



AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON BRINGING  
ASPECTS OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY INTO THE  
MUSLIM HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

BY

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## ABSTRACT

This study is designed to explore the possibility and viability of critical pedagogy in Muslim higher education. Critical pedagogy is an educational approach that highlights democracy, social justice, empowerment, social responsibility, countering hegemony etc. The central concern of this study is to explore how these aspects can be implemented to improve the Muslim higher education system. This was done by drawing from explanations and examples of how critical pedagogy has been implemented in the west. The study employed philosophical method of conceptual analysis and explorative approach to answer the research questions raised. An understanding was developed on the process of implementing critical pedagogy in a classroom context and also some of the challenges and concerns it entails. To contextualize the significance of critical pedagogy in Muslim education context, the study has discussed in general about the problems of Islamic education system and how critical pedagogical aspects can be used to overcome them. Since critical pedagogy is very context specific, this study used the particular context of social psychology course offered at IIUM to demonstrate with examples how a course can be taught from a critical pedagogical perspective in the Muslim higher education context. It provides detailed examples on how certain topics in the course can be taught to develop students' critical consciousness, a sense of social responsibility and the motivation to act upon issues. It demonstrates how students can be taught to identify and resist the power politics of the dominant groups, counter hegemonic ideologies, and defend themselves and their community against these oppressive forces. It is hoped that providing such examples and detailed analysis can contribute to realizing a critical pedagogical classroom setting in the Muslim higher education context.

## ملخص البحث

هذه الدراسة تستهدف إلى استكشاف إمكانية وجدوى طريقة التدريس الانتقادي في سياق تعليم المسلم العالي حيث أن البيداغوجيا الانتقادي هو النهج التعليمي الذي يسلط الضوء على الديمقراطية والعدالة الاجتماعية والمسؤولية الاجتماعية والتصدي للهيمنة وغيرها من القيم. إن هذه الدراسة تهتم باستكشاف إمكانية تنفيذ هذه الجوانب في سياق التعليم العالي للمسلمين و ذلك لتحسين نظام التعليم العالي في العالم الاسلامي. وقد تم ذلك عن طريق استسقاء تفسيرات و أمثلة عن كيفية تنفيذها في البلاد الغربية. والدراسة توظف الأسلوب الفلسفي للتحليل النظري و المنهج الاستكشافي للإجابة على الأسئلة البحثية المطروحة. هناك تفاهم بشأن عملية تنفيذ التربية الانتقادية في الفصول الدراسية، وكذلك عن كيفية مواجهة بعض التحديات والمخاوف التي تنطوي هذا النهج. لقد ناقشت هذه الدراسة عن مشاكل نظام التعليم الاسلامي بشكل عام وذلك لتطوير التربية الانتقادية في سياق التعليم الإسلامي واستخدامها للتغلب على هذه المشاكل. حيث أن التربية الانتقادية تنفذ في سياق محدد لقد بادرت هذه الدراسة باهتمام السياق الخاص بمنهج دراسة علم النفس الاجتماعي في جامعة IIUM وذلك لتقديم الأمثلة عن كيفية تنفيذ نظام التربية الانتقادية في أي دورة تعليمية في سياق التعليم العالي للمسلمين من منظور تربوي. هذا وتوضح الدراسة كيف يمكن تعليم الطلاب على تحديد و مقاومة السياسة القوية من المجموعات المتسلطة و مواجهة الأيديولوجيات المهيمنة و الدفاع عن أنفسهم ومجتمعاتهم من هذه القوات القمعية. إن الشرح المفصل والأمثلة تبين عن كيفية تدريس الموضوعات المعينة في هذه الدورة وذلك بغرس الوعي النقدي بين الطلبة، والشعور بالمسؤولية الاجتماعية، و الدافع للإشتراك في العمل الاجتماع. ومن المؤمل أن توفير مثل هذه الأمثلة و التحليل المفصل يمكن أن تساهم في تحقيق إعداد الفصول الدراسية التربوية الانتقادية في سياق التعليم العالي للمسلمين.

## **APPROVAL PAGE**

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Education.

