

Analysis of Social Class Inequality Based on the Movie *Parasite*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the gap between the rich and poor reflected in movie *Parasite*. Through the analysis of the audio-visual language of the movie, this article starts with the storytelling of *Parasite*, enumerates and analyses the elements that appear in the movie to reflect the gap between the rich and poor. The visual effects in the movie scenes to show the big difference in the living conditions of rich and poor families are analyzed. Based on the movie, this article focuses on researching the impact of the gap between the rich and the poor in real modern society, especially in aspects of education and employment. Through the investigation, it is concluded that in modern society, the rich have the vast majority of high-quality resources, and the uneven distribution of social resources makes it difficult for the poor to enter the rich class by their own efforts. The gradual consolidation of the social class has made the gap between the rich and the poor more obvious from generation to generation.

Keywords: *Parasite, the gap between the rich and the poor, social inequality, social classes, Korean society, education, employment*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the movie *Parasite* must be one of the most attractive movies around the world. *Parasite* is a black comedy thriller film which is directed by director Bong Joon-ho. This film tells a story of the poor Kim family, intending to be employed by the rich Park family and impersonating high-quality personnel so as to escape poverty. The movie *Parasite* premiered at the 72nd Cannes Film Festival in May 2019, and won the Palme d'Or, which was the first time that a Korean film won this award [1]. In the 92nd Academy Awards, *Parasite* won the four leading awards and made history as the first non-English film to win the Best Film Award [2]. This is very rare in the history of Oscars. The success of the movie *Parasite* is surprising. It has created a new history and is an unprecedented pride for Korean movies. Through this movie, director Bong Joon-ho intuitively shows the audience the problem of the gap between rich and poor in modern society, which is why film *Parasite* can transcend differences in cultural backgrounds and resonate with audiences all over the world. This article will analyse how the movie *Parasite* presents the gap between rich and poor, and the social inequality it presents to the audience. This paper also studies the impact of social class consolidation on the destiny of different families, which are caused by the gap between the rich and poor.

2. ELEMENTS TO SHOW THE GAP BETWEEN THE RICH AND POOR

In *Parasite*, the storytelling of the rich and the poor is different from many other movies in the similar genre. The stereotypes of the rich and the poor are shown in many movies. The poor are kind and optimistic, and the rich oppress the poor. However, there is no absolute good or bad people in the movie. It mainly tells stories around two families, one is the wealthy Park family, and the other is the poor and unemployed Kim family who depends on the Park family to get jobs. The following parts will analyse how the storytelling of *Parasite* exposes the gap between the rich and the poor.

2.1. The Food

In the movie, the eating scene appears many times and it is a common method to show the gap between the rich and poor by representing the difference in food. At the beginning of the movie, there is an eating scene that shows the father of Kim family, Kim Ki-taek carefully takes out a bag with only two slices of toast, showing that the family is a very hard life. Subsequently, the Kim family receive a meager reward by folding the pizza boxes. The four members of the Kim family sit around the table drinking beer and eating snacks. After the Kim family get a job in the Park family, they go to the driver's cafeteria to have a buffet. They also go to the pizzeria to eat pizza. The food shows that the quality of life of the Kim family has been improved. However, compared to the Park family, Mrs.

Park only buys food from a high-end organic supermarket and even the three pet dogs of the Park family eat different high-end dog food. This ironically shows that the food that the poor eat is not even as good as the dogs of the rich.

