

Representation Strategies of the Rich and Poor Classes in the *Squid Game*

Ruiheng Li

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

Abstract: The *Squid Game's* high ratings are well documented, and although the *Squid Game* is a battle royale type of episode, it contains many depictions of class inequality as well as the power of choice. The episodes use stark contrasts of colour and setting to establish situations of identity inequality for the audience. Inequality of identity also means inequality of choice and having to be forced to keep the game going. By analysing the images and plot of the episode, the game is used as a vehicle for the reality of class inequality.

Keywords: *Squid Games*; Class; Rich and Poor; Choice.

1. Introduction

Since December 2019 with the discovery of the novel coronavirus, the human community has had to face an ongoing epidemic problem, which can also be considered as a survival issue. In television programs, the survival genre has also attracted wider attention from the general audience. The *Squid Game* is a Korean-language drama series that began screening on Netflix on September 17, 2021. The series consists of nine episodes that revolve around a series of game events derived from a Korean folk children's game called the *Squid Game*, but instead of children, 456 people from all walks of life who are in debt are the participants of the game, and the organizers of the game have prepared a 45.6 billion won prize money for the winner of the game, which is about 28 million pounds. Arkananta, Susilo, Divania, Mauludi and Pandin mentioned that in just one month, *Squidward Games* has reached 165 million hours of viewing, is the No.1 most watched non-English language drama show of all time, and, as of November 2021, is the most watched episode on the streaming platform Netflix [1].

Using the *Squid Game* as the main case study, this essay

critically discusses strategies of wealthy and poor class representation in survival dramas. In the *Squid Game*, the situation in terms of equality and choice among the rich and poor classes is reflected mainly through contrast and reference.

2. Class in the *Squid Game*

In the worldview of the *squid game*, there are no rules except the rules of the game, and both the participants of the game and the organizers of the game only need to abide by the rules of the game.

First, the participants of the game wear uniform green sportswear and white sneakers, and the left chest and back of the jacket are marked with a unique numerical number. All the game participants were treated the same, using uniform transportation, at a uniform time, being received at a uniform place of residence, and not even being uniformly informed of what activities needed to be performed down the connection, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. All the formal uniformity seems to indicate that all game participants are equal, without taking into account the influence of gender, age, and occupation.



Figure 1. All game participants wore uniform green sportswear with different identity numbers



Figure 2. All game participants are managed centrally in one venue

However, in the actual game process, inequality is shown everywhere. For example, in the third game task, a team tug of war was required, which is a sport that requires strength and cooperation, meaning that women, too old and too young, were in a disadvantaged position, so that the older game participant No. 001, Oh Il-nam, and some women were very obviously disliked, as shown in Figure 3. In the fifth game task, the game participants need to pass the glass bridge,

which is composed of tempered glass and ordinary glass respectively, and only if the game participants choose tempered glass and pass it, they will live and continue the game, and game participant No. 017 can judge the difference between ordinary glass and tempered glass because he has worked in a glass factory, so he can pass the game smoothly, as shown in Figure 4 shown.



Figure 3. The dejected expressions of the team having old men and women after learning about the tug-of-war



Figure 4. Player No. 017 is distinguishing tempered glass from ordinary glass

It is noteworthy that the participants of the game are all numbered, and their identities are referred to by numbers during the game, which seems to imply that the participants of the game have lost their rights as human beings and are merely a commodity. In form, it is fair to participate in the game and win to earn prizes, but in reality it is a pet in a cage. In the episode's fifth episode, a sneaky police officer discovers that a similar game has been held not only once. Also, Oh Il-nam mentions that he has been watching the game before, but this time he is participating in the game himself. In other words, the 456 players in each case have been deprived of their human rights and don't even deserve to have a name. Even after the game is over, Seong Gi-hun, who is going to board the plane to pass with the front desk of the game in the ninth episode, is addressed as number 456 instead of his own name, which seems to indicate that even if he wins, even if he wins a high prize, and even if he has a chance to be on par with the rich people, he will not be treated equally. Also mentioned in the fifth episode of the series is that the game's frontman is a former winner of the game, the same as Seong Gi-hun, but unlike Seong Gi-hun, he chose to join the game's organizers, which may be a way to be on an equal footing with the rich people.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that game participant No. 001, Oh Il-nam, was actually one of the game organizers. Therefore, when facing dangerous situations and being failed by the game task, he was not eliminated from the game by death as per the game rules. Moreover, in the last game of the episode, game participant No. 456, the main character of the episode, asks Oh Il-nam the question, "Why should I survive?", which seems to indicate a situation where the organizer of the game can choose the final winner of the game. The entire game process has been portrayed as a fair and equal environment, and what the game participants don't realize is

that the entire game process is actually a way to please the game watchers. And for the game participants, it is only superficially fair, but the real equality is actually in the hands of the game organizers.

