophy of education stems from the thoughts of philosophers, including Plato, Hegel and Fromm, and has also been influenced by the works of Frantz Fanon, a postcolonial philosopher. Especially, he tried to understand the pedagogical structure through the convergent theoretical framework of categories such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, language and culture. In this way, his philosophy of the sociology of knowledge is distinct and it explains how the oppression is over determined by the social and cultural categories through the pedagogical means. Being situated in the post-colonial context, he underscored the affective investment and the logic of domination perpetrated through education by the coloniser and the native elites, to program an individual to a rigid conformity to the oppressive conditions. Understanding that history is all about possibilities and not merely determined inexorably, he advocated reflective praxis as a means to emancipatory pedagogy.

In this paper, I shall attempt to analyse his notions of the banking method of education followed in our present pedagogical practices; what are the alternatives that he propose in place of it; and how such alternatives can be realised through a critical consciousness by means of dialogical practices mediated through/by the world.

BANKING CONCEPT OF EDUCATION

Freire’s criticisms about the present educational system begin with the critique of delinking the pedagogy with the politics of culture. For him, culture is not an absolute category, but embedded in ever-changing dynamics

¹ The word oppressed can be better understood in a dichotomical relation with the word oppressor. The oppressor call the oppressed, depending upon whether they are fellow countrymen or not, with the names ‘those people’, ‘the blind and envious masses’, ‘savages’, ‘natives’, ‘subversives’, ‘violent’, ‘barbaric’, ‘wicked’, ‘docile’, ‘lazy people’, ‘ignorant’, according to Freire. While defining oppression, Freire says that “Any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression”. See Paulo Freire, Myra Bergmann Ramos (Tr.), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum, New York and London, 2005, pp. 55 - 6. For what Freire means by self-affirmation or the full development of the individual, please see footnote

² See also the *Introduction* written by Donaldo Macedo to *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 13.

and multiplicity. But the pedagogy of the oppressor exoticises the lived experiences of the people as a means to coming to their voices. It perpetuates the culture of silence, according to him. Born out of the middle class narcissism, this romantic pedagogy celebrates one's own location and history without yielding a space for epistemological curiosity in order to come to terms with actuality. Alienating the people's lived experience and silencing the voices of the oppressed through such cultural invasion, the oppressed are imbibed with 'self-depreciation', a peculiar characteristic of the culturally suppressed. The student begins to feel that he/she is ignorant and only the 'professor' has 'knowledge' and that the student is the recipient of what the 'professor' has in him/her. Internalising the opinion of the oppressor, the oppressor has begun to be housed within the oppressed.

With the housing of the oppressor within the oppressed, the latter begins to feel that "*to be* is not to resemble the oppressor, but *to be under* him" at a certain point of their existential experience (PF 2005: 65 - 6). This emotional dependence is taken advantage by the oppressor to maintain a still greater oppression. Following Fromm and Fanon, Freire says that this sort of emotional dependence leads the oppressed to necrophilic behaviour, not merely self-depreciation but destruction of life of the self and the other suppressed fellows; that it does not lead the oppressed to biophily. "Necrophilous person loves all that does not grow, all that is mechanical. The necrophilous person is driven by the desire to transform the organic into inorganic, to approach life mechanically, as if all living persons were things... Memory, rather than experience; having rather than being, is what counts. The necrophilous person can relate to an object - a flower or a person - only if he possesses it... He loves control, and in the act of controlling he kills life", says Fromm (PF 2005: 77). Here, *to be* means *to have*. The ontological possibility of developing oneself into a fully human is thought to be possible only through the possession of the 'object', through the negation of negating possibilities.

