The Educational Thought of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Paulo Freire on the Liberation of Education: An Integration of Islamic Spirituality and Critical Consciousness

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Abstract: Contemporary educational discourse increasingly confronts crises of dehumanization, epistemic domination, and the erosion of ethical orientation within modern schooling systems. In response to these challenges, this article examines the educational philosophies of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Paulo Freire as two influential thinkers who, despite emerging from distinct civilizational and epistemological traditions, conceptualize education as a project of liberation. The study aims to explore how al-Attas's Islamic spiritual epistemology and Freire's critical pedagogy can be conceptually integrated to formulate a holistic framework for educational liberation. Employing a qualitative research design grounded in library research and thematic content analysis, this study systematically reviews and comparatively analyzes the primary works of both thinkers alongside authoritative secondary sources. The findings reveal that al-Attas emphasizes liberation from epistemological confusion—particularly the loss of adab—through the Islamization of knowledge, whereas Freire foregrounds emancipation from socio-political oppression through the cultivation of critical consciousness (conscientização). Despite these differences, both perspectives converge on the ethical mission of education as a process of humanization, moral responsibility, and transformative praxis. This article contributes theoretically by proposing an integrative paradigm that bridges Islamic spirituality and Western critical pedagogy, challenging the conventional secular–religious dichotomy in educational theory. Practically, it offers an alternative foundation for transformative education that is responsive to global crises of meaning, injustice, and cultural dislocation, thereby advancing a more comprehensive vision of liberatory education.

Keyword: Critical Pedagogy, Critical Consciousness, Educational Liberation, Humanization In Education, Islamic Spiritual Epistemology, Transformative Education.

INTRODUCTION

Liberatory education has increasingly attracted scholarly attention as a response to contemporary challenges such as structural inequality, moral fragmentation, and the erosion of human dignity in modern societies. Within this discourse, the educational philosophies of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Paulo Freire represent two influential yet distinct paradigms that foreground the role of education in fostering critical consciousness and human emancipation. While emerging from different intellectual traditions, both thinkers challenge reductionist conceptions of education that prioritize technical knowledge transmission over ethical formation and social transformation.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, a prominent contemporary Muslim intellectual, offers a critique of modern education that is detached from metaphysical and moral foundations. He argues that the primary aim of education is the formation of *adab*, understood as the cultivation of moral discipline, intellectual responsibility, and ethical consciousness. For al-Attas, education cannot be separated from the moral and spiritual development of the human person, as this dimension defines the very purpose of knowledge and learning. Recent studies emphasize that education grounded in ethical and moral values provides an alternative direction for addressing the crisis of meaning in contemporary educational systems (Watson-Vandiver & Wiggan, 2020).

In contrast, Paulo Freire conceptualizes education as a praxis of liberation aimed at dismantling oppressive social, political, and economic structures embedded within human consciousness. Central to Freire's critical pedagogy is the notion of dialogue and critical reflection, through which learners become aware of their historical and social conditions and develop the capacity to transform them. Empirical research supports Freire's claim that critical pedagogical practices empower learners to question dominant narratives and challenge systemic injustice, particularly among marginalized communities (Yılmaz et al., 2024; Watson-Vandiver & Wiggan, 2020).

Despite their differing epistemological foundations, both al-Attas and Freire converge in their rejection of education as a neutral or purely instrumental process. Instead, they envision education as a transformative endeavor that shapes morally grounded and critically conscious individuals. Scholars argue that education conceived as a practice of freedom not only challenges structures of domination but also contributes to the formation of authentic and participatory learning communities (Oliveira & Silva, 2025). Such an approach positions learners as active agents of social change rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

Nevertheless, existing scholarship tends to examine the ideas of al-Attas and Freire in isolation. Comparative studies that meaningfully integrate Islamic spiritual perspectives with modern critical pedagogy remain limited. Much of the literature frames Islamic education as primarily normative and theological, while positioning Freirean pedagogy as secular and ideological. This dichotomy has constrained efforts to explore potential synergies between moral-spiritual education and critical consciousness (Aziz et al., 2025). Although recent studies suggest the possibility of integrating spiritual values with emancipatory pedagogy, these attempts often remain partial or descriptive (Mubarok et al., 2025; Yusgiantara et al., 2025).

