
Food as a Symbol of Power Imbalance in ‘Squid Game’

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Abstract:

This paper analysis how food is used as symbol device in the Netflix series Squid Game, contending the way it is presented clearly reflects the show’s central theme of capitalist critique and class inequality. The organizers utilize the players’ rations to exert control, dehumanize them and incite conflict while they are stranded in a hazardous survival game. The games’ organizers callous cruelty is highlighted by the sharp contrast between the players’ meager, controlled rations and the opulent banquets enjoyed by the finalists and the VIPs. The guards purposefully provide the players with little portion of milk, boiled eggs and plain rice to evoke feelings of desperation and rage. The players are pitted against one another and progressively dehumanized as a result of this purposefully created shortage, which leads to infighting and bloodshed. As the players become more desperate, the foods’ availability, presentation and symbolism change to reflect their physical and moral decline under the pressure of a capitalist death game. Food serves as a metaphor for interpersonal connections, roles in games end events from both inside and outside of the competition in the Squid Game.

Keywords: game, players, organizers, rations, food**Introduction:**

Squid Game has broken every possible record, an unforeseen outcome that illustrates the growing prevalence of soft power emanating from Seoul and its vicinity in the Western nations. Upon close scrutiny, food assumes a role that is far from secondary. It is a crucial component for comprehending the character’s emotional states, the social milieu in which they operate, and, more profoundly, the South Korean culture.

The series examines systems that flourish on scarcity and inequality. The food in the games is meticulously rationed to cultivate distrust and desperation, mirroring the unequal distribution of the food in the real world. These instances make clear that hunger is not merely a manifestation of poverty; it serves as an instrument that fortifies the authority of those in power. As director Hwang Dong-hyuk remarked in an interview in the Vogue in 2021, “I wanted to write a story that was an allegory or fable about modern capitalist society,

something that depicts an extreme competition, somewhat like the extreme competition of life. But I wanted it to use the kind of characters we've all met in real life.”[4]

Economic Disparity:

Squid Game reflects cultural identity and economic inequality through food. Even if their meanings are changing, traditional Korean foods and sweets like tteobokki and dalgona candies keep the story rooted in a particular cultural setting. Under the crushing weight of structural unfairness, the childhood treat Dalgona sweet transforms into a lethal trial that signifies a loss of innocence. An important event, like Gi-Hunn and Sang-woo's steak dinner, which serves as a premonition of their violent confrontation, are foreshadowed by food scenes on a narrative level. In the first episode the audience witnesses Gi-Hunn, a gambling addict who lives with his elderly mother, scrape together enough cash to buy his daughter a cheap rice meal (tteobokki) from a sweet vendor for her birthday. His incapacity to provide her something adequate is further shown when he presents her a cheap plastic gun from a claw machine. [3]

Inside the game, the players are given a pathetic lunchbox that contains rice, egg, sausage and kimchi. Their universal poverty and the dehumanization they experience rob them of their individuality. On the other hand, steaks are eaten at expensive fancy restaurants, in the episode one of season one, Gi-Hunn apologizes to his daughter for not taking her to a better place for a meal. He is astonished when she tells him that she and her stepfather visited a steakhouse. [5] The steak, the silverware, the tuxedo in the final episode of the first season conveys to the audience how the final meal is luxurious. It shows how the treason will take place after the last supper.

Another movie known as Parasite (2019), the director Bong Joon-Ho has used food as a means of expressing the social standing and class differences between the rich and the poor. Beyond the film, Bong warns his audience of the potential for class inequality to be the parasite that destroys a society.[2]

A Tool of Control:

During the first two weeks of prolonged food deprivation, the human body may adjust and turn to downward regulation systems. Following that time, there are serious effects on every organ, with thiamine deficiency being the first and the most harmful ailment. According to Sales, Pau Perez, “This is associated with cognitive, emotional and personality changes leading to a break in almost all human beings. The medical and psychological effects of chronic starvation are critical and produce severe suffering” [1]. As the games progress, the player, the amount and the caliber decline. This is a calculated move to break down the trust and solidarity of the players. When the players are starved, their basic survival instinct takes hold, making them more ruthless and hostile towards one another.

The human urge for self preservation and lengths humans will go in order to survive are both highlighted in the series. It demonstrates the degree to which capitalism influences both the top and the lowest classes of our society. Players are urged to influence and betray their teammates with whom they have developed the strongest bonds. [6] The players are

dehumanized by the organizers, who treat them like lab rats in a behavioral experiment. Some turn to food hoarding and theft as their priorities shift from friendship to self-preservation. The Dalgona challenge in the game symbolizes the food in the best way. As their lives are at stake, the players must meticulously extract shapes from a delicate honeycomb candy. The treat for the children turns into a means of controlling someone's life and death. The cider and egg the players are given immediately following that game are just two examples of how writer and director Hwang Dong-Hyuk utilizes the food to hint at an upcoming disaster throughout the nine part series. "I just came close to dying," Jang Deok-su, the gangster remarks. "And what do I get for all of that? An egg for a meal." [7] The limited rations are intentional. After going hungry, the characters fight with each other. Dozens of players are dead after a five-minute violent clash amongst one another.



