

Qur'anic Studies and Islamic Education in the Perspective of Critical Pedagogy: an Analysis of Contemporary Tafsir

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Abstract. Contemporary Islamic education often faces criticism for its doctrinal formalism, which suppresses critical and reflective dimensions. Conversely, the tradition of critical pedagogy, championed by Paulo Freire, advocates for education as a liberating praxis. This creates a conceptual tension and potential synergy with Islamic educational ideals. This research aims to explore the conceptual relationship and synthesize a framework integrating Islamic education with critical pedagogy, arguing that they share a convergent emancipatory mission. Methods: The study employs a qualitative-philosophical-hermeneutic approach, conducting a literature-based analysis of the works of Paulo Freire, Farid Esack, Fazlur Rahman, and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. The analysis reveals a significant epistemological and ethical intersection between both traditions. The synthesis forms an *Islamic education-critical paradigm*, an integrative framework where education becomes a praxis of liberation. This paradigm harmonizes spiritual consciousness (*tawhid*), moral responsibility (*ta'dib*), critical awareness (*conscientization*), and social action (*adl*), rejecting the dichotomy between religious and secular knowledge. The study implies the need for a fundamental reorientation of Islamic education—transforming its curriculum, pedagogical methods, and ultimate goals—to cultivate learners who are both spiritually conscious and socially transformative agents.

Keywords: Banking Education; Conscientization; Critical Pedagogy; Islamic Education; Liberation; Social Justice; Ta'dib; Tawhid

INTRODUCTION

Islamic education as a system of values and actions has an orientation that goes beyond the transfer of knowledge (Sahin, 2018). It is rooted in the principles of monotheism, humanity, and social justice (Ali, 2018). However, in practice, Islamic education is often stuck in doctrinal formalism that removes the critical and reflective dimensions (Shah, 2015). Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* criticized the 'bank-style' educational model that places learners as passive objects (Nugraha, Wibowo, & Hendrawan, 2024). Instead, education should be an arena for dialogue and awareness (Ellinor & Girard, 2023). These values are actually also alive in Islam through the concepts of *tafakkur*, *tadabbur*, and *ijtihad* (Saiin & Karuok, 2023).

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate 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.”(Freire, 1970)

This quote opens up the horizon that education is an arena of moral and social struggle (Noddings & Brooks, 2016). Paulo Freire sees education not just as an intellectual activity, but as a humanitarian project that frees human beings from oppressive structures (Freire, 2020). In this framework, education has an ethical function: humanization (Sabirova, Gusenina, Sukhomlinova, & Safyanov, 2019).

In Islam, similar ideas can be found in the principles of *ta'dib* (education of manners) and *tazkiyah al-nafs* (self-purification) (Fathan, Rohim, & Fathan, 2025). Education is not just a transfer of knowledge, but a process towards spiritual awareness and social responsibility (Ghosh & Mukherjee, 2020). The word of Allah in the Qur'an affirms:

"Allah will exalt the believers among you and those who are given knowledge of some degrees." (Qur'an Surah al-Mujādilah [58]:11)

This verse not only raises the value of knowledge, but also affirms the relationship between knowledge and morality (Goldman, 2020). True knowledge is what brings man to a high degree of humanity, a liberating consciousness (Freire, 2021).

Paulo Freire calls education *praxis*, which is a combination of reflection and action. In Islam, a similar concept is found in the relationship between *'ilm* (knowledge) and *'amal* (deeds). Abu Hamid al-Ghazali writes in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*:
"Knowledge without charity is madness, and charity without knowledge will not materialise."(Al-Ghazālī, n.d.)

This quote suggests that true knowledge must lead to ethical action and social transformation (Rowe, 2018). So, in the context of Islamic education, liberating knowledge is the science that fosters awareness of social and spiritual responsibility (Khan & Ahmed, 2025).

However, Islamic education today is often trapped in formalism. Many institutions focus more on ritual and memorization aspects than on the formation of moral awareness and critical reasoning (Sahin, 2018). This phenomenon is like what Freire calls banking education, which is a model of education in which students are treated as "empty accounts" filled out by teachers (Gan-Krzywoszyńska & Leśniewski, 2021). In this system, the teacher becomes the sole authority, and the student loses agency (Teng, 2019).

On the contrary, Freire offers the concept of dialogical pedagogy, education as dialogue (Shih, 2018). In Islam, this principle of dialogue is known as deliberation and wisdom (Wahid, Yusuf, & Mardan, 2024). The Qur'an encourages a pedagogic approach based on wisdom:

(125) Call (people) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and refute them in a good way. Indeed, your Lord is the One who knows best about those who stray from His path, and He is the One who knows best those who are guided. (Qur'an Surah al-Nahl [16]:125)

In this context, Islamic education has a philosophical foundation that is in harmony with critical pedagogics: both reject epistemological oppression and affirm the value of humanity.

