

The concealed message behind the outstanding series of squid game: a study of the main themes.

الرسالة المخفية وراء السلسلة الرائعة من لعبة الحبار: دراسة الموضوعات الرئيسية

BELMIMOUN Nesrine*¹,

FRID Daoudi²

¹ University of Tlemcen, Algeria. Email: nesrine.belmimoun@univ-tlemcen.dz

² University of Tlemcen, Algeria. Email: daoudi.frid@univ-tlemcen.dz

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Abstract:

Survival shows have been a mass attraction and in-demand genre, luring viewers to dive into a fascinating world that shelters their imagination and vision. There have been a great number of books, series, and movies that have gathered worldwide traction and fame. As a matter of fact, Squid Game is one of the most popular South Korean survival dramas that has taken hold of viewers all over the world, with its unique plot and a noxious cocktail of violence and abuse. This paper aims to address the series' main elements and provide insight and analysis into its popularity as well as its engagement with individuals.

Keywords: squid game, capitalism, dystopia, individualism, survival of the fittest.

ملخص:

أفلام البقاء على قيد الحياة عبارة عن نوع من الجذب الجماهيري والطلب، مما أغرى المشاهدين بالغوص في عالم رائع يؤوي مخيلتهم ورؤيتهم. كان هنالك عدد كبير من الكتب والمسلسلات والأفلام التي جمعت الشعبية والشهرة حول العالم. في الواقع، تعد لعبة الحبار واحدة من أكثر الأعمال الدرامية للبقاء على قيد الحياة شيوعاً في كوريا الجنوبية والتي سيطرت على المشاهدين في مختلف أنحاء العالم، بمؤامرتها الفريدة ومزيج ضار من العنف وسوء المعاملة. ويهدف هذا المقال إلى تناول العناصر الأساسية للمسلسل، وتقديم نظرة ثاقبة وتحليلات لشعبيته، فضلاً عن تعامله مع الأفراد.

كلمات مفتاحية: لعبة الحبار، الرأسمالية، ديستوبيا، الفردية، البقاء للأصلح.

* The corresponding author: Belmimoun Nesrine, Email : nesrine.belmimoun@univ-tlemcen.dz

Introduction:

Squid Game, the popular Korean drama, has seized Netflix and its viewers. It has been reported that it is one of the most-watched series in the history of Netflix. According to Netflix and the magazine Variety, Squid Game "has pulled in a staggering 1.65 billion hours of viewing in 28 days following its Sept. 17 premiere."

The Squid Game was rejected for ten years before it was finally produced because it was deemed unreal. However, it has evolved at a convenient moment amid the pandemic and subsequent economic crisis. It combines urgent social concerns while also providing an escape via the absurdity of the game. It is a deadly game in which players compete against each other for their lives, turning everyday life into a battle for survival.

The series "Squid Game" highlights the brutal implications of economic disparity and debt in South Korea. It explores a contemporary look at what might happen if unfortunate people were offered the option to earn a considerable quantity of money, despite the outcomes.

There have been a variety of themes addressed in the series which enable the viewers to acknowledge the motives and relate to these ideas portrayed and put forward by the director of the series.

The case of struggle and survival is one of the many themes in the series, that many viewers were keen on and drawn to as the present society reflects their realities. Moreover, capitalism was undoubtedly quite the catch, it strikes the spectators at their core as the images of the latter invoke the harsh reality of the Korean society and individuals at once.

In addition, the dystopian genre has proven to be a prevalent one in many forms of media, including books, movies, and video games. When applied, the material typically focuses on a dystopian future in which some sort of political, environmental, or technological crisis has caused chaos on civilization around the planet. In Squid game, it is reflected in the two contents' depiction of two parties, one from a lower socioeconomic status and the other from a higher one.

1. An apercu of the series Squid game

1.1 The director's vision: an idea brought to life

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The breathtaking Korean television drama "Squid Game" was written by the South Korean director, Hwang Dong-Hyuk. He was able to captivate and appeal to the crowd while also taking social media by storm on the one hand and overcoming cultural and language boundaries on the other.

The Squid Game's protagonist, Gi-Hun, is a hopeless, bankrupt, and divorced gambler who steals money from his mother to make ends meet. The story depicts Seong Gi-hun, who is asked to participate in several playground games to win substantial money. When he is at rock bottom, a stranger approaches him at the subway station and offers him the option of participating in a game where he has to choose between red or blue cards to win cash. Later in the game, Gi-hun shows up at the contest in a blue tracksuit as a competitor.

