



AN ANALYSIS OF THE VISUAL NARRATIVE OF *SQUID GAMES* IN THE SOUTH KOREAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Capitalism can be considered as a political system in which all the private owner's takeover the industry for their own profit rather than for the people's good. This system is portrayed in a harsh and rustic manner through the eyes of a Netflix series known as Squid Games. The brunt of capitalism is a global issue and is faced by many people in different areas of the world. Poverty and Inequality are two other concepts that are evident in this series, showing the meagre life of individual and their attempt to reach a position in the society. The rich on the other hand try to take advantage of the helpless situation that these poor people undergo. Class distinction is prominently visible throughout and this very distinction is what acts as an urge for the rich to manipulate them. Class strife, societal inequality, and income discrepancy are the key themes in the series. This paper attempts to analyse how the series portray the capitalist nature of South Korea and how the citizens are affected by it.

KEYWORDS: Class strife, societal inequality, Capitalism, Income discrepancy, Poverty, Wealth and Power

INTRODUCTION

Squid Games is a South Korean drama television series made by Hwang Dong Hyuk streamed through the platform Netflix. He wrote the series based on his personal experience and observation of capitalism in South Korea. Hwang believed that his script would influence the global issue of capitalism. He even mentioned that he wanted to create something not only that would show the struggles of South Korea but something that could affect the whole world. This series was his method of portraying his views and ideologies. Capitalism began when wealth became mobile. The start of this could even be traced back to the first century. It can be noted that capitalism may be divided into two schools. One is in close relation with economic liberalism, with the 18th-century economist Adam Smith who is the pioneer of it. The other is related with Marxism, which was formed by the influence of the 19th-century economist Karl Marx. He was considered a political revolutionary thinker, economist and a philosopher. Marx says that since the period of industrialisation society is a constant dilemma of fight between the rich and the poor due to unequal of powers. Decision making fell into the hands of the wealthy people who owned land and could afford expensive items. These people were also able to hire others to work for them. To put it down in one line, the rich kept getting richer and the poor became poorer. The poor had limited access; they were forced to work for the bourgeoisie. They received minimum wage that practically did not give them any form of profit. Finally capitalism led to social inequality and a split in the society. Marx famously said that the proletariat have nothing to lose but their chains, working men must come forward and unite for this to become a success. From the theoretical perspective Marx believed that journalism played a major role in moulding our ideas and restricting our behaviour. They made the proletariat believe that their situation was natural and right making sure that the working class remained happy despite the unfair system. Marx criticizes capitalist economies ageless demand for the revolutionizing of production and the instability that this causes. He is extremely critical about the capitalist economy and the division of people based on this category. Marx even at one point titles the whole world as a capitalistic economy. "In bourgeois society, capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality, this is on major theme viewed throughout the series. Squid Game has firmly established itself as a cultural phenomenon. Squid Game is a social phenomena that demonstrate that dystopias do not always have to be based on imagined futures, but that one's personal dystopia could be someone else's reality. It shows that as quickly as one's life can go in a positive direction, it can also change and one can end up at the bottom. The cinematic works depict a capitalist dystopia and thus criticise capitalism as well as classism through realistic storylines. Overall, both Squid Game is an amusing story that, when considered further, have deep meaning and can teach a lot about current political and societal issues, not just in South Korea, but in every country.

SQUID GAME – A CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM

Squid Games begin with a walk into the past. With a mild background tone and dim lighting, the story begins with a group of boys playing a game know as the "squid game". The court presented is in the shape of a squid and there is flute music playing in between. The game has a set of rules. There are two groups the offence and

the defence. When the game starts the defence can run around in two feet; however the offence stays outside the line and is only allowed to hop on one foot. The attackers must cut through the waist of the squid passing the defence, which gives them an opportunity to run in both feet. In order to win, the attacker must tap the head of the squid with their foot. If the defence manages to push you outside the squid boundaries your die. Once you tap the head you yell out victory. This very victory gives these small children a sense of hope, enjoyment and freedom.

