

Abstract

Survival of the Desperate: A Marxist Study of Class and Capitalism in *Squid Game*

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This project examines the television series *Squid Game* (2021) through Marxist literary criticism to explore capitalism, class inequality, and exploitation. Although framed as a survival game, the narrative reflects deeper realities of debt, poverty, and ideological control. Using Marxist theory alongside Louis Althusser's concept of ideology and insights from the Frankfurt School, the study analyses how power shapes behaviour, morality, and social relations. It shows how characters represent different classes and how the games operate as metaphors for competition and commodification. Overall, the project argues that *Squid Game* functions not merely as entertainment but as a sharp social critique today.

**SURVIVAL OF THE DESPERATE: A MARXIST STUDY OF CLASS
AND CAPITALISM IN SQUID GAME**



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language
and Literature*

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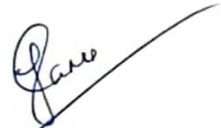
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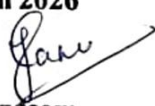
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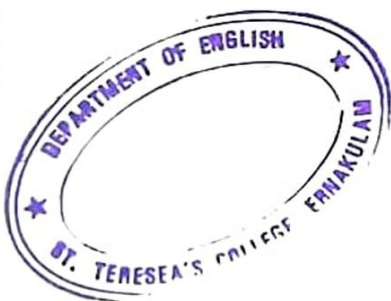
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project titled “Survival of the Desperate: A Marxist Study of Class and Capitalism in *Squid Game*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Sayoojya C.S, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled “Survival of the Desperate: A Marxist Study of Class and Capitalism in *Squid Game*” by Aina Soy is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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Introduction

In recent years, popular culture has increasingly become a space where social and economic realities are questioned and critiqued. Television series and films are no longer limited to entertainment alone; they often reflect the struggles, inequalities, and power structures that exist within society. One such series is *Squid Game* (2021), a South Korean survival drama that gained global attention for its intense narrative and disturbing portrayal of human desperation. While the series appears to revolve around a deadly game, it offers a deeper critique of capitalism, class inequality, and exploitation.

Squid Game presents a world where individuals burdened by debt and financial failure are forced to participate in violent competitions for a large monetary reward. The participants come from different social backgrounds, yet they share a common condition of economic desperation. This situation reflects the realities of capitalist societies, where individuals are often pushed into extreme circumstances due to poverty, unemployment, and lack of social support. The series exposes how capitalism reduces human life to a commodity and transforms survival into ruthless competition.

This project attempts to analyse *Squid Game* through the lens of Marxist literary criticism, focusing on themes of class struggle, exploitation, ideology, and commodification. By using Marxist theory along with ideas from Neo-Marxism and the Frankfurt School, the study examines how economic systems shape human behaviour, morality, and social relationships. The project also explores how ideology operates subtly through symbols, games, and entertainment, making inequality appear normal and unavoidable.

The study is divided into three chapters. Chapter One establishes the theoretical framework by explaining the key concepts of Marxist criticism, Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, and the Frankfurt School. Chapter Two applies these theories to the characters, games, and symbols in *Squid Game*, highlighting how class struggle and capitalist logic are represented within the narrative. Chapter Three moves beyond the text to reflect on the broader social implications of the series, connecting its themes to real-world inequality, moral compromise, and media culture.

Through this analysis, the project aims to show that *Squid Game* is not merely a survival drama but a powerful social critique of capitalist society. By examining the series from a Marxist perspective, the study highlights the relevance of literary theory in understanding contemporary cultural texts and the socio-economic realities they reflect.

The popularity of *Squid Game* across different countries and cultures also makes it an important text for academic study. Unlike many regional television series, *Squid Game* reached a global audience and sparked discussions about inequality, capitalism, and human survival. Viewers from different social backgrounds were able to relate to the characters' struggles, even though the story is set in South Korea. This global reception suggests that the economic problems represented in the series are not limited to one nation but are shared by many societies across the world. As a result, the series becomes a useful cultural text for examining how capitalism operates on both local and global levels.

Another important reason for studying *Squid Game* is its representation of modern social anxieties. In contemporary society, many individuals face increasing pressure due to rising living costs, unemployment, unstable work conditions, and debt. These issues directly affect people's mental health, relationships, and moral choices. The series reflects these anxieties by showing how financial stress forces individuals into extreme situations.

By presenting such realities through fictional storytelling, *Squid Game* allows audiences to confront uncomfortable social truths in a dramatic and emotional way.

