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Literary Theories

HUMANIZING EDUCATION IN TOTTO-CHAN: THE LITTLE GIRL AT THE WINDOW: A FRIEREAN PEDAGOGICAL READING

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Abstract: Education is a complex process that influences not only learning outcomes but also the formation of values, identities and social awareness. However, the contemporary education system prioritizes exam-oriented learning and a rigid institutional system which often limits creativity, dialogue and critical thinking. Paulo Freire's critique of the traditional education model, particularly his opposition to the banking system education, provides a valuable theoretical framework for analyzing alternative educational practices. The educational philosophy represented in Tetsuko Kuroyangi's *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window* challenges traditional exam-oriented schooling by foregrounding liberated humane pedagogical practices. This paper examines the educational philosophy represented in *Totto-chan* through the philosophical framework of Paulo Freire. Using qualitative textual analysis this study analyzes how Sosaku Kobayashi's pedagogical methods reflect Key Frierean concepts such as liberating education, dialogic learning, conscientization, pedagogy of the oppressed and contextual education. By placing *Totto-chan* within the framework of Freire, the paper demonstrates how the novel embodies education as a practice of freedom that liberates the learners through critical awareness and self-worth.

Keywords: Pedagogy; Freirean Pedagogy; Humanizing Education; Child centered education; Liberatory Education; Dialogue; Experiential Learning



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Education is not merely a pathway to cognitive development of the learner, it forges ethics, values and morals from the very environment that shapes their world. The environment mostly is the schools, which function as the primary places of socialization. For this reason, schools are expected to keep a child-friendly environment to promote the holistic development of the students, including their emotional well-being and intellectual curiosity.

Equal importance should be given to the school curricula to promote engagement, comfort and participation from the student's end. However, contemporary education often promotes narrow, textbook centered teaching and learning which give no places for creativity and practicality of the knowledge. Despite numerous studies conducted in this field to improve the contemporary system of education, the educational practices continue to remain in the traditional pedagogical methods. As a result, education has turned into acquiring credentials rather than the holistic development of the learner. Tetsuko Kuroyanagi's *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window* presents an alternative educational vision that challenges rigid pedagogical norms that exist in our educational system. Through the experiences of Totto-chan at Tomoe Gakuen school, the novel illustrates how an empathetic and flexible learning environment can nurture a child's individuality and confidence. This novel presents education as a humane and flexible process that prioritizes child's individuality and the developmental stages. The educational vision articulated in the novel thus invites a critical examination through a pedagogical framework. This paper seeks to analyze the educational values embedded in *Totto-chan* using Paulo Freire's pedagogical theories. Freire's perspectives on dialogue, critical consciousness and liberation performs as a critical framework to understand this novel.

Education plays a significant role in the modernization of a society. Etymologically the term 'education' is derived from the Latin word *educatum* meaning to bring forth or to draw out promoting the development of the human potential. Whereas in the Indian context the concept of education is closely associated with *shiksha*, which denotes both the teaching and learning. This generally emphasizes the reciprocal nature of education in two different contexts. Classical thinkers such as Aristotle emphasized the moral purpose of education, asserting that it contributes to the formation of virtuous citizens. Aristotle emphasizes in his book *Politics* that education aims at the formation of a healthy mind within a healthy body also there is a verbatim which is commonly attributed to Aristotle that posits the idea that educated individuals are superior to the uneducated, much as the living are distinguished from the dead. Education as a discipline is concerned with the theories, methods and practices within schools.

Historically, the concept of education can be traced back to ancient Athens, where structured pedagogical methods were employed to shape citizens for civic and social responsibilities. However, in the contemporary world, education is mostly instrumentalized and often reduced to a means of acquiring qualifications for social and political advancement. Scholars like Antonio Gramsci have observed that institutions such as schools play a crucial role in maintaining cultural hegemony by transmitting dominant ideologies in his book *Prison Notebook*. Similarly, Paulo Freire critiques traditional education for reinforcing hierarchical power structures. According to Freire, conventional pedagogy conditions students to accept authority uncritically, thereby limiting their capacity for social transformation (Freire 72).

Paulo Friere is a Brazilian educator and philosopher best known for his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). During the early years of his career he worked with impoverished and marginalized communities and his experiences led him to recognize the oppressive and dehumanizing nature of conventional education. He observed that through this educational practice the dominant ideologies are reproduced rather than encouraging critical thinking in the learners. In response to this, Friere developed a critical pedagogical framework to empower learners to challenge social inequalities and to recognize the ideological control of the ruling classes.

Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* remains one of the critiques of traditional education system. Friere condemns the banking model of education in which learners are passive and teachers deposit information to them. He argues that students are considered as objects rather than active participants in learning process. He also asserts that this type of education dehumanise the learners and suppress their critical thinking skills. Friere says "education must be a democratic and dialogical process because the act of knowing their words is the mark of all free human beings" (88). As an alternate to this Friere proposes Problem posing education which emphasizes constant dialogue and mutual learning between the learner and the mentor. In this model teacher and the students are collaboratively engaged in the process of learning and the construction of knowledge. Central to Friere's theory is conscientization, the development of the finest critical thinking that enables us to recognize and challenge the existing social condition. According to him education must enable the child to differentiate the oppression which they internalized for years. This pedagogical method is a learner centered and involves a small group of students between twelve and twenty five participants who come together in a space called culture circle, where knowledge is generated collectively through dialogues.

