

Unleashing the potential of capitalism in the Korean drama *Squid Game*

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Abstract

Capitalism is often viewed as a political system where private owners prioritize their own financial gain over the well-being of the general population. This portrayal of capitalism is starkly depicted in the popular Netflix series, *Squid Games*. The negative impacts of capitalism are not limited to a specific region but are a global concern affecting individuals worldwide. The series highlights the harsh realities of poverty and inequality, showcasing the struggles of individuals as they strive to improve their social standing. Meanwhile, the wealthy exploit the vulnerable position of the less fortunate for their own benefit. The series prominently features class distinctions, which serve as a driving force for the affluent to manipulate those in lower social classes. Themes of class conflict, societal disparities, and economic inequality are central to the narrative of *Squid Games*. This analysis aims to explore how the series reflects the capitalist nature of South Korea and its repercussions on the citizens. This study comprehensively analyzes Hwang Dong-Hyuk's *Squid Game* (2021), a Netflix Original series, from a capitalist perspective. Its main aim is to shed light on the significant drawbacks of the contemporary capitalist system. To achieve this, the research begins by providing contextual information and a conceptual framework. It then delves into a critical examination of the notion of freedom as an illusion within the show, along with the presence of dehumanization and violence. Additionally, the study explores the relentless urgency of supply and demand perpetuated by capitalism within the television series and its parallel manifestation in real life.

Keywords: *Capitalism, Squid game, Marxism, Hwang Dong-Hyuk, K-Drama, Societal disparities*

Introduction

Capitalism fuels a never-ending race and enforces a social hierarchy that governs every aspect of human life, promoting constant competition. These cutthroat competitive circumstances also expose individuals who oppress their competitors without regard for moral principles in pursuit of their interests. This paper aims to do exactly that: pinpoint the hidden capitalist ideologies through the analysis of the cinematic contents of *Squid Game*. I will, first, define a

theoretical framework of major aspects of Capitalism, briefly summarize the contents of the television program, and then describe the show's portrayal of capitalism's illusion of freedom, moral-altering dehumanization, and insatiable nature. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Georgians and the Decadent or Aesthetic movements emerged as two distinct poetry streams that were influenced by and reacted against the poetry of the Victorian era. Realistic novels dominated the realm of fiction during this time. However, just as World War I shattered societal and human assumptions, the poetry of the First World War and the subsequent literature were often unsettling, disruptive, and focused on new interests and approaches. Imagism and Modernism thrived in the period between the two world wars. Various responses to Modernism, including Postmodernism, emerged in the post-World War II era. The defining characteristics of a literary period are not always immediately apparent and cannot always be confined to specific dates. As products of the 20th century, it is particularly challenging to make definitive statements about this period, especially considering the complexities of the era.

Serials are a type of television and radio programming that consists of a continuous storyline unfolding in a sequential manner from one episode to another. Unlike traditional episodic television, which features self-contained episodes, serials follow overarching storylines that span entire seasons or the entire duration of the series. Soap operas are the most prominent form of serial dramatic programming worldwide. The success of serials lies in their ability to gradually reveal elements of the story in each episode, enticing viewers to continue watching in order to uncover more. These shows often include recaps at the beginning and cliffhangers at the end of each episode to maintain audience engagement. Viewers are compelled to watch every episode in order to fully comprehend the plot. In contrast, procedural dramas are more self-contained and often referred to as "case-of-the-week" formats. Serialized television episodes can be likened to chapters in a book, as each episode builds upon the previous one, contributing to a larger narrative. This format, exemplified by shows like LOST, Game of Thrones, Stranger Things, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, is designed for binge-watching, allowing viewers to seamlessly transition from one part of the season-long story to the next.

Research Problem & Hypothesis Statement:

The present research work proposes to see how the Korean series Squid Game by Hwang Dong-Hyuk depicts capitalism and how it affects individuals. It is recommended that the squid game highlight the terrible truth of capitalism. It also depicts a figurative example of how capitalism pushes individuals to give up their humanity.

The Researcher has taken on this topic with the notion of demonstrating how the squid game reflects today's society. In the game, as in the real world, doing everything correctly, such as working hard, being clever, and being responsible, does not guarantee anything since there are problems that are essentially unfair.

Aims and Objectives of the Research

This study aims to analyze the Squid Game series through the concepts of capitalism, competition, inequality, and game. The powerful embodiment of this individual kind is an individual who can not only abuse but also mentally or physically impact another person, and we observe this person's reaction in the Squid Game series, which illustrates the way the ruthless competitive game of modern capitalism drives humans to do anything for capital.

Operational Terms and Concepts

The terms expected to be used in this research study will be Capitalism, Squid game series, Exploitation, Competition, inequality, Drama, Modernism, Ruling class, poverty, Marxism, discrimination, wealth gap, and Rich Vs. Poor and Korean society is included in the paper. The terms will be discussed with special references to the referred sources which give insights into these terms.

Review of Literature

One of the important key features of capitalism is competition. Competition between businesses drives innovation and efficiency. Aside from the games, this is a program about poverty, inequality, and desperation, as well as the subtle ways money can turn us against one another. Greed and power drive the world, but Squid Game demonstrates that good may still win over evil, at a price. The capitalist system forces individuals into merciless competition by allowing human values to be put aside to avoid losing self-interested benefits. Many people might be connected to this scenario. Squid Game depicts and echoes the rapid capitalist environment within which each of us lives. To live, we have to participate in the economic game of playing up. A life-or-death tournament of games for kids is the most effective method for each character of Squid Game to catch up. Squid Game demonstrates the truth: capitalism's structure produces unfairness. More crucially, this disparity is caused by the mistreatment of individuals who are unable to keep up. Thus, the thesis focuses on Capitalism which is distinguished by a proclivity for rising social inequality and division. In truth, inequality has existed throughout human history, but the open competition brought about by capitalism has widened the gap between those who are competent compared to those who are not.