2.2. The Smell

The smell is an important element in movie *Parasite* which expresses the gap between the rich and poor. It appears four times in the story. The first time the smell appears is when Da-song, the youngest son of the Park family, he finds that the same smell on Kim Ki-taek and Chung-su's clothes, they are the father and mother of Kim family. Then, the Kim family suspect that the smell is because they use the same washing powder, but they have no money to wash clothes separately. The second time is when Mr. Park and Mrs. Park smells a similar smell on Kim Ki-taek's clothes when they are lying on sofa. At the same time, Kim Ki-taek, Ki-woo and Ki-jung are hiding under the table next to the sofa. Mr. Park says he can smell this kind of smell occasionally when taking the subway. The third time that the smell appears is when Kim-Ki taek drives Mrs. Park back to Park's house. The night before the day, Kim Ki-taek, Ki-woo and Ki-jung escaped from Park's house at a stormy night. The semi-basement they live in is flooded and they have to move to a shelter arranged by the government. So, Mrs. Park instinctively opens the car window because of the bad smell on Kim Ki-taek' clothes, which makes Kim Ki-teak feel embarrassed. The last time the smell appears is on Da-song's birthday party. When Ki-jung is stabbed to death with a knife by "the ghost" Geun-sae who lives in Mr. Park's basement, Mr. Park only asks Kim Ki-taek for his car key and pinches his nose to pick up the car key on the ground. Mr. Park's actions instantly pierce Kim Ki-taek's heart, when he watches his daughter Ki-jung is dying in front of him. Kim Ki-taek takes a knife and plunges it into Mr. Park's heart.

In the movie, the element of the smell runs through the entire storyline. The smell of Kim's family is not just the damp, musty smell in the semi-basement. It actually refers to the smell of the poor. The smell has become an insurmountable gap between the poor class and the rich class, always reminding each other that their identities are completely different.

2.3. The Flooded Semi-basement

In the stormy night, when Kim Ki-taek, Ki-woo, and Ki-jung escaped from the Park's house and then seeing their semi-basement is flooded, this indicates that Kim family's dream of changing the destiny of poverty by parasitizing the Park family has begun to shatter. It is an important turning point in the movie, and it is even more ironic for the display of the gap between the rich and the poor. The semi-basement is flooded due to the heavy rain, and Kim family become homeless overnight. At the same time, Da-

song, the youngest son of Park family, he sleeps in a small tent in the courtyard without being wet by the rain. The next morning, Mrs. Park chooses clothes for Da-song's birthday party in her spacious and bright cloakroom. In contrast, Kim-Ki-taek, Ki-woo and Ki-jung compete with all other homeless people in the government-provided shelter for getting nice donated clothes to attend Da-song's birthday party. A heavy rain has no effect on the wealthy Park family, but it causes the Kim family to lose their home.

When Kim Ki-taek runs out of Park's house, he says to Ki-woo and Ki-jung, "Dad has a plan". But when Kim Ki-taek sleeps in the shelter at night, he cannot hide his sadness and helplessness, saying that "The best plan is no plan". The gap between the rich and the poor is not easy to cross. The poor will often pay a greater price than the rich when they face the same crisis.

3. VISUALLY PRESENCE OF THE GAP IN THE SCENES OF PARASITE

Compared to novels, the success of a good movie is not just about the script. It is also important to bring the audience into the story through visual effects. Bong Joon-ho, the director of the movie *Parasite*, is not just a good storyteller. In order to present the best visual effects, the impressive Park's house and Kim's semi-basement are both built on set by the production team [3]. In addition, the rise and fall of the camera implies the rise and fall of the class where the characters belong. Next the author will analyze how the movie *Parasite* presents the gap between the rich and the poor visually.

3.1. Kim Family's Semi-basement VS. Park Family's House

The first shot of the movie is a window in the semi-basement of the Kim family. In this shot, through the shabby iron railings outside the window, stains on the window, and socks in the foreground, the scene outlines a sense of dilapidation and decadence, showing a dirty and messy semi-basement. During the day, a cleaner sprays pesticide in the poor area. At night, a drunk man vomits and pees in front of this window. When there are many unqualified pizza boxes folded by the Kim family, the owner of the pizza shop wants to cut their rewards, and Kim Ki-taek calmly looks outside from the basement window, like a prisoner who is trapped in jail.

In contrast, Park's house is spacious and bright, and it is a single-family villa with a private courtyard. The Park family buys this house from a famous designer Nangong Hyunza, the first owner and builder of the house. When Ki-woo enters the Park's house as an English tutor for the first time, it makes him feel as if he is in the heaven.