From a literary and cultural studies perspective, popular media texts like *Squid Game* deserve serious academic attention. Earlier literary studies mainly focused on novels, poetry, and classical drama. However, in the present digital age, television series and streaming content have become powerful forms of storytelling that shape public opinion and social awareness. These visual narratives influence how people think about success, failure, morality, and power. Therefore, analysing such texts using established literary theories helps bridge the gap between traditional literary criticism and modern cultural production.

The use of Marxist literary criticism in this project is particularly relevant because the series is deeply connected to economic themes. Marxism focuses on class relations, labour exploitation, and power structures, all of which are central to the narrative of *Squid Game*. The competition shown in the series reflects the capitalist idea that individuals must constantly compete in order to survive. Success is rewarded, while failure leads to exclusion or elimination. This mirrors real-world capitalist systems where economic survival often depends on competition rather than cooperation.

In addition to Marxist criticism, the inclusion of Neo-Marxist perspectives such as Althusser's theory of ideology helps explain how social control operates beyond economic force. The series not only shows physical violence but also highlights psychological and ideological pressure. Characters accept the rules of the game even when they know the risks involved. This reflects how individuals in real society often accept unfair systems because they are taught to believe that there are no alternatives. By examining these

ideological processes, the project aims to show how power operates in subtle and hidden ways.

The Frankfurt School's ideas further strengthen the analysis by focusing on the role of media and entertainment. *Squid Game* itself is part of the global entertainment industry, yet it also criticises the same system that produces it. This contradiction makes the series especially interesting for critical study. On one level, it entertains audiences with suspense and visual spectacle. On another level, it exposes how suffering can be turned into entertainment for profit. This dual nature reflects the complex relationship between culture and capitalism in modern society.

Moreover, the project also highlights the relevance of interdisciplinary study. By combining literary criticism, cultural theory, and social analysis, the research moves beyond simple plot interpretation. It connects storytelling with real social conditions and economic structures. This approach helps demonstrate that literature and media are not isolated art forms, but active participants in shaping social awareness and political thought. Finally, this project aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how popular culture can function as a form of social critique. While many viewers may watch *Squid Game* only for entertainment, a critical reading reveals layers of meaning related to class struggle, exploitation, and ideological control. By applying Marxist theory, this study encourages readers to look beyond surface-level enjoyment and question the systems of power represented in the series. In this way, the project attempts to show that *Squid Game* is not only a dramatic survival story, but also a reflection of the social and economic realities of the contemporary world.

Chapter 1

Foundations of Desperation and Capitalism

Examining serious works of literature or visual storytelling through a theoretical framework reveals deeper structures of meaning beyond surface-level plots and characters. Narratives addressing power, inequality, and social conflict often mirror wider economic and ideological influences. Thus, studying pertinent literary and cultural theories is crucial for grasping how social realities modify these stories.

This chapter therefore, establishes the theoretical framework that guides the present research. The analysis in this project is conducted primarily through Marxist Literary Criticism, which offers a direct way of understanding literature and culture as reflections of economic inequality and class struggle. Alongside classical Marxist ideas, the study also engages with Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, which extends Marxist thought by explaining how individuals are unconsciously shaped by social and ideological institutions. Finally, insights from the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory are considered, as they provide important perspectives on culture, media, and commodification under capitalism.

Together, these three theoretical perspectives provide a strong foundation for the study. Marxist criticism reveals the economic basis of social conflict, Althusser's theory uncovers ideological mechanisms that maintain consent, and the Frankfurt School critiques the commodification of human experience. By establishing these frameworks, this chapter prepares the ground for later chapters that will apply these theories to the selected text. As Marx and Engels state, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class

struggles” (Marx and Engels 23). This idea highlights how social conflict is deeply rooted in economic structures. The following sections therefore examine three major theoretical approaches that are essential for understanding class, ideology, and cultural control.

Marxist criticism is one of the most widely used approaches in literary and cultural studies because it connects art and literature directly with social and economic conditions. It developed from the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the nineteenth century, who argued that the structure of society is shaped by the way material goods are produced and distributed. In simple terms, Marxism holds that the economic system forms the base on which politics, culture, and social relationships rest. Literature, therefore, cannot be separated from the society in which it is produced.

The most important principle of Marxist criticism is the conflict between classes. Marx explained that in a capitalist system, society is divided mainly into two groups: the ruling class, who own the means of production, and the working class, who sell their labour. This opposition creates what Marx called “class struggle.” Many Marxist critics argue that literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges this struggle by representing the lived experiences of inequality, power, and exploitation.

Another important concept in Marxist thought is alienation. In a capitalist society, workers often feel separated from the products of their labour, from other people, and even from their own sense of identity. Literature frequently represents such alienation by portraying characters who feel trapped within social systems larger than themselves. Through these representations, literary texts reveal the emotional and psychological consequences of economic exploitation.

