

Analysis of South Korean Class Conflict Revealed by Elements of Lies and Violence in Cinema

— Parasite as an Example

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Abstract: Since the implementation of neoliberal economic policies in South Korea in the 1990s, the huge gap between the rich and the poor has become a phenomenon, an acute social issue, and a frequent topic of film and television series, which has stimulated a series of topics and discussions critical of capitalism and anti-neoliberalism. This paper examines the class conflicts that exist in South Korean society in the context of the neoliberal economic system. It explores the representation of class conflict and the gap between rich and poor in South Korean film and television productions. This paper applies a case study approach to the film *Parasite*, through reviewing its narratives and the analysis of mise-en-scène, it deals with the elements of lies and violence to illustrate the class conflicts in South Korean society. The findings of this study highlight the presence of a severe class conflict in South Korean society, which is reflected in the immoral behavior of the lower-class characters in *Parasite*, as well as in the violent declaration of war within the lower class and towards the upper class.

Keywords: South Korea, class conflicts, *Parasite*, violence, lies

1. Introduction

The classes explored in this paper are primarily centered around the upper and lower classes that are divided in the neoliberal economy and have socio-cultural implications. The implementation of neoliberal economic policies in South Korea since the 1990s has engendered a dual effect. On one hand, the emergence of large conglomerates, known as Chaebols, such as the Samsung Group and the Hyundai Group, which have facilitated the country's economic growth and enhanced its international economic standing. On the other hand, it has also contributed to a widening socio-economic disparity within the society, resulting in an increasingly pronounced class divide [1]. This paper focuses on exposing the intense manifestation of class conflict in South Korea through two elements: lies and violence. Lies are a forced choice of survival for the poor and cause an identity crisis that leads to the use of violence. Violence is a manifestation of class division, mainly in the form of intra-class conflict and direct warfare and revenge by the lower classes against the upper classes. The main method used in this paper is a case study of *Parasite*, with reference also to the television drama *Squid Game*. This paper is a reference for scholars studying the economic system, socio-cultural context, and class conflicts in South Korea.

2. Introduction to Film *Parasite*

The Korean film *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon-ho and released in 2019, paints a stark picture of social inequality in neoliberal South Korea (Korea in short) through the intertwining lives of three families from different social strata. The Kims, represents the lower class, residing in a modest semi-basement dwelling, struggling to make ends meet. The Ohs, another family representing the lower class, face an even more hostile environment than the Kims'. In stark contrast to these two families, the wealthy Parks revel in the privileges afforded by their affluent lifestyle. The jobs they can offer and the elegance of their living environment are coveted and fiercely competed for by both the Kims and the Ohs. The narrative of *Parasite* revolves around the Kims attempts to work in the Parks and maintain these positions through subterfuges. The Parks' life is the Kims' extravagant dream of one day making the class leap, while the Ohs is a foreshadowing of the harsher life the Kims would face when their dream is shattered. Lies permeate the narrative of *Parasite*, serving as a central element that drives the actions of the Kim family, who always try to prevent their deceit from being uncovered. This engenders which leads to violent confrontations between them and the Ohs, and eventually to the symbolic expression of violence in which Kim Ki-taek kills Park Dong-ik, as an expression of the irreconcilable conflict between the classes. This paper argues the interplay of lies and violence serves as a poignant representation of the pervasive class divisions within Korean society.