Paulo Freire talks about *humanization*, while Islam talks about *takrīm al-insān* (the glorification of human beings). The Qur'an states:

(70) And indeed We have glorified the children of Adam, We have carried them on land and in the sea, We have given them sustenance from the good, and We have made them more perfect than most of the creatures We have created. (Qur'an Surah al-Isrā' [17]:70)

Thus, education in Islam is a spiritual as well as a social proxy. It aims to humanize humans in the light of monotheism.

In modern society, where education is often reduced to an economic means of reproduction, the integration between Islamic values and critical pedagogy is becoming increasingly relevant. This critical Islamic education paradigm seeks to restore the spirit of education as a path to awareness, not just competence. As pointed out by Fazlur Rahman:

“Islamic education must produce a morally responsible and intellectually creative individual who can actualize faith through action in a changing world.”(Rahman, 1982)

This statement emphasizes that Islamic education cannot stop at the level of dogma, but must be a creative and moral vehicle in facing the challenges of the times.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative-philosophical-hermeneutic approach to analyze the literature on the thoughts of four main figures: Paulo Freire, Farid Esack, Fazlur Rahman, and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. This approach was selected due to the conceptual and reflective nature of the study rather than an empirical focus. The hermeneutic method interpreted the meaning of texts and the thinkers' ideas in relation to Islamic education. The primary aim was not to test theory but to understand education as a praxis of liberation. Data sources comprised two types: primary data from the original works of the figures, including *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, *Islam and Modernity*, and *The Concept of Education in Islam*, and secondary data from books, journals, and thematic studies discussing education, Islamic philosophy, and critical theory.

The analysis proceeded through three main steps. First, it involved contextual interpretation to understand the socio-intellectual backgrounds of the thinkers. Second, it consisted of conceptual analysis breaking down key terms such as liberation, *ta'dib*, *ijtihad*, and conscientization. Third, the study used reflective synthesis to identify common ground between critical pedagogy and Islamic epistemology. Conceptual validity was ensured through source triangulation and cross-discourse comparison. In this philosophical inquiry, truth was understood as coherence and depth of meaning rather than empirical verification.

This methodology aligned with Hans-Georg Gadamer's view that understanding a text involves "entering into a dialogue with different traditions and horizons of meaning." In this context, the dialogue between Freire and Islamic thinkers represented not just comparison but a meeting of horizons aimed at liberating humans from ignorance and injustice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Paulo Freire and Liberation Education

Paulo Freire (1921–1997) is known as the father of critical pedagogy. In his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he states that education can function as a tool of liberation or even as an instrument of oppression. He rejected the education system that made students passive objects in the learning process, and called the system a *banking education* model where teachers "deposit" knowledge and students only "receive".

“The banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.”(Freire, 1970)

In Freire's view, liberating education must be dialogical, participatory, and transformative. The teacher is not the sole authority, but rather a partner in the dialogue of

search for meaning. Knowledge is not imposed from the outside, but is built together through reflection on life experiences.

The concept of conscientization or critical awareness is at the core of Freire's thought. He writes that man not only lives in the world, but also "with the world" can reflect reality and act to change it.

"To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming." (Freire, 1970)

This idea contains an implicit theological element: education is the process of creating meaning and moral responsibility to the world. In the context of Islam, this concept is equivalent to the idea of the *caliph fii al-ardh* of man as the manager and interpreter of reality with the guidance of revelation. The Qur'an affirms the role of man as an active subject in history:

There is no such thing as a goddess, and there is no such thing as a goddess. And if you do not have a soul, then you will not be able to do anything about it, and you will not be able to do anything about it, and you will not be able to do anything about it.

﴿11﴾ As for man, there are angels who follow him in turn, in front of him and behind him, guarding him at the command of Allah. Indeed, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change the condition of themselves. And when Allah wills evil against a people, then no one can resist it; and there is never any protector for them but Him. (Qur'an Surah al-Ra'd [13]:11)

This verse affirms the transformative principle that is also at the core of Freire's pedagogy. Critical consciousness (*al-wa'yu al-naqdi*) in Islam is not only intellectual, but also moral and spiritual.

In practice, Freire's liberation education demands the empowerment of students as historical subjects. Teachers are tasked with helping students find their own voice in the face of oppressive structures. In the Islamic framework, this is in line with the mission of *iqra'* to read oneself and reality as signs of God (*āyāt Allāh*).

As stated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas:

The aim of education in Islam is to produce a good man, one who recognizes his proper place in the order of creation and seeks to act accordingly (Al-Attas, 1980).