Research design

This is a qualitative research report in which the researcher chose the qualitative approach of using primary and secondary data. This research employed descriptive analysis to demonstrate how the game and competition are linked with the capitalist economic system in the Squid Game series. The article was evaluated in this Research Study using Primary and Secondary data

obtained from books, journals, numerous research sites, dissertations authored by various academics, and so on.

The primary data is a reference to Capitalism namely: Dong-hyuk, Hwang. "Squid Game: Netflix Series." Watch Squid Game | Netflix, 17 Sept. 2021.

Scope and Limitation

The scope of this Qualitative Research work studies the series through the lens of capitalism. Poverty and inequality are two additional concepts that are apparent in this series, illustrating the impoverished existence of individuals and their endeavors to attain a higher social standing. Conversely, the affluent endeavor to exploit the vulnerable circumstances of these impoverished individuals. Class conflict, societal inequality, and income disparity are the principal themes explored in this series.

However, the limitations of the study of the paper are communism and anti-capitalism. As these are also the parameters to observe in the series. Due to the word limit in the paper, the researcher has just focused on Capitalism and its impact on the characters.

Capitalism and the evolution of Korean drama

Capitalism is often associated with effectiveness based on supply and demand, as well as the potential for achieving success through hard work. However, in today's society, where mass media and economic structures play a dominant role, there is a growing awareness of the negative impact that capitalism can have on humanity. By analyzing the media we consume, we can view popular contemporary television shows like Squid Game not just as entertainment, but as a response to the pressures created by a money-driven capitalist society. These shows also reveal ideologies that, although uncomfortable and painful, are essential for the progress of humanity. The Korean drama series "Squid Game" has gained significant attention for its depiction of a dystopian society where individuals participate in deadly games in pursuit of a large cash prize. Through this narrative, the concept of capitalism emerges as a central theme, providing a framework to explore power dynamics, competition, and societal structures. Serialized television episodes are akin to chapters in a book, each building upon the previous one and contributing to a larger story. This format is designed for binge-watching, as viewers eagerly move on to the next part of the season-long narrative.

Capitalism, as depicted in 'Squid Game,' catalyzes the character's actions and motivations. The allure of financial gain drives individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds to willingly participate in risky games, highlighting the power of monetary incentives in shaping human behavior. This portrayal underscores the inherent desire for economic prosperity and the lengths individuals are willing to go to achieve it. Moreover, the series explores the consequences of unchecked capitalism, shedding light on the stark disparities that arise within a society driven solely by profit. The stark contrast between the wealthy elite, who exploit the

vulnerable for their gain, and the impoverished majority, who are forced to endure dire circumstances, serves as a critique of the inherent inequalities perpetuated by capitalist systems. By exposing the dark underbelly of capitalism, 'Squid Game' prompts viewers to reflect on the ethical implications of an economic system that prioritizes individual gain over collective well-being.

Moreover, the intense competitions within the series vividly illustrate the competitive essence of capitalism. The ruthless atmosphere, where participants strive to surpass and eliminate each other to endure, exemplifies the cutthroat mentality commonly linked to capitalist societies. This portrayal emphasizes the idea that capitalism nurtures a culture centered on individualism and self-interest, where triumph is frequently gauged by one's capacity to outshine others. Consequently, the series prompts a discerning examination of the societal consequences stemming from such a competitive mindset, as well as its influence on interpersonal connections and social unity.

The series depicts individuals facing challenging financial circumstances, shedding light on economic determinism by highlighting the stark disparity in monetary power between the wealthy and the impoverished. Notably, the host of the show mentioned a 93% re-entry rate for the second round of the game, indicating that a vast majority of players willingly returned despite the high level of risk involved. This phenomenon can be attributed to the participants' dire life situations, leading them to perceive the game as a more manageable option compared to their current hardships. During times of crisis, individuals tend to gravitate towards certainty, making the 50/50 chance of winning or losing appear more appealing than a life fraught with uncertainties.

Evolution of Korean drama

Korean dramas, also known as K-dramas, have a deep-rooted history intertwined with political and social influences. Initially used as a tool by the South Korean government in the 1950s, K-dramas gained independence during the socio-political revolution of 1994. Since then, they have played a crucial role in the lives of Koreans and have been pivotal in spreading Hallyu, the Korean Wave, to a global audience. The development of K-dramas can be traced back to the early days of radio dramas in the late 1920s, shaped by the socio-political environment of that era. Following the introduction of television in the late 1950s, the first South Korean broadcasting station was established, only to be destroyed by fire shortly after. Subsequently, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) was established in 1961, ushering in a new era for television dramas in South Korea. Over the years, K-dramas have been utilized to communicate political messages, particularly anti-communist sentiments against North Korean and Russian influences. Despite facing government censorship and regulations, K-dramas have persevered, mirroring the evolving cultural landscape of South Korea. In the 1970s, with the ban on advertising lifted and televisions becoming more affordable, K-dramas emerged as a popular form of family

entertainment. However, the government imposed stricter controls on content during this period, underscoring the significance of news and educational programs on television networks.

The rise of online video platforms and social media has opened up new avenues for K-dramas to connect with a global audience. This has led to increased investments in production quality and content to captivate viewers. As a result, we have seen a trend of filming contemporary dramas in various international locations like Paris, Tahiti, Budapest, Shanghai, and Greece, featuring attractive actors in stylish attire. Additionally, action-adventure dramas have incorporated Hollywood-style elements such as explosions, gunfights, and car chases, as seen in popular series like “Iris” (아이리스) and “Athena: Goddess of War” (아테나: 전쟁의 여신).