Now the story takes us into present where the main protagonist of the story is given money by his mother to buy her grand- daughter Ga-Yeong something for her birthday. This scene depicts and portrays the fact that the family is living in a very poor condition. The protagonist's name is Gi-hun. He is a progressive gambler who bets on horse races and even steals money from his very own mother. However being in immense debt he is continuously tortured by thugs for money and ends up getting beaten up and tortured for it. He fails to even buy his own daughter a present as he loses the money he wins on gambling to a thief. As the series proceeds, it becomes clear that Gi-hun's first financial issues stem from his job loss ten years previously. Hwang Dong-hyuk, the writer and director of Squid Game, has indicated that he based Gi-hun's character on the creators of the 2009 SsangYong Motors plant strike, which ended in a failure after continual police attacks. After the original Gi-hun and a bunch of his employees were cut off, he and his fellow union members protected themselves inside the Dragon Motors warehouse during the night time, according to flashbacks. Strikers were beaten with batons by strike-breakers who broke down the doors. Gi-hun's teammate was bludgeoned to death in front of his eyes by the strike-breakers. Gi-hun misses his daughter's birth while this drama of brutal labour repression unfolds.

Coming back to the series, after his visit to his daughter he takes the metro back home where he meets a suspicious man who tempts him to play a game called ddakji. Each time Gi-hun wins he's offered an amount of 100,000 won. However there is a twist, since there is no money to pay back each time he loses he gets slapped. Once the game is over the man in the grey suit hands over a card stating that if he wants to play more games and earn money all he has to do is contact this number. Gi-hun who is depressed and in dire need of money agrees to contact them and enters the contest. Here we see that there is a clear cut example of oppression of the poor by taking advantage of their helpless situations. The scene shifts to all the contestants who have arrived in a room dressed in green tracksuits. There are a total of 456 players. Men in red suits appear explaining to them the rules of the game. There will be a total of 6 games which will span over six days. The fundamental theme of Squid Game is Korea's tremendous inequality. A group of participants who have immersed themselves in debt head to toe rival against each other in a range of games, starting from Red Light, Green Light to the Korean ppopgi, for a chance to win large sum of money. The only catch is that each game is played to the death. A strict group of armed bodies of masked men who wear red jumpsuits enforces the rules. They have complete authority on violence, they can even shoot pistols and machine guns to murder players who do not follow the rules or even lose a round by not being able to compete with the other contestants. The parallels with the Korean ruling class's security apparatus are difficult to overlook. Failures result in immediate death; the risk elements increase as each round goes by. If a player loses a round, they

either die or is purposefully eliminated, then money falls into the big bowl in the room, which is shown in the form of a big glass bowl hanging in the middle of the players' dorm.

The second episode starts with the element of fire. All the dead bodies are brought to the cremation room. The people alive are escorted back to the dorm. Many players have a change of heart they want to leave the game as they value their life more than money. A voting is held to determine whether the games should be dissolved or not. The voting goes in favour of those who want to go home thus sending all the players back to their miserable lives. This series is considered to be an anti-capitalist allegory, the only way to fight back or even the turn the game against itself is in showing some small manner such as portraying the element teamwork by forming into one and fighting against the rich or by refusing to fall for the huge amount of money. The game can be stopped if the higher number of players agree to stop it, which is stated so according to the final clause written in their consent form. They do just that in the first, after the heinous Red Light, Green Light carnage. It is seen that majority votes to leave the game as they value their life more than money. It's quite surprising that the game's contract even had such a clause at all, but it appears that the host had his heart fixed on the fact that no one should come into this game without full consent, if they wanted to leave then that should be possible for them too. The next day Gi- hun even goes to the police station to bring out the truth but no one believes him. In this episode many other contestant of these games are revealed , a poor boy named Ali, Sang woo the fish vendors son, the thug Kang Deok-su, Kang Sae- byeok, etc. A cop named detective Hwang enters the scene. He is looking for his missing brother and finds the same type of card which Gi- hun gets and decided to take the help of Gi-hun to get into the games. Thus most of the players decide to go back in due to their life of hardship regardless of considering the fact that they might not survive through this whole thing.