Moreover, game participant Byeong-gi, who is a doctor in the episode #111, has agreed with some of the game staff to buy and sell organs during the game; Byeong-gi helps the staff who dispose of the corpses to remove organs in exchange for information about the next game, trying to cheat to complete the game smoothly, which is a clearly unfair situation. Although this behavior is eventually punished, the unfairness still occurs, even though the game's organizers try desperately to build a level playing field.

Next are the game administrators, who, unlike the game's participants who are everywhere equal, have a strict hierarchy of game organizers. The most common game staff wears pink sportswear and masks, and the different patterns on the masks are signs of the different levels, which are round, triangular, and square. The episode does not describe in detail the specific content of the work performed by the staff corresponding to each pattern, but it clearly describes the differences in levels. Round masks represent the lowest level of staff, a higher level than the round mask staff is the triangle pattern mask staff, than the triangle mask staff higher level is the square pattern mask staff. The number of corresponding staff is also more than the number of round mask staff than the number of triangle mask staff, and more than the number of triangle mask staff than the number of square mask staff. As shown in Figure 5. In addition, these many game managers correspond to a game frontman, who is responsible for managing and supervising the whole game session. Unlike the masks of other staff members, the mask of the frontman has a clear shape of five senses and dressed in a plain black uniform, as shown in Figure 6.