Storyline

The story begins by focusing on Seong Gi-Hun, a lazy yet well-meaning individual who depends on his elderly mother's modest income. Gi-Hun, a divorced man with a young daughter, has unfortunately fallen into a pattern of letting her down. He is deeply in debt and wastes the money his mother lends him on a troublesome gambling habit. By a stroke of luck, he wins a significant sum of money at the racetrack. However, he is pursued by debt collectors, and in his attempt to escape them, he falls victim to pickpocketing by a young girl. The collectors eventually catch up with him and force him to sign a physical contract pledging his organs in case of further payment delays. Later that evening, at a subway station, he meets a well-dressed man who suggests a seemingly simple children's game with a twist. If Gi-Hun wins a round, he will receive 100,000 won, but if he loses, the man will slap him in return.

After a series of failures, Gi-hun eventually achieves a triumph and is granted the prize money. In addition, he is given a card with a phone number and an invitation to join a game that promises to provide solutions to his problems. Upon thoughtful contemplation, he decides to dial the number and agree to participate.

The selected participants are taken to an undisclosed location for the game. Upon waking up, they discover themselves in a room with beds and wearing numbered jumpsuits. A group of masked individuals approach and explain that they must compete in six games and win each one to claim the prize money. When a contestant questions the reasoning behind playing after being drugged and stripped of their belongings, the masked individuals remind them that everyone is burdened with substantial debt, and this game is their only chance for survival. Gi-hun arrives at the location and is surprised to see his childhood friend, Cho Sang-woo. Sang-woo, who is believed to be a successful university graduate on a business trip, discloses a shocking truth - he is involved in fraud and embezzlement. This revelation further intensifies the already tense situation they are in.

The initial game that the participants are compelled to engage in is referred to as 'Red light, Green light'. Nevertheless, there is a horrifying twist to this seemingly innocent game - being

caught during its course leads to certain death. As the players witness their fellow contestants being mercilessly shot down, panic rapidly spreads among them. However, despite the fear and terror that grips them, the remaining players gather their courage and decide to continue participating in the game.

Consequently, nearly half of the players are eliminated, leaving those who remain in a state of shock and disbelief regarding the perilous reality they have unwittingly entered.

In an unexpected turn of events, the group decides to invoke one of the rules outlined in the contract and initiates a vote to terminate the game. The majority of the participants agree to bring the game to an end, and they are presented with the option to return and resume playing. Nevertheless, upon spending some time outside the game, they come to the realization that their lives are not significantly improved. Consequently, a majority of the contestants opt to reenter the game. This time, a resolute detective named Hwang Jun-ho manages to clandestinely board the ship in search of his missing brother. In the subsequent challenge, the participants are compelled to take part in a game known as "sugar honeycombs." The objective is to delicately extract a specific shape from a biscuit without causing it to break. Kang Se-byeok, who had previously explored the vents, provides a clever hint that enables Sang-woo to deduce the nature of the game. Despite this realization, Sang-woo chooses not to disclose this information to Gi-hun. Nevertheless, Gi-hun ingeniously uncovers a strategy to simplify the task and successfully survives the second game.

As alliances begin to develop among the players, a confrontation leads to the death of a participant with no tangible repercussions, sparking a riot at night to decrease the number of contenders. The third game, Tug-of-War, is fiercely contested, and despite being part of a seemingly weaker team, Gi-hun and his companions endure with the assistance of the sagacious advice from the elderly Oh IL-nam and some quick thinking from Sang-woo. The masked figures direct the participants to pair up for the upcoming game, which happens to be marbles. However, the catch is that the teammates are pitted against each other. Sang-woo teams up with the straightforward Ali Abdul, while Gi-hun joins forces with Il-nam. Sang-woo, facing defeat, resorts to tricking Ali into handing over all the marbles, while Gi-hun exploits Il-nam's dementia to secure a spot in the next round. A group of wealthy VIPs makes a grand entrance on the island to personally observe the final two games, injecting excitement by placing bets on the contenders. Meanwhile, a search is on for Jun-ho, who is on a quest to uncover the truth behind this sinister game. The fifth game is revealed to be a perilous challenge involving glass stepping stones. With two adjacent bridges, the players must choose between a regular glass step and a tempered glass step. A wrong choice will lead to the glass shattering beneath them, resulting in their demise. In a bid to gain an advantage, the players resort to sabotaging each other, with only three of them making it to the end: Sang-woo, Gi-hun, and Se-byeok. As the game reaches its conclusion, the remaining glass steps explode, causing a shard to pierce Se-byeok and inflict a wound upon her.

Before the ultimate match, the three participants are invited to a lavish dinner, where they are advised to hold onto their steak knives. Gi-hun stands guard next to Se-byeok, ready for any potential threat from Sang-woo. However, when she faints due to excessive blood loss, he hastily heads towards the exit in search of help. In the meantime, Sang-woo seizes the opportunity to strike the final blow and eliminate both players. Gi-hun gains the upper hand after a strenuous battle, but just as he is on the brink of victory, he has a change of heart and tries to convince Sang-woo to abandon the game. Sang-woo, unwilling to go back to his former life, sacrifices himself and makes a final plea for Gi-hun to look after his mother. Fulfilling his promise, Gi-hun locates Se-byeok's younger brother and entrusts him to Sang-woo's mother. Furthermore, he leaves a suitcase filled with money as a gesture to settle the debt he owes Sang-woo.

Gi-hun is on his way to the airport to visit his daughter in the United States. During his journey, he comes across a well-dressed man who is involved in a game with another individual. Despite his attempts, Gi-hun is unable to catch the man in time. Nevertheless, he manages to grab the card from the player and calls the number on it. To intimidate them, Gi-hun threatens the person on the other end of the line. However, he is warned to focus on his affairs for his own benefit. With a strong determination to reveal their identities and bring the game to an end once and for all, Gi-hun decides not to board the flight to see his daughter.