He is transported to a secluded island to meet his childhood friend, who is meant to be a university graduate. He finds that, in reality, his friend is charged with fraud. Players engage in a

round of children's games with the other 455 other participants in the competition. Everyone fails to comprehend that each player will be fighting to death in these merciless and nightmarish games

1.2 Squid game: a twist in children's games

The first game is "red light, green light." This game, however, has an unfortunate spin: if a person is defeated, he or she will die. The majority of participants are removed in the end, leaving others in disbelief as to what they had agreed. Immediately after the first game, they all decide to leave the game. Everyone has returned to their everyday lives, free of the terrifying shackles placed on them. Later on, they return to the game, to everyone's surprise, convinced that they would prefer to risk their lives than live in the real world.

The next game they are meant to play is sugar honeycombs, also called in Korean the dalgona challenge. The honeycomb candy must be carved into a particular form without breaking it. Whereas Sang-woo gets a tip from Kang Se-byeok, who had snuck via the vents earlier, he does not reveal this information to Gi-hun. Eventually, Gi-hun manages to find a way out and survives the second game. In the meantime, players make allies, and a riot breaks out at night when a player is killed in an encounter that has no actual repercussions. The next game played is tug-of-war. The team survives thanks to the insightful advice of the old Oh Il-Nam and Sang Woo.

Moreover, the armed guards informed the participants to form two-person teams for the next game, which turned out to be marbles. The twist is that the members on each side compete against one another. Gi-hun joins Il-Nam, and Sang-woo teams up with Ali. As Sang-woo tries to fool Ali into handing up all the marbles, Gi-hun takes advantage of Il-Nam's dementia to win the next round.

In the seventh episode of the series, affluent people called the VIPs disguise themselves as animals by wearing shimmering gold-colored masks designed like the heads of various animals, including a tiger, a deer, and a bird, to maintain their identities undisclosed. It is a source of entertainment for them to sit in a viewing room and watch the contestants struggle for their lives while wagering on their outcomes.

In the meantime, the contestants took part in a new game: hopscotch, one of the most prevalent childhood games. The aim was to cross a bridge made of two glass squares set side by side. A number from one to sixteen had to be chosen by each participant, and then they were instructed to cross the bridge in that order. Two players can stand on one square of toughened glass, but if one hops on the fragile square next to it, they will be killed. One player, however, quickly discovers a means to distinguish between the various glasses.

Immediately after Sae- byeok's death at the hands of Sang-woo, the last episode of the series starts, with him and Gi-hun surviving as the only two players left in the game. In the final challenge, the infamous Squid Game, Gi-hun is instructed to take the attacking position after winning a coin flip. It is mentioned in the regulations that the winner is chosen by either Gi-hun reaching the top of the squid painted on the ground or by one of the participants murdering the other player. As a result of Sang-woo's terrible act of violence, Gi-hun becomes outraged, and the two engage in a vicious struggle that ends with Sang-woo on the ground and Gi-hun wielding a knife. Gi-hun is emphatic; he refuses to kill Sang-woo and suggests walking away with their lives without the cash award. Still, Sang-woo brings his own sadness on himself and puts the knife to his neck. This ends the game and makes Gi-hun the winner.

As agreed, Gi-Hun is allowed to leave and carry on with his life after receiving the reward, but he soon realises that he has lost his mother. He also finds out that Oh Il-Nam is alive and well, but he is also the mastermind behind the deadly games created in the first place.

1.3 Squid Game's cast: a guide to characters and actors

The plot of a film or book is shaped by its characters. Their stories immerse the reader in their world, allowing them to experience their inner turmoil and concerns. The Squid game's plot is conveyed through the perspective of 456 players, whose remarkable acting and character-building elicit intense emotional reactions.

First, the protagonist, Seong Gi-hun, player number 456, is a divorcee, a gambling addict, and in crippling debt. He joins the game in the hopes of first regaining custody of his daughter, who is about to move to the United States with her mother and stepdad, and second, saving his mother, who is in desperate need of surgery.

Second, Sang-woo is player number 218; Gi-hun's childhood friend is a brilliant student, and his mother's pride in attending South Korea's national university. However, the police are after Sang-woo for embezzling money from his clients.

Third, North Korean defector Kang Sae-byeok and player number 067 is a talented robber. She enters the game in an attempt to win the money she needs to save the rest of her family from North Korea's repressive regime.

Fourth, Oh Il-nam, commonly known as the host or player 001, is the oldest player in the game and the main antagonist. He decides to participate in the competition after being diagnosed with a brain tumor. At first, he seems weak and hopeless, but it is eventually discovered that he is the creator of the Squid games, who has been organising the games for decades.

