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A POSTMODERN IDEA OF CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY IN THE AGE OF CONVERGENCE

by

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Abstract: *The philosophy of postmodernism is based on the idea of subjective truth which further argues that the meaning-making process is differential and subject to the heterogeneity of culture. In context to postmodernism, the concept of critical media literacy can be understood as a social function of literacy. According to this concept, people do not create meaning in isolation, rather it is a social process in which the existing language system influences in deriving meanings and thereby constructs worldviews.*

The concept of literacy has been changed from an individual transformation of learning how to read and write to the social transformation of becoming a change agent. Specially in an era when the convergence of media is shaping a new form of meaning-making process in which a text is not in isolation. Convergence of media is leading to need of facilitating multiliteracies in media education for creating a collaborative teaching-learning environment. This study argues that acquiring critical media literacy skills facilitates the students in achieving autonomy in understanding and creating the meaning of experiences accommodating differences in ideas and opinions in the age of convergence.

Keywords: *Postmodernism, critical media literacy, media education, convergence, multi-literacies*

Introduction:

The concept of literacy has been changing its focus from the micro level to a macro level of understanding with the changing time and technologies. The old school of thought emphasized on the individual transformation through learning to read and write while in the 21st century, the concept of literacy has broadened its sphere emphasizing on it as a social transformation. Especially, when collective intelligence has been becoming a common phenomenon in a network society, literacy is no more only an individual occurrence but an outcome of socio-cultural interaction in a participatory form.

In a multimodal teaching-learning practice, the transition from old literacy to new literacy is a consequence of the adoption of digital technologies particularly in the discipline of media education. However, literacy is not only about competencies of using technologies for communication rather in the postmodern societal structure, literacy has become a social function based on interpersonal actions of understanding and creating meanings. As a social function, literacy involves the process of developing cognitive skills building capacity for critical reflection on socio-cultural realities for personal as well as social change. Thus, literacy acts its crucial role in conscientization as a condition for the acquisition of a critical consciousness. In context of media education, this conscientization refers to students' achievement of critical cognitive skills in understanding media representation in relation to its socio-cultural constructions.

In a social structure, where omnipresent media is shaping our thoughts directly or indirectly, critical media literacy as a cognitive skill of analyzing and evaluating media has become an important skill to cope with the mediatized meaning-making process. Convergence of media is accelerating the flow of media content making it easy to navigate information and also expanding opportunities to participate actively in the knowledge society. In the contemporary convergent media framework, students are not only media consumers; they are also becoming producers as well as distributors of media content. Jenkins (2006) idea of a convergence culture defines as “where old media and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of media producer and the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways”. So, the convergence culture is narrowing down the gap between the producers and the consumers of media in which the traditional model of media literacy has become insufficient in order to understand the political-economic perspective of media as an industry of manufacturing consent. Therefore, adding a critical notion to media literacy helps in the deeper understanding of the media culture in context to its link with power politics. Critical media literacy enables reading texts considering it as a constructed text in the nexus of media representation on the crucial dimension of socio-cultural issues such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, etc., and also struggle for power, i.e. control.

The importance of critical media literacy in the curriculum of media education is to enable the students to interpret and make an informed judgment and thereby develop civic responsibilities.

Regarding what is critical in media education; Robert Morgan (1998) suggests “this process comes to be seen as a form of conversion. Through the powers of analysis, students are seen to move from an unconscious to conscious state, from being enslaved by bodily pleasure and emotional response to being rational and skeptical in their dealings with the media.” This study is focusing on exploring the concept of critical media literacy from a postmodern perspective and understanding it as a social meaning of literacy in the age of media convergence. This research is descriptive and exploratory in nature based on secondary data.

A social approach to critical media literacy: The concept of critical media literacy can be understood from a sociological aspect as it is based on the deconstruction of the meaning-making process which is the interplay of audience, text, and culture. A social aspect of critical media literacy suggests that "individual does not create meanings in isolation, but through their involvement in social networks or interpretive communities which promote and value particular forms of literacy" (Buckingham, 2003). Thus, individuals have their own media experiences within their historical context and different social groups have different orientation towards media. According to David Buckingham, the concept of media literacy cannot be defined objectively as it is based on one’s ability to use and interpret media which is very subjective and differ from person to person. So the question regarding who is media literate is very subjective in nature as the meanings are created in different social contexts with different competencies within different social situation they encounter in their everyday life. Therefore, "if the context of one particular media text is taken out and re-presented or remixed, understanding of its message will vary because of the different context that readers bring with them, their prior knowledge, belief, and experiences" (Funk, et.al. 2016).