Portrayal of labor struggles, sacrifice and class conflict in Squid Game

The first season of the thriller series 'Squid Game' explores the themes of capitalism, survival, and human nature. It revolves around a secret competition where 456 participants, burdened by severe financial difficulties, risk their lives by participating in dangerous children's games, all in hopes of winning a significant cash prize. Hwang Dong-hyuk, the creator of the show, drew inspiration from his economic struggles and the impact of capitalism and class division in South Korea. By depicting the players as mere commodities and reducing them to numbers, the show criticizes the harmful effects of capitalism on human lives. Moreover, the prize money being paid with their blood serves as a literal representation of this critique. Additionally, the series delves into the toxic culture of relentless hustle that drives individuals to work tirelessly and compete ruthlessly, often at the expense of their morals and humanity. It also raises thought-provoking questions about the extent to which people are willing to go for money and how money can corrupt and manipulate individuals. 'Squid Game' has resonated with viewers worldwide, as it reflects the similar challenges and pressures faced in their societies.

Exploitation of labor

Korea's extreme wealth disparity is the central focus of *Squid Game*. The series follows a group of individuals burdened by debt as they participate in a series of childhood games, such as Red Light, Green Light, and traditional Korean games, in hopes of winning 38 billion KRW (equivalent to approximately USD 38 million). However, there is a deadly twist - each game is played until the death of the losing player. The risk of elimination increases with each round, with unsuccessful players being immediately eliminated. As each contestant is eliminated, the prize money grows, symbolized by a large floating piggy bank in the center of their living quarters.

The *Squid Game* features numerous individuals hailing from underprivileged backgrounds, such as migrant workers from North Korea and South Asia. This portrayal sheds light on the vulnerability of marginalized groups within Korean society, who are more susceptible to exploitation. Participants who express doubts about engaging in violent games are cautioned that their poverty or debt levels would only worsen if they were to leave the game. This serves as a testament to how economic desperation can push individuals to take greater risks and succumb to exploitative circumstances. The backstory of Gi-hun, one of the main characters, exemplifies the precarious nature of his employment, leaving him in a disadvantaged position.

Having been laid off, burdened by gambling debts, unable to afford medical care for his mother, and resorting to borrowing from loan sharks, Gi-hun's circumstances highlight the challenges faced by those in similar situations. The absence of a social safety net is vividly portrayed in this scenario. In Episode 2, viewers are presented with a realistic portrayal of the challenging existence faced by marginalized individuals, as well as the underlying motivations that lead them to engage in perilous games. The show highlights how economic pressures can compel vulnerable communities to accept exploitative work conditions, simply because they lack viable alternatives. In essence, *Squid Game* serves as a critique of the societal disparities and power differentials within Korean society, which render certain groups susceptible to severe labor exploitation. The participants' economic vulnerabilities are directly intertwined with their willingness to partake in the brutal and life-threatening games.

Ggnabu

In the world of *Squid Game*, the term 'Gganbu' denotes the idea of alliances or partnerships formed by the characters in the show. These alliances are closely tied to capitalism as they mirror the competitive and individualistic nature of capitalist societies. By forming alliances, the characters aim to enhance their chances of survival and success within the game, illustrating how individuals in capitalist societies often forge strategic partnerships to navigate and compete within economic systems. Moreover, the alliances in *Squid Game* shed light on the theme of self-interest and the pursuit of personal gain, which are commonly associated with capitalist ideologies. The show utilizes the concept of 'Gganbu' to delve into the dynamics of competition, cooperation, and self-preservation within an intensely competitive and exploitative environment,

drawing parallels to the dynamics of capitalism. Each member of the group shares a common understanding of the desire to emerge victorious, as they have all experienced the harsh realities of a corrupt system. Initially, they demonstrate a willingness to collaborate and protect one another. In the episode "The Man with the Umbrella," Il-nam imitates Gi-hun's technique of shaping dalgona honeycomb candy. In "Stick to the Team," when Jang Deok-su/Player 101 (Heo Sung-tae), a ruthless and deceitful player, orchestrates a nighttime assault to eliminate competition and expedite their chances of winning, the five players come to each other's aid. Later on, Sang-woo advises Ali to conceal his injured hand, stating, "Don't let them see. You appear vulnerable." During a life-or-death game of Tug of War, Gi-hun, Sang-woo, and Il-nam effectively lead their team.

The strength of their unity and interdependent relationships plays a crucial role in ensuring the survival of the players.

Labor Struggles and Sacrifice:

The survival game depicted in the show reflects the ruthless nature of capitalism, where contestants, driven by desperation caused by debt and poverty, compete for the opportunity to attain unimaginable wealth. As the rules of the game evolve, it becomes evident how cutthroat capitalism can be. To increase their chances of winning, participants resort to killing, even during essential breaks for meals and sleep. The series effectively portrays the stark contrast between the privileged elites, symbolized by the VIPs, and the ordinary individuals who struggle to survive. The protagonist, Seong Gi-hun, experiences hallucinations of labor protests while participating in the game, vividly recalling his dismissal from Dragon Motors following a strike.

The depiction of the battle for survival in the Squid Game reflects real-life labor disputes, where employees are pitted against profit-oriented corporations. While Squid Game pays homage to the 2009 SsangYong Motors strike, the history of violent class conflicts in Korea spans several decades. For instance, in 1976, female workers at the Dong-Il Textile Factory initiated a campaign for a just and democratic union election that endured for almost two years, marked by severe police brutality and attacks by strikebreakers. The struggle reached its peak when anti-unionists supported by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency assaulted the women workers by pouring human waste on them as they tried to cast their votes in the union election.

Dong-Il embodies various aspects of Korean labor history, including oppressive government policies towards labor, corporate aggression against workers, violence targeting women, and the yellow company unionism associated with the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). The subsequent fifty years of Korean labor history have been equally harsh. In episode 4 of Squid Game, titled "A Fair World," a participant is discovered cheating and promptly executed along with his accomplices. The game master then delivers a passionate speech, presenting the process as a meritocracy and himself as a benevolent provider of opportunities. He states, "These individuals have endured inequality and discrimination in the real world, and we are offering

them a final chance to compete fairly and emerge victorious." Squid Game skillfully intertwines themes of inequality, exploitation, and the dark underbelly of capitalism, resonating with global audiences. Its depiction of a dystopian society serves as a stark cautionary tale about the dire consequences of unbridled greed and systemic injustice.