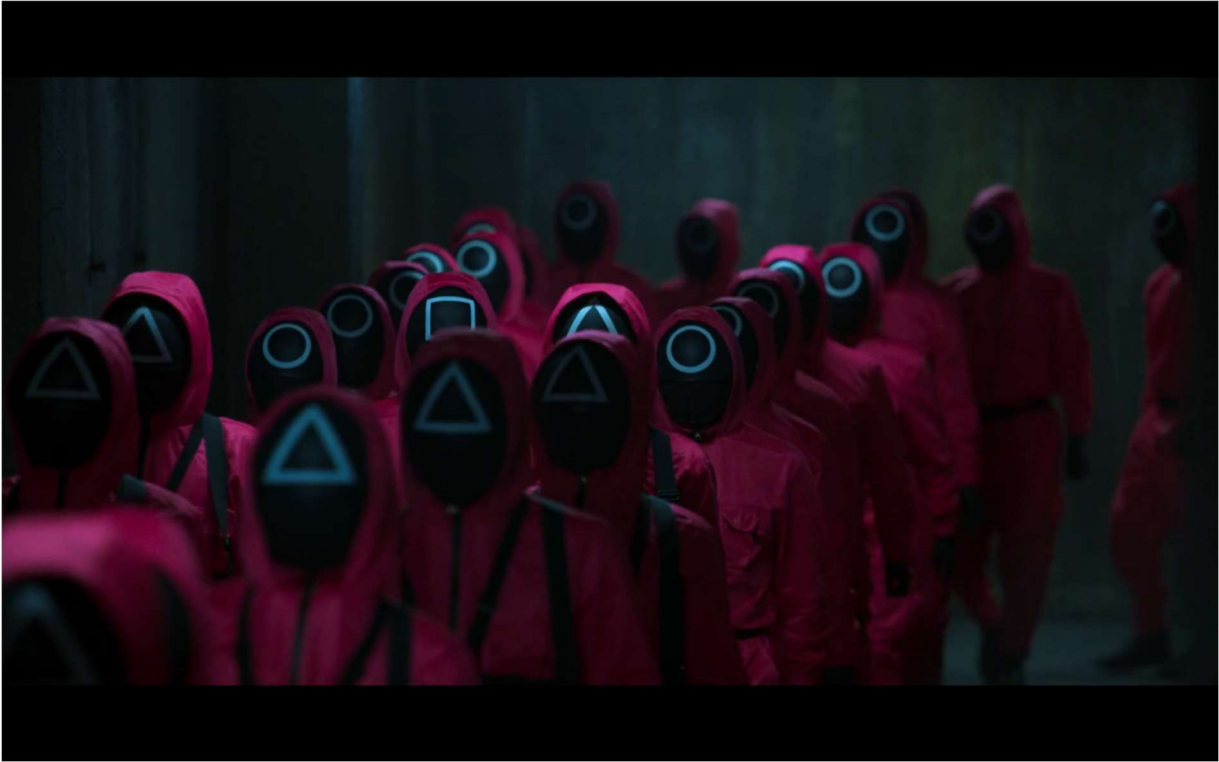


Figure 5. The staff of the game wore uniform pink costumes and masks with different patterns on their heads



Figure 6. The only frontman of the game

Finally, higher in status than these staff members are the game hosts as well as the spectators, wearing shiny animal masks on their heads, as shown in Figure 7. They come from all over the world, but there is no way to know their exact

identities. In the rules of the game, all the game sessions are all designed to please this group of people. Just like the image of the animals shown by the masks, they represent the hunters.



Figure 7. Game viewers

In this episode, because the identity is different, so the image shown is different, the most obvious is the contrast in color. The contrast between the green sportswear of the game participants and the fan sportswear of the staff will create a strong visual impact on the audience, who will know the identity as soon as they see the color, as shown in Figure 8. In addition, the uniform image of the game participants and the uniform management, especially each game participant has a separate label, which is very easy to remind the audience of

the identity of the prisoners, but the venue for the game tasks is a colorful fairy-tale like playground, which contrasts with the prison environment where the prisoners should be, as shown in Figure 9 and Figure 10. In addition, each game task is a familiar childhood game, such as one, two, three wooden man and tug of war, but the result of playing the game is not simply to lose or win, but to live and die, which means that losing the game is the end of death, and the cruel result contrasts with the game that should be entertaining.



Figure 8. The contrast of dressing colors between the participants of the game and the workers of the game

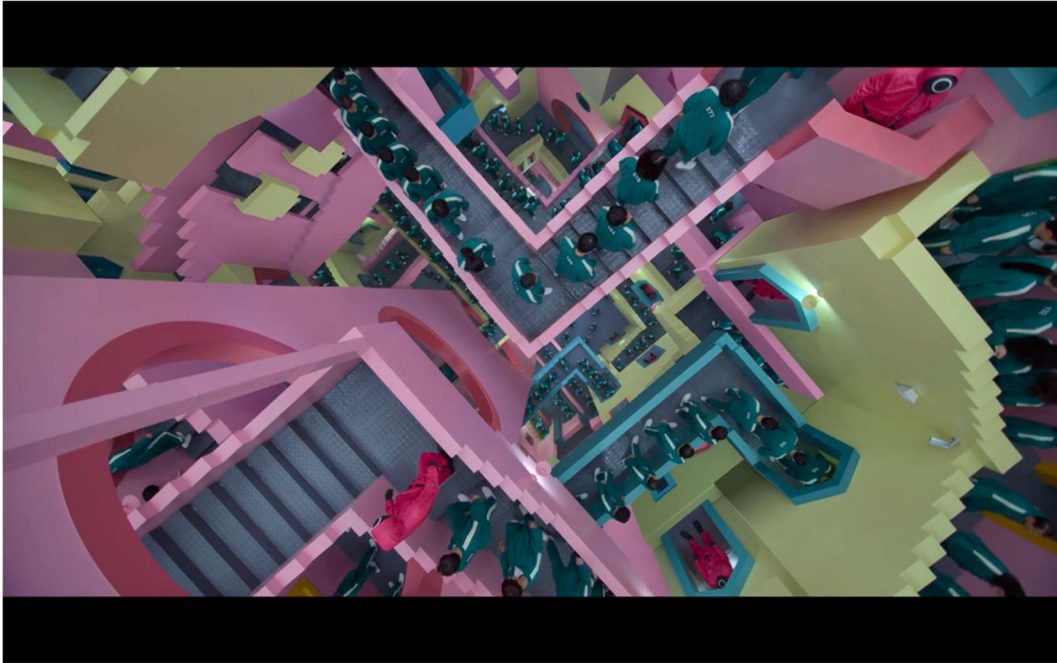


Figure 9. Fairy tale like venue



Figure 10. The participants of the game like prisoners appear in the beautiful playground