As the new episode begins the players are being taken back to the gaming arena. The inspector follows in undetected. The players decide to form into teams to keep their partners protected. Sang woo creates one team, so does Deok-su. All the players are taken to a playground kind of area. Later the contestants are made to pick a shape out of from the choices of circle triangle, star and an umbrella. Here sang woo takes the triangle, Ali takes the circle, Gi- hun picks the umbrella and the old man gets the star. The name of the game is Dalgona; each player needs to cut out their respective shapes from the honeycomb given to them. Gi – hun gets the idea to lick to honeycomb to let the piece fall out easily. One man goes rogue and shoots one of the men in the red suits. That is when we realise the men in the red suits are just kids.

The next episode is titled Stick to the team, we understand that an inside story is taking place through the whole series. One of the contestants playing is a doctor, who is taken to another room once the games are over. Slowly we understand that an underground organ trafficking is taking place and this contestant plays a part in helping them for this, in turn he is provided with clues as to what the next game would be. On another side the contestants are given rationed food so that a riot can break out killing all the weak and keeping the rest. They start to develop a mindset that you trust people when you have no one else to trust. Meanwhile the cop is trying to understand the inside workings of this mysterious place. The third game is about to begin today. They are asked to develop a team of ten people in ten minutes. Sang woo thinks that their team should

comprise of more men and less women. This could be kind of a male chauvinistic attitude represented by him. Deok-su who is in close relation with a loud woman named Han Mi-nyeo kicks her out of the group to form a strong team of ten men. It is revealed that the next game is tug of war. Even though Gi-hun's team thinks they are weak the old man Il-nam gives them certain ideas and strategies as to how they could overcome their drawbacks. During the game when they feel like they are losing they use a double strategy to trick the other team into thinking they are winning by letting go of the rope and moving three steps forwards leaving the viewers in suspense of what is about to happen next.

The strategy acts as luck to them making their opponent team weak giving them a chance to move back with full force and win the game. Gi-hun's team wins the tug of war, surprising everyone. Their mentality to work together, unity of purpose, and the good thinking strategy provided by Il-nam aided them to put down a more powerful opponent. This is considered to be one main feature of labour organisation, though it does not always happen at the sacrifice of other workers life. As everyone is tired after the game they decide not to fight today. Barricades are created with beds for each of their group's survival. As the scenes progress we understand that the main motive of the players in entering the contest is money. Despite knowing the fact that their lives are in dangers they have re entered because they have lost everything and have nothing to look forward to. Il-nam becomes sick but Gi-hun helps him as he has a soft corner towards him. The contender and his accomplices who are discovered to be cheating are quickly put to death. The game master then delivers an impassioned speech in which he portrays the process as a meritocracy and himself as a generous source of opportunities. "These people suffered from inequality and discrimination out in the real world," he says, "and we're giving them one last chance to fight fair and win." Meanwhile the inspector has taken the role of a man in the red suit, he is searching far and wide for his lost brother. He sneaks into the file room and starts looking for information there. As he goes through the squid archives he realises that his brother was a player here back in the days.

The game conductors get news that there is an intruder in their midst. All the players are examined for an intruder but they are unable to find anything. The fourth game is about to begin shortly. The players are asked to make a team of two. Ali joins with sang-woo, Ill-nam and Gi-hun joins forces. Each team is presented with ten marbles each. The team can choose whatever game they want to play and must collect all the ten marbles from their opponent. Sae-byeok teams up with a girl named Ji-Yeong. As the games begin we see how each player tries to win the marbles over. Sang-woo despite the fact being beaten cheats his way out of the game killing Ali. Ji-Yeong gives up because she believes that there is nothing else left in this world for her. Ill-nam despite knowing the fact that he was being cheated by Gi-hun gives him all the marbles as he considers them to be Gganbu. Two friends who always share everything. Finally the old man too is shot dead. Ji-Yeong and Il-nam make their own right decision even though they are under a pathetic system in exchange for friendship and the ability to choose the circumstances of their own deaths. He found a way to do something other than kill by teaching his Gganbu one last lesson and which saves him from dying helps him continue his position in the game.

