



# HEGEMONIC CULTURE AND THE IDEA OF RAYMOND WILLIAMS IN GLADIATOR SERIES – ‘SPARTACUS’

Abhijith Varma P S <sup>1</sup>, Sonia Chellarian <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Integrated MA, Dept. of English Language and Literature, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi, India

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Dept. of English Language and Literature, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi, India

**Abstract:** The popular gladiator series *Spartacus* is examined in this paper from the viewpoints of two significant theorists, Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci, in order to examine the idea of hegemonic culture and also included Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity. The hegemonic culture theory contends that those in positions of power create dominant cultural norms and values in order to maintain their hold on society. Williams and Gramsci both emphasized how important it is to understand how culture affects social hierarchies. In current society, hegemonic culture still survives in different ways, including through the employment of institutions, media, language, and symbols that support the interests and values of the dominant group while excluding those of other groups. *Spartacus*, an American television series which promulgate the life of a Gladiator who led a rebellion against the Romans who were known for capturing of slaves through warfare and were either brought back as an object to be sold to traders or as war booty. Enslaved people would never be freed, and they could be subjected to corporal punishment, sexual exploitation and even forced to train and perform in the arenas as Gladiators who were subjected to entertain the audience by violent confrontation with other gladiators, wild animals, and condemned criminals. The Thracian hero of the plot conducted a mutiny against Rome to overthrow the hegemonic culture. The series argues that by showing characters who challenge accepted cultural norms and ideals, which create cultural opposition can lead to a utopian society free from Roman dominance.

**Index Terms -** Promulgate, War booty, Corporal, Confrontation, Mutiny, Hegemony.

## Introduction

The paper focuses on the notion of hegemonic culture and how it manifests itself in the series, where the importance of power, dominance and leadership are well depicted. All through three seasons and a prequel miniseries, we find the struggle and oppression faced by the people who were persuaded and enlisted in the Roman service as auxiliaries. We can see these people fighting for their freedom and in the hope of escaping from the depressing reality. Many who have been captured were forced to lead a miserable life as slaves who were entitled to satisfy the needs of the capitalist society, and some were given an opportunity to fight in the arena to prove the worth of their life. This sport has given the rich aristocrats and the Roman emperors a chance to show off their wealth and fight for public glory. These games were bloody entertainment usually spectated by thousands and these contests were literally a matter of life and death. According to Raymond Williams, the creation and upkeep of hegemonic culture occurs through the creation and distribution of cultural items including TV shows, films, and novels. Research on this subject would look at how the play challenges and subverts prevailing cultural norms and values, such as patriarchy, slavery, and brutality, and also demonstrates some parallels between modern sports and historical Gladiator battles by depicting Spartacus as a revolutionary figure.

The riveting historical drama *Spartacus* on Starz tells the tale of a Thracian gladiator who leads a revolt against the Roman Republic in 73 BC. The series, which ran from 2010 to 2013, received plaudits for its intense combat scenes, nuanced characters, and accurate depiction of ancient Roman culture. Steven S. DeKnight and Robert Tapert, who were the executive producers of the series structured the events of *Spartacus* in a way to satisfy the idea of Cultural Hegemony put forward by the famous Italian Marxist philosopher, writer, linguist, journalist, and politician Antonio

Francesco Gramsci and the three levels of culture which include Dominant, Residual, and Emergent cultures set forth by Welsh socialist writer, novelist, critic and academician Raymond Henry Williams. The series incorporates these two theories by portraying power, dominance, and leadership, which are the three main features of hegemony through major characters. The series promoted the concept of cultural revolution to accompany the political and economic revolution of Subaltern groups. The storyline of this series grows from the time of Spartacus's allegiance to the Romans, to his betrayal and becoming a gladiator, thus ultimately leading the Slave Rebellion. The Thracian was persuaded by Gaius Claudius Glaber, who was a military commander of the late Roman Republic, the service as an auxiliary in the Roman legion for the campaign against Thracian related tribe known as Getae. But Spartacus felt betrayed and mutiny when Glaber reneges on the deal and switched his attack over Mithridates in Asia Minor, by condemning his death as a gladiator and forcing his wife Sura into slavery. Due to his excellence in the arena, he became a crowd favorite which led Senator Albinus to commute his death sentence to a life of slavery. Later Spartacus was purchased by Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus Vatia popularly known as Quintus Lentulus Batiatus, who was a Lanista, a trainer, and a trader of gladiators. He was the head of his family Ludus, and he promised Spartacus to help him find Sura if he proves his worth as a champion of the arena. Later as the story progresses, we can see the betrayal and stratagem of Roman life and the heroic quest for vengeance carried by Spartacus and 70 – 78 followers who escaped from the Ludus in Capua which eventually led to a slave rebellion also known as Third Servile War.

