

## Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

## The Images of Urban Poverty in Bong Joon Ho's "Parasite"

Bong Joon Ho'nun Parazit Filminde Kent Yoksulluğu İmgeleri

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## ABSTRACT

*The global acclaim, critical adulations, top prizes, and the box-office success amassed by South Korean film-maker Bong Joon Ho with his movie "Parasite" (2019) secured him a place in the film industry as the maker of a masterpiece. The movie's success comes as much from its intricately conceived multi-layered story which transforms into a rapidly moving thriller towards the end as its stunning images of urban poverty and urban privilege. But the most conspicuous fact about Bong Joon Ho's film is that it provides a thoroughly skeptical take on the South Korean economic miracle which has made South Korea the tenth biggest economy in the world and an intimidating competitor in global business and commerce. It is a well-known fact that South Korea is based on a market economy which allows individuals and businesses to freely conduct economic activities. Achieving rapid growth in a short period through guaranteeing profit, the country has enjoyed global success in various fields of commerce including high technology. While some political scientists consider the South Korean miracle as the result of the smart macroeconomic decisions applied by the authoritarian administration which has governed the country since early 1960s, the film shows the tragic consequences of such policies. Bong Joon Ho says that "Korea, on the surface, seems like a very rich and glamorous country now, with K-pop, high-speed internet and IT technology, but the relative wealth between rich and poor is widening. The younger generation, in particular, feels a lot of despair." Juxtaposing the life experience of the poor Kim family and business tycoon, Park family, Bong Joon Ho's movie shows how the neo-liberal cities are the exclusionary centers of the stark differences in living conditions. Approaching the South Korean economic miracle with skepticism, the movie renders the dark realities lurking behind the glamorous facade. The constitution of South Korea stipulates that "the right of property of all citizens shall be guaranteed." Bong Joon Ho's movie, however, belies this through its dark story of socioeconomic injustices and class conflict as the most conspicuous facts of South Korean urban life.*

**Keywords:** urban poverty, South Korean economic miracle, socioeconomic inequality, class conflict, moral decay

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## ÖZ

Güney Koreli yönetmen Bong Joon Ho'nun gösterildiği yıl Altın Palmiy'e'den Oskar'a tüm en iyi film ödülleri toplayan ve aynı zamanda hasılat rekorları kıran "Parasite" (2019) filminin hem sanatsal hem de popülerlik açısından bu derece ilgi görmesinin tek bir nedeni var, o da endüstri sonrası, neo-liberal enformasyon toplumunun sosyoekonomik eşitsizlik ve sınıf çatışmasını eşi benzeri görülmemiş çok katmanlı bir hikayenin yanı sıra son derece çarpıcı kentsel yoksulluk ve kentsel ayrıcalık imgeleriyle sinemaya yansıtması. Güney Kore'nin küresel ekonomiye eklemlenmesini sağlayan "ekonomik mucize" tüm dünyayı şaşırtan bir olguyken, siyaset bilimciler bu olguyu 1960lardan itibaren ülkeyi yöneten otoriter yönetimlerin attığı doğru makroekonomik adımlara bağlar. Bong Joon Ho'nun filmi ise, sermaye birikimi, ucuz iş gücü ve hızlı sanayileşmeyle birlikte tüketim toplumuna geçiş yapan, 2020 itibarıyla kişi başına düşen 31.500\$ milli geliriyle Asya'nın dördüncü, dünyanın onuncu büyük ekonomisi olan, gelişmişlik endekslerinde birinci ligdeki ülkeler arasında giren Güney Kore'nin baş döndüren ekonomik başarısına toplumsal adalet ve gelir dağılımı eşitliği açısından şüpheyle yaklaşmakta. Güney Kore mucizesini alaycı ve trajikomik bir stratejiyle ele alan film, gelişmişliğin simgesi kentsel hayatın gelir dağılımından eşit pay alamayan yoksul kesimler açısından bir cehennem, fakat mucize ekonomisinin baş aktörleri olan girişimci teknokratların başını çektiği kent soylu zenginler açısından bir ayrıcalık alanı olduğunu çarpıcı bir sınıfsal gerilim ve çatışma hikayesiyle gözler önüne serer. Filmin çarpıcılığı büyük ölçüde yansıttığı trajik durumdan, yani kent yoksulluğunu bire bir yaşayan kesimin girişimci teknokrat burjuvanın kentsel ayrıcalıklarını fetiş haline getirmesi ve bunlara ulaşmak için giderek insani ve ahlaki değerlerinden ödün vermek zorunda kalmasını ortaya koymasından kaynaklanır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** kent yoksulluğu, Güney Kore ekonomik mucizesi, gelir dağılımı eşitsizliği, sınıf çatışması, ahlaki çöküş