Marxist critics also use the concepts of base and superstructure. The “base” refers to the economic foundation of society, including production, labour, and ownership.

while the “superstructure” includes institutions such as law, education, politics, art, and culture.

According to Marxist theory, the superstructure often supports the interests of the ruling class, but it can also become a space where resistance and critical awareness emerge. This explains why literature can sometimes challenge dominant ideologies even while being shaped by them.

In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx writes, “The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range” (Marx 45). This statement highlights the contradiction at the heart of capitalism, where labour creates wealth but does not benefit equally from it. Marxist literary criticism uses such ideas to analyse how texts represent inequality, exploitation, and social conflict. What makes Marxist criticism especially powerful is that it reminds readers that individual experiences cannot be separated from economic structures. Characters’ struggles, decisions, and conflicts are often shaped by material conditions rather than personal choice alone. This connection between individual life and social reality lies at the core of Marxist literary analysis.

While classical Marxism focused mainly on economics and class conflict, later thinkers attempted to explain how capitalism continues to survive despite visible inequality. One of the most influential of these thinkers was Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher. He argued that economic power alone does not sustain social systems. Instead, people are controlled through ideology, which shapes beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. Althusser introduced two important concepts: the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). The RSA includes institutions such as the police, army, and legal system, which operate mainly through force or the threat of

force. The ISA includes institutions such as schools, religion, media, and family, which function through ideas and values. These institutions teach individuals how to think and behave in ways that support the existing system.

According to Althusser, ideology does not simply exist outside individuals; it operates within everyday life. He explains this by using the concept of interpellation, which refers to the process through which individuals are “called” into social roles. When people accept identities such as workers, students, or citizens, they unconsciously accept the expectations and responsibilities attached to these roles. As a result, individuals often participate in systems of control without directly questioning them.

Althusser famously states, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 28). This means that ideology shapes how people perceive reality, often masking exploitation and inequality. His theory extends Marxism by explaining how consent is produced and maintained, not only through force but also through belief and habit.

Through this framework, ideology can be understood as a powerful mechanism that sustains social structures. It encourages individuals to accept inequality as natural and unavoidable. This makes Althusser’s theory especially useful for analysing cultural texts that deal with power, obedience, and social conditioning.

Another important branch of Marxist thought is represented by the Frankfurt School, a group of German thinkers such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and later Jürgen Habermas. Their work, often referred to as Critical Theory, focused on the relationship between capitalism, culture, and mass media.

One of their most influential concepts is the culture industry. Horkheimer and Adorno argued that under capitalism, culture is produced and distributed like any other

commodity. Films, music, television programmes, and literature are designed for mass consumption and profit. As a result, cultural products often promote conformity and discourage critical thinking.

The Frankfurt School also highlighted the idea of false choice. Although consumers appear to have many options, these choices are often repetitive and controlled by market forces. This creates standardisation, where similar patterns and messages dominate cultural production. Over time, such repetition shapes public consciousness and reinforces dominant ideologies.

Adorno and Horkheimer state, “The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises” (Adorno and Horkheimer 56). This suggests that entertainment offers temporary pleasure while distracting audiences from deeper social problems. Marcuse further argues that entertainment under capitalism often extends the logic of labour into leisure, limiting genuine freedom and critical awareness (Marcuse 112). Through these ideas, the Frankfurt School demonstrates how capitalism controls not only economic life but also cultural experience. Their theories provide valuable tools for analysing how media and popular culture shape perception, behaviour, and social values. The three theoretical approaches discussed in this chapter is concept of Marxist criticism, Althusser’s theory of ideology, and the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory in which we together provide a strong foundation for the present study. Each framework highlights a different dimension of capitalist society while remaining closely connected to one another. Marxist criticism explains how class struggle and economic exploitation shape social relations. Althusser’s theory reveals how ideology produces consent and encourages individuals to accept existing power structures. The Frankfurt School expands this analysis by demonstrating how culture and media function as tools of control and commodification.

Together, these perspectives establish a theoretical base for analysing literature and popular culture through a critical lens. With these concepts in place, the following chapters move from theory to application, examining how these ideas operate within the selected text through characters, symbols, and narrative structures

The use of Marxist criticism, Althusser's theory of ideology, and Frankfurt School Critical Theory is especially meaningful when studying modern cultural texts such as television series and digital media. Unlike traditional literary works, contemporary visual narratives are produced within highly commercial and profit-driven media industries. These industries are closely connected to capitalist systems of production and consumption. Because of this, theoretical approaches that focus on economics and ideology become essential for understanding not only what a story represents, but also why it is produced in a particular way.

