

An Althusserian Study of Netflix Series *Squid game*

1. Saleha Adnan, 2. Maham Akram

1. MPhil Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad,
Pakistan

Salehaadnan.ENG@tuf.edu.pk

2. Lecturer/Coordinator, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of
Faisalabad, Pakistan

mahamakram.ENG@tuf.edu.pk (Corresponding Author)

Abstract

This article explored the South Korean Netflix series *Squid game* (Season 1) through the theoretical lens of Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, situated within the wider Marxist intellectual tradition. Based on the concept of cultural hegemony formulated by Gramsci, Marx's critique of capitalism and the explanation of Repressive and Ideological State Appliances by Althusser, the study explored the depiction of the series of ideological control, subject formation and systematic compliance. This study used a qualitative method, namely, textual and critical discourse analysis, to examine how characters were hailed into subject positions that replicated and reproduced larger capitalist hierarchies. Owing to the special emphasis on the interpellation, the thesis showed how the series was not only an entertaining piece of work, but a critical commentary on ideology, power, and social control. The relevance of this work was that it served to address the modern literary and cultural criticism by filling in the gap between the abstract Marxist theory and popular culture. In doing so, the thesis provided insight into the both ways media reflected and shaped socio-political realities, encouraging critical awareness of how

ideology constructed subjects in everyday life.

Keywords: Marxism, Althusser, Dehumanization, Power

1. Introduction

Marxist theory, which emerged from the critique of capitalism, provides a theoretical framework to analyze the dynamics of power, class and economic exploitation that underpin modern societies. From a Marxist perspective, capitalism was based on the separation of the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (those who must sell their labor to live). The bourgeoisie “form the ruling class” and “own the factories and corporations” of their society while the proletariat are comprised of “the huge mass of workers who were exploited by this ruling class and whose condition becomes increasingly more desperate” (Berger, 2019). Helemejko (2012) said that “Marx rejected the theory of natural harmony and pointed out that in the 18th century the social classes started to polarize and split into two classes, the class of the oppressors and the class of the oppressed, because of the differences between the propertied and non-propertied classes.” This unequal relationship created systems of oppression, in which the ruling class took advantage of the use of wealth and power at the expense of the working majority. In such systems, power is not only kept in check through material domination, but also through ideological and cultural domination; inequality is made normal. The existence of the lower class is an ongoing fight, the people are subjected to a competition in a system that is structured to help the privileged class. Such issues of economic coercion, systemic injustice, and the use of human life as a commodity are central to Marxist thought and are strikingly relevant to the landscape of the modern world. The South Korean Netflix series *Squid game* (2021) is the best example of this that has come to light in recent years. “This series chronicles a competition of 456 players in a money crisis – *Squid game* (2021) is the latest South Korean cultural phenomenon to spread globally, “with a tight story, social metaphor and intense violence” (Huang, 2022). *Squid game* (2021) is a powerful allegory of capitalist exploitation, vividly illustrating how systems of power manipulate and discard the lower class for entertainment, profit and control through its depiction of economic desperation, dehumanization and violent competition. This thesis argues that the film *Squid game* (2021) is a reflection and critique of inequality and oppression in the modern capitalist world through using a Marxist lens.

Capitalism, inequality, division of classes, exploitation of labor, culture of debts and ideology control are increasingly the characteristics of the contemporary world. In contemporary capitalist societies, people are often pushed into a struggle for survival that is based upon profit, productivity, and the accumulation of wealth and economic power instead of human dignity and the common good. The latter is brilliantly conveyed by *Squid game* (2021), a Netflix survival drama from South Korea. Its extremely graphic depiction of poverty, desperation, and social inequality made it a global phenomenon. But behind its exciting story, *Squid game* (2021) is a critique of capitalism and ideology, pointing out how these systems take advantage of the weakest people and how they give them the impression of being free, equal, and having opportunities.

Despite extensive scholarships on ideology, interpellation, and power, several critical gaps remained. While Althusser, Foucault, Gramsci, and related theorists have provided powerful frameworks for understanding how subjects are shaped by ideology, digital and algorithmic systems that governed participation and identity in contemporary societies remained underexplored. Classical notions of freedom from Plato and Aristotle have not been fully integrated with analyses of modern capitalist and neoliberal contexts, particularly in relation to structural inequality. Scholarship has also largely overlooked transnational and non-Western contexts, including how media, education, and cultural consumption reproduce or resist dominant ideologies. Additionally, the intersection of late capitalism, surveillance, and consumer culture as analyzed by Mandel, Bowles, Wolff, and Reed, required further study, especially regarding how subjectivity was formed and contested in interactive digital spaces. Critically, popular media like the Netflix series *Squid game* (Season 1) had not been analyzed through Marxist lenses, including the frameworks of Marx, Althusser, and Gramsci, to explore systemic inequality, ideological control, and false consciousness. Finally, while concepts like counter interpellation and ideological resistance had been theorized, empirical examinations of how individuals or groups challenge or reinterpret ideology in contemporary, media-saturated societies were still limited. This gap highlighted the need to study the interplay of ideology, subject formation, and popular culture in a 21st-century, globalized context.

