



# A Marxist Analysis of Class Consciousness in Bong Joon-ho's Parasite

Shatabdi Mishra\*

Department of Professional Security Studies, New Jersey City University

## Abstract

The very term 'class' has been a key element in the establishment of society. By the turn of nineteenth century, the philosophical treatises of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels went on to shape the psyche of the age, an age where a division rested on two broad spectrum of polar opposition: the capitalist class and the working class. The capitalist (dominant) class controlled and exerted their power of hegemony on the working (submissive) class to reap the profits and benefits sown by them. Such a notion can be seen in the play of power and exploitation in the film Parasite. The film, Parasite (2019) by Bong Joon-ho is structured around a contrast between two families, the Parks who represent the capitalists, surviving on the labour carried out by the Kim family who are indicative of the working class, and this working class rises up to challenge such established convictions by infiltrating into their homes and disguising their identities.

The film is a stark satire on the inequality and abuse of power that remains etched in the fabric of society. By employing Marxist theory of class consciousness, the paper tries to focus on the disparities that lie between the capitalist and the working class as aptly seen in the Parasite.

**Keywords:** Class Consciousness; Class; Capitalist; Power; Hegemony

**Received:** 29-Apr-2022, Manuscript No. gmj-22-62136; **Editor assigned:** 01-May-2022, PreQC No. gmj-22-62136 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 15-May-2022, QC No. gmj-22-62136; **Revised:** 20-May-2022, Manuscript No. gmj-22-62136 (R); **Published:** 30-May-2022, DOI: 10.36648/1550-7521.20.51.308

## Introduction

The Communist Manifesto written collaboratively by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels saw the history of the world as a result of class struggles that have existed since time immemorial. The working class who sell their labour as a commodity to sustain and support the economy have been reduced to mere objects that live only to be exploited and taken advantage of by the capitalists. Corporate structures that we see in our day to day life have been built on the labour and effort carried out by the working class. "Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonism splitting up into two hostile camps, directly facing each other- Bourgeoisie and Proletariat," [1]. The argument made here reinstates how capitalism not only alienates individuals but it also creates a rupture within the social fabric by creating divisions between the haves and the have not. Eliminating such a rift can be brought about by what Marx calls "class consciousness," which was later on restudied and evaluated by Georg Lukacs in his seminal work History and Class Consciousness (1923). By becoming aware and recognizing the agents of exploitation and oppression, one can be successful in tumbling over the the regime of the tyrant. This is what can be deemed as the "proletariat revolution" which aspires to create a classless society, where, enslavement and brutality would not cease to exist.

When applied to literature, traces of class struggle and class antagonism can be very well observed in works of Charles Dickens like Oliver Twist or Hard Times. Literature, which forms a part of the culture, represents the divides that exists within society. Marxism sought to explain how literature is constituted and moulded by the means of productions or the economy of a given society. In a way, we start to see how cultural artifices give us a peek into the tyrannizing capitalist society formulated on the plight and anguish of the working peasants. Works like Things Fall Apart, Alice in Wonderland, Heart of Darkness, Fight Club, Animal Farm, Uncle Tom's Cabin, etc, explores the concept of Marxist literary theory through carefully crafted plot, characters and themes that revolves around the basic premise of Marxism.

## Methodology

The focus of my study is to show how Marxist class consciousness enables the characters in the film Parasite to challenge the status quo and the hegemony of the capitalist class. The characters in the films rise up their level of class and try to subvert the growing oppression that not only alienates them from others, but also from their own self. Parasite is a satire on the dominant class; it shows how the characters mask their identity in the film to infiltrate into the lives of the Park family by donning a "new" identity to reclaim their position. Such a situation shows up the bleak condition of humanity, of the class, and the society in general. The

\*Corresponding author:

Shatabdi Mishra

✉ shatabdimishra@yahoo.com

Department of mass media and Communication, India

**Citation:** Mishra S (2022) A Marxist Analysis of Class Consciousness in Bong Joon-ho's Parasite. Global Media Journal, 20:51.

rich becomes richer and the poor becomes even poorer.

The paper seeks to identify such tenets of Marxism, to name a few, it tries to encapsulate not only class consciousness, but alienation, capitalism, hegemony, ideology, and the revolution that is carried out against the dominant class or in Gramsci's word, the class of the 'elites.