Marxist criticism helps in identifying how class divisions, labour exploitation, and economic inequality are often reflected in popular narratives, even when these issues are not directly stated. Many cultural texts present social problems through symbolic situations and dramatic conflicts, allowing audiences to emotionally connect with real-world struggles. Through this perspective, literature and media can be understood as spaces where social tensions are either questioned or reinforced.

Althusser's theory further strengthens this approach by explaining how audiences themselves are influenced by ideology. Viewers do not experience cultural texts in isolation. Their interpretations are shaped by education, family, media, and social

institutions. As a result, ideology plays an important role not only in storytelling but also in how people understand and accept the messages within a text. This theory helps explain how ideas such as competition, success, and obedience are often normalised in popular culture.

The Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture is also highly relevant in the present digital era. With the rise of streaming platforms and global entertainment industries, cultural products are increasingly created to attract large audiences and generate profit. This commercial pressure often shapes storytelling patterns, visual spectacle, and emotional appeal. Critical Theory allows readers to question how entertainment can distract audiences from social problems while simultaneously reinforcing dominant capitalist values.

Together, these theoretical approaches encourage readers and viewers to move beyond passive consumption of entertainment. They promote critical thinking by asking audiences to reflect on the social and economic forces behind cultural production. This perspective is important for academic analysis because it connects individual experience with larger systems of power, ideology, and inequality.

By applying this combined theoretical framework, this project aims to examine how class relations, ideology, and social control operate within narrative structures. It also ensures that the analysis remains grounded in established critical thought rather than personal opinion. In this way, the theoretical foundation strengthens the overall study and prepares the ground for the analytical chapters that follow.

Chapter 2

Class Struggle Through Character and Symbol

This chapter applies the Marxist theoretical framework discussed in Chapter One to the narrative of *Squid Game*. By analysing characters, games, and symbols, the chapter explores how class struggle and capitalist ideology operate within the series. The focus of this chapter is to examine how economic inequality, competition, and exploitation are represented through individual experiences and narrative structures. Through this application, the chapter demonstrates how *Squid Game* functions as a critique of capitalist society.

In *Squid Game*, characters are not presented merely as individuals with personal flaws or heroic qualities; instead, they function as clear representatives of different social classes within a capitalist system. Their backgrounds, struggles, and moral decisions are shaped by economic forces rather than free choice. From a Marxist perspective, the series suggests that class position strongly influences human behaviour, ethics, and even survival. By examining the major characters, this section explores how class struggle and economic desperation are embodied at an individual level.

Seong Gi-hun, the central protagonist, represents the working-class individual trapped in a continuous cycle of debt and instability. He is unemployed, financially dependent on his elderly mother, and burdened by gambling addiction. Gi-hun's failures are not simply personal weaknesses; rather, they reflect a system that offers little support to those who fall behind economically. From a Marxist viewpoint, his situation illustrates the idea that material conditions shape consciousness. Gi-hun does not enter the game out of ambition or greed but out of desperation, highlighting how capitalism often forces individuals into extreme choices.

Even within the game, Gi-hun frequently resists the logic of ruthless competition. He chooses cooperation, empathy, and trust, especially in team-based games. In my view, this behaviour suggests an underlying human instinct to resist capitalist cruelty. However, the system repeatedly punishes such compassion, making it clear that moral values are incompatible with survival under extreme capitalist conditions. Gi-hun's character thus reflects the tragic position of the working class: aware of injustice yet largely powerless to escape it.

In contrast, Cho Sang-woo represents the educated middle class and exposes the illusion of meritocracy. As a graduate of Seoul National University, Sang-woo embodies social success and intellectual achievement. However, despite his education and status, he is also deeply indebted due to financial crimes. His presence in the game reveals that capitalism does not guarantee stability even to those who seemingly follow its rules.

Education and intelligence, rather than offering security, merely delay economic collapse. As the games progress, Sang-woo undergoes a moral transformation that highlights the dehumanising effects of capitalism. He becomes increasingly calculating, justifying betrayal and violence as necessary for survival. From a Marxist perspective, his moral decline demonstrates how capitalist systems reward self-interest over solidarity. Sangwoo's character shows how the middle class, when threatened with downward mobility, may abandon ethics in order to preserve status and survival.

Ali Abdul represents one of the most exploited segments of the working class: migrant labourers. As a foreign worker, Ali is denied wages, legal protection, and social respect. His employer physically abuses him and withholds his salary, illustrating the extreme power imbalance between labour and capital. This reflects Marx's concept of labour exploitation, where workers are valued only for their physical output. Ali's strength

is repeatedly used for the benefit of others, both in the real world and within the game, yet he receives little protection in return. Ali's trusting nature further highlights his vulnerability within a capitalist system.