Emerging research indicates that synthesizing Islamic ethical frameworks with critical pedagogical approaches may contribute to a more holistic educational model. Studies on progressive Islamic education highlight the relevance of integrating moral formation, social responsibility, and critical awareness within contemporary curricula (Yunita et al., 2025). Similarly, research on pesantren education in Indonesia suggests that certain educational practices already reflect Freirean elements of dialogue and liberation, albeit without an explicit theoretical integration (Achmad & Izza, 2023).

In an era marked by global identity crises, systemic injustice, and dehumanization, dialogue between Islamic and Western educational thought has become increasingly

significant. Integrating Islamic spirituality with critical consciousness offers the potential to enrich educational theory and practice by combining moral grounding with social transformation. Scholars emphasize that education oriented toward social justice must engage both ethical values and critical praxis to address urgent global challenges (Clark et al., 2022; Mushoffah, 2023). Freire's problem-posing education, in particular, continues to provide a robust framework for cultivating socially engaged and critically reflective learners (Wynn, 2025).

Against this background, this article aims to critically examine and comparatively analyze the educational philosophies of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Paulo Freire within the framework of liberatory education. By synthesizing al-Attas's concept of *adab* with Freire's theory of critical consciousness, this study seeks to propose an integrative theoretical framework that bridges Islamic spirituality and modern critical pedagogy. This approach is expected to contribute to contemporary educational discourse by addressing existing theoretical gaps and offering a holistic perspective on education as a means of ethical formation and social emancipation.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in library-based research, with content analysis as the primary analytical method. The analysis focused on the educational philosophies of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Paulo Freire.

Primary data sources consisted of the major works of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, including Islam and Secularism and The Concept of Education in Islam, and the foundational texts of Paulo Freire, particularly Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Education for Critical Consciousness. To enhance contextual depth and analytical rigor, secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and critical commentaries were also consulted.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic content analysis. Key concepts—namely education, liberation, the human person, knowledge, and consciousness—were identified and systematically coded. The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, an intra-textual analysis was performed to examine the internal coherence and conceptual structure within each thinker's body of work. Second, an inter-textual analysis was undertaken to compare the two frameworks and to identify convergences as well as epistemological divergences.

A comparative–philosophical approach guided the interpretation of the findings, enabling an in-depth examination of the conceptual meanings and normative implications of both thinkers' educational paradigms. This approach allowed the study to move beyond descriptive comparison toward a theoretical synthesis, contributing to contemporary discussions on liberative education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Key Figures

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas

Al-Attas conceptualizes education as the cultivation of *adab*, defined as the recognition of the proper order of reality and the hierarchy of knowledge. From this perspective, educational liberation does not imply emancipation from moral authority or tradition, but rather liberation from epistemological distortions generated by the secularization of knowledge. The absence of *adab* in education results in individuals who are technically competent yet ethically disoriented, undermining the moral purpose of learning (Puspitasari & Yuliana, 2022; Ahmadi et al., 2023).

This framework positions education as an integrative process that links ethical conduct, intellectual responsibility, and spiritual awareness. Failure to instill *adab*, as al-Attas argues,

risks producing educated individuals who lack moral conviction and are therefore limited in their capacity to contribute meaningfully to society (Ahmadi et al., 2023; Zidan et al., 2025).

Paulo Freire

Freire conceptualizes education as a praxis of liberation aimed at developing critical consciousness (*conscientização*). He critiques the oppressive "banking model" of education and advocates dialogical pedagogy as a means of humanization, enabling learners to recognize oppressive social realities and engage in transformative action (Nurhakim, 2022).

In parallel, al-Attas grounds educational liberation in the concept of *ta'dib*, emphasizing the integration of spiritual, moral, and intellectual dimensions. For al-Attas, education that neglects *ta'dib* produces individuals who are intellectually trained yet morally disoriented, alienated from ethical and transcendent values (Nuryanti & Hakim, 2020; Washim et al., 2024).