Fifth, Hwang Jun-ho works as a police officer, and he is on the lookout for his missing brother. He slips his way into the game and acts as a guard to bring down the organisation and rescue his sibling.

Sixth, player 101 is Jang Deok-su, a criminal mobster fleeing the mafia for unpaid gambling debts when he enters the game. He establishes alliances with some players while terrorising others.

On the seventh, Han Mi-nyeo is the mysterious player number 212. She soon adapts to the game and becomes a fierce competitor who will stop at nothing to win.

Eighth, Abdul Ali, the 199th player, is a Pakistani who immigrated to Korea to assist his family. After being conned by his employers, he enters the game to provide for his wife and child.

Ninth, Player 240, Ji-Yeong, was a victim of physical mistreatment, imprisoned after murdering her abusive father. She forms an unexpected relationship with Sae-byeok when they partner up for the tug-of-war round, where she ends up eliminated after sacrificing herself for Sae-byeok's survival.

The whole game is in the hands of the masked frontman, who keeps an eye on everything from above and ensures they proceed as planned. Eventually, the frontman is revealed to be the missing brother of the police officer, Hwang Jun-ho, who disappeared some time ago. To keep his identity secret and anonymous, he wears a mask.

The salesman is a member of the Squid Games' recruitment team. His task is to approach individuals deeply in debt and entice them to play Djajakii¹ by promising them an easy way to generate money. Every time he wins, he slaps his opponent, and if he loses, the salesman has to give money to the other player. If they desire to engage in the games, he then provides them with a card that has a logo and a phone number to contact.

This nine-episode thriller displays both detrimental and disturbing scenes. In essence, the Squid game is a gloomy analogy of modern capitalism. It inserts within itself a strict hierarchy that is fundamental to its functionality. The financially bankrupt players gamble with their lives in children's games, oblivious of the fatal consequences of an astonishing amount of cash loaded into a piggy bank that hangs over the dormitory. Furthermore, the participants are deprived of their identities, dressed in uniforms, and provided with a number between 1 and 456.

2. On Capitalism and social classes: a downward action

2.1. An overview of capitalism

As defined by the Clemson Institute for the Study of Capitalism, capitalism is a socio-economic system within which property is privately held, where free-formed contracts form the basis of trade, and where the government does not take part in the regulation, supervision, or guidance of market mechanisms (4). At the same time, Scott states that private actors are authorised by a political authority to possess and manage property for their benefit under rules and regulations in an indirect form of governance based on a vast and constantly developing political contract (4). In essence, it is an economic system for private owners to manage and dispose of property in their interests. It is worth remembering that capitalism is a historical and social construction; it has a start and an ending (Hodgson, 16).

On the other hand, capitalism is often criticised for pointing out its flaws and drawbacks. It is directly linked to inequality in terms of income and work opportunities in society. Pereira, on this matter, claims that as soon as human societies were able to create an economic surplus and matured into "civilizations" or empires, inequity was inevitable. He asserts that inequity has been a scourge and a burden on human solidarity as it turns men against men and women against women, as the powerful or intelligent exploit the weak in seizing economic excess (1).

Rehbein declares that dominance, not money or status, is at the root of most forms of inequality. Getting a better job or making more money is portrayed as a race. According to him, peer-to-peer or class-based social competition is the most common setting for this challenge. It is believed that winning is a matter of individual worth and that fortune or success results from that (698).

The distribution of commodities and services in all civilizations is uneven, although some cultures are more unjust than others in this regard. Social scientists have devoted a great deal of time and effort to assessing the degree of such disparities and what the primary causes of these inequalities may be. (Stevenson, 333).

¹ It is a traditional South Korean game that uses origami-folded paper tiles. The purpose of the game is to cause the tile of the opposing player to be flipped over.

Nonetheless, capitalism is not about acquiring wealth but rather about capital. There are only two classes, mainly capitalists and workers (or non-capitalists) (Rehbein, 715). This creates a hierarchy within a society where people have different ranks, incomes, and, more importantly, power. Notably, social class is more essential than economic class, since domination is ultimately more important than capital. A social class is characterized, among other things, by a shared tradition and a common culture, much like an ethnic group, which helps to define it (Rehbein, 715).

Wright raises an interesting question when dealing with an accurate definition of "class." Thus, according to him, how do individuals identify themselves and others within a social system of inequality, both individually and collectively (1)? Wright has narrowed down the following definition to explain class; he reveals that individuals employ classes to rank social groups according to a set of subjectively prominent features in a system of economic stratification (idem).

D'Costa explains that the characteristics of Korea's capitalist maturity can be seen in its changing economic growth trend, economic system, trade composition, and foreign assets. Since its World War II economic development (281).

