INTRODUCTION
That education’s major concern, among others, should be to encourage students to think critically is commonplace today. No respectable educational institution, or one having pretentions to be respectable, can afford not to promote critical thinking, nor can a teacher be seen to be hostile to it. Critical thinking is the modern mantra that has everyone enthralled. It is touted as the miracle cure for much that ails both education and society. Yet the question remains to be asked: How many just lip-synch the mantra and how many really know and understand the full implications of what they so devoutly preach and are committed to practising.

In this short opinion piece I will not try to hazard a guess as to how many are serious devotees and how many are camp followers who just follow an advantageous trend when they see one. Although useful from some perspective, this is not at all an interesting question from the perspective I have chosen to write about critical thinking. From that perspective, the question that needs to be given importance is, what the implications of teaching critical thinking are? By implications is meant of course social implications. So the issue is not if critical thinking is true or false in some logical, philosophical sense, but whether teaching critical thinking yields the most desirable social results. To pursue this line of inquiry I have to first give a working definition of critical thinking in vogue today, and then say something about what I mean by social implication. Not to give my short discourse an overall negative hue, I intend to propose an alternative view of critical thinking to the one widely embraced and put in practice today, and show that the vital difference between the two views of critical thinking turns on the issue of social implications.

Ever since teaching critical thinking became fashionable, writing textbooks on the subject has turned out economically to be a very profitable proposition, hence there is no dearth of books on the subject of teaching. There are, however, relatively fewer books on the subject of critical thinking itself. One can, therefore, easily glean from them what they all mean by critical thinking, notwithstanding their minor differences here and there.
Stated briefly, critical thinking is an attempt to teach the skills of thinking effectively and eradicate floppy thinking. Effective thinking, in this view, is one which is logically consistent and rationally grounded. These two conditions require that as critical thinkers, we should also reflect on our assumptions and evaluate them, for if our assumptions are wrong, our thinking cannot be effective. This skill is needed whenever we think or need to think coherently and consistently. Whatever we embark on will fail if we do not think critically. A lawyer’s ability to make his/her case effective in a court of law, on the one hand, and the scientist’s ability to do science creatively and to convince others of the merits of his/her theory on the other, are best examples of critical thinking. Both exhibit, to a very high degree, the ability to solve problems, which the critical theorists maintain is an essential part of critical thinking. And since educational institutions are in the business of turning out competent engineers, lawyers, scientists, physicians and social scientists, critical thinking should be an essential ingredient of every curriculum.

In focusing on and promoting critical thinking, what type of education for human beings is helping to foster and what type of society is it helping to create? Critical thinking is a private, personal skill employed primarily to achieving private and personal goals. In other words, this is a skill which has no social components; I can practise it by myself in isolation from other human beings. To elaborate this point a little further, I need only recognise my private needs when engaging in critical thinking. Critical thinking equips me with the necessary intellectual arsenal to fight intellectual battles in pursuit of my private interests in a world in which the battles, for the most part, are intellectual. It is like having a bigger gun or a more deadly bomb to pursue and safeguard one’s interests with total disregard for the interests of others and/or for the implications of their use. This brand of critical thinking does not necessarily ground us in history and/or society. This becomes clear when we look a little more closely at their view of problem solving. A problem is accepted as a fact for which the critical thinker is suppose to find a solution, without, however, ever asking the following questions: why is it a problem, for whom is it a problem and who created it. These would be the most relevant and pressing questions if the entire enterprise of thinking was viewed, grounded in history and society. For it matters to know the historical and social background of the whole issue to determine for whom it is a problem and why it is a problem and who caused it. These would be the most relevant and pressing questions if the entire enterprise of thinking was viewed, grounded in history and society. For it matters to know the historical and social background of the whole issue to determine for whom it is a problem and why it is a problem and who caused it if a realistic solution is to be found. It may very well not be an isolated problem but a systemic one; to avoid asking these questions is to protect the whole system from criticism. Hence, this view of critical thinking defends the status quo; this account of critical thinking makes no social demands on us, for we can be critical thinkers without being involved in the world, to view the world from the sidelines, so to speak.