Despite their differing epistemological foundations, both thinkers converge on the view that education must transcend technical knowledge acquisition and foster holistic human development. While al-Attas emphasizes moral order and spiritual consciousness, Freire foregrounds critical awareness and social transformation. Their synthesis highlights education as an ethical and emancipatory process, oriented toward the formation of morally grounded, critically engaged individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to societal transformation (Puspitasari & Yuliana, 2022; Hidayatullah et al., 2023).

A Comparative Analysis of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's and Paulo Freire's Thought on Educational Liberation

Ontologically, al-Attas departs from a theocentric Islamic worldview, whereas Freire is grounded in a historically and socially oriented critical humanism. Despite these differing foundations, both reject the reduction of human beings to mere objects within educational systems. Educational liberation, for both thinkers, is understood as a process of restoring human dignity.

From an epistemological perspective, al-Attas emphasizes the integration of revelation and reason, while Freire prioritizes dialogue and critical reflection on lived reality. These differences are not contradictory but complementary: al-Attas's spirituality provides an ethical–metaphysical foundation, whereas Freire's pedagogy offers a praxis-oriented and transformational mechanism.

In terms of curriculum and educational practice, al-Attas stresses the formation of a morally cultivated (*adab*-oriented) personality, while Freire foregrounds critical consciousness and social action. Both perspectives are highly relevant in addressing contemporary educational challenges that demand a balance between morality, intellectual development, and social justice. The synthesis of these views suggests that comprehensive liberatory education requires the integration of spiritual and critical dimensions, thereby avoiding both rigid religious formalism and value-empty activism.

Although emerging from distinct educational traditions, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Paulo Freire engage the concept of educational liberation in profound and complementary ways. Al-Attas conceives education as a process of cultivating *adab*, integrating morality and spirituality as the epistemic foundation of knowledge. In his view, educational liberation does not signify emancipation from authority or traditional values, but rather liberation from epistemological distortions produced by the secularization of knowledge (Puspitasari & Yuliana, 2022; Ahmadi et al., 2023). By contrast, Freire emphasizes education as a means of awakening critical consciousness and achieving liberation from social oppression through dialogical and participatory pedagogy (Zidan et al., 2025).

The convergence between the two thinkers lies in their shared commitment to social transformation through education and their positioning of learners as agents of change capable of contributing meaningfully to society. However, their approaches differ substantially. Al-

Attas places greater emphasis on spiritual values and moral understanding in shaping civilized individuals, grounded in an Islamic worldview and the recognition of divine order (Nurhakim, 2022). Freire, on the other hand, underscores critical awareness and collective action as essential to social empowerment, focusing on the analysis of oppressive social structures (Pratama & Wahyuni, 2023). In this sense, al-Attas directs education toward the integration of Islamic ethics and culture, while Freire orients it toward resistance against oppression through political consciousness and social action.

The relevance of al-Attas's and Freire's thought in the contemporary era is particularly significant given the increasing complexity of modern educational challenges. In the context of globalization—where traditional values are frequently confronted by secular paradigms—al-Attas's philosophy offers a compelling alternative that reasserts the importance of morality and spirituality in education (Washim et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Freire's approach remains highly adaptable in developing-world contexts, where education serves as a means of empowering individuals to understand and transform oppressive social conditions (Nuryanti & Hakim, 2020). Integrating these perspectives enables the development of a holistic educational framework that attends not only to cognitive competence but also to moral formation and social awareness.

Accordingly, education that responds effectively to contemporary challenges should adopt elements from both frameworks, creating a synergy between spirituality and critical consciousness. In this integrated vision, education functions not merely as a vehicle for knowledge acquisition, but as a means of cultivating a morally grounded, socially aware, and transformative society (Muslimah & Khoir, 2025). Together, al-Attas and Freire offer valuable contributions toward a pedagogical model capable of addressing the dynamics of global education, where individuals are increasingly required to act as agents of change across social, cultural, and spiritual domains.

Implications

Theoretically, the integration of al-Attas's and Freire's thought expands the horizon of educational studies by moving beyond the conventional Islam–West and religious–secular dichotomies. This framework offers a new paradigm of liberatory education that is grounded in transcendent ethics while remaining responsive to concrete social realities. By bridging spiritual epistemology and critical pedagogy, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of education as both an ethical and emancipatory project.

