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# Critical Theory Needs Decolonization and Neo-Vedanta May Hold the Key

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## Abstract

Frankfurt School Critical Theory emerged to challenge systems of oppression, but it carries a fatal flaw: it's stuck in the Enlightenment mindset that birthed colonialism. It talks about freedom – but only from a Eurocentric lens, ignoring the wisdom of the Global South. Enter Neo-Vedanta, a revolutionary reinterpretation of ancient Indian philosophy, propelled by Swami Vivekananda's call for a spiritual and social awakening. While Critical Theory exposes power structures, Neo-Vedanta goes deeper, arguing that real freedom starts within. It dismantles the ego – the root of domination – and replaces it with *seva*, selfless service. For Vivekananda, liberation wasn't about personal enlightenment or Western-style progress; it was about merging the self with humanity's collective struggle. This isn't about picking sides – it's about creating something new: a world where liberation isn't a Western export but a global conversation. True freedom, Neo-Vedanta reminds us, isn't just about breaking chains. It's about dissolving the very idea of control – and finding power in service, not domination. Liberation was never meant to belong to one civilization alone.

**Keywords:** Critical Theory; liberation; Neo-Vedanta; progress; service

Frankfurt School Critical Theory prides itself on championing freedom, but its Eurocentric blinders tell a different story. Rooted in Enlightenment ideals, it largely ignores colonialism and dismisses non-Western perspectives. But a fresh perspective could change that: the transformative Neo-Vedantic concept of liberation, a revolutionary reinterpretation of ancient Indian philosophy, offers a way to expand Critical Theory, creating a more inclusive vision of emancipation for all.

## 1. The critique of power in Critical Theory

Critical Theory, a groundbreaking intellectual movement born from the Frankfurt School, suggests that modern society operates on hidden systems of power that shape our thoughts, actions, and desires – often without us realizing it. Critical Theory pulls back the curtain, revealing these dynamics and challenging the structures.

Critical Theory isn't just about critique – it's a roadmap for change. It empowers us to question the status quo, rethink democracy, and imagine a world where justice and equality are tangible realities. Frankfurt School theorist Max Horkheimer envisioned Critical Theory as a radical tool for “human emancipation from slavery,” a force for freedom designed to build a world that meets human needs and unlocks potential.<sup>1</sup>

But something went awry. The colonizing tendencies within Critical Theory arose from its own central premise: questioning systems of power, dominance, and exclusion. When Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (2002) claim that “freedom in society is inseparable from Enlightenment thinking,” this framework harbored the seeds of its own regression.<sup>2</sup> Though they emphasized the necessity for Enlightenment modernity to liberate itself from irrational domination, Adorno omitted the role of colonialism, genocide of native peoples, and slavery as integral components of Enlightenment modernity in Europe and did not concern himself with the emancipation of the colonized population of the world.<sup>3,4</sup>

The next generation of critical theorists – such as Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst – built their ideas of freedom around Hegelian ideals of Progress and Reason and, in the process, tied them tightly to the scaffolding of Enlightenment and European modernity. Habermas believed in Shmuel Eisenstadt's concept of “multiple modernities,” suggesting that modernity could take diverse forms across different societies; Honneth drew on the Hegelian tradition of “mutual recognition,” which emphasized the importance of acknowledgment and empathy in building equitable societies.<sup>5</sup> Yet these theorists failed to abandon the ingrained notion of Euro-America's developmental superiority over “traditional” societies of the Global South.

The message was clear: liberation and progress flowed from the Global North to the Global South, not the other way around. For all its talk of emancipation, Critical Theory has been caught in a web of coloniality – which Aníbal Quijano describes as a suppression of diverse “modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives.”<sup>6</sup> Catherine Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo call for an openness to alternative “world senses and life visions” long ignored by colonial legacies for engaging in any form of decolonization.<sup>7</sup> Amy Allen believes that Critical Theory must let go of its claims to moral superiority and instead cultivate humility – a willingness to listen and be unsettled by embracing the destabilizing beauty of engaging with other cultures on equal footing.<sup>8</sup>

For Allen, what is needed is the “problematization of our own point of view,” by which she does not mean “a rejection or abstract negation of the normative inheritance of modernity but rather... a fuller realization of its central value, namely, freedom.”<sup>9</sup> But let's not assume this alone will suffice. Problematization, while a good start, falls short of achieving true global emancipation. Here's the harsh truth: Western Critical Theory cannot cling to the

<sup>1</sup> Horkheimer 1972, 246.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, xvi.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, xviii.

<sup>4</sup> Bhambra 2021, 76.

<sup>5</sup> Allen 2019, 283–4; Honneth 1995, 92–5.

<sup>6</sup> Quijano 2007, 169.