Class struggle

The organizers of the game promote the notion that the Squid Game offers a sanctuary from the unjust and biased societal structure, where the lower class is subjected to oppression for the amusement of the upper class. However, in reality, the players are merely transferred from one oppressive system to another, with no significant alteration to their position or function within that system. This represents the players' final opportunity to improve their lives, whereas for the organizers and their privileged VIP acquaintances, the Squid Game is merely a form of traditional entertainment, akin to the Olympics or the Emmys.

In the opulent setting, individuals lounge on extravagant couches with beverages, engaging in betting on players and making superficial remarks about the atrocities unfolding on the other side of the glass as a form of entertainment - which it indeed is. The glass serves a symbolic function not only in delineating the separation between two social classes or worlds but also in delineating the distinction between the subject and the object, as well as the power imbalance between them. In this framework, players are dehumanized and reduced to mere objects that exist solely to amuse. Once their imminent demise renders them incapable of performing, their bodies are either incinerated or subjected to organ extraction. Consequently, even after fulfilling their primary role, the players' bodies are disassembled into smaller components and repurposed, akin to a secondhand vehicle. The depersonalization of the players is underscored by their uniforms, which are indistinguishable except for their assigned identification numbers. When Gi-Hun inquires the "Front Man" about the rationale behind the Squid Game subsequent to his triumph and departure from the games, he receives a straightforward response:

FRONT MAN: "You enjoy horse racing, correct? You individuals are akin to horses."

Hence, it becomes evident that the purported "equality" within the Squid Game arena was not intended to promote a fair society, but rather to heighten the amusement for the VIP spectators - to render the games more thrilling and unpredictable to observe.

Throughout the duration of the competition, a faction of extremely affluent individuals from around the world watch with amusement as the contestants struggle in their pursuit of the cash reward. They place bets on the contestants' fates, mirroring the protagonist of the series, Gi-hun, who had previously risked everything and fell into insurmountable debt. This serves as a thought-provoking portrayal of the disparities in treatment within a capitalist society, where the wealthy and the less fortunate are subject to different standards. Squid Game depicts a scenario where underprivileged individuals engage in life-threatening challenges for the entertainment of

the privileged class. The participants are subjected to dehumanizing experiences, including loss of dignity, humiliation, and ultimately death, all under the watchful eyes of the elites. This survival drama portrays ordinary citizens battling for the amusement of the elite, with the victor being granted immense riches but also burdened with lasting psychological trauma due to the violence they endured and perpetrated, exemplified by Gi-hun's post-victory PTSD.

The Guise of "Equality"

The Games are overseen by a mysterious figure known as the Front Man, concealed behind a black mask. As the story progresses, we discover that the Front Man is actually a former victor of the Games, and his demeanor strongly resembles that of President Snow. Similar to Snow, the Front Man has become desensitized by the brutality of the Games, transforming into a power-hungry tyrant. The most unsettling moment involving the Front Man occurs in the fifth episode. Upon learning that some guards have recruited a contestant who was previously a doctor to harvest organs from deceased participants (which is undeniably repulsive), the Front Man launches into a furious tirade. He passionately emphasizes the importance of equality within the Games and proceeds to execute both the guards and the doctor for violating this principle. The Front Man firmly believes that "equality" is a fundamental aspect of the Games, as all contestants face an oppressive and unequal world beyond the confines of the arena. He perceives himself as a virtuous and righteous individual for providing the participants with a fair opportunity. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that true equality cannot be achieved within the Games. The inherent and unique qualities, talents, and experiences that each individual brings with them cannot be erased or leveled, rendering the notion of equality within the Games inherently flawed.

How does Squid Game reflect Korean society?

In the first episode of Squid Game, the main character, Seong Gi-Hun, makes the difficult decision to pledge his organs as collateral to repay his loan sharks. This gripping series sheds light on the alarming levels of personal debt faced by many South Koreans, which can be attributed to a combination of unemployment, easily accessible loans, and exorbitant interest rates. However, it is important to acknowledge that South Korea's economic landscape is not without its own set of challenges. The country's economy is heavily influenced by chaebols, which are large corporate conglomerates owned by powerful families. Initially praised for their role in lifting the nation out of poverty, these chaebols now embody the concept of monopoly capitalism, often plagued by corruption and a lack of accountability. This system has contributed to the growing issue of income inequality in South Korea. As highlighted by sociologist Hagen Koo, by the year 2016, South Korea's income ratio between the top 10 percent and the bottom 10 percent stood at 4.78, a figure very close to that of the United States (4.89), which holds the highest ratio among nations in The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

This statistic underscores the pervasive issue of inequality that exists in today's world. Overall, Squid Game not only captivates audiences with its intense storyline but also serves as a reflection of the economic challenges faced by South Korea, particularly concerning personal debt and the influence of chaebols in the country's economic structure. This final conflict, when VIPs watch Gi-hun and Sang-Woo's final battle from the safety of a viewing box, mirrors capitalism's survival game, where owners rationalize their production processes and lay off workers. The fight to save costs and raise profits sends the system into periodic convulsions. This was seen in 2008's global economic crisis when working people were victims. In the final episode of Season 1, Gi-hun leaves a case full of cash for Sang-Woo's mother, with the proviso that she care for Sae-byeok's young brother. While touching, it implied hopelessness; even if all the contestants survived, they couldn't ease the low wages and high debt of South Korea's workers.