3. Lies as Metaphors: Unveiling the Intense Class Conflicts Within Korean Society

3.1. Lies as a Forced Choice of Survival Strategy

The Kims in *Parasite* takes legal and moral risks by inventing various lies, falsifying documents, and even framing others, merely to fulfil their simple wish to be employed, hinting at the difficulties of the underclass people in Korea who want to make the class leap. The story of *Parasite* begins when Kim Ki-woo's friend Min-hyuk comes to visit Kim's family to give them a Scholar's Stone, a symbol of good luck in Korea, and offers Ki-woo a job at the Parks as an English tutor. The Kims' fortunes experience a notable transformation with the acquisition of the Scholar's Stone, as each member of the family secures employment in a Korean society grappling with a considerable unemployment rate. Encouraged by this unexpected opportunity, they foster aspirations of ascending to a better life and a higher social class. However, all their imaginations and changes in their lives are based on a lie, just as the Scholar's Stone itself, is an artificial object that has been forged. In the climax of the film, a rainstorm hits the Kims' house, and the stone defies the laws of physics by floating in the water. This strange phenomenon suggests that the stone is artificial and hollow, implying that the initial stroke of good fortune it brings to the Kims' household is inherently deceptive and therefore the Kims' aspirations of upward social mobility based on lies are actually impossible to achieve [2]. Nevertheless, as underclass people with no social status or legitimate diplomas, the Kims were left with no alternative but to lie about their identities, forging documents and pretending to be qualified professionals. During this process, the Kims have never shown guilt for their immorality even take this for granted. For example, Ki-Jung's forged documents were praised by Ki-woo and their father, Kim Ki-taek, Ki-taek even thought that if Seoul University had a document forgery program, Ki-Jung would have admitted to the first class. Although they present as lacking in morality and capable of lying without any burden, in the context of Korean society as portrayed by *Parasite*, this characterization goes beyond mere reprehensibility. Instead, it highlights the stark reality of the poor, who are confronted with extremely limited opportunities and are compelled to make these choices out of necessity. Mrs. Kim, Chung-sook has commented on Mrs. Park's kindness and innocent, suggesting that her kindness stems from her wealth. This commentary directly raises a disquieting

status quo in today's neoliberal Korea, wherein money not only means the purchasing power but also becomes essential for safeguarding personal integrity and morality [3].

3.2. Identity Crisis and Violent Consequences Caused by Lies

Meanwhile, lying leads to a crisis of self-identity and to a violent ending. In *Parasite*, the Kims have multiple identities, including their real underclass and unemployed identities, their fabricated identities, and their fantasy identities as rich people living in the Parks' mansion. These identities become intricately intertwined as the narrative unfolds. As a result of achieving the class leap in a short time and experiencing a life of the upper class, a perplexing state of confusion is generated between the inflated imagination and the constant recognition of the status quo, which sets the stage for Ki-teak's final violent outburst. Before elucidating how Ki-teak's identity crisis has developed, it is important to establish the initial circumstances of the Kims, situated at the lowest rung of Korean society. According to Nam Lee, "In *Parasite*, Bong displays what has happened in Korean society in the last twenty years since the neoliberal restructuring: the collapse of the middle class". In *Parasite*, Bong uses the two contrasting social classes of the lower and upper classes to create a dramatic conflict, while the middle class in-between disappears. The stratification of the middle class and the formation of a new labour underclass is one of the key reasons for the emergence of inequality in Korean society in the wake of the neoliberal society. In the film, the underclass, represented by the Kims and the Ohs, consists mainly of low-income self-employed and informal workers, characterised by "low income, job insecurity, minimal social protection, and dismal prospect for promotion or social mobility." [4] Through the conversation within the Kims and visual cues at the beginning of the film, Bong covertly offered a glimpse into the family's past, unravelling the reason of their current poverty. Chung-sook, was a potential athlete, Ki-taek used to work in a Valet Parking Service job, and the family once owned a Taiwan Cake franchise and a fried chicken restaurant, both of which failed. The identities assumed by the Kims predominantly stem from the identities they were compelled to relinquish or should have attained, such as working-class drivers, university students, and housewives. However, their present predicament finds them in a far more precarious position than their previous working-class status. The bankruptcy of their two previously self-owned restaurants serves as an explanation for their dire poverty, as they have not only lost their livelihoods and fallen into bankruptcy but have also been compelled to join the informal labour sector in Korea, engaging in menial tasks such as folding takeaway cartons for pizzerias. The bankruptcy of the Kims reflects a common experience of middle-class failure in Korea, attributable to the overcapacity and high competition in the market [5]. The Taiwanese cake shop also serves as a symbol of failure within Korean society, affecting not only the Kims and the Ohs but also leading to the collapse of numerous small businesses. Therefore, the poverty of the Kims and the Ohs highlights the causes of poverty and the current state of life of the rest of the underclasses in Korean society, and helplessly demonstrates that their poverty is not a consequence of poor decision-making or idleness, but a reflection of a system failure [6].

