



UNKNOWN CITIZENS IN THE SQUID GAME: A STUDY ON STATE DOMINATION IN HWANG- DONG-HYUK'S KOREAN DRAMA "SQUID GAME"

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Abstract

W.H Auden's poem "Unknown Citizens" presents a Kafkaesque situation of insensitive bureaucracy, state surveillance and modern capitalism. This paper explores the various dimensions of a similar world order as seen in the recent Netflix drama "Squid Game". Using insights from philosophers like Foucault and Agamben, the paper illustrates how fear pervades through the body of the hapless players in Squid Game and controls them. Agamben's idea of Homo Sacer is used to understand the state's approach towards citizens who are not worthy to be saved. The economic dimension of capitalism and its connection with state power is also discussed briefly.

Keywords: Agamben, Auden, Capitalism, Foucault, Squid Game, Surveillance.

Seong Gi-hun (played by Lee Jung-jae), the protagonist of Squid Game, is introduced to a mysterious game show in a metro station which is emblematic of the modern urban life. The salesman who recruits Gi-hun (played by Gong Yoo) gives a detailed description of Gi-hun and seems to know every single aspect of his personal life. This scene reminds of W.H Auden's iconic poem "The Unknown Citizen", which deals with the plight of the modern man in a surveillance state.

The recent Netflix released Korean drama "Squid Game" directed by Hwang- Dong-hyuk was an instant hit globally and is credited as the most watched Netflix original series so far. Squid Game as the name suggests is designed in the form of a series of childhood games but with a violent twist. Unlike in video games there is no undo button in Squid Game. Here, you either win a jackpot that could save you from financial distress or die in the course of it.

The players are all connected by their neck deep debt and are consciously picked due to their desperation and financial precariousness. The players play these games at the risk of their own life as losing a game means losing their life as such.

Depersonalization is characteristic of the modern society as seen in Squid Game and Unknown Citizens. In Auden's poem, as the title points out, the citizen remains unknown even though everything about the citizen is known. He is referred to as *JS/07 M 378* which is possibly the social security number of that person. His name is not referred anywhere in the poem as it is irrelevant in a modern state where a number represents an individual. For the state, the number is more important than a real person in flesh and blood. The human element is lost in reducing an individual to a mere number in the bureaucratic administrative machinery. In "Squid Game" too, we can observe a similar reductionism. Each player is

given an identical green jumpsuit and a unique number from one to four hundred and fifty six to tell them apart. Inside the gaming arena, their individual identities don't matter unlike their numbers.

Surveillance is a crucial aspect of any modern state. It is projected as a necessity for the common good of the society and to limit the chances of law and order violation. The danger of violating the privacy of an individual is always rebuffed by the authorities in power. Auden's poem shows the horrifying extent of state surveillance in a bureaucratic state. The state constantly follows each development of a citizen and is aware of his job, his health condition, political opinion, the kind of newspaper he reads and even the equipments he have at home such as "a phonograph, a radio, a car and a Frigidaire" (Auden). In Squid Game, the surveillance is taken to the next level with the help of modern technologies like CCTV cameras and night vision cameras. This technologically assisted ultra-surveillance is reminiscent of modern tyrannical states like China and Russia. This is what the New York Times had reported about the high-tech surveillance by the Chinese government in the region of Xinjiang which is mainly occupied by the minority community of Uighur Muslims:

Kashgar and other areas of Xinjiang have in recent years systematically collected DNA and other biological data from residents too, especially Muslims. Officials now collect blood, fingerprints, voice recordings, head portraits from multiple angles, and scans of irises, which can provide a unique identifier like fingerprints. ("How China Uses")

A database containing all the information including facial scan are collected of each player before they are admitted into the playfield. This is to keep a close watch on each player and to eliminate the losing players with surgical precision. This ultra-surveillance also helps in reinforcing the operation of power through the very texture of multitudes that it disciplines, that too with the minimal exertion of hard power. In "Discipline and Punish", Michel Foucault has dealt with this operation of power that "insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied;

to form a body of knowledge about these individuals, rather than to deploy the ostentatious signs of sovereignty" (209).