Dehumanization and Moral Corruption

Kim argues that Squid Game utilizes visual metaphors to depict the dehumanization experienced by South Koreans. According to Kim, the set design in the series portrays players as commodities on store shelves, symbolizing the harsh treatment of individuals at the bottom of society and the lack of dignity afforded to the economically disadvantaged in a capitalist system. Kim further suggests that the economic challenges faced by many young Koreans have led to feelings of entrapment and hopelessness, a theme mirrored in the cutthroat competition among the players in Squid Game. The show sheds light on the immense pressure to succeed and gain social status in South Korea, a pressure that begins early in life. Kim contends that South Korean society is not a true meritocracy, and Squid Game serves as a reflection of the issues that arise in an unjust system.

The concept of wealth and success can have a dual effect on human compassion and empathy, both enhancing and diminishing these qualities simultaneously. The characters in Squid Game shed light on how the pursuit of financial stability is often driven by acts of love, such as providing a birthday gift for a child, ensuring a meal for family members, or simply seeking personal happiness and fulfillment. Capitalism, akin to the televised games, exploits the innate compassion of its less fortunate participants, blurring the distinction between moral right and wrong.

When faced with the threat of elimination, contestants resort to deceit, betrayal, and dishonesty, escalating violence as circumstances grow increasingly dire and individuals are pushed to their breaking points. Engaging in these games strips competitors of their humanity, reducing them to mere numbers and objects of amusement, leading to perpetual moral conflicts. Similarly, in the realm of capitalism, some individuals may resort to criminal activities, illicit gambling, and other unethical means to secure basic needs. Others conform to the "company man" persona,

sacrificing personal values and relationships for the sake of corporate profits. Regardless of our position on this spectrum, we find ourselves in situations that challenge our integrity and moral compass.

Analyzing the characters

Player 456: Gi-Hun

The protagonist of the show has been portrayed as an empathetic individual Lee Jung-Jae, in the role of Seong Gi-hun, embodies the protagonist who stands out in the competitive environment by displaying empathy and representing the last remnants of humanity in the world. The character is designed to be likable and virtuous, yet faces a crucial moment where he is compelled to resort to unethical tactics to survive. Despite being burdened by debt, we witness him taking his daughter out to celebrate her birthday. His daughter resides separately with her mother and stepfather. In an attempt to purchase a gift for his daughter, Gi-hun wagers on a horse race and secures a substantial sum of money, only to have it stolen shortly afterwards in a subway while en route to meet his daughter. Left with a small amount of money, he engages in a game involving a jackpot machine filled with children's toys. Ironically, the toy he acquires for his daughter turns out to be a gun, a clever device utilized by the Director to foreshadow the brutal game that Gi-hun is soon to partake in.

VIPS

The Squid Games attract a group of affluent individuals known as the VIPs, who assume the role of spectators. These distinguished individuals don distinctive golden masks that resemble a variety of animals. Their purpose is to place wagers on the participants of the Squid Games, with the aspiration of increasing their wealth. While the majority of the VIPs seem to be of American origin, it is worth noting that one particular VIP, identified as the Deer-Masked VIP, converses with a Chinese accent, while another VIP, recognized by the Eagle-Masked VIP, speaks with a French accent.

Abdul Ali

Ali, a courteous and appreciative individual, exhibits remarkable altruism within the game. Despite the potential risk of certain death, he selflessly saves Gi-hun during the Red Light, Green Light challenge, even though they are practically strangers. Additionally, Ali expresses gratitude towards others for their small acts of kindness, exemplified by his appreciation towards Sang-woo for lending him a phone and covering his bus fare. Renowned for his benevolent nature among the players, Ali's innocence occasionally leads him into unforeseen difficulties. While typically composed, he displays moments of heightened emotions, such as his pursuit of the much-needed paycheck and his reaction upon discovering Sang-woo's actions during the Marbles

game. Regrettably, during the fourth game, Ali falls victim to Sang-woo's deception, resulting in his elimination after unknowingly surrendering his marbles.

Cho Sang-woo

Seong Gi-hun's childhood best friend, Sang-woo, fell into deep debt from failed investments, leading him to join the Squid Games. He initially helped Gi-hun and formed alliances, especially with Ali Abdul. However, as the games progressed, Sang-woo became more ruthless and selfish to ensure his survival. He resorted to manipulation to win the Marbles game, betraying Ali and causing his death. Sang-woo also killed Kang Sae-byeok to stay in the games. In the final round, he faced off against Gi-hun in a Squid Game and lost. Instead of claiming victory, Gi-hun tried to end the games early to save Sang-woo, but Sang-woo chose to end his own life. Before dying, Sang-woo asked Gi-hun to use some of the prize money to help his mother.

Oh Il-nam (오일남), also known as Player 001, was a wealthy businessman who created and hosted the Squid Games. Throughout his life, Il-nam always sought out new ways to have fun. He had a strong affection for his family, particularly his son, as he often spoke fondly of them. Towards the end of his life, Il-nam participated in the final death game he had created, the 33rd Squid Game, and genuinely enjoyed playing it. During the game, he formed a friendship with Seong Gi-hun and became his ally. Gi-hun was perhaps the first true friend Il-nam had in a long time, and this made playing with him all the more enjoyable. Before his passing, Il-nam revealed to Gi-hun that their time together had brought back forgotten memories from his past. Additionally, Il-nam played a crucial role in the 33rd Squid Game by casting the deciding vote, allowing the participants to return home.