This qualitative study centered on Gramsci's theory that ideology reproduced power structures by turning individuals into obedient objects.

The Research Objectives of this thesis are:

- To examine the ways in which ideologies shape and support the idea of class struggle in *Squid game* (2021)
- To explore how money is a tool of power and control in the capitalist hierarchy.
- To see the idea of interpellation as a control mechanism in *Squid game* (2021) by Althusser.

The questions of this thesis are:

- What is the role of ideologies in creating and reinforcing the class struggle in *Squid game* (2021)?
- What is the role and power of money in the capitalist hierarchy?
- How does interpellation play the role of a means of control in *Squid game* (2021)?

2. Review of Literature

Cultural hegemony and capitalism are ideas that are central in comprehending the manner in which societies are organized and governed. Cultural hegemony is a concept proposed by Gramsci to describe how the dominant group influences culture and values in subtle and pervasive ways to defend their reign and make their ideologies seem normal and universal. The socio-economic system of capitalism has helped to support this domination by placing wealth and power among a small group of people and placing individual competition and economic inequality as a given. These ideas are part and parcel of the larger system of the Marxist theory which criticized capitalistic societies as exploitative and class struggle oriented. For Marxists, capitalism is a system of economic and ideological oppression, not only an economic system, which is alienating the working classes and reproducing itself by means of material and ideological domination. Cultural hegemony is one of the processes by which the consent is produced, and disobedience is repressed within capitalism. Capitalism and hegemony provide a critical perspective of Marxist analysis by providing scholars with an opportunity to explore how economic power is cemented by culture, ideology, and media. This review of the literature examined these underpinning concepts and how they can be used to understand cultural texts like *Squid game* critically.

2.1 Althusser

On the Reproduction of Capitalism by Gramsci (2014) elaborated upon his previous essay Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation) to provide a more detailed explanation of how societies based on capitalism reproduce. His main point of contention was that capitalism is not reproduced simply because of economic production, but ideology, a system of beliefs and practices that make people subconsciously agree to structures that subordinate them. According to Gramsci, this process is sustained through institutions such as education, religion, the family, and the media, which shape individuals' understanding of the social world. By presenting existing social relations as natural and inevitable, these institutions encourage consent rather than coercion, ensuring the continued reproduction of capitalist society across generations.

Althusser presents two very important mechanisms that perpetuate capitalism:

1. **Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs):** RSAs are those institutions that operate mainly through coercion or force e.g. the police, military, and the courts. They keep their minds in line with the threat or use of violence.
2. **Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs):** These are more subtly operated by ideology as opposed to force. These include schools, the media, religion, family, and culture. In contrast to RSAs, ISAs worked by moulding the beliefs, values and behaviors of people in such a way that they voluntarily embraced the capitalist system as a natural and fair situation.

The most important contribution of Althusser in this writing has been his theory of interpellation, or the way through which ideology hailed people and subjected them to become subjects. As an individual reacted to such an ideological appeal (i.e. adhering to social norms or accepting his or her place in the system), he or she became interpellated, in other words, placed as subjects who reproduced the social order. This has become so ingrained that it became part of them and they internalized their oppression and believed that the identities are based on choice.

In contemporary capitalistic communities, Althusser has stated that ISA is the school that was the most dominating. Schools provided a systematic induction into acceptance of authority, discipline, and hierarchy of labor, unlike religious or familial institutions. Education replicated not only the skills but also the ideological subjugation that capitalism demanded by inculcating obedience,

punctuality and competitiveness.

Althusser has also redefined ideology as a material practice, rather than a system of ideas. Ideology was practiced and performed, it is enacted in rituals, habits, and also in social institutions as opposed to being believed in. Therefore, people are the producers as well as consumers of ideology.

2.2 Ideological State Apparatus

Alloggio (2012) has touched upon the notions of Ideological State Apparatuses, the ideology itself and its functioning in the construction of subjugated subjectivity following which he has considered the Marxist interpretation of Nicolo Machiavelli to highlight the Marxist view towards the ideological control and its changes and limits.

Hafsa (2023) from Bangladesh in her study brought light onto the marginalized people living in a modern developed Indian society based on their portrayal in Arundhati Roy's "*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*". She has particularly critiqued the character of Anjum Saddam Tilo and Musa since they never belonged to the normal Indian society in fact they are neglected and ignored on several occasions and are violently killed by the society in which they inhabit.