Bong Joon Ho's Oscar-winning movie, "Parasite" uses urbanscapes to show the socioeconomic injustices and wealth gap between rich and poor in the South Korean society. The movie's images of the South Korean urban landscape reflect a divided reality where the poor inhabit the bug-infested, dingy semi-basement apartments and the South Korean rich inhabit beautifully designed, technologically supported, and secluded spaces. "Parasite" shows that exclusionary urbanspaces inhabited

by the wealthy elite are inaccessible by the poor who can only have access to comfort, luxury, and seclusion by becoming household aides to the wealthy. The fact that such discrepant realities exist side by side indicates that the South Korean economic success considered 'miraculous' by many is undercut by the socioeconomic injustices. In "Parasite," the wealthy avoid the dingy neighborhoods inhabited by the poor and the poor endanger their moral values to have access to the urban districts alloca-

ted to the South Korean business tycoons, captains of industry, and the technocratic elite. Foregrounding the collision between the opposite poles of the urban experience, Bong Joon-Ho creates a dreary picture of the degrading and dehumanizing effects of the socioeconomic gap on both the rich and the poor.

“Parasite” starts with the scenes from the Kim family’s daily life in a semi-basement apartment located in a seedy, decrepit neighborhood of Seoul. The apartment lacks the basic infrastructure facilities required in a livable environment. It has no ventilation; the sewerage is clogged; it hardly gets sunlight; it is infested by bugs; the smell of damp laden forever sticks to the inhabitants’ clothes. But the worst of all, it becomes a death-trap during heavy rainstorms. In South Korea, the term used for these semi-basement apartments inhabited by the low-income people is ‘banjiha.’ Colm Quinn (2022) points out that “Roughly 5 percent of households in Seoul are believed to live in banjiha properties across the city” (para. 4). The deadly floods of August 2022, which came after the heaviest rains in 80 years in Seoul, have brought banjihās to focus.

The recent flood has brought disaster to the inhabitants of semi-basement banjihās in Seoul. The news articles that relate the news about the August 2022-flood in Seoul are relevant in a discussion of the film’s take on urban poverty. In fact, the flooding reports imply the film’s foreshadowing the disaster which brings urban destitution and housing crisis under focus. BBC reporter, Melissa Zhu (2022) writes that the flood has been deadly: “As of Wednesday, at least 11 people were confirmed dead or missing as a result of the floods, which have gone on for three days”. The fact that some of the flood victims lived in the semi-basement banjihās exposes the glamour of the South Korean mo-

dern urbanscape. As he reports the flood, Colm Quinn (2022) refers to Bong Joon Ho’s movie: “That four of those killed in the flooding lived in banjiha--semi-basement dwellings--the kind popularized in the Oscar-winning movie Parasite, which featured a catastrophic flood scene” Quinn states that the movie “has thrown a spotlight on the country’s housing crisis” (Quinn, 2022, para. 7). While the CNN report about the deadly flood in Seoul calls attention to the drastic housing crisis, it implies that the existing urban poverty raises skeptical responses about ‘the South Korean economic miracle’: “Seoul has vowed to move some of the city’s poorest families out of underground and semi-subterranean homes after 13 people were killed in flooding caused by record rainfall this week, sparking public horror and calls for government accountability” (Yeung & Bae, 2022). The fact that banjihās become a deathtrap during the flood shows the doom faced by the South Korean low-income social groups. The news article further points out that the deaths in flooded banjihās have brought social and economic injustices to focus: “The deaths, which included a family who drowned after becoming trapped underground, have spurred the South Korean capital to put an end to people living in “banjiha” homes--the often cramped and dingy basement apartments made famous by the movie “Parasite” (Yeung & Bae, 2022). As the news articles indicate, the flooding semi-basement apartments are the tragic emblems of urban poverty in South Korea, a country proud of its economic success in the neoliberal economic climate of 2000s.