<sup>7</sup> Walsh and Mignolo 2018, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Allen 2016, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Allen 2016, 195.

“normative inheritance of modernity” while claiming to fight for liberation. That’s a contradiction that shackles it to the very structures it seeks to dismantle. Mignolo’s challenge cuts to the core: genuine alternatives to colonial epistemology cannot emerge from within the same Western framework that created them.<sup>10</sup>

To truly decolonize – or “world” – Critical Theory, we need a revolution in thought. Anything less would be like trying to redirect a drying stream, hoping it will somehow flow faster and fuller, even as it withers. What’s needed isn’t to reshape the old stream, but to seek a new confluence. But where can we find alternative ideas of emancipation and liberation to rejuvenate the dried stream of Critical Theory?

Perhaps the answer lies outside the West – in India, in the philosophy of Neo-Vedanta. Together, Critical Theory and Neo-Vedanta form something neither could achieve alone – a river that runs deeper, wider, and stronger, carrying with it not just the will to dismantle oppression but the vision to rebuild a freer, more compassionate world. But how can a spiritual tradition speak to the realities of oppression and liberation?

## 2. Liberation in Neo-Vedanta

Born from the roaring fires of 19th-century Bengal’s Renaissance and India’s anti-colonial upheaval, Neo-Vedanta wasn’t just a philosophy – it was a battle cry. Rising alongside the Swadeshi movement and radical religious reforms like the Brahmo Samaj, it was a spiritual insurgency led by none other than Swami Vivekananda. He didn’t merely redefine monastic life – he shattered the old mold.

The older model of Adi Shankaracharya’s Advaita Vedanta declared the world as *Maya*, an illusion that traps us in the endless loop of *samsara* (worldly existence). True liberation, he taught, comes from the realization that *Atman* (Individual Consciousness) and *Brahman* (Universal Consciousness) are one and the same. This profound self-knowledge, known as *Brahma-Jnana* or *atma-bodhi*, breaks the chains of ignorance. For Shankaracharya, the path wasn’t about changing the outer world but transforming the inner self. As Kapil Tiwari notes, in Shankara’s *Advaita, Jnana* (knowledge) triumphs over *Karma* (action).<sup>11</sup>

Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedanta took Shankara’s ancient wisdom and reloaded it with modern logic and modern urgency.<sup>12</sup> His Neo-Vedantic idea of liberation wasn’t a quiet path to personal salvation but a fearless answer to the ignorant masses, corrupt priests, hypocritical *babus*, and spineless princes who kept India in spiritual and social chains.<sup>13</sup> It was an electrifying call to action, blending spirituality with service, *seva*, and a vision of universal brotherhood.<sup>14</sup>

His guru, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, wasn’t just a mystic – he was a visionary who saw the truth before the world did. He inspired Vivekananda to realize that Vedanta wasn’t a luxury for monks in forests – it belonged to the streets, the cities, the people. As Vivekananda declared: “The Vedanta of the forest can be brought to human habitation and applied to the

<sup>10</sup> Mignolo 2000, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Tiwari 1977, 1, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Sooklal 1993, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Gupta 1974, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Das 2015, 374.

work-a-day world.”<sup>15</sup> This was Vedanta on the move – a philosophy that marched alongside India’s freedom fighters, preaching service over ritual and action over apathy. Neo-Vedanta wasn’t a prayer – it was a revolution.

Swamiji’s Neo-Vedanta, or what Romain Rolland famously called “Ramakrishnite Vedantism,” was rooted in the radical belief in the “divinity of man” and the “essential spirituality of life.”<sup>16</sup> The Neo-Vedantic *jivanmukta* has demolished the door of “selfish, purely contemplative faith.”<sup>17</sup> This Vedanta is for fighters, for those who refuse to watch the world burn from a safe distance. Ramakrishna once said, “Religion is not for empty bellies.” First, feed the people – then awaken their souls. Vivekananda didn’t just agree – he turned it into a manifesto in *Practical Vedanta – IV*: “Who cares whether there is a heaven or hell? ... Here is the world and it is full of misery. Get out into it as Buddha did, and struggle to lessen it or die in the attempt.”<sup>18</sup> This was *seva* as rebellion. In his poem *Birbani*, Vivekananda shattered the line between God and humanity, declaring that to serve the living was to serve Lord Shiva Himself.<sup>19</sup> Selfless action wasn’t just moral – it was divine.