Eslami and Valizadeh (2022) have given an answer to this question that how Marxism can be examined in the light of politics and not just it has a true economic character and this is the reason the authors have used the help of the book *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* by Gramsci translated by Mr. Roozbeh Sadra. After critically reading the book, the authors have come to the solution that determined the ideological mechanisms of the state in sociopolitical aspects he also promoted a conspiracy illusion on the other hand.

Tyagi (2014), a Delhi resident, has delved into how the subject of ISA is presented in the novel of the same name by Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, and the significance of this presentation to the identity forming process. Likewise, in a group study by Setyorini, Idris and Surabaya (2017), the adult literature "*The Giver*" has been explored through the lens of Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses within the novels' society which is a dystopian community.

Wolff (2005) extended the idea of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) of Gramsci in his analysis of the way U.S. capitalism perpetuated itself via ideology, as opposed to coercion.

According to Wolff, the media, education, religion and the family are some of the institutions that act as powerful ISAs and promote consumerism and capitalist ideals. Instead of just instilling obedience, these institutions are molding people to internalize the ideology of capitalism to associate freedom with consumption and identity with material success. This conditioning of ideology has covered the inequality of classes and shifted their discontent on individual failure instead of systemic errors. Wolff pointed out that consumer culture continued to hold the working class ideologically committed to capitalism, making them unable to have class consciousness and to act in solidarity. To the Left, he indicated that change was possible only through a critique of the economic foundation of capitalism, but that a critique of its ideological superstructure, of the beliefs and desires that are embedded within it, is also necessary.

3. Materials and Methods

This qualitative study centered on Gramsci's theory that ideology reproduced power structures by turning individuals into obedient objects.

3.1 Ideology: What is it?

Understanding the definition of "ideology" was also vital for interpreting the term "ideological state apparatus." Ideology can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In his own words, Terry Eagleton characterizes Althusser's ideology.

“Humans are unique subjects because of a specific arrangement of signifying practices that also creates lived relations that link these social subjects to the prevailing production relations in our society” (Eagleton, 1991).

In essence, Althusser's philosophy was more than just "false consciousness," which forced the working class to view the world through the lens of the dominant class. Althusser put up two preliminary theses to illustrate his definition of ideology: "Ideology has a material existence" (Althusser, 2001) and "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 2001).

Gramsci and Althusser are regarded as two significant twentieth-century thinkers who expanded our knowledge of ideology. According to Gramsci, ideology is a component of materialism in the

eighteenth century that involved exaggeration. It used to mean "science of ideas," and as inspection was the only way science could find and use ideas; it meant "analysis of ideas," or the pursuit of ideas' origins. Gramsci believed that concepts needed to be broken down into their most basic components, which could only be consciousness. "If ideologies are to be more than just ink on paper, they must become dramas" (Gramsci, 1917).

According to Gramsci, ideology is complicated. According to Gramsci, ideology denoted a composite form of the social world, not just in the sense of complicated, but more succinctly in the sense of nonlinear objects, collections of various parts and numerous pieces that depended on countless purposes. According to Filippini (2017), "the development of ideologies in Gramsci thus took the form of a circular movement that was characterized at certain moments by intensification of an organization, and at others by crisis and decay".

In a strategic position within society, ideology could also be recognised as a group's trademark. There had been little indication of which position will grow more ideological, as was the case in so many other situations. An "out-group" whose ideology was a protest against an exclusive or discriminatory social hierarchy, or a "in-group" whose ideology justified a relationship of dominance (Gerring, 1997).

3.2 Ideological Construction

Domination was also the foundation of ideology. "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force in society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force," wrote Marx and Engels (1970), the fundamental source for ideology as domination. Many contemporary authors had promoted a broader understanding of mechanisms of domination in place of this class-specific consideration of domination. In this perspective, ideology "bolsters stable institutional arrangements by explaining, justifying, and prompting support for a particular stratification system whose failure or demise will lead to the disintegration of a particular pattern of control" (Wilson, 1992). Writers of a Marxist or communist abstraction did not minimize this idea of ideology. However, according to Apter (1964), "ideology helps to support an elite and to justify the exercise of power".

This research has been based on a Marxist theoretical tradition that viewed ideology as a key mechanism for the maintenance and reproduction of power structures. This study embraced

Gramsci's perspective of ideology as a material, institutional, and subject-forming force rather than seeing it as a simple set of abstract beliefs or warped notions. This framework established ideology as an active process that shapes people's lived realities and maintained systems of domination through consent rather than overt coercion by combining Althusser's formulation of Ideological State Apparatuses and interpellation, Marx's critique of capitalism, and Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony.