The leading economists agree that the neoliberal economic policies have made South Korea the tenth biggest economy in the world and an intimidating competitor in global business. Political scientists point out that the South Korean “economic miracle” is the result of the macroeconomic

decisions made by the administrations that have governed the country since the World War II. When the South Korean government undertook the task of nation building in 1948, they defined three conditions: “(1) poverty reduction, (2) social security and (3) national defense capacity” (Chun, 2018, p.34). Seung-hun Chun points out that industrialization had been seen as an effective means to deal with these conditions. In the decades that follow, industrial growth has become the precedence and provided “the significant increase in the nation’s output and income” (Chun, 2018, p. 23). Giving precedence to industrialization as well as applying the rules of market economy and allowing individuals and businesses to freely conduct economic activities, South Korea has achieved unprecedented economic growth in the second half of the twentieth century.

Writing in the early nineties, Robert Lucas called South Korean economic success as “The Miracle on the Han River” (as cited in Chun, 2018, p. 23). Lucas pointed out the signs of the sustainment of the miraculous economic and social transformation in South Korea:

I do not think it is in any way an exaggeration to refer to this continuing transformation of the Korean society as a miracle... Never before have the lives of so many people undergone so rapid an improvement over so long a period, is there any sign that this progress is near its end (as cited in Chun, 2018, p. 23).

According to Judith A. Teichman (2012), the improvement of the lives of the Korean people is primarily related with “early land reform and labor-intensive and export-oriented industrialization” (p.17). Referring to the country’s “policy of employment generating industrial strategy”, she compares South Korea with Latin American countries and states that South Korea has been able to avoid severe unemployment

and poverty which are “common in Latin America” (p.17). Calling attention to the South Korean efforts for reducing unemployment, Teichman presages a sustained economic growth.

In the second decade of the new millennium, indeed, the South Korean economic miracle persists. In 2020, the income per capita was calculated as 31.450 dollars a year. The country has been enjoying global success in various fields of commerce including high technology since the nineties. Yet, the recent research shows that this glamorous facade hardly covers the harsh reality of urban poverty. Seong-Kyu Ha (2004) points out that since the country began to receive money loans from International Monetary Fund in the late nineties, economic inequality has risen, which primarily has shown itself in “the increasing polarization in the housing conditions of the better off and of those of the worse off” (p. 139). Ha continues that “the impact on the economy of the ensuing crisis was severe, with the urban poor suffering more than any other group” (Ha, 2004, p. 140). The film’s director Bong Joon Ho is also skeptical about ‘the South Korean economic miracle.’ In an interview with Steve Rose, Joon Ho states that “Korea, on the surface, seems like a very rich and glamorous country now, with K-pop, high-speed internet and IT technology, but the relative wealth between rich and poor is widening. The younger generation, in particular, feels a lot of despair” (Rose, 2020, para. 3). Approaching ‘the South Korean economic miracle’ with skepticism, “Parasite” renders the dark realities behind this glamorous facade. The film penetrates into the reality of urban poverty which “is not simply low or inadequate income but refers also to a lack of physical necessities and other assets” (Ha, 2004, p. 140).

The most remarkable indication of urban poverty in South Korea is the inequality in living conditions. In “Parasite”, Joon Ho presents the urban space as the neoliberal city divided between the gated and isolated residences inhabited by the wealthy elite and the dingy neighborhoods inhabited by the poor. The gloomy content of “Parasite” involves the captivating scenes in which the poor aspires to be a part of the isolated, secluded, luxurious urban spaces inhabited by the wealthy. The gap between the urban experiences of the Kim family and the Park family, who represents the wealthy elite of South Korea, creates a gloomy picture of social and economic inequality. While the Park family residence appears to have all the comfort and luxury that money can buy with its ultra-modern design, technological facilities, lush green yard, expensive designer furniture, and more importantly, seclusion and peace, the semi-basement *banjiha* where the Kims live lacks even the basic facilities. While the Park property epitomizes the exclusive privileges of the rich minority, the Kims’ rundown semi-basement apartment represents the conditions of the destitute who struggles to survive in the neoliberal city.