He places faith in Sang-woo, believing in fairness and honesty, only to be betrayed. In my view, Ali's fate symbolises how capitalism preys upon the most powerless, particularly migrants who lack social and economic security. His death is not only tragic but symbolic of how expendable labour is treated under exploitative systems.

Oh Il-nam initially appears as a weak, impoverished elderly man, creating the illusion of equality among participants. However, his later revelation as the creator of the game exposes the fundamental inequality at the heart of the competition. Unlike the other players, Il-nam participates by choice rather than necessity. From a Marxist standpoint, this reinforces the idea that the ruling class can engage with suffering as entertainment while remaining insulated from its consequences.

Il-nam's boredom-driven participation reflects how extreme wealth produces detachment from human suffering. His character demonstrates that for the capitalist elite, exploitation is not only normalised but also aestheticised and gamified. The supposed fairness of the game collapses once his true identity is revealed, emphasising that equality under capitalism is largely an illusion.

Through these characters, *Squid Game* presents a powerful microcosm of capitalist society. The working class, the middle class, migrant labourers, and the elite are all placed within the same space, yet their experiences and outcomes remain deeply unequal. This character-based representation of class struggle reveals how capitalism shapes morality, relationships, and survival itself. This discussion prepares the ground for

further analysis of the games and symbols that reinforce these class divisions in the following sections.

In *Squid Game*, the games themselves are not just a backdrop for the story but act as a clear reflection of how a capitalist system functions. Although the games are introduced as fair, voluntary, and rule-bound, they are actually designed to push players into intense competition while benefiting those who control the system. From a Marxist point of view, the games operate like a miniature capitalist society, where survival depends less on morality or kindness and more on calculation, strength, and sacrifice.

At the start, the players are constantly reminded that everyone is equal and that the rules apply to all in the same way. This idea of equality creates a sense of hope and fairness, much like capitalism promises equal opportunity to all individuals. However, as the games progress, it becomes clear that this equality is only an illusion. Some players are physically stronger, some are more intelligent, and others are more emotionally detached. These differences give certain players advantages, while the weaker and more vulnerable are eliminated early. In my view, this closely resembles real society, where people are told they have equal chances even though their social and economic backgrounds are very different.

Another important aspect of the games is the way human life is reduced to a number. Every time a player dies, the prize money increases, making the connection between death and profit very visible. From a Marxist perspective, this reflects how capitalism often values people only for their usefulness. Once a person is no longer productive or beneficial to the system, they are easily discarded. The emotionless way in which deaths are treated in the game highlights how human dignity is ignored when profit becomes the primary goal. When viewed through the lens of the Frankfurt School, the

Games can also be understood as a form of entertainment and spectacle. The presence of the VIPs is especially significant, as they watch the violence purely for pleasure. Human suffering becomes a source of enjoyment for the rich, turning pain into a form of luxury entertainment. In my view, this is one of the most unsettling elements of the series, as it shows how media and power can normalise cruelty and make exploitation appear acceptable.

The repetitive and strict structure of the games further reflects capitalist labour systems. Each game demands discipline, obedience, and performance under extreme pressure. Players are not allowed to pause, question the rules, or show emotional weakness. Failure results in immediate elimination, much like how workers are often replaced or discarded when they are no longer efficient. This constant pressure emphasises how systems driven by profit prioritise productivity over human well-being.

Overall, the games in *Squid Game* act as a powerful metaphor for capitalism itself. While they appear fair and voluntary on the surface, they function through control, inequality, and exploitation. The series suggests that the real enemy is not individual greed, but the system that forces people to compete, dehumanises them, and treats survival as a reward.

In *Squid Game*, symbols are used not just for visual impact but to subtly control how the players think and behave. While the game appears to offer freedom of choice, the series clearly shows how ideology works behind the scenes, shaping consent and obedience. Using Louis Althusser's idea of ideology, this section explores how symbols in the series condition individuals to accept violence, inequality, and exploitation as normal. One of the most striking symbols in the series is the large glass sphere filled with prize money that hangs above the players' dormitory. The money is always visible,

constantly reminding the players why they are participating. According to Althusser, ideology shapes how individuals imagine their relationship to reality. In this case, the prize money creates an illusion of hope and escape. The players begin to believe that enduring suffering will lead to freedom, even though the system causing their suffering remains unchanged. In my view, the money functions as a psychological tool that keeps the players obedient and motivated.