4. Results and Discussion

It was only through its disturbing allegorical revelation of modern-day capitalist power systems and the ideological processes that upheld them that *Squid game* (2021) achieved such global success not just due to its violent spectacle. The series was a carefully set-up game of survival, over which human lives had been devalued to expendable units of entertainment and profit, under the influence of an invisible elite, the power of which worked by surveillance, hierarchy, ritual, and symbolic domination. This chapter treats *Squid game* as a political and ideological text and holds that the game itself served as a material manifestation of capitalism as such, and that the participants were interpellated as subjects within a system that diligently promotes exploitation, competition and self-destruction in the name of choice and opportunity.

Based on the theory of ideology and interpellation formulated by Gramsci, the analysis explored how the series used the process of how individuals were hailed into subject positions that enabled them to be complicit in their domination. Competitors arrived in the arena as social outcasts with huge debts, but once within the game they learned to identify themselves as more of a player, with a number instead of a name, and with rules that play by the logic of capitalist meritocracy. Their agreement to take part, which was constantly couched in terms of being voluntary was a reflection of the ideological illusion of free will under capitalism, whereby the subjects were under the impression that they were making a choice, when in fact they were reacting to the structural pressures of capitalism. This contradiction was summed up by Seong Gi-hun (Player 456) in Episode 2 (43:17), when he questioned the state's failure to protect him: "I paid my taxes. I followed the law. I did everything the government told me to do. But when I needed help, where was the government?" This scene foreshadowed the betrayal of ideology that lied at the core of capitalist citizenship and preconditions the game as a metaphorical continuation of economic

violence in real-life.

In the first chapter, the *Squid game* (2021) arena was put into the context of a microcosm of capitalist society, where competition was naturalized, solidarity is punished, and only by killing others, one becomes a survivor. The game was a hyperbolic but all too recognizable variant of neoliberal reality, in which individualization of success and the moralization of failure were made. Under this closed system, the elite was not seen but was all powerful and set the rules, dominated the space and devoured the pain of the participants as spectacle. Their status could be said to be the dominant ideological instance as defined by Althusser: the ones who were not just involved in ideology but created and controlled it. In turn, the players were interpaed into the roles, which presupposed obedience, discipline and internalization of the logic of the game, even when the latter presupposed killing of the other players.

The interpretation of the concept of entertainment as enjoyed by the rich, in the form of the VIPs, was then subjected to analysis, wherein the masked appearance of the latter literalizes the voyeuristic pleasure of consuming pain by the global rich. Their animal costumes and Western accented, and their dispassionate commentary created them as representatives of imperial and capitalist overindulgence, making the bodies of the Korean actors into the source of exoticized and disposable entertainment. This relationship revealed the functioning of global capitalism, which was not only economically but culturally as well, transforming misery in the Global South into a spectacle that can be consumed by transnational elites. The fact that the VIPs are anonymous, they can observe without being noticed, and that they are not answerable to anyone, only added to the unequal power relations that are characteristic of the whole system.

The aesthetically imperialistic series created by the visuals and space incorporated the nostalgia of childhood and the dictatorship of authoritarianism. This aesthetics served as a signifying practice which connected the social subjects with the existing relations of production of the game (Eagleton, 1991: 1), which made sure that the stratification system seems to be both natural and warranted (Wilson, 1992: 19–21). The Escher-inspired pastel staircases form a mazing construction of endless up and down the staircase, as a representation of what appeared to be the illusion of social movement within strict classes. The red-uniformed guards with their masks on their faces symbolized the bureaucratic apparatus of repression as they are ideological and repressive

apparatuses that do not act on their own but that imposed the regulations of the system. Their circle of strict hierarchy, triangle, square mirrors the institutional stratification, and their anonymity supported the idea that power in the modern systems was not used by a person but by a position. This dehumanization of the players further is driven by the fact that the players themselves are reduced to the level of numbers depriving them of identity and history and re-creating them as fungible units of labor and danger.

The objects of the game obtained great symbolic loads and will be analyzed as ideological indications. The coffins covered with pink ribbons which were brought to the dormitory in front of the other players symbolized the process of death but aestheticized it, turning corpses into cleanly packaging commodities. The giant glass piggy bank, full of cash, hanging over the heads of the players served as a reminder constantly that only monetary value was counted and that every death literally added value to the prize. The prize money thereby became a source of desire as well as control and interpellated the players into the logic of human life being calculable and exchangeable. The 456, who was the last player and the sum of all participants in the game, was an allusion to how the individuality of the subjects was reduced to a serial form, as well as a numerical representation of mass precarity in capitalism. Internalization of ideology was embodied in the figure of the Front Man who was masked by black and placed above the guards and players. Since he was a former winner that now administered the system, he was the best representative of the subject who had completely assimilated with the ruling logic and was now imposing it on other people. His role demonstrated how domination reproduced itself not only externally through coercion but through subjects who developed to believe in and uphold the very structures, which had oppressed them in the past. His surveillance, control and administration of spectacle displayed the smooth operation of ideological power when no longer felt as an instrument of coercion but as an essential need.