The television show *Spartacus* has received a lot of scholarly and critical attention. The investigation of how the programme depicts power relations and conflicts between dominant and submissive cultures is a recurring theme in much of the writing. Scholars like Dr. Kinitra D. Brooks, Associate professor of English at the University of Texas at San Antonio and expert in science fiction, horror, and African American and Afro-Caribbean literature, examine the show's depiction of slavery and its relationship to more general issues of race, power, and exploitation in modern society in her article titled *The Deeper Roots of Blood and Sand: The Depiction of Slavery and Power in Spartacus*, which was published in the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 2015. She contends that the show's depiction of slavery as a structure of oppression and exploitation resonates with current debates over racial injustice and social justice. Others have examined how gender and sexuality are represented, especially in connection to how women and LGBTQ characters are portrayed, and how this affects broader cultural attitudes towards these identities. The 2013 article *Spartacus: Blood and Sex* by Jacqueline Furby examines the show's portrayal of gender and sexuality and makes the case that it disrupts conventional gender roles and heteronormative presumptions. She highlights how the show depicts homoerotic connections between male characters as well as strong, sophisticated female characters who defy gender stereotypes. Many academics have also examined the series' use of violence and spectacle, as well as how these fit into the story and the broader cultural environment. Michael W. Taylor's *Spectacles of Blood and Honour: Gladiators and Violence in Spartacus* is one example of this type of study. This 2014 article discusses how violence and spectacle are depicted in the show in relation to both modern culture and ancient Rome. He states that the portrayal of gladiatorial fights in the programme reflects and criticizes both the social and cultural norms of ancient Rome and current views on violence and spectacle. Thus, some academics contend that the show's extreme violence serves a more subversive purpose by questioning prevailing cultural norms and ideals, while some claim that it is a reflection of our society's preoccupation with cruelty and sensationalism. Overall, *Spartacus* literature offers a complex and nuanced analysis of the show's themes and ideas, emphasizing its propensity to question and challenge established societal conventions and hierarchies.

There is still a need for a more thorough examination of the ways in which violence is employed to generate meaning within the narrative and the larger cultural environment, even though some scholars have claimed that the violence in the show serves a subversive function, they only looked at how the series portrays violence, gender and sexuality, and historical accuracy, there is a large gap to be concentrated on how the show interacts with Williams and Gramsci's views. In particular, there is a lack of research on how the show both upholds and challenges established power systems. For instance, the show portrays the Roman Republic as a cruel and repressive government while also depicting the gladiators as nasty and merciless individuals in their own way. Furthermore, the portrayal of gender and sexuality in the series is nuanced, with some characters questioning conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity while others strictly uphold traditional gender roles. Researchers can better comprehend the political and cultural relevance of *Spartacus* by applying Williams and Gramsci's theories to the examination of the show. In particular, this research can offer insight into the ways that popular culture can both support and undermine established power structures, as well as the part that the media plays in influencing how we view the past and modern society.

The concepts of hegemonic culture and cultural resistance proposed by both Williams and Gramsci offer a theoretical foundation for comprehending the power dynamics at work in production. The series *Spartacus* depicts a world in which many social groupings and cultural traditions compete for dominance, and Williams' and Gramsci's theories

provide a framework for understanding how dominant cultures uphold their authority and how to subordinate cultures oppose and challenge it. The show's depiction of enslavement and the struggles of the gladiators against their Roman masters make the notions of hegemony and cultural resistance particularly pertinent. Their theories provide a framework for understanding how the Roman culture in power strives to hold onto control over the gladiator culture in subordination, as well as how the gladiators attempt to resist and challenge this power dynamic. The analysis of Williams and Gramsci is crucial for comprehending the cultural and historical issues in *Spartacus* since it provides a more comprehensive theoretical framework. In order to comprehend how the power dynamics shown in *Spartacus* reflect more general historical and cultural trends, it is helpful to appreciate the complicated relationship between culture and power that both thinkers were interested in exploring. Due to the fact that it provides a theoretical framework for comprehending the power dynamics at play in the show as well as a wider context for comprehending the cultural and historical themes explored in the series, the study of Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci is significant in relation to the television series *Spartacus*.