Commenting on the housing inequality in South Korea, Jeong Ho-Lee points out the contrast between the slum areas and wealthy districts of Seoul with specific examples. In the divided urban space of neoliberal Seoul, while the slum area known as Guryong exists side by side with wealthy Gangnam, its inhabitants are totally excluded from Gangnam where property prices soar:

The fight over Guryong village has become a symbol for the wealth gap in South Korea. Gangnam, where the average apartment sells for about 2 billion won (\$1.8 million), is synonymous with the conspicuous wealth satirized by Psy’s viral “Gangnam Style” video in 2012. Guryong, howev-

er, captures those left out of the boom, including the country’s oldest residents: More than four out of 10 Koreans older than 65 live in poverty, a developed-world high. (Ho-Lee, 2022)

The inequality between the poor living conditions of Guryong village populated by the low-income residents and the posh Gangnam district shows the extent of social inequality in South Korea. Jeong Ho-Lee concludes that despite its economic success and rapid urbanization, South Korea is faced with urban poverty. Bong Joon Ho’s “Parasite” can be seen as an effective commentary on destitution in the South Korean urban environment which is ironically regarded as the emblem of the economic success. The film thus views the South Korean economic miracle through a darkly satirical lens. Mostly taking place in the Parks’ luxurious residence, it shows the secluded isolation of the wealthy minority of Seoul from the reality of the destitute. Joon Ho works his satire through the scenes of consumption culture which the wealthy enjoy but the poor are only spectators. The images of a life of wealth and comfort such as Mrs. Park’s shopping sprees and the glitzy birthday party she throws for her son stand in stark contrast to the inhuman conditions the Kim family experiences. While the wealthy minority can never get enough of glamour and luxury, the poor face deadly flooding in the dreary semi-basement apartments.

“Parasite” represents the Kim family’s epic struggle to overcome their urban poverty and their longing for a better life. Neither the father, Ki-taek nor the mother, Chung-sook has employment or any form of social security. They try to survive by odd-jobs like folding hundreds of pizza boxes. The film presents humorous scenes in which the family uses their cunning and inventiveness in order to meet some basic needs. The scenes in which the kids poach on a neighbor’s Wifi or when a cloud of

fumigation comes from outside, Ki-taek insists on keeping the windows open in order to take advantage of the free pesticide, exemplify the inventive solutions. Such scenes reinforce Joon Ho's satirical approach to so-called economic miracle. Although they choke briefly, the Kim family sorts out the pest invasion. Ki-woo, who is the protagonist of the film, has college aspirations, but lacks financial means to pursue them. One of the most severe consequences of economic exclusion is the fact that it causes lack of education. Economically and socially excluded people are usually less educated and this causes more social problems. "Parasite" shows how the poor deal with such disadvantage by putting emphasis on the individual effort.

The Kim children represent successful examples of self-education. They educate themselves in a way that they can become private tutors in the rich households. Thus, when Ki-woo shows up at the Park villa, it is as if he crosses the threshold into another world of cultivated pleasures and polished surfaces. The posh residence of Parks makes him more deeply aware of his own family's deprivation. The Parks can afford private tutors, drivers, and housekeepers. In the film, the fact that the poor can only have access to the elite households through selling their labour is centralized. The poor thus become domestic workers, nannies, tutors and private chauffeurs. They drive the rich to shopping malls and high-end restaurants and try to bridge the gap by following the dress codes imposed by their employer. The film presents the conflict by juxtaposing scenes in which the smug Mr Park is depicted as ascending the stairs of his ultra-modern home while the Kims have to run down the hill to reach their house during the flood. The scene is shot in a way as if the Kim family descends to the underworld.