By emphasising the theme of social implication, I am underscoring the view that value of education should not be judged solely by its contribution to the country’s GDP. Only the creation of wealth shows up on GDP’s score card; for the distribution of that wealth, there is no logical space on the card. The distribution of wealth becomes an issue only if social equality is first deemed as an important concern. And social equality is one important
dimension along which social implications, of any educational practice is to be judged and validated. Briefly stated, social equality aims to realise social justice in society. And social justice does not mean equality of wealth and income but rather the recognition of equal moral worth of each individual human being. If we accept this proposition, then we are committed to making sure that each individual’s basic needs are met; and needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education and protection from coercion and false arrests are basic because if they are not met, one is not truly human. Hence, concern for social equality requires that the social score board for development should record not only how much wealth is being produced but also how justly that wealth is being distributed or else despite the wealth, there will be some living in squalor as the rich get richer and the poor slip deeper into poverty.

For social justice to be an issue, we need to foster another type of human being; one who is not locked into his/her private and personal interests. Not to be so circumscribed is to recognise in the needs of others, one’s own needs, to acknowledge that human needs are not private but social. This proposition acquires cogency from the more general proposition that humans are essentially social beings, that before there is any I, there is we. The recognition of the priority of ‘we’ over ‘I’ is predicated on the view that we share this planet which has limited resources that have to be used wisely, that is to say justly, or else there will be strife and more strife. This is no doubt a moral view, which irrespective of what religion or creed one follows, has for each one of us very clear and obvious practical consequences.

Arising from this moral perspective, there is another form of critical thinking that asks the question: why are things the way they are and can they be different? To ask this question is to care the way the world is; and to care is to be involved in the way the world is. Caring comes from the ability to recognise in the needs of others, your need, to see in the suffering of others, human suffering, from which no one is immune; in short to have the courage to face your own vulnerability. Caring, hence, draws you into the world and forces you to take a stand. What does caring in this context mean if not the desire for social justice? In other words, to ask the question, why are things the way they are, is to ask, is the world just? And to ask, is the world just is to ask a moral question. This mode of critical thinking is not a skill that is to be practised in a social, historical and moral vacuum, but rather a moral project that investigates history for clues for the lack of social justice in the contemporary society. If education undertakes to teach students to care and take a stand in an uncaring world, then it has to adopt this mode of critical thinking. Education will then have a moral purpose, and not just the economic goal of producing greater numbers.

To foster and prime young students to care does not require a major shift or change in the present system of education, but just a change in the habits of mind of those responsible for education both at the level of policy and practice. It requires educationists not to view education primarily as an economic enterprise that may have moral consequences, but rather essentially as a moral project that also has beneficial economic consequences. For
that is how education has been viewed for much of its early history in all the civilizations. Furthermore, recently philosophers have been telling us that knowledge is a form of scratching, we scratch where it itches, underscoring that creation of knowledge is the result of problem solving; and hence it follows that the type of knowledge we create depends on the type of question we ask or what we view as a problem. What is the problem and for whom and why, depends entirely on how we view the world. If we see the world essentially as a limitless source of raw material for the satisfaction of our private needs, we will face one set of problems, but if we see the world primarily as a place where the basic needs of many go unrecognised, we will have entirely different types of problems. In the first case, it is important to point out that the problems would be of technical kind; in the second, however, the issue is a moral one. It is not to say that the two are mutually exclusive, but what ultimately is the source of the problem, by virtue of which something is seen as a problem, would in each case be different.

Our educational institutions are the crucible in which the next generation is wrought; the choice is ours: do we want to turn out year upon year smart and clever engineers, accountants, physicians, scientists and teachers all ably fitted with critical thinking skills yet not moved to take a stand for the less fortunate because not having learnt to care or to teach the next generation to care and express their care for others by using whatever knowledge or skills they have acquired in helping the much embattled and fractious world to become a less trying place for the faceless, nameless millions who struggle each day just to survive.

And if today, despite the phenomenal increase in the number of people being educated in both relative and absolute terms, and the concomitant increase in knowledge, there has not been any let up in violence of all kinds, could it not be it is the inhuman response of some to the inhuman world.

Finally the vision of education spelled out above is unabashedly idealistic; a teacher who is not an idealist is in the wrong profession; we teach not for money or fame but to make the world a little better.