It was these symbiotic components that created a complete allegory of capitalist ideology at work; the highbrow spectators, the ideologically drilled guards, the numbered players, the symbolic use of architecture, and the all-pervasive temptation of money that *Squid game* (2021) presented. This chapter will show how the series was visualizing the interpellation: the way people were hailed to a place where exploitation seemed natural, competition seemed natural and inequality seemed justified. The game was not solely an expression of capitalism, it theatrically simulated the

processes that lead to the production of obedient subjects, structural violence being normalized, and systemic cruelty turned into entertainment.

This chapter will demonstrate that *Squid game* (2021) was not only an attack on economic inequality, but a multifaceted ideological statement which revealed how the power was working through the spectacle, consent, and the shaping of a subject. The next few pages will subsequently expound on how the elite dominated the game, how the poor were disciplined and objectified, and how ideology, through pleasure and terror, ensured the re-creation of a system that thrived on human life, and offered itself as being fair, voluntary and even entertaining.

4.1 Elites Controlling the Game

The domination of the elite was the form of control in *Squid game* (2021) and the structural basis of the whole system. The game was not a free or neutral domain, it was created, sponsored and controlled by an elite layer of the influential ones whose authority stretched to all spheres of its functioning. This elite, which was the most visible with the VIPs and negotiated through the Frontman, dictated the rules, the environment and lives of the participants so that the system would work in their interests. They were unquestionably powerful and yet mostly unknown, which supported a sense of hierarchy whereby those on the top are not affected by the ramifications of their actions, and those on the bottom were left to endure the entirety of exploitation.

This domination was manifested through the organization and management of the game. When Frontman stated that the rest of the games were going to be played as planned and that he did not think you would be disappointed (Episode 7, 48:08) was an eye opener to how much the system was concerned with the satisfaction of the elite. Likewise, withholding information, “I’d hate to spoil the fun to everyone” (46:45) - proved the control of knowledge in itself, which supported the imbalance in power between the individuals who created the game, and the ones who played it. The elite also fixed the nature of the game but also controlled the flow of information so that the participants were kept in the dark, requiring, and obedient.

According to the Marxists, as put forward by Marx, the elite were the bourgeoisie the ruling elite who own the means of production (Marx, 1867). The game itself was the means of production in *Squid game* (2021), creating the value of suffering and work of the participants. The players, as the proletariat, were compelled to compete, and the only way they would survive was by

maneuverings their ways through a system that was out to exploit them. The domination of resources, rules, and outcomes by the elite mirrored the larger trends of the capitalist systems of power where the few were in superior positions to take advantage of the hard work and susceptibility of the many.

This order was also enlightened by the idea of ideological and repressive state apparatuses by Althusser (1971). The elite used both of these types of control: the guards and the Frontman are a repressive apparatus: by monitoring and violence, they enforced the rules and framed the game as fair and voluntary was an ideological apparatus that helped to gain the consent of participants.

The players were interpolated into a role of competitors in terms of embracing the logic of the system and engaging in reproduction. The control of the elite was therefore not just material but ideological as well influencing the perception and experience of the game.

This control was essential to understand how this control was sustained, and Gramsci has developed the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). The elite did not only use force; they create a system whereby players perceive a sense of legitimacy to the game. The regulations seem just, the prizes were huge and the possibility to achieve success was high. This image created agreeableness, including the already exploited ones, and the system was stable. Hegemonic control was effective as seen in the willingness of the players to go on with the game, even when they realized how brutal it was.

Also the idea of power and surveillance by Foucault emphasized the use of visibility and control in the exercise of power (Foucault, 1977). The subjects were constantly observed with their behaviors influenced by the awareness that they were under observation. The elite though are very much invisible, which formed an imbalance in which power was exercised out of an invisibility. The system made them more authoritative since they are free to manipulate the system without any form of scrutiny. This control was further supported by the role of spectacle that was theorized by Debord (1967). The game was created in order to be a show of the elite, to turn the misery of those involved into a commodity. This show not only entertained but also justified the system as a well-organized and involving spectacle as opposed to a place of exploitation. The fact that the spectacle was controlled by the elite means that the story was always in their own interest as it hides the inequalities that are the norm of the spectacle.

As postulated by scholars like Fisher (2009), capitalist structures presented a situation where people see no other way to join, and this further consolidated the structure of existence. Likewise, Zizek (2021) implied that *Squid game* (2021) revealed the processes in which the power was preserved with the help of coercion, ideology, and spectacle. The example of the elite domination of the game showed this mixture of power and its two-sidedness, the one evident and the other hidden.