The methodology applied in this paper is qualitative and theoretical analyses that pinpoint important themes, characters, and story points that are pertinent to the theoretical framework being used. This could entail carefully reading the episodes and making thorough notes on any scenes, conversations, or visuals that are especially pertinent to the research subject. Close engagement with Williams' and Gramsci's theories, particularly their notions of hegemonic culture and cultural resistance, would be required for the theoretical study. This would entail carefully going through their writings with the aim of discovering crucial ideas and justifications that may be used to analyze the series. The theoretical analysis and the show's qualitative analysis will be merged to pinpoint particular instances in which the show's themes and ideas support or contradict Williams and Gramsci's theories. In order to demonstrate how their ideas, provide a helpful framework for understanding the power dynamics at play in *Spartacus*, as well as the more general cultural and historical themes explored in the show, the research methodology is therefore likely to involve a synthesis of the qualitative and theoretical analyses into a coherent argument.

### **Spartacus and Hegemonic Culture**

The *Spartacus* television series can be analyzed using Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. According to Gramsci's thesis, the ruling class makes use of cultural institutions like the media, education, and religion to maintain its supremacy over inferior groups and to shape society's values, beliefs, and worldview. It can be analyzed through the lens of the television series *Spartacus* as a representative of hegemonic culture. The hegemonic culture is evident in the series when ancient Rome is portrayed as a strong, oppressive civilization where the ruling class has complete control over the lives and bodies of slaves and gladiators. Its depiction of the Roman political system, the military, and the entertainment industry, all of which are under the control of the ruling elite, represents this hegemonic culture in the series. The programme also shows how the ruling class reinforces its ideology and maintains its power by exerting control over institutions of culture including language, law, and religion. There is always a chance of resistance and counter-hegemony from inferior groups, according to Gramsci, who also asserted that cultural hegemony is not absolute. By challenging the prevailing cultural narratives and beliefs of the Roman elite, slaves and gladiators in *Spartacus* demonstrate examples of resistance and counter-hegemony. The legend Spartacus was a slave who rises up in rebellion against his Roman owners and takes the helm of a slave uprising. He is a prime example of the concept of resistance to the dominant culture since he aims to topple the systems of authority that have been placed upon him. Spartacus is portrayed as a hero who struggles against the Roman Empire's tyranny. He wants to develop a new culture based on freedom and equality, which poses a threat to the dominant culture of the Roman Empire. The insurrection of Spartacus was not just a physical one against the Roman Empire but also a cultural one against the imperial civilization that predominated. Spartacus is portrayed as a complicated and multidimensional figure in the Gladiator series. He is not merely a one-dimensional hero; rather, he is a flawed human being who battles his own problems. The difficulties of opposing hegemonic culture are reflected in Spartacus' battle with his own identity and his interactions with his fellow rebels.

### **Dominant, Residual and Emergent Cultures in the series**

The Dominant, Residual, and Emergent cultures were the three categories of cultures described by Raymond Williams in his theory of cultural analysis. These classifications can be used to analyze the television show *Spartacus*, in which the governing elite of ancient Rome, who had complete control over the lives and bodies of slaves and gladiators, is depicted as the dominant culture. The political system, the armed forces, and the entertainment sector, all of which are governed by the governing elite, are used in the programme to symbolize the prevailing culture. The dominant culture upholds the values and ideologies of the ruling class, especially the notion that success and status can only be attained via violence and power. The portrayal of the customs and beliefs of ancient Rome that continue even as the dominant culture changes in *Spartacus* illustrates the residual culture. The depiction of conventional Roman religion, law, and

language serves as a representation of the residual culture in the programme. The ruling class frequently makes use of these lingering cultural traditions to uphold their position of authority and support their worldview. The portrayal of slaves and gladiators' battles to oppose and disrupt prevailing cultural narratives and beliefs in *Spartacus* reveals the emergence of a new culture. The characters' rejection of the prevalent ideals and beliefs of ancient Rome and their struggle for freedom and dignity serve as representations of the nascent culture in the series. By providing alternative values and viewpoints that support the concepts of individual freedom, equality, and solidarity, the emergent culture challenges the prevailing culture.