3.2. Uphill and Downhill

In *Parasite*, director Bong Joon-ho also cleverly uses rising and sinking to show that the poor and the rich are in different social classes. When Ki-woo walks towards the Park's house for the first time, a wide uphill road is shown in the shot, which indicates it is a way for Ki-woo and his families to enter the upper class. In addition, when Mrs. Park and Mr. Park go back home, the camera always shows that they go upstairs from the private garage and enter the living room.

In the night of heavy rain, Kim Ki-taek takes Ki-woo and Ki-jung out of the Park's house in a hurry. The director used close-up shots to show the rainwater flowing down into the gutter. Then in the movie, multiple panoramic bird's-eye view shots appeared continuously, showing that Kim Ki-taek, Ki-woo and Ki-jung keep running downstairs in the direction of the down-flow of water in the downpour. Compared to the warm and spacious feeling in the Park's house, the three of Kim's family not only return to the semi-basement where they originally live in, but also means that they return to the poor class.

4. REALISTIC ENLIGHTENMENT OF PARASITE

Behind the great success that the movie *Parasite* has achieved, it is because of its artistic value as a film, and its exposure the dark side of human experience and dares to tread in places western films are sometimes scared of [4], which is the disparity between the rich and the poor and class consolidation in Korean society. In fact, it is not a social problem that only exists in South Korea. Under the current economic system, regardless of the political system, this is probably a common social problem in many countries, which is also the reason that why *Parasite* can resonate with so many audiences around the world. At the end of the movie, the Kim family loses their jobs in Park's house and fail to become rich people. So, in reality, it is hard for the poor people like Kim family to have the opportunity to escape poverty and enter the so-called upper class.

4.1. Inequality of Educational Resources

In the movie, even though Ji-woo and Ji-jung of the Kim family are unemployed, they are actually smart. At the beginning of the movie, Ki-woo's friend Min Hyuk is a college student. Min Hyuk introduces Ki-woo to Mrs. Park as Da-hye's temporary English tutor during his study abroad. Although Ki-woo failed to enter the university, he has retaken the university entrance exam four times. From the conversation between Min Hyuk and Ki Woo, it can be known that Ki Woo finally gives up the university entrance examination because he has no money to pay for the tutoring class for the college entrance examination. And Ki-woo's younger sister, Ki-jung, fails to complete high

school education because of poverty. It seems to be fair that everyone in South Korea needs to pass the same university entrance exam to enter the university, and Ki-woo fails to pass the exam may be because he has not made enough effort. In fact, the so-called fair college entrance examination is not really fair. It is an unfair wealth competition between rich and poor families. The gap between the rich and poor is not only a gap in economic strength, but also directly affects the future of children born in different families. In fact, many children who were born into poor families like Ki-woo have a harder time getting into college than children from rich families. According to a research report from UCLA in the United States, students from the lowest-income families are about 9 times less likely to receive a bachelor's degree by the age of 24 than students from higher-income families. In addition, students in California's high-poor high schools spend nearly 10 days less time studying each year than wealthy students because of the poor educational environment [5].

Especially in South Korea, there is a "spoon theory" used to classify social classes. In Korea, the wealthiest family is the golden spoon, followed by the silver spoon, copper spoon, and iron spoon. The poorest family is the soil spoon. In the movie *Parasite*, the Park family is the golden or silver spoon, while the Kim family is the soil spoon. Most wealthy Koreans inherited the assets of the previous generation. Parents' wealth and social class determine their children's future, and class inheritance has essentially become structured. According to a national survey in South Korea, children who grew up in wealthy families proved to be more likely to enter top universities and find jobs. On the contrary, Koreans born in poor families have no wealth or status to inherit, and they must change their situation by their own efforts [6]. However, for children born in poor families, relying on their own efforts does not mean that they can get rid of poverty and change their class by just making efforts.