The reason why different people have different identities and different endings in the world of *squid games* is that these people are in different classes. 456 participants of the game are poor people who owe huge amounts of money for various reasons. For example, Seong Gi-hun, the main character of the episode, is divorced from his wife and his daughter is going to live with her mother. Seong Gi-hun not only owes money, but also lives with his mother and does not have a stable job, and even the gift for his daughter's birthday has to be paid by stealing her mother's insurance money and gambling. By describing the debt crisis of one person, and the equal state of 456 people, to refer to the participants of these games are all facing a debt crisis situation. These 456 individuals, each of whom is participating in the *squid game* because of their huge debts, are different from the game's viewers and hosts. The watchers and hosts of the game are wealthy families who, because they have little fun in life, hold *squid games* for pleasure.

3. Reflection of the Real Class

According to Frater, director Hwang Dong-hyuk created the *squid game* based on the unequal struggle of the capitalist memory economy class in Korea, plus some of his own personal experiences, which were also inspired by some escape shows [2]. These depictions of aspects of the capitalist class are not just confined to Korea but may even resonate on a worldwide scale. In addition, Hwang also argues that the economy is unequal, such as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, where some people can be vaccinated but others cannot [3]. This may also be the reason why the director wanted to create a situation where all the participants of the game are on equal terms in the episode.

As depicted in the second and sixth episodes of the series, these debt-ridden game participants, faced with stressful situations in their lives and jobs and burdened with huge debts,

choose to participate in the *Squid Game* for a last chance at survival. It may seem that the organizers of the game offer these people a choice, but in fact these people actually do not have a choice, if they do not participate in this game, then everyday life will have to continue as it is or worse, and every day they have to avoid debt collectors. This is a passive choice, and the game's participant 001 Oh Il-nam is different from other players in that Oh Il-nam can actively choose to participate or not to participate in the game, and even if he fails in the game, he can avoid the fate of death. For the other 455 players, participating in the game is a chance to win 45.6 billion won in prize money, while for Oh Il-nam for the other 455 players, playing the game is a chance to win 45.6 billion won, while for Oh Il-nam, playing the game is a chance to enjoy the fun and excitement of the game. This is because Oh Il-nam is in a different class than the other 455 players, which means that there is a difference between active and passive when faced with a choice.

Most of the movies or dramas on the theme of survival and escape focus more on the vulnerability of human nature in the midst of difficulties rather than class differences, such as the movie *As the Gods Will* in which the main characters are a group of high school students, and the game participants in the drama *Alice in Borderland* do not involve the gap between the rich and the poor. Not only that, but many depictions of the poor class are also limited to the working class or the working and living conditions of the poor [4]. The theme of the *Squid Game*, however, is in line with the global capital environment [5,6,7,8], especially the current debt situation faced by the Korean people in general [9].

Not only that, Lowry also mentioned that the success of the *squid game* may have been due to the construction in color, by visually presenting the audience with striking variations and repeatedly emphasizing these elements, is that the audience is more receptive to these settings [10]. This seems to suggest that it is the use of these color contrasts that deepens the audience's understanding of the theme. In addition, the situation portrayed in the episode seems to be perfectly in line with the situation facing South Korea now, that is, it seems that the vast majority of its citizens are facing wealth inequality, so much so that there are many audiences who are very sensitive to such topics, which may also be the reason why the *Squid Game* is receiving very excessive attention [11]. There are also many critics who have made the connection between *Squid Game* and *Parasite* [12,13], arguing that the episodes of these series actually attack the predatory nature of the Korean capital idea and shatter the glorified image of capitalism. Although it is only a localized issue of economy and class in Korea, it still covers the whole capitalist society [14].

4. Conclusion

Although the theme of the *squid game* describes a battle royale type of story, it contains a lot of content about class inequality and the power of choice.