Al-Attas' quote above shows an epistemological parallel with Freire. For Freire, an educated human being is one who is aware of his position in the world; For Islam, civilized people (*insān mu'addab*) are those who know their place in the Divine order.

Islamic education, in this framework, can be understood as spiritual and social liberation based on monotheism. It not only frees man from ignorance, but also from dependence on oppressive value systems.

truth. And if you turn around or refuse to be a witness, then verily Allah is All-Knowing.
(Qur'an Surah al-Nisā' [4]:135)

This verse forms the basis of Esack's theology of action, that justice is not an addition to faith, but the essence of piety. In the context of Islamic education, this idea demands that the learning process does not stop at the transmission of knowledge, but becomes a means of social and moral empowerment.

Esack rejected the separation between *'ilm* (knowledge) and *'amal* (social action). True Islamic education, according to him, is one that fosters social *consciousness* as an expression of faith. He called it *taqwā in action*, piety that is established in the praxis of liberation.

"True piety, therefore, must always express itself in solidarity with the marginalized; faith divorced from justice is hypocrisy."(Esack, 1997)

This statement shows that true faith is both political and spiritual. Within the framework of education, Esack's spirit demands a transformation of the curriculum so as not only to teach theological truth, but also to train ethical and social sensitivity.

Thus, Islamic education with an Esackian spirit is prophetic education: education that does not stop in the classroom, but is transformed into ethical action in society as Allah says:

[illegible]

and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: 'The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: "The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: 'The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said

(110) You are the best people who were born for mankind, commanding the righteous, and preventing the unrighteous, and believing in Allah. If the People of the Book believed, it would have been better for them, some of them were believers, and most of them were wicked. (Qur'an Surah Āli 'Imrān [3]:110)

Thus, the principle of *taqwā* in action in Esack's theology is in line with the purpose of Islamic education: to form a man of faith and to strive for social truth (*al-ḥaqq wa al-'adl*).

Fazlur Rahman and the Rationality of Ijtihadi in Islamic Education

Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988) was one of the modern Islamic thinkers who emphasized the importance of rational *ijtihad* and *moral renewal* in Islamic education. In *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (1982), he criticized the stagnation of Islamic thought that lost its creative and contextual spirit.

"The fundamental problem of Muslim education today is that it has lost its moral and intellectual dynamism; education has become a mere transmission of tradition rather than a process of moral-intellectual growth."(Rahman, 1982)

Rahman proposed the idea that Islamic education should produce people who believe and think freely in a responsible manner. Education is not just about memorizing texts, but understanding the context and actualizing the values of the Qur'an in real life.

In Rahman's view, the process of Islamic education should follow two epistemological movements:

- a. Movement from text to context: understanding the message of revelation in its historical context.
- b. Movement from context to text: rereading the Qur'an in modern situations.

This approach is known as the hermeneutic double movement, which allows for the integration between timeless values and the demands of the times. Rahman asserted: *"The Qur'an is a book of moral principles, not a legal code; its purpose is to generate a moral society, not to impose rigid laws."*(*Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual*, n.d.) This quote shows that the core of Islamic education is moral formation (*khuluq*), not just formal obedience. In the context of critical pedagogy, this morality is a form of critical *moral agency*. Rahman emphasized the importance of *ijtihad* as a living method of education: *"Ijtihad is not merely a legal device but a moral and intellectual process through which man realizes the divine will in history"*.(Rahman, 1982)

Within this framework, true Islamic education must cultivate *ijtihadi* intellect, creative reasoning rooted in faith. This is very close to Paulo Freire's vision of critical consciousness based on love, humility, and faith.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and the Concept of *Ta'dib*

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (born 1931) developed the concept of *ta'dib* as the core of Islamic education. According to him, education is not just *ta'līm* (teaching) or *tarbiyah* (coaching), but *ta'dib* is the cultivation of manners, knowledge about the place of everything in the order of existence.

“Education in Islam is the process of instilling adab (right discipline) into man, leading him to recognize and acknowledge his proper place in the order of being and existence.” (Al-Attas, 1980)

Al-Attas argues that the crisis of modern education is a crisis of manners. Science loses its spiritual orientation because it is detached from Divine values. In this case, Islamic education must restore the relationship between knowledge and wisdom. *“The confusion of knowledge, where it is used for worldly ends without the guidance of revelation, is the root cause of the loss of adab and the rise of injustice.”* (Al-Attas, 1979) This concept is very close to the spirit of Freire, who also criticized capitalistic education that served economic structure, not human values. If Freire speaks of *humanization*, then Al-Attas speaks of *the perfect human being who* is balanced between intellect, spirit, and charity. Al-Attas wrote:

“The aim of Islamic education is the balanced growth of the total personality through training of the spirit, intellect, rational self, feelings and bodily senses.” (Al-Attas, 1979)

Thus, true Islamic education is a process of unification between rationality, spirituality, and morality. This also answers the separation between "religion" and "science" in the modern education system.