Finally, the elite domination of the game in *Squid game* (2021) was a complex apparatus of power that was fueled by economic and ideological control, surveillance and spectacle. The elite created and maintained the circumstances of the game, making sure that it operated to their benefit and was relatively immune to the effects of the game. Based on the Marxist theory, it was identified that this control was not just structural, but more of an ideological nature, based on Althusser, Gramsci, Foucault and Debord, making use of their theories of state apparatuses, hegemony, power as well as the theory of spectacle. It showed the concentration, exercise and reproduction of power and how human life has become a resource, which is used to satisfy the interests of the high.

4.2 Metaphor for Capitalism

Squid game (2021) made the game a compressed metaphor of capitalism that revealed the logic of the structure of the competitive process, exploitation, and the unequal distribution of resources. The subjects are recruited into a system based on marginalized and indebted backgrounds and falsely offers an upward mobility but was essentially created to advantage those who already hold the power. The regulations seem to be neutral and universally applicable, but the circumstances of people involvement were highly unequal as it was aligned with contradictions of capitalist societies.

The game therefore reflected a system where only the most competitive survives and triumph of a few will mean the defeat and death of the many. This metaphor was clearly expressed in the second episode, as one of the members (Seong Gi-hun) claims, "I am a tax-paying citizen!" (43:17) and appealed to the discourse of civic inclusion and economic input. This quote brought out the conflict between being a part of the economic system and being outside the benefits of the economic system. Although the person met the demands of society, he was still languishing in debts and exposure, which depicted how capitalism could not deliver equal results. The game recreated this

situation by providing a possibility to be relieved financially and at the same time exposing the players to a high level of risk, which confirmed the notion that opportunity in such systems could not be divided into any other aspect than exploitation.

Ideologically speaking, according to Marxist ideas as theorized by Marx, the game had a Marxist interpretation of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, who were in a state of conflict over which team would win the game (Marx, 1867). The participants symbolized the working classes whose labour and existence created value, but the elite represented by the VIPs own the means of production and enjoy the spoils. The competitive system of the game does not allow collective action to be involved, and the game was divided so that each participant was concentrated on their personal survival. This division corresponded to the analysis of Marx on the concepts of capitalism, where workers were put on opposite sides, which did not create the opportunities of resistance and strengthened the dominance of a ruling class.

This framework was also enlightened by the ideological interpellation as proposed by Althusser (1971). The hails game initiated the players into the role of a competitor, which forces them to internalize the logic of that system and made it seem valid. By obeying the rules and trying to achieve success in them, people reproduced themselves and thus exploited them. This process was strengthened by the framing of the game as voluntary to obscure structural coercion of debt, poverty, and lack of options that motivated participation. Ideology thus played a role of making necessity a choice so that it could be obeyed without the need to force.

Gramsci came up with the concept of hegemony which further explained how this metaphor was perpetuated (Gramsci, 1971). The respondents had faith in success, even in cases where they were vastly outnumbered by the system. Consent was produced by this belief, and the system would not need to be coerced all the time. The prospect of gaining large sums of money as a reward was such an enticing factor that it strengthened the notion that the game was just, and that one could win by trying. This reflected the ideology of capitalists, which valued meritocracy and disregards the existence of structural inequalities. Also, the concept of disciplinary power as developed by Foucault brought attention to the fact that the game controlled behavior by the rules, surveillance, and normalization (Foucault, 1977). Students were under continuous supervision and assessment, and their behavior was predetermined by the limitations of the system. Such setting

promotes self-regulation, since people changed their behavior to conform to the game expectations. The metaphor can therefore be expanded to involve control mechanisms that regulate the conduct and thought patterns of individuals themselves in the context of hierarchical structures, not just economic relations.

Spectacle, according to its theorization by Guy Debord, added to the capitalist metaphor (Debord, 1967). The game was made to become a show to the high and mighty and turn the plight of the players into entertainment. This spectacle hid the relations of exploitation beneath and made them interesting and even enticing.

Capitalist systems generated a feeling of inevitability, according to scholars like Fisher (2009) people had a feeling that they have no other possible alternative. This was clearly seen when the participants were given the choice of leaving the game yet they decided to go back to the game. They were willing to go back and had to endure its cruelty, and this depicted how ingrained the rationality of capitalism had become. This condition as a metaphor was reflected in the game, which revealed how people got sucked into structures that exploit them and seem to give people hope.

To sum up, *Squid game* (2021) served as a strong metaphor of capitalism, summing up all of its major dynamics of competition, inequality, and ideological domination. The game, with its organization, regulations and its depiction of power, mirrored the position of people in the systems, which placed profit over human lives. It was based on Marxist theory in which, Althusser introduced the idea of interpellation, Gramsci the idea of hegemony, Foucault the idea of disciplinary power and Debord the idea of spectacle, it was clear that the game was not only a narrative element but a critical commentary on the capitalist society. It showed the functioning of power structures in the perpetuation of power, turning the struggle of humanity into necessity and spectacles.