The surveillance in Squid Games is graded just like in modern states. The ones in pink jumpsuits have a certain hierarchy which can be distinguished by the shapes on their black masks. The circle occupies the lowest position, the triangle above them and the square at the top. The Front man in the black overcoat and mask occupies the highest niche in the gaming island. However, even the Front man is answerable to the VIPs who had envisioned this game. The guards in pink are not immune from surveillance and are always under the close watch of the Front man apart from the mutual surveillance they do on one another. The guards are also guided by a set of codes which cannot be violated. The complex web of surveillance, both horizontal and vertical, which is enhanced by technology, is characteristic of modern states. This deep surveillance helps in neutralizing all forms of possible rebellion against the authority. Diffusing all forms of tensions that might arise from a society is a primary concern of state discipline as outlined by Foucault:

It must also master all the forces that are formed from the very constitution of an organized multiplicity; it must neutralize the effects of counterpower that spring from them and which form a resistance to power that wishes to dominate it: agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions- anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions. (209)

The front man as well as the guards don't reveal their identity and keep their faces hidden under a mask. The masks in Squid Game are suggestive of the faceless nature of the state. It not only shows the indifference of the modern state towards the common people but equally about the nebulous nature of it. One cannot measure the extent of the modern state which is dimensionless. This vagueness also helps in strengthening the operation of power on its subjects as it seeps into their very being.

The presence of a set of laws and regulations is yet another distinguishing feature of any modern state. Laws are meant to ensure the good conduct of citizens and to prevent any one individual or group from violating the rights and freedom of another. However, it also helps in shaping the individual's thoughts and actions so as to ensure that they behave according to the limits set by the state. The laws in Squid Game are simple just like the rules of a children's game. Keeping the law simple doesn't necessarily make it weak, instead it ensures greater impact and application. There are only three clauses given in the consent form of the players in Squid Game:

Clause 1: A player is not allowed to voluntarily quit the game

Clause 2: A player who refuses to play will be eliminated

Clause 3: The games maybe terminated upon a majority vote. ("*Red Light*" 00:40:21-31)

These clauses are simple yet ambiguous enough to keep the mysterious nature of law intact. The mysterious nature of law triggers fear in the players and it makes the application of law more effective. The incomprehensibility of law forces the players to behave, as the consequences of violating the same might be huge. The laws of the modern state are generally in the negative which tell the citizens what not to do than what they can do. It acts as a restriction on their freedom; or in other words, the law provides only a conditional freedom.

The first clause is clear and emphatic as it poses a definite restriction on the freedom of a player to quit. Once signed, the player consents to give up her/his freedom to quit. It means there is no turning back once a player willingly consents to participate. The second clause is the most ambiguous one as it merely says that a player will be "eliminated" if she/he refuses to play. The gravity of the term "eliminated" won't be revealed until the first game begins. The players shockingly realize that elimination is a euphemism for killing. This clause is an illustration of the ambiguous nature in which some laws are framed and the misuse of the same by the executive. Ambiguous clauses give the state

the leeway to bend the rules according to their convenience and to safeguard them from public scrutiny. The third clause is a safety valve that the modern state puts so as to present them as benign and upholders of the values of democracy.

The third clause is the peak of the state's hypocrisy. It gives the players an illusion of agency and autonomy. The clause is apparently benign and democratic however; just like every other modern democracy it has an inbuilt element of tyranny, which is of the majority. Only a majority decision could change the course of the games and it doesn't give any importance to individual feelings and emotions. The minority voices are crushed in a state where the majority sets the rules. This is probably the inherent evil of any democracy. Moreover, the choice given to the players is only an illusory one. It is no real choice that they make. Inam, the player number 1 and the master-brain behind this deadly game, defends his actions in deathbed saying he never forced anyone to play and the players joined out of their own volition. However, he is blind towards the economic reality of capitalism that forces these players to sign up for these games as they don't have an alternative. The stark economic disparity in the society often goes unaddressed and there is a cold insensitivity in perceiving the actions of these helpless individuals as voluntary.