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Figure 1: The famous sugar honey comb Dalgona game in season one

Dehumanization: Knowing that the players are in dire need of money and they would stop at nothing to obtain it, the VIP planned the entire game. He simply enrolled as player 001 because he wanted to have some fun before passing away as he was aware that he had a terminal illness. Fun here is defined as a series of brutal games played to entertain the elite class.

By the time he passed away in the end, Il Naam had lost every bit of humanity left in him. He was cold and ruthless due to his great affluence and disengagement from the regular society. He received what he deserved, but his persona shows how the upper class doesn't care about the lower classes, because after all they are disconnected from reality that they are unable to understand other people's struggles. [9] Il-Naam remained cruel up to the very end, even in his last scene Gi-Hun. Despite or maybe because of his lack of empathy and fundamental human decency, he was so certain that people couldn't care for one another.

The scene's most significant take away is that Il-Naam was mistaken; despite people's lack of wealth, there is still good in the world.

Meals are employed in Squid Game to illustrate the disparity of power between the players and the VIPs as well as within the players. To show their despair, they provide the players with less food, such as optimized meals like milk, boiled eggs and plain rice, which are low in protein. However, in order to demonstrate their outrageous privilege, they serve VIP's expensive meals like steaks and wine.



Figure 2: The meals taken by the VIPs stands for class disparity.

Throughout the dinner, the organizers keep the players under control by giving winners extra food and denying rebels food. Additionally, they manipulate players' mindsets by keeping them weak with minimal food, which leads to conflict among them. For example, the stronger players steal food from weaker players to demonstrate their superiority, which leads to elimination of large number of players. [8]

Finally they provide them with expensive meals prior to the final game in an attempt to coerce them into playing a lethal game. In the second game, the players employ the honey comb or Dalgona game in a life-death game where their survival depends on using food as a weapon. Additionally they depict food as a sacrifice, signifying how players rarely use food sharing as a means of protesting the unjust system.

Nostalgia and Cultural Difference:

Dalgona has a long history in South Korea. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Korea remained impoverished. After the war, street food vendors attempted to fill the hole by producing Dalgona candy, as many children became accustomed to the chocolates given out by American soldiers. In the 1960's, sugar became affordable and

because it was easier to mold, Dalgona merchants preferred to use it instead of glucose when sugar was still pricey.

Dalgona vendors were found frequently near schools, parks, toy stores in the 1970's and the 1980's as children adored the game and the inexpensive candy. However the Dalgona candy's appeal declined with the introduction of the international candies in the early 2000s. Many of the food vendors lost their jobs as a result. Fortunately, a lot more Koreans are now waiting in line for the candy again due to the popularity of the Squid Game and the Dalgona Coffee trend. [10]

In the second game of the Man with the Umbrella's 33rd Squid game, Dalgona's make an appearance. Unaware of the game, the players had to select among four shapes: triangle, circle, star and umbrella. Byeong-gi, who was informed of the upcoming game, and Cho Sang-woo, who recognized the shapes and recalled what Kang Sae-byeok had told him about witnessing them heating sugar, both identified the game.[11]

Symbolic Foreshadowing:

As we approach the ninth episode of season one, five leads are dead and Seong Gi-hun (player 456), Cho Sang-Woo (player 218) and Kang Sae-byeok (player 067) are the finalists. The night before the final meal, the three finalists are treated to a lavish steak meal. It is revealed that Sae-byeok's injuries from the previous game have left her severely injured and bleeding. In order to make sure the three kill the weakest among them before the last game, they all are left with knives at the table end of the meal.[12] The scene strongly echoes the biblical account of the Last Supper, an elaborate meal that precedes an act of betrayal, the sumptuous meal serves as a hideous prelude to the series most devastating betrayal. The animalistic act of devouring 'blood-oozing' steak echoes of the brutality the players are supposed to unleash upon one another, while the red colour symbolizes the bloodshed to come.

Conclusion:

The food in the 'squid game' is ultimately significant as it combines human narrative with social critique. The structures of power at work, the desperation brought on by shortage, and the deep cultural and emotional resonance of Korean cuisine are all depicted through the food. Food is used to demonstrate empathy, draw attention to division, and help viewers better comprehend its characters and the structures that determine their fate.

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