This necrophilous behaviour of the oppressed is realised through the transformation of communication into a communiqué, dialogue into monologue. Impeding the process of communication as two-way-traffic, the humans are reduced to the status of things, the recipients where the oppressor dons the role of the depositor. The students are not understood as *actors in intercommunication*. The anti-dialogical nature aims at conquest of the other through a paternalistic behaviour in the teacher-student relationship. "The vanquished are disposed of their word, their expressiveness, their culture" (PF 2005: 138). Once this anti-dialogical process is initiated, it leads to the preservation of power, not holistic development of the individual and furthering the cause of necrophilism.

Explaining the process of oppression through cultural invasion through such a dialectical process between the conditions of oppression and the subjects of oppression, Freire maintains that the oppression is maintained,

regulated and reified through the pedagogical structures. Here, he names such a pedagogical structure as ‘banking concept of education’. Though he does not rule out the possibility of emergence from suppression even within this model of education, he underscores the importance of critical consciousness as a means of emergence. Now let us see what he means by the ‘banking concept of education’.

According to Freire, a careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship reveals that the education system suffers from what he calls as ‘narration sickness’. “The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalised and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration - contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated and alienating verbosity. The outstanding character of this narrative education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transforming power” (PF 2005: 71).

In this way, education becomes an act of depositing, according to Freire, where students are turned into depositories, the containers to be filled with the ‘knowledge’ of the teacher. The teachers turn into depositors, acting as bank-clerks. Though “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other” (PF 2005: 72), the banking method of education projects an absolute ignorance onto the students and thereby makes the student and the teacher as necessary binaries. The authority of knowledge is confused with the professional authority and the teacher sets himself/herself against the emancipatory interests of the students.

Further, the banking method of education is in conjunction with paternalistic social action, considering the oppressed as ‘pathological welfare recipients’. Normally the word ‘marginalised’ is used within the academic circles as another nomenclature for oppression and exclusion. Through the word ‘marginalisation’, what is presupposed is that the marginalised need to be included within the mainstream. Freire does not accept such a definition of marginalisation. Rather he says, “the oppressed are not “marginals”, are not people living “outside” society. They have always been “inside” - inside the structure which made them “being for others”. The solution is not to “integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they become “beings for themselves”” (PF 2005: 74). As the banking method is in-built with the contradictions of welfare and of integration into the system, these contradictions may lead the ‘massified’ students against domestication and to emerge from the submerged conditions.

According to the banking method of education, there is an assumption of dichotomy between the world and the human beings. In other words, being-in-the-world as recipients does not mean being-with-the-world and others in transforming it. The beings are understood as possessors of consciousness, not the masters³ of their consciousness. “For example, my desk, my books, my coffee cup, all the objects before me - as bits of the world which surround me - would be “inside” me, exactly as I am inside my study right now. This view makes no distinction between being accessible to consciousness and entering consciousness” (PF 2005: 75 - 6). This dichotomy between the world and the human beings is further strengthened through banking model of education where the educator regulates and organises what should enter into the consciousness of the educated, to make them ‘fit’ for the world, through the method of continuous evaluation.

In this manner, the educated person becomes the adapted person; the majority culturally adapts to the dominant minority. By quoting Fromm, Freire says that through this symbolic cultural adaptation to another person’s life, the dominated have the illusion of acting, but in reality they are a part of those who really act. In populist manifestations, the oppressed identify with the dominant elite and thus feel themselves to be active, whereas in actuality they are immersed in bad faith. As the freedom is inseparable from authority, the freedom of the oppressed is realised through the adaptation of the values of the cultural dominant. In such authoritarianism, freedom as the full development of the human⁴ is denied and the hypertrophy of the one provokes the atrophy of the other (PF 2005: 178).

As a further development of the preservation of the cultural domination, the world is mythicised. The actuality of the world is not problematised but the world is mythicised as a fixed unchanging entity to which the spectators must adapt. For example, Freire quotes the following as myths perpetuated to maintain the status quo of domination: the present oppressive order as ‘free society’, all are free to work as they wish, the street vendor is as much an entrepreneur, the universal right to education, the equality of individuals, the charity and generosity of elites (in awarding fellowships and starting educational institutions), the docility of the weak and so on (PF 2005: 139 - 40). All such myths get massified with the well organised slogans and propaganda of the media. Through such a cultural conquest, the passivity of the oppressed becomes complete by the oppressor.