The next scene opens with the dead body of Ali. The VIPS are arriving soon. We can see that one man who has lost his wife has committed suicide. The cop enters the scene as a waitress boy and tries to lure one of the VIPS into his trap. Now a total of sixteen players are left and the fifth game is about to begin. Each player is made to choose a mannequin and take a corresponding vest. The name of the game is Glass Stepping Stones. There are is a bridge like structure where there are two sets of glasses, one tempered which is strong and the other normal which breaks easily. They have a total of sixteen minutes to cross the bridge. Each player goes one by one, many fall in the way. One player who is a priest takes a lot of time to cross over as he prays each time before he steps on a stone. Mi-nyeo gets back at Deok-su for betraying her by taking both of them to their death. Later we understand that a man knows how to distinguish the glasses, however the creators understand his trick and adjust the lighting accordingly. Finally the entire glasses break and only three people are left. Meanwhile the Front man and the men in red suit search for the intruder who swims to an island.

As the next scene opens the front man comes face to face with the inspector. The cop understands that the front man is his very own brother In-ho. He asks the cop to give up but he decides not to. The front man fires and his brother falls into the sea. The final three contestants are given good clothing and good food. Sae-byok is hurt very badly, she makes Gi-hun promise her that if anything happens to her then he should take care of her brother. Sang-woo who is determined to win kills Sae-byok, Gi-hun who witnesses this becomes traumatized. The last two players are left. Front man is guilty of killing his brother; thus, the scene ends with the girl's body being incinerated.

The final episode is titled 'One Lucky Day'. The final game is about to take place. Both the players flip a coin to decide who goes. They are going to play the squid game, the very game that was introduced to us in the first episode. It is considered to be one very physical and violent game. When the game begins, initially we feel that Gi-hun is losing as Sang -woo gains ground over him. Slowly the tables turn, sang-woo is pinned to the ground. As Gi- hun makes his way to win the game he takes a step back, he decides to forfeit the game and does not want to continue playing. He remembers the old ways when he and Sang-woo were friends and does not want his friend to die. In the end, Gi-hun astounds the VIPS and the Front Man by walking away from moments before his victory. Under capitalism, this group of obscenely wealthy men couldn't understand how one person could be so close to victory after all the hardships he had been through, even go to near death experiences and even then, refuse to accept the prize. However human life was always more valuable to Gi-hun. Gi-hun remembers Sae-byeok's advice and remains true to his originality. He does not want to take anyone's life, especially his own friend's. However after all that has happened Sang- woo wants his friend to get the money and help his family too, therefore he stabs himself to his death, thus leaving Gi-hun as the winner of the games.

Gi -hun comes back home to find the fact that his mother has passed away. He slowly walks around like a lone beggar one that has lost all hope and has no one with him. Suddenly one day he receives a card mentioning a time and place to meet someone, to his surprise that man turns out to be Il-nam. He was founder of these games and he explains how these events came to be and for what reason. He points out the fact that someone with no money and someone with too much money can never truly be happy. His clients had all the money in

this world but no happiness. He points out that Gi-hun helped him remember who he was and he slowly moved to his death.

Later Gi-hun changed his lifestyle and accepts his life for what he has. He takes Sae-Byuk's brother to Sang-Woo's mother and asks her to take care of him. He also provides them with all the money they will ever need. Later he decides to go see his daughter in the US. On his way to the airport he sees the man in the grey suit again playing with another poor vagabond. He tries to catch him but just misses by a second. That moment, he decides to stay back use all his power and money in bringing these people before the law to punish them for their crimes thus ending the series in cliff hanger tone. Squid Game combine with Korean social realism and also with films like The Host and Parasite revealing South Korean class discrimination. Considering its strange elements, Squid Game is based on the harsh working conditions that South Korean employees face in real life. The enormous cash reward offers an escape from debt for each of the Squid Game competitors. In truth, household debt in South Korea has skyrocketed. While the fictional Squid Game contestants and the people of the real world go through hardships due to of their immense debt, the South Korean government turns a blind eye against them and acts like they have no choice or say in these matters.