The research methodology adopted in this paper is qualitative in nature. The Marxist literary criticism has been taken to demonstrate class consciousness and the proletariat revolution furthered by locating the stances and markers of oppression and subjugation [2].

## Literature Review

The advent of Marxism began at the turn of nineteenth century when thinkers like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels turned their attention towards the growing class animosity that started to erupt within the bourgeoisie and the proletariat over the legitimization of hegemony that rested on the latter. As the society became more productive and industrialized, the exploitation became rampant and beyond control over the individuals (working class) who had to give their labour in order to bring in the revenues and economy with which the capitalists or the bourgeoisie indulged and exercised their power to control. The Communist Manifesto by Engels and Marx writes, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."

The ideology of the capitalist classes gets reinforced by means of modes of representation that may include arts, social values, lifestyle, films, and literatures etc. These values are soon absorbed by the working classes and the hegemony of power occurs when through language and forms of expression the ideology is sustained and survived by means of naturalization. This form operates at the level of the unconscious, where though an individual thinks that they may be "free," they are in fact trapped in the bourgeoisie consumer culture that feeds off of them. The apparent capitalist class and its ideology gives the erroneous notion to the working class that they indeed are free in their choice, but in reality, it is deemed as a 'false consciousness.' The true 'class consciousness' can be achieved when the working class (proletariat) becomes aware of the patterns of exploitation, hegemony, and control that exists, it is through this "consciousness," that the proletariat starts to revolt and becomes a revolutionary by overthrowing the capitalist regime. The collective needs and aspirations of the marginalized class begin to subvert the dominant political ideology, as Marx had stated in Communist Manifesto: "working men have no country [3].

The society is built on two adhering components, namely the Base which includes means of production, and the Superstructure which sums up to be the cultural aspects. It is the Base and the Superstructure that shape each other including society. This is a result of the interpellation of the ideology of the upper class in a way that we

Start to internalize them. Promod K. Nayar writes, "The most significant feature of ideology is that it is invisible. One may cite the Louis Althusser who stated how such ideology of exploitation and ascribing "cultural roles takes place. In his essay, Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation), Althusser makes note of how ideologies are enforced by ISA (Ideological State Apparatus), i.e., education, media, religion through threats violence carefully orchestrated and maintained by RSA (Repressive State Apparatus), i.e., military, law enforcement, or the police. This is how the ideology is implemented within a society to keep the working class at their place. While they may think that they are independent and are not being exploited or subconsciously hegemonized, the truth, however, remains further away. The political slogan, "Workers of the world, unite" of Karl Marx can be skilfully explained in this context. The slogan serves as a mouthpiece towards the beginning of the proletariat revolution to bring down the anarchy of capitalism and such other ideologies that are being bred [4].

The theme of capitalism, class struggle, alienation and class consciousness can be seen in the film Parasite that has been taken in this paper as the focus of my study. The tenets of Marxism can be aptly seen in every cultural form that we come across; ironically, it goes forth to show the prevalent ideology of the dominant class. The film Parasite (2020) by Bong Joon Ho, Roger Ebert reviewing for the New Yorker adds, "Parasite may be his most daring examination of the structural inequity that has come to define the world. It is a tonal juggling act that first feels like a satire—a comedy of manners that bounces a group of lovable con artists of a very wealthy family of awkward eccentrics." Another notable editor, Namrata Joshi, for The Hindu writes "Bong Joon-ho offers a deeply dystopian vision of an unfair world where social differences can't be wished away [5].