The uniforms and masks used in the game further reflect ideological control. The players wear identical tracksuits marked only by numbers, which removes their individuality and reduces them to roles within the system. This reflects Althusser's concept of interpellation, where individuals are "called into" specific identities. Similarly, the guards' masks erase personal identity while reinforcing authority. The shapes on the masks indicate rank, emphasizing hierarchy and discipline. These visual elements show how ideology operates quietly through appearance and routine rather than through open violence.

The contracts and rules signed by the players also represent ideological manipulation. Although the game is described as voluntary, the players' choices are shaped by poverty, debt, and lack of alternatives. By signing the contract, players appear to consent to the rules, which discourages resistance later. In my view, this reflects Althusser's argument that ideology makes individuals accept oppression by convincing them that they have freely chosen it.

Even the childhood games themselves function as ideological symbols. Games associated with innocence and joy are transformed into deadly competitions. This contrast highlights how capitalism distorts basic human experiences, turning play into

violence. By disguising brutality within familiar and nostalgic forms, the system makes exploitation appear normal and even acceptable.

Overall, the symbols in Squid Game reveal how ideology maintains control not through force alone, but through belief, routine, and illusion. Money, uniforms, rules, and games work together to shape behaviour and suppress resistance. Through an Althusserian lens, the series shows how individuals are interpellated into an oppressive system that appears fair but is deeply unequal.

This chapter has explored how Squid Game presents class struggle and capitalist exploitation through its characters, structure, and symbols. By applying Marxist theory, the chapter shows how the lives and decisions of the characters are shaped by economic pressure rather than personal choice alone. Characters like Gi-hun, Sang-woo, Ali, and Oh Il-nam reflect different positions within the class system, revealing how inequality influences behaviour, morality, and survival.

The analysis of the games highlights how competition and violence are used to mirror capitalist logic. Although the games are presented as fair and voluntary, they function through hidden inequality and coercion. As the players struggle to survive, human life is reduced to profit, showing how systems driven by capital often ignore dignity and compassion. In this sense, the games reflect a society where success comes at the cost of others' suffering.

The discussion of symbols and ideology further reveals how control is maintained without constant force. Through money, uniforms, rules, and childhood games, the system shapes belief and obedience. These elements create the illusion of choice and fairness, encouraging individuals to accept exploitation as unavoidable. From an

Althusserian perspective, this highlights how ideology convinces people to participate in systems that ultimately harm them.

Overall, this chapter demonstrates that Squid Game is more than a story about survival. It serves as a critique of a social order that thrives on inequality, competition, and dehumanisation. By exposing these mechanisms, the series encourages viewers to question not only the games on screen, but also the structures of power operating in real life. This understanding forms the foundation for the next chapter, which will examine the broader social relevance of these themes.

However, as the pressure increases and the number of survivors decreases, these relationships begin to weaken. Trust slowly turns into fear and suspicion, and personal survival becomes more important than collective unity

Chapter 3

Marxist Critique and Broader Reflections

The previous chapters of this study focused on explaining Marxist theory and applying it to the narrative of *Squid Game*. This chapter moves a step further by looking at what the series suggests about the real world. Although *Squid Game* is a fictional story, its themes strongly reflect the social and economic realities of contemporary society. Issues such as inequality, debt, and exploitation shown in the series are not imaginary but closely connected to everyday life under capitalism.

Through a Marxist perspective, *Squid Game* highlights how capitalist systems shape human behaviour and moral choices. The desperation experienced by the players mirrors the struggles of individuals who are forced to compete in order to survive. In many ways, the series shows how economic pressure pushes people into situations where compassion becomes difficult, and survival takes priority.

This chapter therefore, examines *Squid Game* as a broader social critique rather than just a survival drama. By connecting the events of the series to real-world capitalist structures, this chapter aims to show how the show reflects existing inequalities and ideological control. In doing so, it emphasises the relevance of Marxist criticism in understanding contemporary society and popular culture.

One of the strongest reasons *Squid Game* connects with audiences worldwide is that its depiction of inequality feels familiar. Although the series is fictional, the economic struggles faced by the players closely resemble real-life conditions under capitalism. Issues such as unemployment, debt, lack of social security, and exploitation are not limited to the world of the game but are part of everyday reality for many people.

From a Marxist perspective, capitalism creates a sharp divide between those who own wealth and those who must sell their labour to survive. This divide is clearly reflected in

Squid Game, where the players represent individuals pushed to the margins of society. Many of them are burdened by loans, job insecurity, or financial failure, leaving them with very limited choices. In the real world, similar pressures force people into exhausting work conditions, unsafe labour, or moral compromises simply to survive.