Ki-woo aka "Kevin" becomes a part of the staff of the Park villa as the tutor of the Parks' daughter. Using her photoshop skills, his sister, Da-Song aka Jessica creates a fake diploma for him so that the Parks do not suspect his teaching credentials. The film further reveals that the poor has no other way to have access to the privileges of the wealthy except through moral compromise and dishonesty. Soon Ki-woo realizes that his own family could easily fill similar roles and through careful scheming introduces his sister as an art therapist for the family's little son. The Kim family may live in sewage-flooded squalor, but they are every bit as smart as the Parks. One by one they fill the open positions in the Park household using a variety of schemes. They fake identities and execute a well-rehearsed plan at the end of which the driver and devoted housekeeper are eliminated. The mother Chung Sook replaces the devoted housekeeper, Moon-gwang, who is left behind by the former architect owner of the villa. The father, Ki-taek becomes the new chauffeur. As the Kim family plays their part as submissive and good-natured servants, the film develops its theme of master-servant relationship working tension and dread. The scene where Mr. Park reminds Ki-taek not to go over the line and maintain the formal employer-employee relationship exemplifies the arrogance of the employer and the silent resentment of the employee. Later, Park tells his wife how Ki-taek smells bad and equates the smell to the "repulsive" atmosphere of the subway. The film thus implies that the mere presence of the poor is repulsive for the rich and as such works its tension.

The dramatic tension reaches its peak with the scene the Parks leave for a camping trip. The Kims thus have the opportunity to enjoy the privileges of the luxurious house. They bring out the booze, food, and take over the house. The scenes in which the Kims enjoy the family party in

the Parks' house show how the trappings of bourgeoisie seduce the poor. Yet, this brief break from poverty proves to be costly. The dark satire appears as the party is cut short when the former housekeeper returns, bringing a surprise with her. The turning point of the movie appears in the form of a secret in the basement which threatens to expose the Kims as impostors. It turns out that the Kims are not the only 'parasites' in the household. The former housekeeper, Moon-gwang has been hiding her husband in the basement-bunker for years outside the knowledge of Parks. A maze of events is unleashed which brings the class conflict and social inequality to the fore.

The exposition of the former housekeeper's scam implies a repetitive process in which the 'parasitic' status of the Kim family duplicates. In its depictions of urban poverty, the film sarcastically inverts the class struggle and renders it as an animosity between the poor. In other words, the film takes a sarcastic turn as the class conflict transforms into a violent animosity between the poor who begin to struggle for keeping the 'parasite' status. The former housekeeper and her husband are also parasites living off the Park household. In order to maintain the comforts of this parasitic life, both sides engage in a life and death struggle. The former housekeeper and her husband and the Kims thus begin fighting over the privileges they have in the Park household and the sterile, secluded, and peaceful villa ironically becomes the setting of bloody violence. Dehumanizing aspects of urban poverty are depicted in the scenes in which the former and present household employees allow animosity even to the extent of killing each other. The moral decay of the poor thus emerges as an inevitable consequence of poverty. The scenes that show the struggle of the poor against the poor imply Joon Ho's gloomy perspective with regard to

the South Korean social and economic inequality. The struggle ends with violence which affects all sides. The film's ending is like the eruption of tension experienced by the poor who have to make so many moral compromises in their struggle for survival. The exploding violence during the birthday party of the Parks' little son is, therefore, the result of such tension. The violent scene in which the two of his employees are left bleeding to death and yet Mr. Park, who tries to take his fainted son to the hospital, is totally indifferent represents the peak of the disastrous consequences of the animosity nurtured by urban poverty. Ki-taek who loses control over the loss of his daughter attacks and stabs Mr. Park to death. His murderous act can be seen as an exploitative reaction against the socio-economic inequality. Mr. Park, on the other hand, becomes the victim of the exploitative relations that rip the society apart.

In consequence, Bong Joon Ho's "Parasite" emerges as a masterpiece which exposes the dark realities of the globalized, neoliberal metropolitan space. The urban planning tends to focus on creating world-class infrastructure and spaces exclusive for the rich elite. Yet, this leads to urban spaces which are marred with economic and social inequalities. The film thus shows how the modern urban spaces are divided by the disparity between the poor and the rich who isolate themselves behind the secured gates. Focusing on such disparity between the destitute and the wealthy, Bong Joon-Ho implies that neoliberal urban space does not present much hope for the former. The father, Ki-Taek wants social upliftment for his family, yet what he ends up in is the life sentence in the basement-bunker of the Park residence. In its closing, "Parasite" puts forward a remarkable picture of the wreckage caused by urban poverty.

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