Synthesis of Islamic Education and Critical Pedagogics: Integration of Islamic Epistemology and Critical Pedagogics

From the analysis of the thoughts of the four main figures Paulo Freire, Farid Esack, Fazlur Rahman, and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, it can be concluded that there is an epistemological and ethical intersection between critical pedagogics and Islamic education.

- a. Freire emphasized liberation through critical consciousness.
- b. Esack emphasized liberation through faith and social justice (*taqwā in action*).
- c. Rahman emphasized liberation through the rationality of *ijtihadi*.
- d. Al-Attas emphasized liberation through manners and the integration of knowledge.

If synthesized, these four views form the paradigm of Islamic education – Critical Pedagogic, which is education that:

- a. Based on monotheism as a moral and spiritual orientation.
- b. It is oriented towards the liberation of human beings from epistemological, social, and spiritual oppression.
- c. Encourage a balance between reflection and action, between faith and ratio, between knowledge and charity.

In this paradigm, Islamic education functions not only as an institution of social reproduction, but also as an arena for moral and structural transformation. Paulo Freire speaks of the "*praxis of freedom*"; Esack added "*faith in action*"; Rahman emphasized "*moral-intellectual renewal*"; and Al-Attas teaches "*adab as harmony of being*". The four, though different traditions, meet in the same spiritual horizon: education as the path to man's liberation in Divine truth.

Dimensions of Ethics and Spirituality

Freire rejected an education that separated knowledge from love. He wrote: "*Dialogue cannot exist without love. Love is the foundation of dialogue.*" (Freire, 1970) This concept finds echoes in Islam, where love for Allah (*maḥabbah*) is the basis for the search for knowledge. In the Sufism tradition, knowledge without love will dry up and lose its spirit. Al-Ghazālī writes in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*:

Knowledge is not a good thing, but it is a good thing, and it is a good thing.

"Knowledge without love will not grow, charity without sincerity will not be accepted."
(Al-Ghazālī, n.d.)

Thus, both Freire and Islam place love as the basis of pedagogical ethics. In Islamic education – Critical pedagogy, love is not sentimental, but an ethics of social action rooted in monotheism.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

a. Re-orientation of Islamic Education Goals.

The purpose of Islamic education must be expanded from mere cognitive achievement to the formation of critical, just, and monotheistic human beings.

b. Curriculum Transformation.

The curriculum needs to be designed integratively—connecting revelation, ratio, and social reality. Religious science must be animated by social reflection, and general science is guided by spiritual values.

c. The Role of the Teacher as a *Murabbi-Mujahid*.

Teachers are not only imparters of knowledge, but moral and social guides who guide students to find the meaning of life and their responsibilities to the people.

d. Education as *Amr bi al-Ma'rūf wa Nahy 'an al-Munkar*.

The basic principle of Islamic pedagogy is the command to call for good and prevent evil. This is synonymous with Freire's vision of an *educational pedagogy of hope* that gives birth to social and spiritual hope. (Freire, 1993)

e. Reconstruction of the Epistemology of Islamic Science.

Islamic Education – Critical pedagogics rejects the dichotomy between religious science and world science. All knowledge must be returned to *maqṣad al-'ilm*: knowing Allah, upholding justice, and honoring man. As stated in the Qur'an:

And what is the creation of the jinn and the human beings? [Al-Dhariyat: 56]

(56) *And I did not create the jinn and mankind but that they should serve Me.* (Qur'an Surah al-Dzāriyāt [51]:56)

This verse emphasizes that true education is an intellectual worship that leads humans to the awareness of God through the transformation of self and society.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that a profound conceptual synergy exists between Islamic education and critical pedagogy, both sharing an emancipatory goal to liberate individuals from ignorance, oppression, and moral alienation. Synthesizing insights from Paulo Freire, Farid Esack, Fazlur Rahman, and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, it proposed an integrated "Islamic education-critical paradigm" where education is a transformative praxis uniting spiritual consciousness (*tawhid*) with critical reflection and social justice (*adl*). This framework bridges the divide between faith and reason, spirituality and social engagement, fostering individuals who are spiritually grounded, intellectually critical, and socially committed. Future research should empirically explore this paradigm's practical implementation in educational settings, evaluating its impact on students' critical thinking, spirituality, and social activism. Additionally, investigations should address institutional and socio-cultural challenges and seek effective pedagogical models that translate dialogical learning and conscientization into authentic Islamic education contexts.

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