The cold face of Capitalism is shown through the VIPs who are pulling the strings behind these games. These deadly games are yet another fantasy of the spoiled rich who got bored of every other possible pleasure in this world. When the poor struggle to meet the two ends of their life, the rich ones indulge in criminal extravagance. South Korea's rapid growth has been a matter of envy for many developing nations across Asia and beyond. However, the capitalist South Korean economy has its fissures as well. The series captures the widening gap between the rich and the poor in South Korea. A recent report in "*The Conversation*" shows the extent of this crisis:

Household debt in South Korea has risen sharply in recent years to over 100% of its GDP – the highest in Asia. The top 20% of earners in the country have a net worth 166

times that of the bottom 20%, a disparity which has increased by half since 2017. ("Squid Game: the real debt crisis")

The global story of economic inequality is no different. A Report shows that world's richest 1% have more than twice as much wealth as 6.9 billion people (Oxfam). The new political order sustained and financed by the wealthy few look for stability so as to keep their investments safe even though it is at the cost of human development. It is this unjust economic order with an apparent stability that forces the players to sign the consent form and join the game. It is the realization that the world outside is more dangerous and hostile they return to the games despite knowing that the stakes are high. The illusion of "choice" and "freedom" is a common ground between the modern capitalist order and Squid Game.

Horse is a major motif in this series. Gi-hun had the habit of betting on race horses which had only pushed him into further debt. The people who bet on the horses wield agency and power and the horses are used merely as pawns. The same power hierarchy is maintained in the gaming arena where the players take up the position of the horses and the VIPs who bet on these players take up the dominant power position. The peak of dehumanization associated with capitalism is illustrated through the horse motif. Reducing human beings to sub-human levels is not unprecedented as the history of humankind is replete with such evil practices as evident in various discourses be it caste, race or colonial subjugation. This exercise gives the oppressors the legitimacy to dominate the oppressed without the element of guilt. The guilt element is erased as the oppressor no longer subjugates another fellow being. Dominating another species can be justified as the "law of the nature", a non-avoidable natural reality that is part of our existence. But the question is as a "civilized race" should we resort to the law of the nature to justify this dominance?

The capitalist extravagance can well be associated with the primitive order of nature which is of domination and subjugation. The seventh episode called "VIPS" show the height of capitalist

indulgence and the barbarity of the privileged. The VIPs are surrounded by elegant rooms, intoxicants, servants at their calling, and even nude girls painted in animal motifs like snakes. The VIPs themselves have covered their faces with golden masks of various animal images suggesting that the law of the wild prevails in Squid Game and by extension, in the capitalist world order. The players in Squid Game always live under perpetual fear as a prey would in the presence of its predator. It is a metaphor for how capitalism invariably preys upon the poor and hapless ones.

The real State outside is not interested in the players who got enrolled in this death trap. The players come from vulnerable social backgrounds and are not considered as productive agents for the state's growth. They are more or less social misfits the state is trying to get rid of. Despite of all the surveillance, the state doesn't seem to be aware of the missing of a significant number of its citizens. With the exception of the police officer Hwang Jun-ho, who sneaks into the island in search of his missing brother, the state is hardly aware of the missing of these poor people. As the game ends, all the players with the exception of the first and last player die. These players who get killed by the authorities, in the words of Giorgio Agamben, would constitute "sacred life". The Italian philosopher in his seminal work, "Homo Sacer" posits:

The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life – that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed – is the life that has been captured in this sphere. (53)

The series is used as a proxy to understand the operation of power in a modern surveillance state and the relationship between the state and its subjects. Using insights from Foucault and Agamben, it is shown how modern state disciplines its subjects and reduce some as mere "sacred life". The fissures in the modern economic order and the strong nexus between capitalism and the modern political state are also explored in detail. The authorities in Squid Game boast about choice and fair play; however the important questions, as raised by Auden in the

ending lines of his poem, go unaddressed: "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard" (Auden).

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