

“Can the Subaltern Speak?”

- **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** – Indian scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic, Professor at Columbia University
- associated with literary criticism, feminism and deconstruction, and (her critique of) Western philosophy, postcolonialism and Marxism
- important concepts:
 - “the subaltern” (Subaltern Studies)
 - “strategic essentialism”
 - “the other”



“The Subaltern”

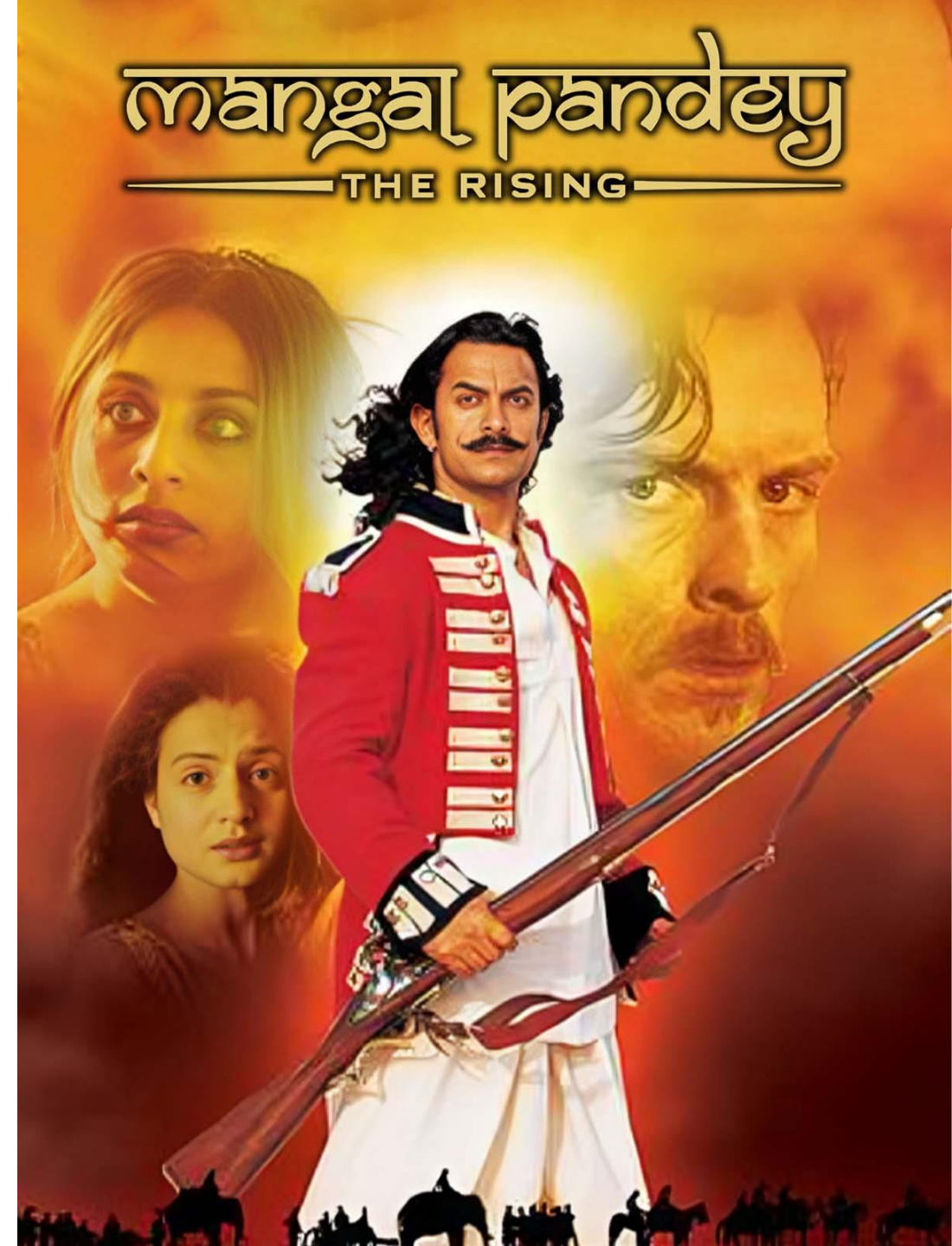
- the Italian Marxist theorist **Antonio Gramsci**’s definition:
 - [first introduced in his Prison Notebooks (written between 1929–1935) as a strategic term to discuss the working class and peasantry under fascist censorship]
 - **subaltern classes** as any “low rank” person or group of people in a particular society **suffering under hegemonic domination** of a ruling elite class **that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals** of the same nation → **those subordinated by hegemony and excluded from any meaningful role in a regime of power**
 - characterized by their lack of unified political organization: “The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'State': their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States.”
 - therefore **historically specific**: political and class-based, rooted in the concrete material conditions of workers and peasants in Italian society under Mussolini’s regime

“The Subaltern”

- Gramsci then developed a systematic approach to studying subaltern groups through six progressive phases:
 1. Their objective formation by changes taking place in economic production (base / infrastructure)
 2. Their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations and their attempts to influence their programs
 3. The birth of new parties and dominant groups, which are mainly created for the subjugation and ‘maintenance’ of the subaltern
 4. The formations which the subaltern groups themselves made to vindicate limited rights
 5. New formations which maintain the subaltern groups’ autonomy within old frameworks
 6. Those formations which may help to affirm their entire autonomy
- his framework also extended beyond class to include **“people from different religions or cultures, or those existing at the margins of society”** who – he believed – had transformative potential to challenge and eventually overcome hegemonic domination through political organization and consciousness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbMin0ha11w>

“White men are saving brown women from brown men.”



- Colonial discourse often split India into “backward men” and “victimized women”, legitimizing imperial rule as a humanitarian mission
- British reformers could depict themselves as moral saviors to justify political domination
- **Indian women trapped between two systems:** forced into subordination by their own society, then further disempowered when “rescued” by colonial authorities who spoke for them rather than enabling their own voices
 - **“double oppression/colonization”**
 - **“If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.”**
- in Spivak’s view, such “rescue” both destroys indigenous modes of social critique and forecloses subaltern subjects’ capacity to articulate alternative forms of agency

- Spivak asks whether the “subaltern”, i.e., those socially, politically, and geographically **marginalized under colonial and patriarchal power** – can ever truly have a voice within the discourses that claim to “give voice” to them
- even well-meaning scholars or activists who (claim to) “speak for” the subaltern inevitably reinscribe the very power differentials they wish to dismantle, because **the act of representation always filters real voices through dominant languages and epistemologies**
- some (e.g., Gayatri Sen) have advocated that marginalized groups temporarily present themselves as **unified “essences”** to resist imperialist narratives, but
 - Spivak cautions that this strategy can freeze complex lived experiences into simplistic identities, making true multiplicity and dissent impossible to register
- Spivak analyses two British-colonial “feminist” interventions in India
 - the campaign against suttee/sati (widow immolation)
 - the abolition of female infanticide
- in both cases, colonial reformers – whether sincerely motivated or not – erased Indian women’s own voices and agency by substituting their “civilized” prescriptions for local forms of knowledge and protest
- Spivak concludes that **the subaltern cannot speak within hegemonic discourses**; but what appears as **silence** may actually be a form of refusal
- genuine “speaking” would require dismantling the epistemic structures that render subalterns literally inaudible