The curriculum of media education requires developing not only technical skills but also cognitive skills for critically framing their learning on issues of power, race, class, religion, etc. Developing critical media literacy as a consciousness for recognizing power game exerted in media texts, boosts the students to become an agent of social change against the naturalization process of oppressive representation. The concept of critical media literacy underlines on the principle of representation which is very complex in nature, because, “judgment on representation is a complex process and it is not academic imposition on students” (Buckingham, 2003). This process requires broader understanding of media in relation to its context including socio-economic and historical aspects in which texts are produced, consumed and distributed. Hence, critical media literacy works towards social functions as its consequences depend upon the social context and social purposes. Such a focus on social and cultural presentation of media defines critical media literacy as a social meaning of literacy.

This social aspect of literacy involves a more inclusive classroom in which cultural and linguistic diversities are stimulated for preparing the students in a globalized world. Such an inclusive meaning of literacy assigns plurality in terms of acknowledging the differences of contexts, subjectivities and also multiple texts genres. The emergence of convergent media is accelerating this inclusion process through facilitating interactivity as well as collaborative learning using

audio-visual modes of technologies. Introducing multimodal teaching-learning practices in the classroom opens scope for developing multiliteracies. The concept of multiliteracies which was first coined by the New London Group in the mid-90 addresses technological advancement and its impact in teaching-learning practices. "The multiplicity of communications channels and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today call for a much broader view of literacy than portrayed by traditional language-based approaches" (The New London Group, 1996). It advocates a multimodal classroom curriculum using different technological tools and communication channels for more participatory classroom in which both the teachers and students become co-learners embracing socio-cultural diversities. For instance, teachers are using social media, blogging, video conferencing and other communication channels to build learning networks and thereby promoting a collaborative learning environment. The pedagogy of multiliteracies in media education relates to understanding media representation on different media forms critically analyzing and evaluating media texts fostering multiple reading from diverse perspectives.

Understanding critical media literacy as a postmodern idea: The concept of critical media literacy is based on the postmodern idea that power relation plays the crucial role in structuring all social truth and realities. It believes that texts are not objective rather meanings are polysomic and its interpretation depends on the subjectivity of the readers. Postmodernism asserts a heterogeneous meaning-making process celebrating differences and pluralism which rejects the idea of absolute truth or generalization. The question of absolute reality is the major debate of postmodernism as it resists metanarrative, a narrative which assumes the universality of meaning irrespective of differences in contexts. It confirms the idea of critical literacy that critical skepticism is required in deconstructing the dominant meanings in order to unveil the sociocultural and political ideologies underpinned in the texts.

The postmodern perspective of critical media literacy challenges the traditional idea of considering media as a conscious industry. According to this perspective, although the media have powerful influence on audience reinforcing what to think about, yet it is difficult to inject a repressive ideology directly into the consciousness of the audience who are not passive victims of mediated culture. It believes that in spite of powerful influence of media it is difficult to fix a preferred meaning as different individuals read messages in different ways. The autonomous and sophisticated audiences may have multiple reading of media representations that shape a diverse media culture.

According to Sholle and Denski (1995), "the early versions of media literacy were constructed on a model of the media acting as a creator of messages that imposed meaning on the audience." Earlier the concept of media education was more about developing an inoculative approach among the students for protecting them from the negative effect of the media. Such an inoculative approach considered the audience as passive consumers of media text placing them within a similar social context and with similar predispositions. But in a postmodern context, the

subjective reading of texts denies the metanarrative interpretation of the text and argues for a meaning-making process which is differential and subject to the heterogeneity of culture.

Postmodernism emphasizes on a pragmatic perspective of understanding texts which varies from context to context. The role of context in deriving meaning is the key idea of this philosophy according to which the process of deconstruction of representation is differential from subject to subject. The postmodern theory explains how we create subjectivity based on our own experiences and dispositions which ultimately leads to differences between meanings and its affect on the audience. Hence, autonomy of every individual works in the process of reading and rereading of media texts. Critical media literacy in such postmodern condition considers every individual as an autonomous entity and focuses on developing skills of empowerment and protection. According to Renee Hobbs (2016) “empowerment focuses on how knowledge and critical thinking skills increase people’s active engagement with media in ways that support civic participation, while protection emphasizes on the potential dangers and risks of exposure to offensive or harmful media content or conduct”. Such empowerment and protection are possible through developing skills of critical reflection on political correctness of media text. Such critical reflection on media content, media institutions, and media ownership, exploring issues of institutional power and examining quality, credibility, equity, social justice, issues of representation, etc. empower the audience in understanding political correctness of the media texts in context to its existence as an ideological text.