Debt plays a particularly important role both in the series and in real life. The characters enter the game because debt has taken control of their lives, making escape seem impossible. This reflects how modern capitalism often traps individuals in cycles of borrowing and repayment. In my view, debt functions as a silent form of control, keeping people obedient and dependent on the system that exploits them. The promise of sudden wealth, whether through gambling, risky investments, or extreme chances like the game, becomes a false hope offered to the desperate.

Another important issue highlighted by *Squid Game* is the exploitation of vulnerable groups, especially migrant workers and the poor. Ali's character represents the reality faced by many migrant labourers worldwide who work under harsh conditions, receive unfair wages, and lack legal protection. Capitalist systems often benefit from such labour while denying these workers dignity and security. This shows how inequality is not accidental but built into the structure of capitalism itself.

The extreme contrast between the wealthy elites and the players further reflects real-world economic imbalance. While the VIPs live in luxury and boredom, the players risk their lives for basic survival. This mirrors how wealth concentration in capitalist societies allows a small group to live comfortably while the majority struggles. In my view, *Squid Game* exaggerates this contrast to make visible what is often ignored or normalised in everyday life.

Overall, *Squid Game* serves as a reflection of real-world inequality under capitalism. By presenting economic struggle in a dramatic and extreme form, the series encourages viewers to question the fairness of a system that rewards a few while exploiting many. Through a Marxist lens, the show highlights how inequality is not the result of individual failure, but a consequence of structural economic conditions.

One of the most disturbing aspects of *Squid Game* is the way capitalism shapes moral choices. The series suggests that human behaviour cannot be judged in isolation from economic conditions. Under extreme financial pressure, ideas of right and wrong begin to blur, and survival becomes the primary concern. From a Marxist perspective, this shows how material conditions influence human consciousness and ethical decision-making.

Throughout the series, characters are forced to choose between moral values and survival. Gi-hun often attempts to act ethically by helping others and showing empathy, even when doing so puts him at risk. However, his moral stance frequently leads to suffering, suggesting that compassion is difficult to sustain in a system driven by competition. In contrast, Sang-woo gradually abandons ethical considerations and adopts a purely survival-based mindset. His actions reveal how capitalism rewards calculation and self-interest rather than cooperation.

The series also challenges the idea of free choice. Although the players technically choose to participate; their decisions are shaped by debt, poverty, and lack of alternatives. In my view, this highlights how capitalist systems create the illusion of choice while limiting real freedom. People appear responsible for their decisions, yet those decisions are often made under conditions of desperation. By presenting moral collapse as a consequence of systemic pressure, *Squid Game* avoids blaming individuals alone. Instead, it encourages viewers to question the system that forces people into such choices

This reinforces the Marxist idea that morality cannot be separated from material and social conditions.

Beyond economic inequality, *Squid Game* also offers a critique of modern media and entertainment. Through the perspective of the Frankfurt School, the series exposes how suffering is transformed into spectacle. The games are carefully designed for visual pleasure, suspense, and consumption, both for the VIPs within the show and for viewers in the real world.

The presence of the VIPs highlights how the wealthy consume violence as entertainment. Their detachment from the players' suffering reflects how the media often turns real human pain into content. In my view, this mirrors reality television, competitive shows, and even social media, where struggle and humiliation are frequently presented for public consumption.

At the same time, *Squid Game* makes the audience uncomfortable by implicating them as spectators. Viewers are drawn into the excitement of the games while being aware of their brutality. This self-awareness forces reflection on how entertainment under capitalism can normalise inequality and violence.

The series, therefore functions both as part of popular culture and as a critique of it. While it is consumed as entertainment, it simultaneously exposes the ideological mechanisms that shape audience perception. This aligns with the Frankfurt School's argument that culture under capitalism both distracts and controls, even while appearing harmless.

This chapter has examined *Squid Game* as a broader Marxist critique of capitalist society. By connecting the series to real-world inequality, moral compromise, and

media culture, the analysis shows that the narrative reflects existing social and economic realities rather than pure fiction. The desperation of the characters mirrors the pressures faced by individuals living under systems defined by debt, competition, and exploitation.

The discussion of morality reveals how capitalism reshapes human behaviour, often forcing individuals to choose survival over ethics. Similarly, the examination of media and entertainment highlights how suffering is commodified and consumed, reinforcing ideological control. Together, these elements suggest that capitalism sustains itself not only through economic power, but also through belief, habit, and normalization.