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Dean, Kulliyah of Education

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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*This research work is dedicated to all the teachers for whom teaching is a passion and wishes to struggle towards making the world a more just and better place*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Abstract Arabic .....	iii
Approval Page.....	iv
Declaration Page .....	v
Copyright Page.....	vi
Dedication Page .....	vii
Aknowledgements.....	viii
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Background of The Study .....	1
Statement of Problem.....	4
Objectives of The Study.....	6
Research Questions .....	6
Significance of The Study.....	6
Literature review .....	7
Landscape of Critical Pedagogy .....	7
Critical Pedagogical Classrooms .....	9
Research in Critical pedagogy from Muslim Context .....	13
Possibility of Introducing Critical Pedagogical Classroom in the Muslim Education Context .....	16
Research Methodology .....	18
Organization of the Study .....	20
Definition of Terms.....	22
<b>CHAPTER TWO: METHODS OF BRINGING ASPECTS OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY INTO A CLASSROOM SETTING.....</b>	<b>24</b>
Introduction.....	24
Democratic Classroom and Teaching For Democracy .....	26
Students as Active Meaning Creators.....	30
Student Involvement in the Curriculum .....	32
Realizing The Power Dimension .....	35
Critical Consciousness/ Conscientization .....	39
Social Responsibility And Social Action.....	42
<b>CHAPTER THREE: ADDRESSING CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS OF IMPLEMENTING CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL METHODS .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Introduction.....	45
Concerns and Challenges Teachers May Encounter.....	46
Dealing with Uncertainty and Constant Change .....	47
Dealing with the Temporary Loss of Security.....	49
Dealing with Student Involvement .....	52
Commanding Respect and Consideration .....	52
Getting Students to Participate.....	53

Student Involvement in The Curriculum and Having a Choice in The Learning Material.....	55
Dealing with Issue of Covering an Overwhelming Body of Knowledge.....	57
Concerns and Challenges: From The Students’ Point of View .....	60
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: BRINGING CRITICAL PEDAGOGY INTO MUSLIM EDUCATION CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>63</b>
Introduction.....	63
Implementing Critical Pedagogy in a Muslim Higher Education Context.....	64
Problem of Indoctrination and Domestication.....	65
Problem of Rigidity and Control: Reinforcing the Power Dimension .....	68
Awakening Critical Consciousness Among the Students.....	70
Inculcating Social Responsibility and Involving in Social Action.....	72
Implementing Critical Pedagogy in a Social Psychology Classroom Setting in the Muslim context .....	74
Begin With the Objectives and Goals of the Course .....	75
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	78
Chapter 2: Research Methods in Social Psychology .....	81
Chapter 3: Prosocial Behaviour and Bystander Effect .....	84
Chapter 4 Social Influence.....	87
Chapter 5 Aggression .....	89
<b>CHAPTER FIVE:SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>92</b>
Introduction.....	92
Summary of the Study .....	92
Recommendations for Further Studies.....	96
Conclusion .....	97
<b>REFERENCE .....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: CHAPTER 2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: CHAPTER 4 SOCIAL INFLUENCE .....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: CHAPTER 5 AGGRESSION .....</b>	<b>116</b>

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Education was once a luxury that was reserved for the elites of the society. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the public system of education emerged in western societies giving every child the right and opportunity to free education (Carl, 2009). At the time, this was a revolutionary idea, despite it being in tandem with the industrial revolution. The main aim of the public education system was to train individuals to take their place in the industrial economy. In this new educational system, people were now being educated irrespective of their financial or social background and everyone had supposedly equal opportunities to excel. Although at a glance such an education system held high hopes and esteem for the society as a whole, it had its flaws and shortcomings and soon educators and activists began to realise it. They began to point out that despite the availability of opportunities for people to get educated find jobs and consequently lead better lives as so promised, human living conditions, and basic human rights had no improvement. In fact, they were worse than before. It was getting quite apparent that the existing education system was doing little to improve the living condition of the people or address the social and economic issues that they faced. Educational institutions began to be recognised as institutions that assist in promoting inequalities of gender, class and race, maintaining the status quo and replicating the privileges and values of the dominant groups (Apple, 1982; Freire, 2003; Postman, 1996).

This led educators and scholars to rethink the education system and seek much more effective and feasible alternatives. Hence to confront the system that was struggling hard to maintain the status quo, educators committed themselves to social justice within schools and also within the society (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). Questions began to be raised regarding the existing system of education and its benefits for the society. It is in this context that critical pedagogy took root in the twentieth century where educators had a theoretical landscape of radical beliefs, principles and practices related to education which they believed would contribute to an emancipatory and democratic system of education (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009). A similar trend of problems in the society and the incompetency of educational institutions can be observed in the Muslim world, though the Muslims hold a proud history of intellectual and cultural progress and prosperity. The previous Muslim societies witnessed a civilisation where education and social progress went hand in hand. Education was seen as a key to enhancing the social lives of the people. We have a history of scholars, scientists and intellectuals who first and foremost took into consideration the harms and benefits of their works to the society before carrying it thorough. Such was their social commitment and education was seen as a means to enhance and develop the society and social life. Hence, in contrast to the western world, the condition of the Muslim World seems to have gone from better to worse and continues to worsen.