### **Homogeneity between ancient gladiator games and modern sports**

The fact that both gladiatorial combat and modern sports are spectator-heavy entertainment events is perhaps the most striking similarity between the two. In both situations, spectators come to the games for entertainment, to support their favorite athletes or teams, and to see amazing displays of athleticism and talent. Ancient gladiator battles and contemporary sports have both been commercialized and made into successful companies, which is another resemblance. Gladiator battles were frequently paid for by wealthy spectators in ancient Rome who exploited them to increase their status and influence. Powerful businesses now control a large number of sports, earning millions of dollars through retail sales, sponsorships, and TV rights. Modern sports and the gladiator fights of antiquity both feature physical prowess and rivalry between players or teams. Gladiators were skilled fighters who engaged in death-defying combat in the arena in antiquity. Athletes train for years to hone their skills and compete against one another in regulated contests in modern sports. Even though gladiator fights from antiquity were generally more violent than modern sports, many sports still contain elements of physical aggression and violence. Modern sports can definitely be physically demanding and competitive, but they are frequently supervised by laws and guidelines intended to ensure the participant's safety. World Wrestling Entertainment or simply WWE can be called the modern example of gladiator fights. The contestants in ancient gladiator games, sometimes engaged in death-defying battles. The WWE, on the other hand, is a scripted type of entertainment that features staged combat, whereas ancient Roman gladiators engaged in frequently terrible and gory bouts to the death. Nevertheless, there are some parallels between the spectacle and drama present in these two forms of entertainment. Larger-than-life characters, gripping plotlines, and remarkable athleticism are frequently featured in WWE contests. Similar to modern-day boxing matches, ancient Roman gladiator fights included expert warriors engaged in battle and were frequently accompanied by elaborate shows, including music and costumes. Additionally, there is a big emphasis on audience involvement and engagement in both WWE and the old Roman gladiator fights. In the case of WWE, viewers are urged to support their preferred wrestlers and take part in chanting and other crowd activities. Gladiator battles were created to appeal to a broad audience since they were frequently employed in ancient Rome as a means for the governing class to interact with ordinary people.

### **Conclusion**

The story of *Spartacus* serves as a potent illustration of how dominant culture functions in society and how it can be opposed and overthrown. Hegemonic culture is a dynamic and contentious force that influences a society's norms, values, and perspectives. The Gladiator television series portrays *Spartacus* as a symbol of opposition to that society, which depicts the Roman Empire as the dominant culture. It also shows how dominant and subordinate groups compete with one another and how coercion and consent are used by the dominant group to preserve its dominance. The show also examines the complicated interactions that take place between oppressed communities and those who oppress them. It also emphasizes on the hues of the complexity that emerges from oppression. The term "Subaltern" was first used by Indian academic, feminist critic, and literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to describe marginalized people that are not included in societal power structures and do not have access to political representation and agency. In the *Spartacus* series, slaves in ancient Rome can be viewed as subalterns since they are excluded from the prevailing power structures of Roman society and lacked political representation or agency. According to Spivak, dominant cultural narratives frequently mute and erase subalterns, making it crucial to amplify their voices and question established hierarchies of power in order to bring about change. This is exactly what the *Spartacus* series does by highlighting the subordinate status of slaves in ancient Rome and their fight for agency and autonomy. The series provides a potent illustration of the manner in which subaltern communities can oppose and challenge dominant power structures through the portrayal of *Spartacus* and his fellow slaves. The slaves in the series give subaltern populations today a message of empowerment and optimism by asserting their agency and resisting their captors. By analyzing the show through the lens of Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci, we can better grasp the intricate processes of hegemonic culture and the possibility of resistance and subversion. The rich and diverse *Spartacus* persona personifies the difficulties of opposing a dominating civilization. Finally, *Spartacus* serves as a warning against the forces of hegemony and a reminder that the struggle for influence and power will continue if we do not oppose it and building a more just and equal society would remain a dream. The show illustrates how marginalized groups assert a agency and

overthrow established power structures through its representation of subaltern resistance, ultimately conveying a message of optimism and empowerment to viewers.

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