³ Here mastery does not mean domination. Domination presupposes the defeat of the other, whereas mastery is about coexistence with critical consciousness.

⁴ According to Freire, “The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed.” *Ibid.*, p. 85. For a further discussion on the development of collective-individuality, please refer to Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life - A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2008.

Here it is very important to note that the terminologies of the class contradiction are not used by Freire to denote the economic and cultural power relations of the classes. The class contradiction is not a compartmentalised rigidity also in the theory of Freire. The class relations can be better understood through Gramsci's notion of hegemony. However, Freire attempted to analyse how the class contradictions are maintained through the culturally invasive pedagogy. In place of it, he proposes critical pedagogy as an alternative.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

The Greek and Latin roots of the word 'pedagogy' [*paedagogus (Lt.) and paidagogos (Gr.)*] suggest that the pedagogue is a slave who escorted children to school⁵. Hence pedagogy means 'to lead a child' and so it is directive and transformative⁶. But rooted in philosophical anthropology, Freire's radical pedagogy proposes to go beyond the class room boundaries in order to develop a fully human. For him, the struggle against oppression is an act of love against lovelessness even if the lovelessness is clothed in pseudo-generosity. As the rebellion has its origin from the initial violence of the oppressive class⁷, Freire is of the opinion that the critical reflective action of the oppressed alone can initiate the process of love through dialogue. Towards this, Freire proposes the critical pedagogy.

According to Freire, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students" (PF 2005: 72). In other words, the pedagogy must be carried out in relation *with* the students, and not *for* the students. It is possible with the critical discovery that both the teachers and the students are manifestations of dehumanisation. As liberation is possible in the supersession of the limit-situations of the material conditions, and not through the symbolic transcendence of this world, it is full of agony with the pangs of childbirth. It is viable as the teacher-student contradiction is superseded by the humanisation of all people through the mediation of the limiting situations of the world, according to Freire (PF 2005: 48 - 9). He calls this process as co-intentional pedagogy.

"The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this

⁵ See Merriam Webster Dictionary available in App Store of iPhone, downloaded as on 20.8.2014.

⁶ See for further discussions, Donald Macedo's introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 25.

⁷ For a further discussion about violence as a means for the colonized to come to terms to one's own self, please see Frantz Fanon, (Tr.) Constance Farrington, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1963 and also Frantz Fanon, (Tr.) Charles Lam Markmann, *Black Skin White Masks*, Pluto Press, London, 1986.

pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. In both stages, it is always through action in depth that the culture of domination is culturally confronted” (PF 2005: 54).

In opposition to banking method of education, Freire proposes problem posing education which rejects communiqués and monologue but embodies communication and dialogue. Problem-posing education presupposes that “no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught” (PF 2005: 80). It is cognitive, not narrative, where both the teacher and the student are mediated by the world and the cognisable objects. In the banking method, the mediating objects are pre-owned by the teacher and the students are called upon to know and memorise the private property of the teacher. Whereas in the problem-posing method, the dialogue between humans is mediated by the world and the world gets named with the dialogical reflective action. People’s historicity and their situatedness become the starting point of education; the program content of education is evolved through the dialogue between the educator and the student. The investigation of what is found to be the program content of education is termed by him as ‘thematic universe’. “The object of investigation is not the persons, but rather the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world in which their generative themes are found” (PF 2005: 97). The reality which Freire refers to is not a fragmented one, but the ‘interactive constituent elements of the whole’ which is derived from people’s lived experiences.