He further states that what is proper here is the extended implication of markets as social institutions that rule economic life and commit to economic prosperity, even though unequal, and that these markets exceed national frontiers (ibid.).

The advancement in inequality results from the complicated economic, political, and social changes in contemporary South Korea, echoing the intersection of globalization and transformations in the population and the family system (Shin and Kong, 33).

According to the journal *Global Asia*, South Korea is witnessing a rise in unemployment-wise inequalities. It claims that as a result of deteriorating revenue distribution and rising youth unemployment, South Korea published its highest-ever youth unemployment rate of 12.5 percent earlier this year. Therefore, some of the leading causes of social inequality can emerge from a society's misconceptions of gender roles, racial stereotyping, and unfair legislation.

2.2. An image of capitalism and social classes in Squid game

The show's early episodes established that this is a society where life without money is unliveable. It attempts to answer the following questions: What lengths would one go to for money? How much of one's physique and energy would one be willing to give up to lead the life desired? The Squid Game illustrates an effort to address these issues brought to their logical conclusion; yet, they are the same fundamental problems addressed to everyone living under capitalism: What sort of employment and career does one choose? What are the disadvantages of a particular job, and what is one willing to give up to survive?

Capitalism's essential concept that individuals must barter their whole lives and even their bodies in return for the means of survival strikes at the core of the game's entire premise. As in episode one, "Red Light, Green Light," when the salesman approaches Gi-hun and suggests they play a game, he later asks him, "How about you use your body to pay?" This key question is fundamental to the Squid game, as the players give up their bodies and sacrifice them to survive in the games.

All players have an opportunity to win the first two games with no competition involved. Squid game participants can build solid and real ties, but this swiftly escalates as the game's creators actively push the players to murder one another to win. It is explicitly mentioned in episode four.

"Stick to the team," one of the guards says, "we give you less food on purpose to make you fight each other."

A scenario in which whatever one side wins is lost by the other is known as a "zero-sum game." The thrill of victory in the Squid game is tied to the knowledge that one is also putting other players' lives in danger. When players are encouraged to abandon their comrades even more mercilessly to get to the top, the games replicate the principle of capitalism. A good illustration of this is the marble game, which forces players who have been partnered up to play against one another.

The games are designed to demonstrate that when the cards are down, it is everyone for themselves, much like in the broader elements of capitalism. It also emphasizes that capitalism is a matter of chance and that unpredictability and fairness are closely intertwined. Episode seven is an excellent illustration of this point. The players must pass a defective glass bridge in the game; the remaining 16 players from the previous games must pick a number corresponding to the sequence in which the games will be played out. The middle numbers are picked swiftly. However, the first and last numbers are selected slowly since no one realizes precisely what the work entails.

Throughout Squid Game, the themes of socio-economic inequality are addressed via the sometimes tragic stories of the contestants' economic difficulties. These have been often exacerbated by Korea's lack of a social welfare state and the country's uncontrolled financial institutions.

Moreover, the Squid game mirrors the dreadful reality of class inequality. The game follows a hierarchy. The hierarchy is divided into three classes of people, with the hopeless players above and the workers subdivided at the bottom. Individuals that manage Squid Games use masks to conceal their identities and escape legal repercussions. Since the games are unlawful, they wish to keep this away from the general public and the candidates. The workers must keep their masks at all times, and they are instructed not to remove them in front of the candidates since "once they know who you are, you lose everything," the Front Man informs them.

The employees with a circle on their masks are the lowest-ranking members of the team. They are in charge of doing basic yet vital chores around the island. Second-level personnel wear masks with a triangle on them. They enforce the regulations of each game. Workers wearing a square on their masks are considered the most outstanding caliber. Since they are in charge of the triangles and circles, they may issue directives to them as needed.

The people's lavish lifestyles on top are another point of eternalizing inequality. As long as the rich can use material pleasures to distract themselves and dissociate, dismissing the poor as distant lesser species, this removes their sense of collectivist responsibility to their fellow human beings. At the end of episode nine, "one lucky day", the frontman tells Gi-hun "you bet on horses. It is the same here, but we bet on humans. You're our horse." In fact, the horse symbol represents the pinnacle of dehumanization connected to capitalism, and it serves to demonstrate this point. It is not uncommon to reduce human people to sub-human realms, as shown by the history of humankind's involvement in such terrible acts, which can be found in various discourses about gender, race, and colonial enslavement.

3.1. Dystopian fiction

As Gordin et al. put it, "Dystopia is utopia's twentieth-century doppelgänger." They further state that dystopia "has found fruitful ground to blossom in the copious expanses of science fiction" (1).