Due to some of the characteristics of the current Islamic educational practice, it is impossible to address the issues and needs of the Muslim societies unless it undergoes a major transformation. The problems of the Islamic educational system and its inability to tackle the problems of the modern world captured the attention of Muslim scholars and educators. They identified many issues with the Islamic educational institutions that render its students incapable of recognising, understanding

and facing the problems and issues of the modern world. They realised that the contemporary Islamic educational practice was not designed to train its students to involve in the world by being socially conscious and responsible by addressing the issues in their communities (Kazmi, 1999; 2011; Hussein, 2007; Rahath, 2011; Rahath & Hashim, 2013). The domesticating and authoritarian approach; intolerance for questioning and rejection of critical thinking were all characteristics of Islamic educational institutions that rendered students ignorant of the world, prevented them from involving in the world and solving its problems. Students are also unable to think outside of what they have been taught to think (Rahath, 2011).

Precisely due to this reason, its graduates are incapable of identifying, addressing or facing the problems plaguing the Muslim world today. It also explains why Muslims are unable to catch up in terms of scientific and other developments. It is not because Muslims lack the intellectual and material capability or capacity to do so, but because these capabilities are not being put into effective use. Although Islamic history holds a glorious past in terms of economic, political, cultural, religious and scientific development, it is at present, at its most unimpressive and lowest. In every aspect, be it political, economical, academic or scientific development, they have taken a steep fall. Much of the Muslim world is in civil or political unrest. The Muslim socio-political world is home to oppression, suppression, tyranny and injustice of all kinds. People are desperate, violence is rampant, and militant groups have taken justice into their own hands. A change, in this context, is no doubt inevitable and educational systems are the most plausible and effective platform for this. But then, this can only be made possible if certain changes are brought into the Muslim education setting.

Taking into consideration how critical pedagogy was able to bring about a change in the way education was perceived and the possibilities it put forth in utilising this arena for solving human problems, some Muslim educators ventured to analyse its potential in an Islamic educational setting. Works done by Kazmi (1999; 2003; 2000), Rahath (2011) and Hussein (2007; 2006), reflect the problems in Muslim education practice and they have elaborated on aspects of Islamic critical pedagogy as a way of addressing them. According to them, critical pedagogy emphasises the empowerment and liberation of students from the deintellectualizing, indoctrinating and domesticating system and method of education. Other Muslim writers like Proglar (2004), Menon and Ahmad (2008) have also addressed similar issues. These intellectuals have elaborated, directly or indirectly, on aspects of critical pedagogy as one of the solutions to the problems in the Islamic educational system and Muslim world, and to promote values cherished by Islam that has been grossly neglected by Muslim educationists for centuries.

It should be pointed out that it is not the intention here to promote critical pedagogy as the only solution to the problems in the Islamic education practice. There may be several other ways of addressing them, but from the researcher's perspective, for the lack of a feasible alternative developed in the Muslim context itself, critical pedagogy can be considered as a plausible way. This is because certain aspects and aspirations of critical pedagogy have great similarities with some aspects of what Islam seeks to establish or bring about in its education context.

## **STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

Realising the significance of critical pedagogy in the present Islamic educational context, Muslim scholars brought in the concept of critical pedagogy to address the