4.3 The Amusement of the Rich

Games in *Squid game* were clearly designed as entertainment of the rich elite, and human suffering turned into a product to be consumed. Their lavish environment, the presence of the VIPs and their detached commentary indicated that the game was not only about making money but also about

enjoyment. The lives of the participants were made commodities and shown to please themselves, who hold the power to view without repercussions. Such a dynamic revealed the system where inequality was not only tolerated but was celebrated, which shows the interplay of wealth, power, and spectacle.

This was well demonstrated in Episode 7, in which the VIPs sat in a posh lounge, with luxury all around them, and observed the action of the games. Their conversation was an expression of their consumerism of suffering: VIP 2 remarked, “The games of this edition had been amazing” (46:35), VIP 1 added, “Right. The contest in Korea was the best” (46:34), and the Frontman assured them, “I believe this next game will exceed your expectation” (46:32). These utterances put the games into context as cyclical, much like seasons of entertainment, implying a system of global production and consumption of such spectacles. This framing was further strengthened when the Frontman stated that he would not wish to “spoil the fun of everybody” (46:45) and, thus, the games are presented as an object of pleasure that had to be meticulously controlled and provided. It is further exacerbated by the fact that the VIPs would prefer to observe with their own eyes, as VIP 1 stated: “Trust me, the screens at our homes were big enough. But nothing like the ones that can be seen with your own eyes” (46:24). This quote highlighted the importance attached to being close to violence, in which entertainment value was increased by seeing suffering first-hand. The games were not just spectated, but it was more of an experience as the games were available only to the rich and powerful. The hierarchical difference between the elite and the participants was strengthened by this exclusivity, which left the participants as objects of observation.

According to Marxist way of thinking as expressed by Marx, this dynamic was the accumulation of power and wealth to the bourgeoisie who were beneficiaries in the exploitation of the proletariat (Marx, 1867). The work, torture and death of the participants created value that was destroyed by the elite, which demonstrated how even the extreme exploitations in capitalism can become sources of profit and pleasure. The fact that the VIPs were not involved in the effects of the game underscored that alienation of such systems in which the powerful and the powerless were separated by a wall of ignorance.

This was further elucidated with the notion of ideology as proposed by Gramsci (Althusser, 1971). By framing the games as entertainment, a narrative was created, which normalized violence and

covered its roots. Shifting the focus onto the structural conditions of poverty, debt and inequality that lead to participation, the system did this by presenting the events as a form of leisure. Using words and actions, the VIPs supported this ideological framing, making sure that the system was regarded as valid and even worthy.

This was especially applicable to the idea of spectacle, as created by Debord (1967). The games were also created to be a visual show where pain was turned into a picture to be devoured. This spectacle was enhanced by the commentary and reactions of the VIPs made the plight of the participants a kind of narrative entertainment. This can be seen as an extension of the idea of Debord that contemporary societies are mediating social relations by images and that complex realities are being cut into images that can be consumed. In *Squid game*, this mediation materializes, as human lives turn into the subject of elite entertainment. In terms of the hegemonic approach, which was developed by Gramsci, the suffering was transformed into entertainment, which helped to uphold the dominance (Gramsci, 1971). When exploitation was viewed as a spectacle, the system minimized chances of opposition, by portraying inequality as a normal and even fun part of social order. The participants were also conscious of the stakes but they still played the game showing the extent to which this ideology was internalized.

Also, the idea of power and surveillance by Foucault accentuated the fact that even the act of observation itself was a control (Foucault, 1977). The eyes of the VIPs were not passive; it determined the game's organization and the course of the game, and thus decisions and results. The participants knew they are observed and therefore they changed their behavior, hence integrating themselves more in the system. According to scholars like Fisher (2009), the existence of capitalist systems led to circumstances where exploitation became standard and seen as a natural occurrence. Likewise, Zizek (2021) implied that *Squid game* (2021) demonstrated how capitalism turned suffering into a spectacle, which was viewed as inevitable and normal. This change was reflected in the enjoyment of the games by the VIPs as it exemplified how power was exercised both economically and culturally.

To sum up, the instrumentalization of the games as a form of entertainment of the wealthy in *Squid game* revealed the extensive involvement of wealth, power, and spectacle. The VIPs were a system where inequality was not only perpetuated but even aestheticized and pleased through their

consumption of human suffering. Based on Marxism theory, the idea of ideology by Althusser, the spectacle as viewed by Debord, the concept of hegemony as expressed by Gramsci, and the framework of power as presented by Foucault, the concept of entertainment was not a category of neutrality but a way domination was reproduced.