In this model a learner is never dependent upon a teacher to interpret their experience of oppression, but they critically reflect upon their social realities through the shared discussions. Friere emphasized that through this dialogue “the teacher of the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges teacher students with student’s teachers” (80). This method reverses the nature of learning, wherein students and teachers simultaneously learn and teach from each other. For Friere, education must function as a practice of freedom aimed at human liberation rather than ideological domination.

The schooling method at Tomoe Gakuen exemplifies Friere’s concept of liberating education. Headmaster Kobayashi prioritizes the emotional and the intellectual needs of the students, allowing them freedom of expression and choice. His readiness to listen patiently to Totto chan reflects his profound nature respecting the learner’s voice.

Mother and Totto-chan arrived at the school at eight, and when she had finished talking and the headmaster had told her she was a pupil of the school, he looked at his pocket watch and said, "Ah, it's time for lunch." So, the headmaster must have listened to Totto-chan for four solid hours! (Kuroyanagi 8)

The extended listening by the headmaster exemplifies the pedagogical approach followed in the school. Through the lens of Paulo Friere, this dialogue highlights the mutual respect and the humanization of education. Such practices challenge authoritarian educational structures and promote learner autonomy. The novel presents several classroom practices at Tomoe Gakuen that challenges the conventional disciplinary structures. One such instances is related to the seating arrangement of the students which is deliberately flexible. The seating arrangements in the classroom give the freedom to choose where they wish to sit. This flexibility creates a non-hierarchical and comfortable learning environment that respects the individuality of each child. A similar spirit of freedom can also be observed in classroom activities. Unlike conventional period timetable, Tome Gakuen adopts a learner centered approach where learner has the full autonomy to choose their subject. As the narrator observes:

"Schools normally schedule one subject, for example, Japanese, the first period, when you just do Japanese; then, say, arithmetic the second period, when you just do arithmetic. But here it was quite different. At the beginning of the first period, the teacher made a list of all the problems and questions in the subjects to be studied that day. Then she would say, "Now, start with any of these you like." (Kuroyanagi 12)

This practice allows the children to begin with subjects that interest them rather than forcing them to engage with content they find unappealing. Such an approach nurtures autonomy and choices, enabling learners to engage in education in their own terms. The headmaster's interaction with Totto during her lost purse further exemplifies an empathetic and non-punitive behavior (Kuroyangi 21). Creative freedom is also encouraged through the unconventional learning practices like writing on the floor with the chalk. As the narrator explains, the headmaster believed that the assembly hall floor could function as a large blackboard where children could respond freely to music, writing and drawing as expansively as they wished (Kuroyangi 84). These classroom practices collectively demonstrate an educational philosophy which is rooted in freedom, creativity and respect. Through the lens of Paulo Friere, these practices can be read as liberating practices that promotes dialogue, humanization and the holistic development of the learner.

Dialogue are the main foundations of learning at Tomo Gakuen. Kobayashi encourages open communication between teachers and the students which reduces the hierarchies between them. Classroom interactions at the school are upon mutual respect and shared inquiry. This approach reflects the Feiere's idea that authentic education emerges through the dialogue rather than the monologue. By engaging students in the time of meal, he transforms everyday experience into learning, this reinforces the idea that learning is co-created.

Conscientization or critical thinking is cultivated at Tomoe Gakuen through experiential learning and moral engagement activities. Students learn values like empathy, humanity, equality and social responsibility through their experiences. Kobayashi's guidance encourages children to reflect on their actions and their impact on others. These practices resonate with Freire's emphasis on education as a means of developing social awareness. By linking textual knowledge to the real-life experiences Tome Gakuen allows students to internalize moral principles naturally.

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Inclusive environment at the Tomoe reflects the pedagogy of the Oppresse of Paulo Friere. The physical and the behavioral responses of the children are embraced rather than excluded. Different physical activities are designed to ensure the participation from every student which reinforces the dignity of every learner. "The only sports events that were the same as at other elementary schools were the Tug of War and the Three-Legged Race. All the rest had been invented by the headmaster. Requiring no special or elaborate equipment, they made use of familiar everyday school things." (Kuroyanagi 48).

By integrating innovative and inclusive physical activities, Kobayashi not only ensured the participation of every child but also fostered an environment where equality is celebrated. His subtle guidance encourages children to reflect on their actions and their impact on others. These practices resonate with Freire's emphasis on education as a means of developing social awareness. Learning at Tomoe Gakuen is extended beyond text books into natural and social environment. Field trips, farming activities and hands on learning experiences are regularly conducted in the school to connect knowledge to the lived reality. One such instance occurs when children are taken into the field to learn about flowers and blooming. A similar approach is evident in the teaching of farming experience. As the narrator recounts: "The farming teacher told the children to take spades and hoes from the car and start them at the weeding. He told them all about weeds: how hardy they were; how some grew faster than crops and hid the sun from them; how weeds were good hiding places for bad insects; and how weeds could be a nuisance by taking all the nourishment from the soil. He taught them one thing after another." (Kuroyanagi 67)

This type of experience created by the teacher challenges the rigid distinction between teacher and the learner, this strongly resonates with Paulo Friere's rejection of hierarchical knowledge of transmission. Totto-chan challenges the traditional system of education and offers an alternate approach which is rooted in empathy, experience, liberation and freedom. Through the pedagogical practice of headmaster Kobayashi, the novel embodies the Paulo Frier's educational system into practice. By placing Tottochan in the Frierian pedagogical framework, this study highlights the enduring relevance of child centered educational practices in shaping meaningful education.

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