## Data Collection and Data Analysis

The film Parasite by Bong Joon-Ho presents the story of the Kim family who live in a "semi-basement" house supporting themselves by folding the pizza boxes. This family stands for the lower class that lives and fends for themselves by selling their labour as a commodity and in doing so, they are reduced to an inanimate object. Their job of "folding boxes" can be seen in this light. It does not help them in any way to make ends meet because their apartment is almost dilapidated and it is situated underneath the structure of the city, overlooking the streets, in comparison with the Parks' mansion built by a notable architect of South Korea by the name of Namgoong. Quite metaphorically, Joon-Ho at the premise of the film, introduces us to the huge disparity that lies in the film. By situating this family's house at the lower level, he brings to our attention the inequality that exists. They quite literally live under the structured oppression orchestrated by the capitalist, and by situating the Park house at a level that lies above the slum houses; Bong Joon-Ho drives our attention to the social stratification and discrimination. When Ki-woo's friend Min comes over to their place, it surely turns over their condition as it brings in an opportunity for the family to start working in the Park family, here representing the upper class. Even though they remain in their position of subjugation, they rise up soon afterwards. Little by little, we see each character infiltrating the Park mansion in guise of tutors, driver, and housekeepers. One more thing to note here is that the son of Kim family changes his name from Ki-woo to Kevin, an Americanized name, to connote the hub of capitalism, even his sister, Ki-jung also substitutes her name for Jessica, and enacts as an art therapist for the Park family's son.

One of the significant aspect of the film in its entirety is the significance of the scholars' rock that is given to them by Min. The legend has it that the rock is supposed to bring "material prosperity," evidently this rock here symbolizes the class struggle that soon ensues. The Park family are rich and have endowed their house with products that have been imported from United States, the hub of capitalism. Objects or names that have been derived chiefly from Western terminology like walkie talkies, or Cub Scouts, Mercedes Benz, or even places like Illinois and Chicago also find a reference in the film. This chiefly brings to our attention the Growing fetishism associated with commodities that bear the semblance of consumerist culture, a culture that is shaped and influenced by the rising economy of metropolitan citadels like USA, Germany or the U.K. Their way of dressing and wearing expensive and branded items capitulates the commodity fetishism associated with capitalism. It can be described as a way in which individuals attribute a sense of magic or "phantom like quality" to an inanimate object. The social relationship is not established on the premise of an inherent human relationship one shares with another individual, but the relationship that is culminated with the effect of buying objects that is a result of production and exchange. This creates a sense of alienation, the Park family remain oblivious to the struggles of the Kim family or any class

that is beneath them. Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) talks about how "commodity fetishism extends to all fields of human activity, including consciousness itself." The faculty of the mind itself is rendered redundant by the obsession that is supplemented by this form of fetishism coupled by alienation. In contrast to the Parks, we see Chung-sook brushing the rock, this highlights their hope to rise above by means of acquiring wealth. The Parks have failed to realize the potential struggle that engulfs the Kims. After having donned a new identity to support them, the Kims soon after initiate their "plan" to eliminate the former housemaid, and the driver. While the Kims constantly have their conversation about their money problems, or electricity outages, or the inaccessibility when it comes to Internet, the Parks do not. The Kims are perfectly aware of the socioeconomic conditions under which they get minimum wage, unbeknownst to the Parks. In the beginning of the film, we see how the Kims live in a shoddy neighbourhood with people who have the same class condition as them. The family, in most of the scenes, strive hard to find a Wifi signal in the house, stealing into the Wifi access used by the ones living above them. This can be seen as a notion of the plight of the ones who "live under the shadow" of their masters. This class are alienated from their individualism, as they begin to get fragmented by the alienation that they so suffer. According to Georg Lukacs, reification can be as an extreme form of alienation where the individuals start to appear like objects rather than things. In this context, the Kim family resemble commodities used and exploited by the Park family [6].

Interestingly, while the Kims have invaded the Park family, what they do not know is that under the house, inside a bunker made to withstand nuclear attacks, the

Former housemaid by the name of Gook Moon-gwang, has kept her husband. This goes a long way to show that no matter what, the class struggle cannot easily be eliminated whatsoever. The Kims, and the former housemaid and her husband have to live "under" the capitalist subjugation and dominance. These characters involve in a scuffle to keep up their facade of masked identities. Another thing to consider here is that, in such scenes to make the audience realize the inequity that exists, Joon-ho very carefully divides the scenes by means of line as a marker to show the differences between the two contrasting families. The Parks have nothing to complain for, they are equipped with all the luxuries they can afford. The Kims have to sustain themselves by means of forgery and deceit. The situation of Moon-gwang and her husband Oh Geun-sae is more bleaker and dark. The husband is out of work and has to be confined within the walls of a bunker by living with the bare minimum, in relation to the Park family who reside "above" the bunker in a furnished house, enjoying the privileges they have. This family, especially the husband has stayed all his life inside a bunker and only when the Parks go to sleep at night, he climbs up the stairs to fetch himself water or food. The precarious condition of the lower class is thus represented by means of making individuals like objects who have no will, voice, identity of their own, but have to survive under the control of the upper class.