First of all, class inequality, in the episode, visual contrast is frequently used to describe class inequality, the contrast between green and pink allows the audience to quickly understand the inconsistency of identity, the prison-like situation also contrasts with the fairy tale like game environment, in addition, the joyfulness of the game activities and the tension between life and death are also in contrast. All the acts that show equality are in an unequal environment to express that inequality exists all the time. The differences in

profession, age and gender create inequality in the game, some participants cheat, and the game organizers can control the pace of the game and even decide the final winner of the game. It is the debt-ridden poor status of the game's participants that makes them face unequal treatment.

Secondly, the organizers of the game, because they are the wealthy class, can subjectively choose to watch the game and bet on it, or to participate in it directly, or even to provide the indebted poor class with the opportunity to participate in it. The players who participate in the game, on the other hand, seem to have a subjective choice to participate in the game again, but it is a desperate situation, and if they do not participate in the game again, they will face the urging of their debtors, or even death.

Finally, the game is a reflection of reality. The *Squid Game* is different from the previous battle royale shows, which put the focus on the class aspect, in other words, it is because of the low class they are in that they participate in the *squid game*. This has also been supported by many critics. *Squid Games* combines the popular survival element with class confrontation and hits the reality of the equality aspect.

References

- [1] Arkananta, J.A., Susilo, P.A., Divania, K.V., Mauludi, A.B. and Pandin, M.G.R., 2021. Implications of the Ethics of Life and Society's Views on the South Korean Series: *Squid Game*.
- [2] Frater, P., 2021. 'Squid Game' Director Not Hurrying to Capitalize on Global Success - Variety. [online] Variety.com. Available at: <<https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/squid-game-director-hwang-dong-hyuk-korean-series-global-success-1235073355/>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].
- [3] Jeffries, S., 2021. *Squid Game's* creator: 'I'm not that rich. It's not like Netflix paid me a bonus'. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/oct/26/squid-games-creator-rich-netflix-bonus-hwang-dong-hyuk>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].
- [4] Ronsini, V., 2009. Television representations and symbolic reproduction of inequality. *International Journal of Communication*, 3, pp.683-694.
- [5] CAI, D., 2021. 'Squid Game' Is, Unfortunately, the Perfect Show for Our Current Dystopia. [online] Vanity Fair. Available at: <<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/10/squid-game-is-unfortunately-the-perfect-show-for-our-current-dystopia>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].
- [6] Doyle, J., 2021. Global sensation *Squid Game* is a parable of capitalist exploitation. [online] Available at: <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/television/article-global-sensation-squid-game-is-a-parable-of-capitalist-exploitation/>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].
- [7] Kim, N. and McCurry, J., 2021. *Squid Game* lays bare South Korea's real-life personal debt crisis. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/08/squid-game-lays-bare-south-koreas-real-life-personal-debt-crisis>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].
- [8] LAU, Y., 2021. *Squid Game's* 'get-rich-quick' theme echoes young Koreans' risky financial behavior. [online] Fortune. Available at: <<https://fortune.com/2021/10/15/squid-game-netflix-south-korea-debt-gambling-crypto-retail-trading/>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].
- [9] NEWTON, F., 2021. Why You're Watching *Squid Game*. [online] Jacobinmag.com. Available at: <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/10/squid-game-capitalism-debt-south-korea-uk-capitalist-realism>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].

- [10] Kim, T., 2021. "Squid Game"'s Capitalist Parables. [online] The Nation. Available at: <<https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/squid-game-review/>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].
- [11] Lowry, B., 2021. 'Squid Game' sets off a new game, trying to figure out why it took off on Netflix. [online] CNN. Available at: <<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/05/entertainment/squid-game-analysis/index.html>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].
- [12] Wong, H., 2021. Squid Game: the hellish horrorshow taking the whole world by storm. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/sep/28/squid-game-the-hellish-horrorshow-taking-the-whole-world-by-storm>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].
- [13] CLARK, C., 2021. Squid Game Is an Allegory of Capitalist Hell. [online] Jacobinmag.com. Available at: <<https://jacobinmag.com/2021/10/squid-game-capitalism-south-korea-parasite-inequality-netflix>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].
- [14] Ome, M., 2021. In Netflix's 'Squid Game,' Debt Is a Double-Edged Sword. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/10/netflix-squid-game-debt-perspectives/620287/>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].