Critical media literacy as a pedagogical approach in media education equips the students with inculcating counter-hegemonic skills of reading preferred meanings. It helps in identifying discursive meanings which are constructed in the production of texts. This process of demystification of meanings can be understood in the works of Stuart Hall, who developed the theory of encoding and decoding explaining the relationship between the encoder (sender) and the decoder (receiver) of a text. In the book, “Media and cultural studies keyword”(Durham&Kellner, 2001), the Stuart Hall’s essay on “Encoding/Decoding” explains the process of encoding and decoding of meaning in terms of circuit of four stages of communication including production, circulation, use, and reproduction. According to him, though the meanings are constructed in the production phase based on institutional ideologies, assumption about audience, etc. yet it is not identical with reception of meaning on the audience parts. Differences in production and reception of meanings occur because of the existing asymmetric socio-cultural relations between the decoders and the encoders. Such an asymmetric relation is possible because of the existing correlation among the elements of knowledge, culture, social and historical context at the connotation level of understanding texts. Stuart Hall discussed three hypothetical situations explaining the process of deconstruction of media text based on subjective capacity of the receivers in deriving meaning. At the first hypothetical situation, receivers take the dominant hegemonic position in which they accept the preferred meaning which is the naturalized meaning determined by institutional, political ideologies of the encoders. On the other hand, the second position refers to a negotiated position in which the decoders may

accept the legitimacy of the dominant meaning but they create their own version of a negotiated meaning based on some adaptive as well as oppositional elements. Such elements are determined by the situational position of the receivers in reading the text which differs from discourse to discourse. The third position as explained by Hall is related to oppositional codes of the decoders in which they reject the message and take part in the struggle over meanings. In this third position, receivers create alternative meanings to give voice against the dominant or preferred meanings.

Developing critical media literacy skills among the students help them to enhance their skills in understanding their position in relation to a preferred meaning. A classroom environment should encourage the students to empower themselves in negotiating meaning as well as create alternative meanings recognizing the socio-cultural context based on their own judgments. Such a process of media education opens scope for a dialogical classroom in which teachers and students are engaged in democratic classroom practices. A multimodal classroom in which students participations are encouraged through providing scope for interactivity between teachers and students facilitating them to enhance their cognitive skills in understanding and creating the meaning of experiences

A multimodal curriculum of media education for developing critical media literacy: A postmodern view of media education emphasizes on a democratic classroom environment in which students as audience have been liberated in the classroom in interpreting media texts. It also focuses on developing instructional practices and theoretical frameworks that support diversity of responses of the students rather than creating consensus. Such an approach to media education gives it an investigative nature fostering both critical understandings as well as awareness in students for inculcating critical judgments about media representations. Len Masterman (2001) in the book “Media literacy in the information age: Current perspective” argues that "media education should facilitate the students to increase their understanding of the media- of how and in whose interest they work, how they are organized, how they produce meaning, how they go about the business of representing a reality".

A multimodal teaching-learning classroom empowers the students to communicate their individual cultural experiences interacting with varied social contexts. Blending different modes of teaching including text, audio, video, and image, a multimodal curriculum produces collective meanings facilitating a dialogical classroom. A dialogical classroom, in which both the students and teachers play role as co-investigator in the teaching and learning process, requires recognizing the diverse background of the students. For meaningful learning, students should learn to critically synthesize the information through a cognitive process of integrating existing knowledge in analyzing and evaluating media texts. This synthesizing process furthers development of collaborative intelligence in which students and teachers can easily form an interactive platform using different communication technologies. Teachers need to encourage the

students for liberal decoding of the text in the classroom through negotiating meanings based on their experiences. The content of media education also needs to recognize the diversity of pleasure of reading the text instead of enforcing the preferred meaning on the students. Therefore, the postmodern view believes that no longer the educators are the legislators of creating meanings and imposing legitimized culture on the students. Teachers are the interpreters, making available multiple realities and diverse forms of perception and knowledge (Buckingham, 2003).

According to Paulo Freire, it is the problem-posing education that facilitates a dialogical relationship in a classroom environment for development of critical consciousness. Problematization of the process of representation and engaging with issues of power and pleasure through the lenses of ideology, naturalization, stereotypes, etc., media education facilitates students in developing the skills of critical media literacy. Problem-posing education makes the students as critical thinkers and helps them to overcome their false perception of the reality engaging themselves in a situation which is presented as a problem to them. Freire believed that a dialogical classroom culture helps in demythologizing such problems through encouraging the students to unveil the reality. "Dialogical relations are indispensable to the capacity of cognitive actors. The students are no longer docile listener –are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher." (Freire,1970).

Conclusion: "None of us really knows how to live in this era of media convergence, collective intelligence, and participatory culture. These changes are producing anxieties and uncertainties, even panic, as people imagine a world without gatekeepers and live with the reality of expanding corporate media power" (Jenkins,2006).Critical media literacy as an optimistic idea in such convergence culture minimizes the conflict between the reader and the text. Media education furthers this process implementing critical media literacy as a teaching pedagogy. Such pedagogy does not make the students cynical about media; on the contrary, it creates awareness on how media function in creating meanings. Media education should encourage students for acknowledging diversity of pleasure in reading media texts considering its sociological basis of any ideological or aesthetical criticisms.

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