"Do you know what someone with no money has in common with someone with too much money? Living is no fun for them. If you have too much money, no matter what you buy, eat, and drink, everything gets boring in the end." Oh Il-nam explains to Seong Gi-hun his motives for creating the Squid Games in "One Lucky Day"

Marxist perspective to understand the interplay of capitalism in Squid Game

In the late 1990s, South Korea, which was once influenced by collective thinking from Confucianism and Daoist ideologies, faced a setback in its positive growth due to the Asian financial crisis. This crisis led to a situation where everyone had to fend for themselves as the housing market boomed and employment opportunities became scarce over time. Marx posits that an individual's future wealth accumulation is contingent upon their material conditions. Despite the prevalence of rags-to-riches narratives, the reality remains that approximately 100

million individuals will be grappling with extreme poverty in 2021, as reported by the World Bank. The proliferation of motivational content on social media emphasizing the significance of productivity and success often references the humble beginnings of some of the world's wealthiest individuals such as Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk. While these anecdotes may foster the belief that diligence will inevitably lead to billionaire status, empirical data suggests otherwise.

The participants in the Squid game find themselves immersed in a state of Alienation, a concept coined by Marx. Marx argues that what sets humans apart from other animals is our ability to exercise our free will in the act of creation. However, in a Capitalist society, this freedom is restricted to a select few, while the majority are compelled to toil for their basic survival, much like animals. Consequently, this detachment from their true selves and their labor leads to a sense of alienation among humans. Notably, all the players in the Squid game reach a point where they are willing to resort to cheating or even killing others to ensure their survival. The show's allure lies in the revelation of the game's organizers. In the final chapter, as Gi-hun embarks on his journey home after emerging victorious, he queries the masked man about the true orchestrators behind the game. The man's response unveils a startling truth - to them, the players are mere horses in a race, serving as subjects of their bets. In essence, a minority group, devoid of alternative means of amusement, devised a game where they could witness individuals killing one another in pursuit of monetary gain necessary for their livelihoods.

In the contemporary society we inhabit, there is a potential risk of resembling one of the 456 participants in the Squid Game, where the pursuit of money has taken precedence over all other forms of value. This situation forces individuals to engage in perilous children's games, where their very lives are at stake. Our world has reached a point where money, originally intended to symbolize value, has itself become the ultimate form of value, akin to the essence contained within a bottle of gin. This phenomenon can be traced back to the inception of Marx's seminal work, *Das Capital*, specifically the first chapter that delves into the concept of value and its genesis. According to Marx, value is derived from the human labor expended in the creation of commodities, which subsequently represent the embodiment of work. He astutely observed that money, in essence, is the estranged essence of both labor and life, exerting a dominant influence over individuals who revere it. (*Capital*, Volume 1).

Marxist theorists elucidate the development of "civilized" societies by emphasizing the ongoing struggle between the ruling class, who possess authority over production, and the working class, who are responsible for producing goods and services within society. Within the Marxist framework, the capitalist system is characterized by a clash between the bourgeoisie, who are the owners of capital, and the proletariat, who are the laborers. According to Marxists, the fundamental cause of class conflict lies in the fact that those who exercise control over social

production inevitably exert control over the class responsible for producing goods. In the context of capitalism, this manifests as the exploitation of workers by the bourgeoisie. The ideology of survival and ruthlessness inherent in the capitalist microcosm of the games inevitably results in discrimination against certain groups of individuals. The prevailing belief is that forming groups consisting of large, strong, and middle-aged/young men is essential for protection and success in the games.

For instance, in the tug-of-war game, where a team comprised of ten strong men is favored, women, elderly, and disabled individuals are marginalized and eliminated more quickly. This mirrors the principles of capitalism, where an individual's value is often tied to their ability to generate profit for those in power. Similarly, in *Squid Game*, one's societal worth is determined by their contribution to winning the prize money and surviving the challenges. For example, Ali Abdul, a contestant with a physical disability, is urged by Sang-woo to conceal his condition to avoid alienating potential team members. Sang-woo's dissatisfaction with being paired with three women and an elderly man further highlights the sexism and ableism that emerge from the economic pressures within the game's structure. This scenario evokes parallels with the COVID-19 pandemic, where a callous, individualistic mindset has been observed in the willingness to sacrifice the elderly and vulnerable in favor of economic interests.

Ali Abdul also serves as a representative for immigrant workers within South Korean society. Ali displays an excessive level of politeness and submissiveness towards his South Korean counterparts, indicating the hardships he has faced in his life. Similar to numerous immigrants in the modern capitalist system, Ali must embody impeccable morals and politeness to uphold a positive image and ensure his survival. Ali's experiences exemplify the necessity for migrant workers to submit themselves to thrive within a system that exploits racism and xenophobia, both within the realm of games and the global economic structure. Han Mi-nyeo, a rather pitiable figure, resorts to the most deplorable tactics, including racism, in her struggle for survival. When she struggles to find a supportive team, she points to Ali, questioning why he should hold a position of privilege over her as a non-Korean individual. The most disheartening aspect of Ali's character lies in how his literal and metaphorical bowing down to Sang-Woo ultimately leads to his demise. Ali places an excessive amount of trust and faith in Sang-Woo, who deceives him into losing the marble games, resulting in Ali's tragic death.

Imperialism and its impact play a significant role in Don-Hyuk's work. The presence of the VIPs, a group of affluent foreign men, on the island to witness the blood games while indulging in a luxurious holiday experience, highlights the connection between these men and the crude entertainment derived from the games. This can be seen as a parallel to the phenomenon of sexual imperialism prevalent in certain regions like Thailand, where wealthy Western men engage in sex tourism. Although the identities of these VIPs are concealed behind

masks, they predominantly appear to be of American and European origin. One particular VIP, an American, not only attempts to sexually assault one of the island's workers, Hwang Jun-ho, but also derives perverse pleasure from the games.