The setting of both the house provides us an element of divide that can be carefully investigated. In one of the scene, we see how semi-basement house of Kim's family is submerged in the flood water as a result of a heavy rainfall. While the Parks enjoy the bountiful weather of the next day, the Kims, on the other hand, had to abandon their house like the many other that lived in the neighbourhood. Taking an alternative to spend the night at a common gymnasium with the many who share their rank, they are once again reminded of the fact that they are poor. The next day, Ki-taek adopts his role of being the chauffeur to the Parks, and in such an episode of the film, we see the Park wife, Choi Yeon-gyo, talking over the phone, telling her friend, that "The sky's so blue, and no pollution thanks to all the rain yesterday!" The crashing contrast is yet again visible and remains poignant to the narrative of the film.

The scene of "climbing up the stairs," or "climbing back down," has been portrayed many a times. Each time the Kims climb the stairs, it shows their attempt to overthrow the regime of the dominant by rising up to their level by means of deceitful

Appearance, and when they climb back down, it shows their factual position. Lukacs writes, "When the worker knows himself as a commodity his knowledge is practical. That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge." The class consciousness of these characters come up to the surface towards end of the scene, when Oh Geun-sae escapes from the bunker and hits the son, Kim Ki-woo, with the rock, a symbol of material prosperity, the 'rock' soon becomes a weapon of murder, and as Geun-sae approaches the yard where the Parks are hosting a birthday party for their son, he starts charging the Kims. The symbol of the rock can delineated as a symbol of protest, also, the need to obtain material means, or wealth, and a place in the hierarchy of class, turns into a Proletariat revolution. The revolution of the lower class against the capitalist class is initiated when Park Dong-ik is killed by Ki-taek, the father of the Kim family, after he is triggered by the smell of the blood, and closes his nose, with a grotesque face of disgust. This disgust for the lower class and their predicament can never truly be addressed or acknowledged by their so called masters. The "smell" that Dong-ik so articulately detests is recounted many times when he says, "That smell wafts through the car....Like an old radish? You know when you boil a rag? It smells like that." The identity of an individual is thus reduced and diminished to the point of a bad stench. It is this that prompts Ki-taek to overthrow the Parks by the murder, a symbol of subverting the hegemony of the capitalism. The class consciousness is thus achieved by this powerful scene that unveils the truth of class struggle by the rich divide. At the end of the film, what we are left with are the remnants of the revolution brought about by the Proletariat revolution in the form of bloodbath. The "plan" of Ki-taek at last is attained in the form of protest that reveals the reality shrouded by the dominance of the upper class through the ideology that is reinforced and seeped into their lives at the beginning of the film. The use of the phrase "plan" in this milieu can be seen in the light of Marx's belief which is, "Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workingmen of all countries unite!" It can be said that in putting the "plan" in action the gambit of creating a "classless" society is also accomplished.

## Conclusion

Through the application of Marxian class consciousness, we have deciphered the agents of capitalism and domination that has been very meticulously orchestrated by the Park family on the Kim family. Their identity and the 'self' which had been rendered unimportant and moot, at last, begins to analyze and become self-aware of their station in the hierarchy of power distribution where the capitalist grow and nourish at the labour of the ones who work under them. The 'stench' of the Kim family becomes poignant in the sense that it reminds them of their lot. The 'rock' always substantiates this, from a symbol of material wealth at the beginning of the film; it becomes a tool of murder that leaves a catastrophe of ensuing murders and deaths. At this point, we can safely delineate that 'rising up the stairs,' and 'climbing back down,' the 'rock' and the 'stench' serves as reminders of the growing consciousness of the Kim family. By donning in different identities, the Kim family initiate their process of subversion of the dominant class. Ki-taek's recurrent idea of 'plan' and ways to implement it functions as the groundwork of the impending revolution of the proletariat. The true way, one can achieve this by consciously being aware of one's class and so at the end by murdering Mr Park or Park Dong-ik, the 'father' of the family or the 'father' of capitalism and bourgeoisie, Kim family is successful in bringing out the proletariat revolution by becoming class conscious.

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