Zhurkova and Khomutnikova state that dystopia depicts a tremendously dismal and dreadful society in which unfairness and evil thrive (186). When the concept of dystopia is evoked, one would directly associate it with abuse and inequity in a society where oppression and wickedness prosper. Furthermore, dystopia asserts the uniqueness of each person and depicts the interpersonal relationships that disclose the inner lives of their characters (idem).

Dystopia's etymological origins may be traced back to the use of the word "Utopia" by Thomas More in 1516 to name both his fictional island and the titular book, which was first published in Latin in 1516 and then translated into English by Ralph Robinson in 1551 (Millward,6). He further argues that "More's punning neologism, contrived from Greek ou (not) in combination with topos (a place), meaning a place that is not or no place, invites the interpretation of the first syllable as eu (meaning pleasant or good) when transliterated via Latin back into Greek" (idem).

Novels and movies have paved the way for the success of dystopian fiction. Philip Reeve claims that, although dystopian fiction seems to be a radical critique of contemporary society, it is often highly conservative. It presents modern society as hopeless and turns to the past for solutions—to the rugged individualism of the frontier spirit or a modest withdrawal to preindustrial modes of life (qtd in Basu et al., 27). It seems that dystopian fiction portrays modern society as doomed and lost. The idea pointed out by Finnsson is that no longer existing cultures are described in dystopian fiction as "remarkably inferior" to the reader's own (4).

In essence, dystopias depict a hazardous and distant society in the future. It is a society where the standard of living is "inferior" due to a lack of resources, oppression, or fear (Nithya, 215). One might add that dystopian fiction has a connection with the world, but in a rather imagined, helpless, and tyrannised future.

Additionally, dystopian fiction, which has its roots in literature, is very adaptable, able to take on various forms across a wide range of media, as dystopian films, television shows, digital games, and graphic novels have all demonstrated (Isomaa et al., xiv). Thus, various genres have been identified to include dystopian fiction.

Ultimately, and given the society in which we live and the options for the future presented by science, it is not odd that dystopian fiction continues to be created, read, and explored (Isomaa et al., xiv). Besides, it was well accepted and relatively widespread during the 20th century, mainly aimed at young adults.

3.2. Squid game phenomenon and dystopian fiction:

With the international success of *The Hunger Games*, dystopian fiction saw a spike in popularity among young adult readers in the 2010s, which refers to works aimed toward adolescents and young adults between the ages of 12 and 18, regardless of the genre in which they appear. As in *The Hunger Games*, the *Squid Game* sets working-class participants against one another for the opportunity to live a luxury lifestyle.

On the other hand, Squid Game is not intended for young adults like The Hunger Games. Aside from youthful audiences, the film's violence, blood, and explicit denunciation of contemporary capitalism have made it a success with a broader range of people.

Classic dystopian fiction takes place in the future. However, Squid Game defies this stereotype by being set in 2021 and depicting the present rather than the future. In Squid Game, we see visuals of poverty, crushing debt, and financial discrepancy, knowing that these issues exist in our society.

The squid game functions as entertainment within the dystopian world; yet, the "game" itself is unstable, serving as a cause of unease for both the characters and the audience as an enjoyable or humorous frame is placed on brutal, violent confrontations. In addition, the story is set in a capitalist dystopia that is grounded in reality yet sharply attacks capitalism and social inequality. This explains the cultural phenomenon of dystopian fiction, as it depicts socially fearful conditions.

A prominent feature of this dystopia, which is explicitly and implicitly criticized, is the game paradigm, mainly when it goes beyond simple children's pastimes in which nothing is at risk to the point where life itself becomes a game.

To sum up, one could say that dystopian stories provide writers and filmmakers with an arena from which to express their opinions on political and cultural concerns in a way that is both engaging and thought-provoking. Dystopias are proven to be widespread as social occurrences, suggesting that dystopian works need not be reliant on hypothetical and imaginary futures but rather that one person's dystopia may be another's everyday occurrence.

Conclusion:

Squid Game's emphasis on games from our childhood stems back to a more innocent period, when features of social status and capitalist society were less prominent. The fact that Squid Game is set in Korea makes it seem less biased to Western viewers; the condemnation of capitalism and the glorification of meritocracy are shifted to a foreign culture with which one is not acquainted and hence less implicated. As the contestants struggle out on screen and the viewers witness their abject terror and loss of hope, it provides a kind of solace in the knowledge that this is, after all, only an illusion or fiction, regardless of how awful reality may be.

This struggle among egoism, which stipulates that one should make moral judgments solely on what is in one's own self-interest, and some kind of solidarity and compassion is the gist not only of the games themselves, but of life in general.

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