The references to Jeffrey Epstein's island draw a parallel between the group of wealthy, aristocratic men seeking illegal sexual gratification and the events depicted in Don-Hyuk's work. It is important to note that Han Mi-nyeo, despite her reprehensible treatment of Ali, is also a victim within the games due to her gender. As previously mentioned, women are afforded limited opportunities in the blood games, prompting Mi-Nyeo to utilize her sexuality as a tool to manipulate the men and increase her chances of survival. This serves as an allegory for women in capitalist societies who, at times, are compelled to engage in similar lines of work to survive. This raises the question of whether consent obtained under economic coercion can truly be considered consent. How can Mi-nyeo provide consent when faced with the threat of death? This line of reasoning can also be applied to capitalism, particularly in the Global South where the sex trade is characterized by coercive practices, largely influenced by Western imperialism. The imperialism in Korea cannot be discussed without addressing North Korea. Sae-Byeok, a character from the DPRK, embodies the complex interplay between capitalism, imperialism, and North-South relations in Korea. She is dehumanized as a "commie bitch" due to her origin, a reflection of the prevalent attitude in South Korea. Sae-Byeok serves as a symbol of irony, highlighting how the hyper-capitalist society in South Korea justifies itself through anti-communist and anti-DPRK propaganda. When asked if South Korea is better than the DPRK, Sae-Byeok remains silent, a poignant moment given the imminent threat of death they both face due to South Korean capitalism. In her final moments, Sae-Byeok expresses a desire to return home, likely referring to the DPRK. "Squid Game" offers a nuanced portrayal of the DPRK and North-South relations, avoiding a chauvinistic perspective.

This subject further illustrates how the material conditions of society shape the individuals within that system, a concept derived from the Marxist notion of base and superstructure. For instance, as the games progress, our main characters become increasingly desensitized to violence and its consequences and are more inclined to disregard any societal taboos associated with its use. During the marble game, both Gi-hun and Sang-woo manipulate their opponents in order to emerge victorious, resulting in the deaths of two other participants. Figures like Gi-hun have been influenced by the material constraints on the island, where winning games ruthlessly guarantees survival and prosperity. Similarly, within a capitalist framework, the most cutthroat and unfeeling capitalists are able to amass the greatest wealth. Capitalism compels capitalists and those aspiring to be capitalists to completely forsake their ethical principles if they wish to thrive. Likewise, only the most ruthless and unfeeling competitors will endure the challenges of the games. As the competition unfolds, most of the players lose sight of the monetary rewards and simply strive to stay alive, leading them to

commit heinous acts. This stands in stark contrast to the beginning of the series, where Gi-Hun steals money from his own mother to place bets, aiming to accumulate more wealth but with the intention of settling his debts so he can provide his daughter with a memorable birthday. Many individuals, when confronted with imminent poverty and indebtedness, are compelled to resort to unsavory means to survive, including criminal activities. Squid Game underscores how capitalism brings out the worst in people, compelling them to engage in a cutthroat pursuit of profit accumulation, mirroring the competition on the island.

Conclusion

The Korean drama series, "Squid Game," presents a captivating analysis of the impact of capitalism on human behavior and societal structures. By highlighting the role of financial incentives, inequalities, and competition, the show encourages viewers to critically reflect on the ethical and social consequences of a capitalist system. Through its exploration of these themes, "Squid Game" contributes to the broader academic conversation surrounding the complex nature of capitalism and its effects on both individuals and communities. This discourse seeks to shed light on the potential of capitalism within the context of the Korean drama series, "Squid Game." As previously mentioned, the incorporation of capitalism as a driving force in the show's narrative has garnered significant interest from scholars and enthusiasts alike. The examination of capitalism's power in "Squid Game" is a relevant and deserving topic that warrants further academic investigation. Capitalism, like the actual squid game, gives freedom to its players. There are no set rules to win the game and the players can choose any method to win the game. In the final episode of the web series, when only two contestants remain, they can use any method to win the game without any bound rules which means one can kill the other to win the fortune. The ones who have greater physical strength would win the squid game, and the ones with inherited wealth or the trick to manipulate the financial system would win the rat race of capitalism. "Squid Game" serves as a powerful commentary on the harsh realities of capitalism, exposing its impact on desperate lives and the choices people make in pursuit of survival and wealth. There is certainly much more one can talk about the show, including the role of the guards on the island who offer a solid commentary on capitalist police forces. Squid Game is a pertinent and relatively complex critique of capitalism. Director and creator Hwang-Dong Hyuk brilliantly elucidates so many different elements of capitalism, from sexism, ableism, imperialism, and propaganda. The show serves as a stark reminder that capitalism's hunger for accumulation can lead to dire consequences for individuals and society. "Squid Game" provides a lens through which we can critically examine capitalist ideologies, unmasking the hidden anti-capitalist sentiments that resonate with viewers.

The portrayal of helplessness resulting from a concealed removal of agency, alongside the inherent corruption and unending greed depicted in both the show and our reality, positions Squid Game as a stark representation of capitalism. This serves as a stark reminder of the urgent necessity for worldwide economic restructuring, particularly in nations profoundly impacted by capitalist systems. Squid Game, as a form of anti-capitalist media, offers a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of our society. It underscores the inherent flaws within a system that thrives on competition, materialism, and avarice, ultimately highlighting the detrimental impact of capitalism on human nature. By shedding light on these issues, the show advocates for the eradication of capitalism to address global challenges such as poverty, social exclusion, and criminality. In a capitalist society, a small group of individuals holds the reins of power and wields significant influence over the most crucial decisions. They possess a unique form of authority that is unparalleled by any other members of society, often having the final say in all matters. This arrangement gives rise to a predicament wherein the functioning components of society are tightly controlled by these individuals. As they hold the key to power, the decisions and resolutions they make invariably favor their interests. Their allegiance lies primarily with their gain rather than the welfare of others. This situation can be likened to that of an employee working for a large corporation, where the primary focus is on maximizing individual profits rather than ensuring the well-being of the workers.

When such firms are in control, they do not hesitate to exploit those around them if it guarantees easy profits. Consequently, those who find themselves in a lower tier of power constantly endure hardships. The sole objective of these powerful entities is to amass wealth, disregarding any other considerations. They propagate the notion that capitalism is the ideal system, emphasizing the pursuit of profits above all else.

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