problems faced by Islamic educational institutions and the Muslim communities. Since it is a relatively new field for the Muslims and because it has not been widely accepted by the Muslims, not many researches can be found in this area. However, the concept of critical pedagogy and the significance of its application in the Islamic educational context have been discussed by some previous researches (Rahath, 2011; Hussein, 2006; Rahath&Kazmi, unpublished). But, these researches have focused mainly on the philosophical and theoretical aspects of critical pedagogy in an Islamic setting. Unlike in the west, not much research has been done on how to implement ‘critical pedagogy’ in a Muslim context. The researches that do address critical pedagogy from an Islamic perspective in a practical setting focus only on certain aspects of it. Therefore, this research is concerned with focusing more comprehensively on critical pedagogy from a practical aspect in a Muslim context and its implementation is explained with the help of an example in a Muslim higher education context. The primary focus is given to analyse how critical pedagogy can be implemented in a higher education classroom setting to raise the critical consciousness of the students, inculcate in them a sense of social responsibility and motivate them to involve in social action. The researcher believes that it is useful to examine and analyse studies done in the west reporting and discussing the practical applications of critical pedagogy in higher education classroom setting. This will enable the researcher to compile and report how critical pedagogy was grounded by the researchers in their classrooms in those studies. The researcher can also make use of it to propose an example of a practical application of critical pedagogy in a Muslim education context. Coming up with approaches to bringing in the aspects of critical pedagogy, particularly critical pedagogy into an Islamic higher education classroom setting, might give a more concrete and practical example in this direction.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The aims of this research are:

1. To explore some of the practical methods that can be used to bring critical pedagogical aspects into a concrete classroom setting.
2. To analyse some of the challenges and concerns in implementing critical pedagogy in a concrete classroom setting and how they can be addressed.
3. To examine how critical pedagogy can be implemented in a higher education classroom setting in a Muslim context.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are some of the practical methods that can be used to bring critical pedagogy in a classroom setting?
2. What are some of the challenges and concerns in implementing critical pedagogy in an education context and how can they be addressed?
3. How can critical pedagogy be implemented in a higher education classroom setting in the Muslim context?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Since this study is an attempt to explore how critical pedagogy can be brought into a classroom setting in the Muslim context, it is expected that this research will come up with examples of implementing critical pedagogy. It is believed that this study will help Islamic institutions by suggesting methods that can be used to empower students and equip them with an awareness of socio-political realities, and develop among them social responsibility and critical consciousness. By giving practical examples of implementing critical pedagogy in teaching social psychology course, this research will



provide a more practical understanding and an easy material for its implementation in this particular course or similar courses for teachers who wish to undertake this approach.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section gives a brief background on the history and theories of critical pedagogy. In light of this, certain characteristics of a critical pedagogical classroom are described. This section also puts forth some of the studies on critical pedagogy from the Muslim context. This section is concluded by discussing the possibility of introducing critical pedagogy and setting up a critical pedagogical classroom in the Muslim education context. This is done by highlighting the connection critical pedagogy has to faith and analysing studies done from a Christian perspective.

### **Landscape of Critical Pedagogy**

The intellectual influence of critical pedagogy can be traced back to classical theorists like Gramsci and Foucault and their contributions to understanding education critically. The theory of hegemony articulated by Gramsci argues that moral leaders including teachers play an important role in implementing social control whereby students are led to support the interest of the elites even if it was against the interest of their own class. Foucault on the other hand, questions the power relationships and the legitimization of knowledge in a society within these power relationships (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). The Frankfurt School, the critical theories of which were influenced by Karl Marx, has primary links with critical pedagogy. In fact, critical pedagogy is seen as the realisation of the critical theories of the Frankfurt School (Breuing, 2011). These theories sought to voice out against authoritarianism and dominations of all kinds

(Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009); withholding opportunities from students in designing their goals and lives; the role of schools in de-skilling them (Apple, 1982); and the role of schools in undermining social consciousness and social transformation (Eisner, 2002 as cited in Breuing, 2011). Thus, it can be seen that several critical pedagogical concepts are drawn from the critical social theories put forth by the thinkers of Frankfurt School like Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm and Leo Lowenthal (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009).

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator is seen as one of the most influential person in critical pedagogy literature. He sought to improve the conditions of the marginalised and emphasised the need of engaging in praxis for social change and social justice (Breuing, 2011). Freire was not so much concerned with teaching practices, but on grounding education within the social framework. He, therefore, asked questions of power, oppression within schools, cultural domination and education as emancipation. "Through his views on emancipatory education, Freire made central pedagogical questions related to social agency, voice and democratic participation" (p. 5). These views still strongly influence the writings on critical pedagogy to this day (Darder, 2003).

Another group of scholars in North America known as the 'new left scholars' who became increasingly interested in critical pedagogy have made tremendous contributions in this direction. Scholars like Roger Simon, Peter McLaren, Michael Apple and Henry Giroux believed that revolutionary critical pedagogy would enable educators to bring about a democratic classroom environment and social values related to it. Hence, they focused their attention towards examining how schools contribute to the transmission of political, economic and social messages (Darder, 2003).