Overall, *Squid Game* emerges as a powerful cultural text that challenges viewers to reflect on inequality, choice, and responsibility. Through a Marxist lens, the series exposes the structures that shape modern life and encourages critical awareness of the systems people are often taught to accept as inevitable. This study therefore affirms the relevance of Marxist criticism in understanding contemporary literature and popular culture.

Conclusion

This project has examined *Squid Game* as a powerful cultural text that critiques capitalism and class inequality through the lens of Marxist literary criticism. By analysing the series using classical Marxist theory, Louis Althusser's concept of ideology, and insights from the Frankfurt School, the study has demonstrated how economic systems influence not only material conditions but also human behaviour, moral choices, and social relationships. What initially appears to be a fictional survival game is revealed to be a symbolic representation of real-world capitalist structures that depend on exploitation, competition, and unequal power relations.

One of the central findings of this study is that *Squid Game* exposes the harsh realities faced by individuals living under economic pressure. The characters are driven into extreme situations not because of personal failure alone, but because of systemic inequalities that limit opportunity and security. Through a Marxist perspective, the series highlights how poverty, debt, and lack of social protection push individuals into desperate choices. This reflects the larger reality of capitalist societies, where survival often becomes a struggle shaped by unequal access to resources and opportunities. The series, therefore, challenges the idea that success and failure are purely individual responsibilities and instead points toward the structural causes of inequality.

Chapter One established the theoretical foundation necessary to understand these issues. By introducing Marxist literary criticism, Althusser's theory of ideology, and the Frankfurt School's concept of the culture industry, the study created a framework for

analysing power, class, and cultural control. These theories provided the tools to interpret the series beyond its surface narrative. Marxist criticism helped explain economic exploitation and class struggle,

Althusser's ideas revealed how ideology shapes consent and obedience, and the Frankfurt School offered insight into how entertainment and media function within capitalist systems. Chapter Two applied these theoretical perspectives to the characters, narrative structure, and symbols in *Squid Game*. Through character analysis, the study showed how individuals from different social backgrounds represent various positions within the class system. The games themselves were examined as symbolic structures that mirror capitalist competition, discipline, and the elimination of the weak. Symbols such as money, uniforms, contracts, and childhood games were analysed as tools of ideological control that normalise inequality and exploitation. Together, these elements revealed how the series portrays capitalism not only as an economic system but also as a social and psychological force that shapes identity and behaviour.

Chapter Three extended the discussion by connecting the themes of the series to broader social realities. The analysis demonstrated how *Squid Game* reflects real-world issues such as unemployment, debt culture, migrant labour exploitation, and growing economic inequality. The study also explored how media and entertainment contribute to ideological control by transforming suffering into spectacle. In doing so, the series forces viewers to reflect on their own role as spectators and consumers of popular culture. This self-reflexive element makes *Squid Game* particularly significant, as it does not merely entertain but also encourages critical awareness of the systems that shape modern life.

Another important aspect highlighted by this study is the relationship between morality and capitalism. The series suggests that ethical values are often compromised under conditions of extreme economic pressure. Characters are forced to choose between survival and moral responsibility, revealing how capitalist competition encourages self-interest over solidarity. From a Marxist perspective, this reinforces the idea that human behaviour cannot be separated from material conditions. By portraying moral conflict as a product of social systems rather than individual weakness, *Squid Game* challenges audiences to rethink conventional ideas of guilt, success, and responsibility.

The ideological dimension of the series is also central to its critical message. Through Althusser's concept of interpellation, the study showed how individuals are shaped into obedient participants within oppressive systems. The illusion of choice, fairness, and equality in the games reflects how ideology operates in real life by masking structural inequality. Similarly, the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture helps explain how entertainment can function as a tool of distraction while reinforcing dominant values. By combining these theoretical perspectives, the project demonstrates that capitalism maintains power not only through economic control but also through culture, ideology, and everyday practices. Overall, this study confirms that *Squid Game* is not merely a popular television series but a meaningful social commentary on contemporary capitalist society. The series exposes the human cost of economic inequality and highlights the emotional and psychological impact of living under systems driven by profit and competition. By using a Marxist critical framework, the project shows how literature and popular culture can serve as important spaces for questioning dominant ideologies and raising awareness about social injustice. In conclusion, *Squid Game* serves as a reminder of the urgent need to examine and challenge systems that prioritise profit over people. The series encourages viewers to reflect

on issues of class, power, exploitation, and responsibility in both fictional and real-world contexts. This project has demonstrated that Marxist literary criticism remains highly relevant in the study of modern cultural texts, as it provides valuable tools for understanding inequality and social conflict. Through this analysis, the study affirms the importance of critical thinking in interpreting popular culture and recognising the deeper social realities it represents.

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