4.4 Game Itself

In *Squid game*, the game was the main ideological and structural mechanism by which power, control, and exploitation were structured and reproduced. It was not a series of obstacles but a well-designed mechanism, which controlled behavior, shaped perception, and determined life and death. The game's rules seemed to be just, impartial, and easy, but they hid highly unequal circumstances to guarantee the further persistence of hierarchy and domination. The game marked the coercive pressures of economic desperation, debt, and social marginalization that drove the players by making it look like a voluntary and rule-based competition. Such an illusion of justice was literally reinforced when Seong Gi-hun stated, "This was just a game." (Episode 2, 1:00:10). The statement played an ideological role where the events were framed as entertainment rather than exploitation. The system neutralized moral critique and normalized violence by reducing life-and-death struggles to the level of a game. Participants were led to perceive their experiences as merely an organized game, even when the outcomes were death. This linguistic reframing was instrumental in maintaining the system, as it reshaped how individuals understood their own experiences within it.

Ideological basis of the game was also shown when the Recruiter said, "These things are not human. These are no more than trash, useless. They had no meaning in this world." (Season 2, Episode 1). This dehumanizing form of discourse created the participants as disposable, and it is acceptable to include them into a system in which their lives are disposable. This game was therefore based on a twofold logic: it is packaged as a chance of redemption, but it also made partakers already worthless. This contradiction guaranteed obeying commands, as people were interested in trying to demonstrate their worth in the system that had already refused it.

In Marxist terms, the game can be seen as a microcosm of capitalist production as it was expressed by Marx (1867). In this instance, the participants were laboring bodies whose labor was used to create value, entertainment, and profit to the elite. They only survived by surpassing others, which

showed the competitive aspect of the capitalist systems where people were opposed to each other in the scarcity of resources.

The removal of the players represented the disenfranchisement and marginalization of such systems where losing meant losing a means of living or in this extreme scenario losing life. This was another structure that was enlightened by the ideological interpellation conception by Gramsci (Althusser, 1971). The game hailed people into particular positions of subjects who competed, survived, became winners, and who made their identities and their own actions in line with the game rules. Players reproduced the system logic by accommodating these roles and thus became part of the reproduction of the system. This process was supported by the seeming voluntariness of the game since people felt that they were doing it voluntarily, but not because of structural coercion.

Another concept of Foucault that was depicted in the game was the notion of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977). The system controlled and provided obedience, through strict rules, surveillance, and punishment. Subjects were observed continuously with their activities being limited by very clear limits. Self-regulation was promoted in this environment since people would modify their behavior to conform to system expectations. The game therefore acted as a disciplinary apparatus, generating subjects who conformed to its logic, without having to be constantly enforced by external forces.

In terms of a hegemonic perspective as laid down by Gramsci, the game was able to sustain its dominance by gaining the consent of the participants (Gramsci, 1971). Although they were aware of its cruelty, players would still decide to play on the basis of the fact that it was possible to succeed in the system. The game structure (advancement as an option to be gained via effort and strategy) solidified this belief. But this seeming meritocracy masked the inequalities that pervaded it so that the system could be preserved.

Also, the idea of the spectacle by Guy Debord played the key role in comprehending the role of the game (Debord, 1967). The exercises were not only meant to be taken by the participants but also watched and taken by the elite. It turned into a show, in which agony was turned into fun. This show veiled the truth of exploitation and made it an orderly and entertaining affair. On the same note, Žižek (2021) claimed that *Squid game* (2021) unveiled how capitalism transformed and even

the most extreme violence into something consumable, making it a part of value and meaning systems.

To sum up, the game of *Squid game* (2021) itself was a complex system, involving ideology, discipline, and spectacle to control and exploit its participants. It influenced perception and behavior through its rules, language, and structure, and makes sure that there was compliance and reproduced hierarchy. Based on the Marxist theory, the idea of interpellation by Althusser and the concept of disciplinary power by Foucault, the concept of hegemony used by Gramsci and the spectacle analysis by Debord it became clear that the game was not a story-telling device but rather a reflection of the wider mechanisms of power. It summarized how people were enticed into, ruled by and eventually devoured by the systems that put profit and control over human life first.

5. Summary

This paper had analyzed the *Squid game* (Season 1) in the Marxist analysis to understand how the showed satirizes capitalism, inequality of classes, ideological suppression and commodification of life. Using the work of Marx, Gramsci, and Debord, this study had shown that *Squid game* (2021) was not a simple survival drama but a multifaceted socially critical reflection on how the modern capitalist society worked. The series brought to light the exploitative frameworks which were present in the contemporary economic system and how people can be lured into debt, competition, alienation, and ideological control.

The conclusions of this paper indicated that capitalism was the key structuring principle of the story. This game, in turn, was a metaphor of the capitalist society where people had to compete against each other to gain access to scarce resources as a few elite classes enjoy their fight. Though the games seem to give equal opportunities to all players, this seeming equality was a mask to greater structural disparities. The series thus questioned the myth of meritocracy that was inherent in the capitalist system and revealed how individuals can be as successful as they were due to structural factors and not necessarily because of their individual endeavors.

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