It can be observed that critical pedagogy is very diverse and heterogeneous as it has emerged from several different intellectual traditions (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). What needs to be emphasised here is that all the traditions of critical pedagogy have in common their commitment to the liberation of the oppressed and the development of a sense of social responsibility and critical consciousness among the students and teachers (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009). They also emphasised the importance of social involvement and justice and the importance of a democratic classroom towards the realisation of a more egalitarian society devoid of oppression.

### **Critical Pedagogical Classrooms**

Taking into consideration the commitments that all proponents and traditions of critical pedagogy share, there are certain characteristics that are common to all critical pedagogical classrooms in terms of the design, the teacher-student relationships and the structure of the whole teaching-learning process. Critical pedagogical classroom is a democratic setting where the students have a say in what is taught and learned. A democratic classroom is where knowledge is constructed mutually by the students and teacher (Dewey, 1916; Goomansingh, 2009). It represents a two-way dialogue where the students are also given the opportunity to participate in the decision making process concerning the classroom. Apart from giving students the opportunity to participate in the decision making process, democratic classroom also provides an environment where the students do not feel threatened to voice their thoughts and opinions. It provides an environment where the students can engage in experiential learning, questioning, critical analysis and evaluation (Goomansingh, 2009). Thus, the classroom becomes a place where the students can engage in actual learning without having the fear of being reprimanded or ridiculed for their questions, opinions or suggestions;

where everyone has equal opportunities and individuality. Such open, free and mutual involvement is crucial for the development of a sense of agency, awareness and responsibility.

Goomansingh (2009) highlights two reasons that can lead to the development of a sense of social responsibility among the students in a critical pedagogy based democratic classroom. According to him, in such a classroom setting, the students will be engaged in critical questioning which in turn leads them to question the dominant and established theories and practices. Secondly, it brings together personal experiences and academic knowledge. Hence, the student is able to frame their "personal experiences in the contexts of power and privilege as well as subordination and exclusion" (Goomansingh, 2009, p. 228).

Hence, there is a need to educate students for democracy (Breuing, 2011; Dewey, 1916, Goomansingh, 2009) and set up a democratic classroom where issues of human rights and social justice are raised. Where the students are able to make a connection between what they learn and their experiences, and the experiences of others in their community. Living in a community, it is imperative that the members of the community become less 'self-centred' and more 'others-centred' for a harmonious coexistence and to achieve the common good (Goomansingh, 2009).

Another important aspect of a critical pedagogical classroom is that the power dimension should be addressed in class. Power exists inside the educational setting. Efforts should be made to deconstruct power in the classroom setting. Thus, when setting a classroom based on critical pedagogical approach, the teachers have to first make an effort at addressing the student teacher power relationship. This does not mean power has to be completely eradicated but to remove the unhealthy, disempowering, dominating and repressive aspects of it. When power is diluted, there is space for

student involvement and participation. This can bring the different student experiences into the class (Goomansingh, 2009).

But when it comes to critical pedagogy and developing students to be critically conscious, socially responsible and active members of the society, it is not just enough to establish a setting of shared power between the teachers and students and teach the students about sharing power in the classroom. We live in a world where oppression, suppression and injustice of all kinds are rampant; where the basic rights to life, property, and dignity and freedom frequently are denied. Everything from the government to the media functions to maintain the status quo. Schools are seen as fertile grounds for this. Ideally, education should shape the society but in reality, the society is shaping education to suit the interests of the elites and the ones in power (Freire & Shor, 1987). Keeping the majority (like the lower middle class, the poor, and the marginalised classes) under a state of ‘false consciousness’ is an essential key to the survival of the ones in power. As Freire (Freire & Shor, 1987) mentions, it would be quite foolish to expect the ruling class to allow or accept the kind of education that would turn against it. They know that if education was left on its own, it would create all kinds of problems for them. Hence, they supervise it. Thus, reproducing the dominant ideology is the main objective of a systematic education (Freire & Shor, 1987). According to Freire (Freire & Shor, 1987), only an educator whose political dream is to liberate, can work against reproducing the dominant ideology. Only they can make their students realise this reality; to guide them to see the world differently and critically from the eyes of a liberator.