The Ohs' discovery of the Kims as a family threatens their disguised identity, but long before that, the Park family's sensitivity to scent of the Kim's common semi-basement smell has also kept their disguise at the border of being uncovered. However, in addition to these potential threats, the self-identity crisis of Ki-teak's that leads to the emotional eruption at the end is also caused by Mr. Park, Park Dong-ik's instinctively resentment and discrimination against Ki-teak's original identity as a poor man in underclass. As Ki-taek's employer, Dong-ik holds a significantly higher position than Ki-teak, despite they are all fathers and husbands. Ki-taek's constantly attempts to communicate with Dong-ik as equals are seen as disrespectful by Dong-ik, prompting him to reinforce the boundaries firmly and decisively between them. For example, while Ki-taek was driving Dong-ik's car, the two engage in casual conversation regarding to the former housemaid. The camera cuts between the two

men in different positions, the front and back seats of the car. Although the two men maintain coherent communication, they are never in the same shot, which allows them to keep a distance and communicate without crossing the line. Ki-taek, however, turns his head back to Dong-ik to a growing degree in subsequent conversations, attempting to cross the invisible line between the front and back seats. While doing so, Dong-ik's attitude grows impatient, at last ending the conversation by asking Ki-taek to look ahead. Thus, even though the Kims faked their identities by lying to get a chance to work for a wealthy family, a clear boundary between the two social classes remains intact. This is exemplified by Dong-ik's feeling offended by Ki-taek's frequent turning back to the back seat and his smell. Despite coexisting within the same physical space, these two characters are in completely different positions. They all reside in the same city, but their living conditions differ drastically: one occupies a luxurious modern mansion high above the ground, while the other lives in a damp semi-basement; within the same room, one rests on the sofa while the other hides beneath it; and in the car, they sit in separate seats with one in the front and the other in the back. This clearly visible divide between the poor and the rich, embodied by their spatial arrangement, is caused by inequalities in society, economic oppression and discrimination between classes, and this divide prevents people between the two classes from having an equal conversation. Therefore, with the double denial of the underclass's self-identity by others and themselves, and the oscillation between unattainable fantasy and harsh reality, the Kims are caught in an identity crisis that leads to violent acts.

4. Violence: The Evident Manifestation of Class Conflict

4.1. Violence in Intra-class Competition

The violence takes place in the internal and external realms of the underclass, where the internal violence is a rivalry between the Kims and the Ohs. The external violence, on the other hand, is a more dramatic act of revenge against capitalism, caused by oppression and discrimination, huge inequalities, and identity crisis. *Parasite*, while establishing a strong antagonism between the classes, is not a story of the underclasses declaring war on the upper classes. Instead, the confrontation between the Kims and the Ohs exposes the relentless truth that in capitalist society the proletarians are always fighting each other to gain access to limited resources and to improve their status, which allegorizes one of neoliberalism's most pernicious effects, which is the lack of solidarity of the working-class [7]. A key critique of capitalism is its imposition of pervasive competition, which results in the oppression of perceived rivals in both professional and personal realms, and reinforces the belief that any means are justifiable in the pursuit of success [8]. In order to gain employment with the Parks, the Kims use almost ruthless subterfuge to displace the previous employees and secure a larger share of resources. The Kims' ruthless and indifferent competition with individuals of the same social standing ultimately escalates into violence. An instance of this is the confrontation between the Kims and the Ohs that takes place in the living room of the Parks' house, resulting in the accidental death of Moon-gwang by the hands of Chung-sook. In recent years, Korean dramas have frequently depicted an and the plight of the underclass within a society that is controlled by the upper class who is extremely powerful, where individuals are compelled to disregard the suffering of others or engage in a relentless competition that perpetuates extreme violence, leading to death and bloodshed. An example of the intense competition between the underclass is *Squid Game*, directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk, released in 2021 on Netflix. This series tells a story of a group of underclasses who, driven by money and seeking to escape their dire financial circumstances, engage in a life-threatening survival game orchestrated by the rich. This series depicts the brutal existence of people in a highly competitive capitalist system and reveals the devastation of the exploitative system in today's modern society. The capitalist forces in *Squid Game* place the participants in a world completely isolated from the legal and moral order of society and present an enticing yet unattainable