While Critical Theory ties liberation to material progress and structural critique, Vedanta – Shankaracharya’s Advaita Vedanta and Swamiji’s Neo-Vedanta – offers a deeper, complementary model by addressing the root cause of oppression: ego, domination, and desire. The individual – after attaining liberation through the realization that “the unity of the individual self with the universal Self means that an individual cannot inflict injury on another without injuring himself” – negates the very basis of “self” versus “other” that fuels oppression.<sup>20</sup> Imagine a life free from the endless chase for more – more money, more power. In the philosophy of Vedanta, this is not just a lofty, mystical dream; it is a philosophy that starts within and ripples outward, reshaping the world by reshaping the self.

Neo-Vedanta wasn’t only a spiritual revolution for social change – it was a philosophical fistfight. It has the ability to stare down Critical Theory’s Eurocentric roots and Enlightenment rationality’s cold, mechanistic version of progress. Where the West preached that freedom came through reason and material gains, Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedanta fought back with a radical social ethic of compassion and selflessness – a global reset on what liberation even means. And Belur Math, the headquarters of Ramakrishna Mission? It wasn’t built to hide monks from the world – it was a command center for revolution-in-action, running on three engines<sup>21</sup>:

*Anna Dana* – Feed the hungry.

*Vidya Dana* – Spread intellectual knowledge.

*Jnana Dana* – Awaken spiritual consciousness.

Vivekananda’s thunderous call, “*Atmano Moksartham, Jagat Hitaya Cha*” – “For one’s own liberation, and for the welfare of the world” – obliterated the lie that spirituality and social justice were separate paths. If the One and the Many are ultimately the same, then chasing personal enlightenment while ignoring the suffering of others isn’t just selfish – it’s a

<sup>15</sup> Beckerlegge 2007, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Rolland 2016 [1931], 241.

<sup>17</sup> Rolland 2016 [1931], 237.

<sup>18</sup> Rolland 2016 [1931], 230.

<sup>19</sup> Vivekananda 1989, 197–217.

<sup>20</sup> Richards 1995, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Rolland 2016 [1931], 260.

betrayal of truth itself.<sup>22</sup> And if Vivekananda started the fire, Sri Aurobindo poured rocket fuel on it. His Integral Yoga wasn't content with inner peace – it demanded a “radical change of our entire being.”<sup>23</sup> His vision? A world reborn – not by escaping reality but by tearing down the old one. Aurobindo's supramental transformation will produce a society consisting of:

Unity-in-diversity – Not sameness, but strength through difference.

Peace-with-justice – No peace without fairness.

Love-with-freedom – Because domination has no place in liberation.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Freedom from oppression

What if liberation wasn't a fight between the secular and the sacred but a dialogue between them? The task before us is not to choose between these two visions of liberation but to let them speak to one another. Imagine a liberation that isn't Western or Eastern, material or spiritual, but something bigger. Truly universal. It imagines a world where liberation is not just freedom from oppression but freedom from the very impulse to oppress, where freedom is not won through domination, but realized through “*seva*” and compassion; where justice is not only structural, but also spiritual. Perhaps true emancipation begins when we realize that we are not free until we serve.

As Richard King astutely points out, to truly transcend the Eurocentric debates that have dominated Western academia, we cannot afford to ignore the role of religion.<sup>25</sup> Let's create a new space where secular Enlightenment ideals and Neo-Vedantic wisdom don't clash but collide and create. The world doesn't need another war of ideologies. It needs an intermediary space – where the secular and the sacred don't cancel each other out, but ignite something entirely new.

This is where Critical Theory can become truly *cross-cultural*. Raimundo Panikkar rightly observes that “cross-cultural studies do not mean to study other cultures, but to let other cultures impregnate the very study of the problem.”<sup>26</sup> This engagement must be an active, reciprocal dialogue that allows the sacred ideas of liberation in Eastern philosophies to *impregnate* the secular idea of freedom in Critical Theory. Such a transformation would not only broaden the scope of Critical Theory but would also instigate a profound shift in the very conception of the philosophy of freedom itself.

Critical Theory, as it stands, was a product of a particular historical and cultural moment – a moment deeply tied to the intellectual and colonial projects of the West. To remain relevant in a globalized world, it must evolve. By embracing cross-cultural engagement, we can reimagine liberation not as a Western construct but as a global, inclusive ideal. The truth is, the postcolonial world is already here – and it demands more than old frameworks can give. The question isn't whether we can afford to decolonize Critical Theory – it's whether we can afford not to. The time for a truly transformative, global philosophy is now. Will Critical Theory rise to the challenge, or will it remain shackled to the past? The answer lies in our willingness to engage with the wisdom of the world.

<sup>22</sup> Sarvapriyananda 2014, 210.

<sup>23</sup> Aurobindo 1996, 388.

<sup>24</sup> Chaudhuri 1972, 10.

<sup>25</sup> King 2009, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Panikkar 1992, 236.

*Liberation, after all, was never meant to belong to one civilization alone.*

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