4.2. Difference in Employment Competitiveness

What is more, parents' income and social class have become increasingly important determinants of cognitive development [7]. A study shows that the higher the education and income of parents, the more likely their children are to find better jobs [8]. South Korea's college enrolment rate is hovering above 70%. However, behind the high enrolment rate is the improvement of education level, which has caused college graduates to lose their competitiveness in the labour market. Young people have to seek other skills to pass additional skills. The qualifications are unique, including GPA, internships and career counselling [9]. As what Kim Ki-taek says in *Parasite*, there are 500 college students applying for a guard position in South Korea. This is not a joke, but it speaks a cruel reality. According to Statistics Korea (2018), Korea's youth unemployment rate is 10%, the highest since records began in 1999 [10]. Therefore, for young people like Ki-woo who have not been admitted to

college and have no financial ability to improve their additional abilities, becoming unemployed is not simply the result of not working hard. There is a reality show in Hong Kong called Rich Mate Poor Mate Series. It is a reality show that explores Hong Kong's structural poverty and the disparity between the rich and the poor. Many Hong Kong people from wealthier families, with high education or successful experience, experience the daily life of the grassroots in Hong Kong in the program. Michelle, who was born in a rich family, shared her experience as a show participant. She said, "If I was born in Africa and slept with a lion and a tiger, I would not know what the outside world is like, and naturally I would not have any yearning. Similarly, some happy children were born with a golden key. There will be servants and cars, and they will think this is inevitable" [11]. This is similar to what Kim Ki-taek said in *Parasite*, when the Kim family took advantage of the Park's house to go camping while drinking and having a party in the Park's house. He says that children from wealthy families have no wrinkles on their clothes as money is an iron, which makes everything smooth.

4.3. The Lack of Outlook

Compared with children from rich families, children from poor families not only lack good educational resources and good job opportunities, but more importantly, they do not have a broad outlook. In fact, the Kim families are lucky to get jobs in Park's house, but they do not make good use of this opportunity. Instead, they dream that Ki woo can marry with Da-hye, the daughter of Park's family and enters the upper class. After Ki-woo knows that the lucky stone given by his friend Min Hyuk is a fake stone that can float on the water, he still regards it as a treasure. The excessive desire for wealth also blinded his eyes, so that he finally chooses to use this stone to hit Geun-sae, the "ghost" who is parasitic in the basement of the Park's family that would make Ki-woo lose his job.

4.4 Solidified Gap Between the Rich and Poor

The social class is increasingly solidified, the upward mobility of classes is becoming more and more difficult, resources are firmly controlled by the upper class, and opportunities for the poor are becoming fewer and fewer. According to a study conducted by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, "the persistence of poverty across generations has deepened, with 50.7 percent in the youngest generation answering that both father and son were in the lower class - an increase of almost 15 percent from the 36.4 percent who answered the same in the democracy generation" [6]. The poor want to counterattack, and the hope of changing their class and destiny is becoming increasingly slim, which seems to be destined since people are born.

5. CONCLUSION

In 2019, the movie *Parasite* can stand out from many good movies and become one of the most watched movies of the year, not only because of its artistry, but also because of its enlightenment to the real society and ruthlessly exposing the gap between the rich and the poor. Through the description of the rich Park family and the poor Kim family, the movie outlines two different worlds in which the poor and the rich live. Although they are connected to each other in society, there is an invisible wall that separates them. The gap between the rich and the poor is not just an economic gap, but also a huge gap in housing, education, outlook, etc. These potential gaps have separated the lives of the poor and the rich into different social classes. The poor are getting poorer and poorer because of their lack of social resources, while the rich have been at the top of the social class in that they have access to high-quality resources for generations. Therefore, behind the gap between the rich and the poor are the gradually solidified social classes, the cruel reality that it is increasingly difficult for the poor to change their destiny. This paper mainly focuses on Korean society which is closely connected with the social background of *Parasite*. In the future, the author will study on the gap between the rich and poor in European and American countries, as well as in-depth research on education, employment, and housing in the future.

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