desire by hanging a huge transparent cash jar that keeps piling up at the end of each round in the participant's dormitory. The cash jar and the Parks' mansion in *Parasite*, serve as both a tantalizing opportunity and a distant aspiration for the protagonists, symbolizing the potential to transform their fortunes and transcend their social class. Hea-kyoung Koh in his essay state that "the verticality of architectural structures" depicted in *Parasite* holds profound symbolic significance, representing the hierarchical levels within which the human characters exist and the stratification of the cultural context that surrounds them. When Ki-woo first arrives in the neighbourhood where the Parks live for his interview, the camera places him in the deepest of the frame, making him appear tiny in comparison to his surroundings, and he frequently looks upright at the surrounding high-rise housing in order to spot the Park's house. This elevated view corresponds to the participants in the *Squid Game* looking up at the money jar. Within the constructed illusion of capitalism for the underclass, driving people to fiercely compete solely for their own interests. However, these competitions often prove futile, as exemplified by the Ohs and the Kims, wherein their quest for the chance to reside and work in the Parks' abruptly concludes with the tragic loss of three lives. The futility of competition leads to the shattering of people's ideals, or the realisation that they can never be realised, which then leads to jealousy and animosity. This negativity reverberates back to the upper class in capitalism, who have the vast majority of power and resources in this society.

4.2. Violence as Revenge Toward Upper Class

The violent conflict between the underclass ended up referring to a bloody war with the upper class, particularly point to the conflict between Ki-teak and Dong-ik. At the end of the film, during the birthday party of the Parks' youngest son, Geun-sae comes out of the basement to take revenge for his wife, he kills Ki-jung, and then he is killed by Chung-sook's desperately. After the proletarian families sacrifice a family member each, the chaos, anger, sadness and all other negative emotions of the proletariat explode towards the upper classes. Although the Parks did not directly contribute in any way to the tragic end of these two families in the film, the very existence of capital causes all the tragedies. As Kyung Hyun Kim states in his book, the film showcases "the first moment in Korean cinematic history that valorizes the killing of a capitalist for no apparent reason other than the fact that he is a capitalist" [9]. Dong-ik's gesture of covering his nose in disgust upon encountering the odour emanating from Geun-sae's lifeless body, a behaviour he had previously displayed when confronted with the smell of Ki-teak's semi-basement living quarters, deeply wounded Ki-teak's pride and thus served as a decisive catalyst for his ultimate decision to take Dong-ik's life. Ki-teak motives for killing Dong-ik are not clear in the narrative, which makes his action more symbolic than an impulsive act made in the midst of chaos and allows the film to move at the end from competition between the oppressed and engaging in meaningless internal conflict to the long-standing accumulation of anger among the lower classes. Thus, the final violence is not only the revenge of the lower class who has been deprived of their labour, time, and even dignity by the rich, but it is also the last rebellion of the poor who, desperately realize that they will forever remain in a socially oppressed position, unable to make the class leap.

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on Korean class conflict as reflected in the lies and violent elements of the film *Parasite*. While class conflict in Korean society is now mainly reflected in the lack of solidarity and competition within the lower class, the film gives a satirical exploration of class issues through the violent conflict of the lower class against the upper class, that is, the upper class or class divisions themselves should be eliminated. This paper focuses on the class issue in Korea through the film *Parasite*, but this paper does not include data on the gap between rich and poor in Korea from the

1990s to modern society, as well as specific data on the average income of specific companies and the general public. Future research can be compared through Korean films and television productions or data from Korean reality to reveal the class issue in Korea in a more concrete way.

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