The VIP guests who we meet near the end of the series are the ones that sponsor the Squid Game. While the contestants and all those who conduct the game are Korean, these characters have much more of an American accent in their dialogs. The VIPs in Squid Game do not care about the contestants or have any sort of empathy to the suffering of the Korean protagonists. Through this kind of behaviour we understand that these VIP's value their luxury and entertainment over the injustices shown to the poor players. At the time of writing, North Korea is attempting to reach an agreement with its southern neighbours. South Korea, meanwhile, exercises its US-backed military power. The Korean working class is oppressed by both the Korean capitalist class, which is made up of chaebols which are rich dynasties that dominate Korean industrial conglomerates, and US imperialism

We come to understand that the competition only exists because of the capitalistic mindset that people have even today, it's not surprising that it is ultimately a capitalist endeavour. We see that the immensely rich VIPs, most of whom does not show their faces and cover it up with a mask, fun this game and see it on a gambling basis. They do not appear to have any sort of humanity in them as we can see human who are their staff are all painted top to bottom and made to pose as furniture in their main room. We see a very auspicious scene, a VIP threatens to kill someone who works for them, whom the viewers understand is an undercover cop Hwang Jun-ho, if he does not remove his mask, despite the fact that the VIP is well aware that doing so would result in the server's death, he only wants his needs to be fulfilled. We understand that after one year of the game Player 1, who turns out to be the Host, comes to Gi-hun. Ill-nam slowly explains why and how all of this came into being It all comes back to the game unbreakable bond to economics; on one hand we see that there is a large number of population, many struggling with debt and poverty. On the other hand we see people like the host and the VIP's who are unbelievably immensely rich. They have everything in this world and they are bored to a point where they have started to bet on human lives and gamble on it like as they are some animals kept for sale.

Throughout the series, it is clear that Squid Game required significant funding. Because the show is based on current events rather than science fiction or fantasy, the various props, properties and the island setting must have cost a lot. Since the Host worked in the banking sector, he was able to pay for everything. It's a business where he made money by moving money around. His profession qualifies him as a deserving villain. The bank executive asks Gi-hun to try various investment ideas so that he himself could make more money through their bank, the bankers wanted Gi-hun to make a large sum of money passively with 45 billion won. Gi-hun's decision to leave is reminiscent of his previous attempt to leave. The game creators greatly try to turn each player against one another throughout the series, the same way how capitalism turns one worker against another. The investors in the game, are the ones making all the decisions as they want the players to fight on another like animals fighting for their prey, so they won't work together to find out what's happening or to even questions the guys in the jumpsuits who are ordering them around and even mercilessly watching them die, the people in the jumpsuit give them less food so that a fight will break out overnight. We can also see that there is a daily inflow of cash every time one player dies, they even try strategies such as giving the contestants knives for the evening so that they can eliminate the weak again. It never turns out to be a good idea when players decide to work together. One of them ends up dying pretty quickly. Some of the organisers of the game misuse their power by shooting the players without showing any kindness or even conducting their organ trafficking business in another end. However, the men in the jumpsuits quickly understand that they are just as easily rid of as the players, if not more so. The Front Man shoots anyone that does not abide by the rules of the game without hesitation. A player at one point asks what made the men in the red jumpsuits run such a work, however the answer to that question was very predictable. They were very young men who were in dire need of money who would be forgotten even if they never came back. The greatest lie shown by capitalism it made the workers realise that life is a game which ends in an equation of zero, and that anything we want is not given to us only because another person had already taken it from us. Through the game we were able to understand that every player acted as something that came in between another player to get all the money. Towards the end we understand that Gi-hun should kill his childhood friend for him to win and achieve all the money. However, money is not everything in life and that fact becomes quite clear to us.

CONCLUSION

In a capitalist society the power will be in hands of a few and they are the ones who make the most important decisions. They enjoy a sort of power that no one else in the society does and they usually have the last words in all the matters. A problem that arises due to this is that, every major functioning parts of the society will be leashed by these people. Since they are the ones in control, the decisions and resolutions that they make will always be favouring themselves. Their commitment will always be towards their own good rather than the betterment of others. It will be like the situation of a worker who works for a big company. For them the priority will always be their own profit rather than their workers well being.

When it is these firm that are in, they won't hesitate to exploit the people around them, if it means that they would easily get a profit. It would mean that people who exist in a tier below these points of great power will always be having to suffer. Their eyes are fixed on nothing but profits and put forward the idea that capitalism

can save them and bring great innovation. All the while people too prosper along with them, but unfortunately this has never been the case. In their quest for gains and yields. They wouldn't care about the fact of who is suffering and why they are suffering. This paper aims in portraying how capitalism is intertwined with this netflix series and the sufferings poor people go through due to the same.

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