Practically, the findings of this study have significant implications for the development of curriculum, pedagogy, and educational policy that emphasize character formation, critical consciousness, and social responsibility. Within this framework, teachers are positioned not merely as transmitters of knowledge, but as moral educators and facilitators of critical dialogue who guide learners toward ethical reflection and social engagement.

In a global context, this approach offers an important contribution to education in multicultural and postcolonial societies, where reconciliation between spiritual identity and demands for social justice remains a pressing challenge. The synthesis of al-Attas's emphasis on *ta'dib* and Freire's concept of critical consciousness provides a valuable foundation for addressing these tensions.

The educational philosophies of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Paulo Freire carry significant implications for contemporary educational systems. Al-Attas emphasizes that education must integrate Islamic spirituality and moral values—conceptualized through *ta'dib*—to form individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also ethically cultivated (Puspitasari & Yuliana, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2023). This process fosters awareness of individual responsibility toward the self, God, and society. Conversely, Freire underscores education as a means of raising awareness of social realities and encouraging active participation in structural

transformation (Nurhakim, 2022). Together, these perspectives affirm that education is not merely a process of knowledge transmission, but a formative endeavor centered on character development and active civic participation.

Moreover, the interaction between the spiritual orientation emphasized by al-Attas and the critical consciousness advocated by Freire generates a comprehensive educational paradigm. By adopting al-Attas's approach, educators can embed ethical and moral values within the curriculum, while simultaneously applying dialogical methods inspired by Freire to encourage reflection and engagement (Washim et al., 2024). Such an approach enables learners not only to grasp academic concepts, but also to critically examine their moral and social implications, thereby enhancing social sensitivity and transformative potential.

These implications are particularly relevant in Muslim-majority contexts, where formal education often remains influenced by secular paradigms. Al-Attas's thought highlights the necessity of educational systems that acknowledge the central role of spirituality in learning and promote the integration of knowledge with faith and morality (Puspitasari & Yuliana, 2022; Washim et al., 2024). At the same time, Freire's conception of education as a practice of liberation can be applied to empower younger generations to actively defend their rights and contribute to positive social change.

The adoption of both thinkers' ideas within modern education has the potential to foster individuals who are not only knowledgeable, but also morally grounded and socially responsible. By integrating al-Attas's spiritual framework with Freire's critical approach, education can move toward a more integrative and contextually relevant model that responds to contemporary global challenges (Ahmad et al., 2023; Washim et al., 2024). This integration opens space for curricular adjustments that prepare learners not only for the labor market, but also for responsible citizenship and ethical engagement.

In conclusion, synthesizing the educational philosophies of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Paulo Freire contributes not only to individual character formation, but also to the strengthening of collective social consciousness toward more just social transformation. Education, therefore, must prepare learners not only for individual success, but also for their roles as agents of change within broader social contexts. The integration of spirituality and critical consciousness thus emerges as a key foundation for building educational systems that are not only effective, but genuinely liberatory (Washim et al., 2024; Firdaus, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the educational philosophies of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Paulo Freire offer unique and complementary perspectives for addressing the challenges of twenty-first-century education. Al-Attas emphasizes the importance of cultivating *adab* as the foundation of education, encompassing moral and spiritual dimensions in the formation of individual character, whereas Freire focuses on the crisis of social consciousness that must be addressed through critical education in order to achieve structural transformation. Both thinkers converge on the principle that education must move beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and engage the moral and social domains, thereby producing holistic individuals who are responsive to complex global challenges. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of these two bodies of thought within the context of modern education, which is essential for understanding the role of education in responding to secularization and social oppression. This integration offers a framework that not only reinforces spiritual values through al-Attas's approach, but also foregrounds critical consciousness as articulated by Freire, encouraging individuals not merely to learn but also to act within their social contexts. This study thus makes an original contribution to educational scholarship by demonstrating how the integration of spiritual values and critical awareness can generate a more inclusive and multidimensional paradigm of education.

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