A critical pedagogical class is also an arena that acts as a training lab to conscientize the students and gets them motivated to involve in social action. Freire (2003) defines conscientization as the process of awakening critical awareness of how

people are oppressed and realise the structure of oppression. Conscientization according to Montero (2011a) is a process of developing critical consciousness which will equip people to critically analyse the situations they live in and their life as a whole. It brings to their awareness the conditions of their life and the power relations with their oppressors. This will enable them to realise the need for attempts to bring an end to the oppressions, suppressions and exclusions from the society (Montero, 2011b). Conscientization therefore involves key processes like ‘problematization’, ‘de-ideologization’, and ‘de-naturalization’ (Montero, 2011a).

Denaturalization is the process of doubting, questioning and rejecting the unjust/unfair events and circumstances of life which were considered to be natural, essential and an inevitable part of life (Montero, 2011b). De-ideologization is the process of creating awareness about the interests behind ideologies and power relationships that play a role in oppressing, suppressing and dominating the people. This will make the students realise how and why they are being oppressed. It will then help them to challenge these ideologies and the power relations that come with it. Problematization is the process through which people can be liberated from ideological knowledge that rejects the rights of the oppressed and serves the interests of the oppressors (Montero, 2011b). Problematization includes both emotional and cognitive processes which are initiated by doubting the present or existing system. This can be done only by fostering critical knowledge and critical consciousness (Montero, 2011c). Problematization will make the students question the injustices and reject the interpretations of the circumstances of their life set by the dominant class.

Providing a democratic environment, educating for democracy, addressing the power dimension both inside the classroom and outside, motivating students to involve in social action and developing their critical consciousness are some of the main

characteristics or aims of the critical pedagogical classroom. But when it comes to actually implementing critical pedagogy in the classroom setting, the diversity and heterogeneity of critical pedagogy as discussed in the previous section also reflects in each and every classroom. This will be evident from the discussions presented in the following chapters.

So far it can be seen how critical pedagogy has progressed and is characterised and explained from a western context and by western scholars. Since this research is grounded in an Islamic context, it needs to dive into what the Muslim scholars have mentioned about critical pedagogy. And how critical pedagogy has been explored or analysed in relation to the Islamic context.

### **Research in Critical Pedagogy in Muslim Context**

Literature on critical pedagogy in the Muslim context is not altogether unavailable. Rahath and Kazmi (unpublished) have conducted an in-depth study examining Islamic education from an Islamic critical pedagogical perspective. This study focused on analysing the possibility of Islamic critical pedagogical perspective in promoting the values that are upheld by Islam. It aimed at analysing if and how aspects of critical pedagogy can be used to bring about a positive shift in the Islamic education system and make it more issue oriented. To this end, in their research, they have briefly and systematically analysed the problems of the Islamic educational system. The domesticating nature of Islamic education system, the intolerance towards disagreements, questions and criticism and resistance towards change are some of the problems highlighted.

Their study has then made an attempt at exploring how some of the dimensions of critical pedagogy relate to Islamic values. According to them, social justice, solving

human problems, addressing concrete social realities, and giving importance to the social existence of humanity are some of the major concepts that are upheld in both Islam and by critical pedagogues. By emphasising these common principles upheld by both, they show how critical pedagogy can be used to bring about a positive change and face the problems in the existing system of Islamic education.

Hussein's (2006) doctoral thesis, entitled 'Towards Islamization of critical pedagogy: A Malaysian case study', explores how critical pedagogy can contribute to addressing the problems of the Islamization of knowledge project. She also evaluates the reconstruction of western critical pedagogy from an Islamic perspective. She dedicates a part of her thesis to empirically examine the outcome of using Islamic critical pedagogy in a Malaysian classroom setting. It focuses on the experience of the students and the teacher in such a classroom setting.

Her article entitled 'Critical Pedagogy, Islamization of knowledge and Muslim Education' also focuses on critical pedagogy from an Islamic perspective. In this study, Hussien (2007) makes an attempt at exploring the contribution of an Islamized critical pedagogy in resolving the crisis of Islamic education and the Muslim mind. According to her, Muslim scholars, save few, have yet to adequately understand and discuss the underlying philosophical assumptions of Islamic education (Hussien, 2007). Hence, Islamic education fails to realise many of the emancipatory and empowering aspects of education and knowledge that Islam upholds. As a consequence of avoiding important questions related to such significant aspects of education, Islamic education has become irrelevant, dysfunctional and incapable of establishing social justice in the Muslim world (Hussien, 2007). When she proposes critical pedagogy as a solution to this crisis, she shows that this is not bringing in new and foreign elements into the Islamic education practice, rather, reemphasizing what is already inherent to Islam. She