Once named, the world reappears as a problem to its own namers and it requires a new naming. In this way, the permanent revolution becomes possible through the educational practice. Education as the practice of freedom is an ongoing activity, for Freire. Quoting Edmund Husserl’s *Ideas*, Freire further states that the apprehension of reality is an act of singling out a problem or a theme from the background of experiences, gained by the people. This apprehension also includes a turning-towards, in reflective action, and not merely activism. Through this critical dialogical practice, the submerged consciousness strives for the emergence of consciousness. Only when the reality ceases to be the insurmountable, the humans emerge from their submersion and become active subjects. Critical consciousness, or what he calls in Portuguese as *conscientizacao*, is the root of the deepening of the awareness of submersion and emergence.

Freire’s notions on education are not merely historical but phenomenological in their approach to the problems. Towards this understanding, he considers limiting situations of an epoch, the thematic universe developed within the epoch and its generative themes and the critical consciousness towards one’s own

situatedness as constituent elements of the emancipatory pedagogy. The tri-dimensions of time into past, present and future, the epochal units interrelate to form a historical continuity/discontinuity. In a phenomenological fashion, he tries to define an epoch “as characterised by a complex ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites, striving towards plenitude” (PF 2005: 101). The complex interacting themes and aspects of an epoch constitute its thematic universe. The submerged consciousness which did not perceive the limit-situation in its entirety, rather apprehending the situation as epiphenomena, cannot yield way for a thematic universe. The coding of the thematic universe has to start with one’s own concrete existential situation. Decoding the coded reality needs a critical consciousness. According to Freire, a group or person who could not concretely express or code one’s own existential situation is permeated with the *theme of silence*; it suggests the structure of mutism perpetuated by the overwhelming power of the limiting situations of reality, not the weakness of the people as described by elites. Thus, “thematic investigation becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character” (PF 2005: 107).

In the process of education as freedom, he insists on critical consciousness as an epistemological criterion towards the phenomenological understanding of one’s own existential situations. “By making it possible for people to enter the historical process as responsible Subjects, *Conscientizacao* enrolls them in the search for self-affirmation and thus avoids fanaticism” (PF 2005: 35). As said earlier, *conscientizacao* is the deepening of this attitude towards the emerging intentionality. But it does not stop with subjective perception of the limiting situations, but coupled with action it prepares men and women to struggle against the dehumanisation. It is through *conscientizacao* that the people leave emerge from the status of *objects* and assume the status of historical *Subjects* through liberative and reflective praxis of humanisation. The critical consciousness needs to be understood in juxtaposition to the notion of sectarianism. The pedagogy of freedom is all about radicalisation that is nourished by a critical spirit; it is creative; it involves increased commitment in the effort to transform objective reality, but not a subjectivistic.

CONCLUSION

The one whose ideas come closer to Freire’s notions on pedagogy within Indian context is Rabindranath Tagore. Rooted in Indian traditions, including Vedantic, Buddhist, and other local traditions like Bauls, he tried to implement such a transformative pedagogy within the Ashramic cultural tradition. With such an indigenous rationality, the transformative pedagogy that Tagore envisaged did not touch upon the question of power, class

and other such social categories within the pedagogical structure. Unless such issues are deliberated as generative themes within the pedagogical structure in India, the transformative pedagogy will not become a viable option, as propounded by Freire.

In his *Foreword* to the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull states, “There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes “the practice of freedom”, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. The development of an educational methodology that facilitates this process will inevitably lead to tension and conflict within our society. But it could also contribute to the formation of a new man and mark the beginning of a new era...” (PF 2005: 34). Questioning the so-called neutrality of the present education system may find us shivering in agony or antagonism, depending upon the degree of our conformity and non-conformity to the present system of education. With the antagonism towards Freire’s work, we may shirk our responsibility and censor the works of such critical educators, as it happened in the West. But we may also begin our serious soul-searching, as educators, about our present education system, so that we may pave the way for the holistic development of every individual in solidarity with others. Being situated in the postcolonial epoch, the decolonisation of the present pedagogical practices is the urgent task confronting the entire system today.

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