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VIOLENCE, CAPITAL, AND THE UNCONSCIOUS: ARCHETYPAL NARRATIVES OF INDIVIDUATION IN THE NETFLIX SERIES SQUID GAME

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the South Korean series Squid Game through Fredric Jameson's postmodern theory, C. G. Jung's archetypal psychology and key principles from behavioural economics. The study argues that the series functions as both a cultural allegory of late capitalism and a psychological exploration of shadow projection, individuation, and childhood symbolism. Integrating theoretical frameworks with narrative analysis, the article demonstrates that Squid Game reflects the psychic fragmentation, moral paradoxes and economic desperation characteristic of contemporary society. The findings show that the series not only critiques capitalist structures but also dramatizes the internal conflicts and archetypal energies at work within the human psyche. The findings of the study can be useful to women entrepreneurs in creating a work environment which empowers weaker women to grow sustainably.*

KEYWORDS: *Squid Game; Archetypal Psychology; Shadow Archetype; Child Archetype; Individuation; Behavioural Economics; Psychic Fragmentation; Economic Desperation*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global popularity of *Squid Game* signifies more than an attraction to violence or spectacle. The series speaks to contemporary anxieties about debt, economic inequality, moral ambiguity and the psychological consequences of living under late capitalism. These themes align closely with Fredric Jameson's concept of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, a period marked by fragmentation, nostalgia, loss of affect and the dominance of mass culture. Simultaneously, the series' symbolic landscape—childhood games, colour-coded hierarchies, masks, abandonment and sacrifice—invokes fundamental archetypal patterns described by C. G. Jung, particularly the shadow and child archetypes. The behaviour of the players also corresponds with irrational economic patterns identified in behavioural economics. This study situates *Squid Game* at the intersection of these discourses and aims to provide a holistic interpretive framework that reveals how psychological, cultural and economic forces converge within the narrative.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Much existing scholarship on *Squid Game* emphasizes its socio-economic critique without examining the deeper psychological and archetypal structures embedded within its narrative. Similarly, while several studies discuss postmodern aesthetics or behavioural economic motives in isolation, few combine these frameworks. The problem addressed in this article is the absence of a comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis that unifies postmodern theory, archetypal psychology and behavioural economics to explain the cultural and psychological significance of *Squid Game*.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Jameson identifies postmodernism as a period in which distinctions between high and low culture collapse and mass culture dominates the formation of identity. He argues that the loss of historicity, the waning of affect and the prevalence of pastiche are symptoms of late capitalism. Jung's theories emphasize universal psychic structures that manifest in symbolic narratives, especially during crisis, transformation or identity fragmentation. The child and shadow archetypes are among the most prominent motifs that emerge in narratives dealing with trauma, moral conflict or rebirth. Behavioural economics contributes to understanding human irrationality under conditions of scarcity, competition or uncertainty. Concepts such as loss aversion, rational herding, reciprocity and the Dunning–Kruger effect illuminate the cognitive distortions evident in the behaviour of *Squid Game* contestants. While scholars have explored the series' commentary on inequality and violence, very few have connected these theoretical strands. The present study fills this gap.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to examine how *Squid Game* embodies postmodern aesthetics, archetypal psychological patterns and behavioural economic tendencies. It seeks to interpret the series as both a cultural critique of late capitalism and a psychological exploration of shadow integration and individuation. Additionally, the study explores how symbolic childhood motifs in the series reflect deeper anxieties about vulnerability, abandonment and transformation.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research is qualitative and interpretative. The study employs close textual analysis of the series alongside relevant theoretical frameworks. The primary data consists of narrative elements, character trajectories, dialogues and visual motifs from *Squid Game*. Secondary data includes scholarly works on postmodernism, Jungian psychology and behavioural economics. The analysis proceeds through thematic interpretation rather than statistical measurement.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson offers a critique of modernism and postmodernism from a Marxist perspective. According to Jameson, postmodernism is a forced but highly permeating field where cultures are formed through mass media or “mass culture” (Jameson 6). This so-called mass culture indirectly forces us to shape our ideologies and brings us under the influence of media culture—a process that Jameson calls hegemony. It is a form of hegemony in the postmodern globe, where media and capitalism play the most notable role in colonising people’s thoughts and ways of life (Jameson 8). In his work, Jameson argues that postmodernism is the age of the end of traditional doctrines. The end of conventional principles can be seen through a new wave of aesthetic productions. Through his seminal work, Jameson attempts to signalize the nature of cultural exhibitions in the second half of the 20th century, the era of late capitalism, and to make them stand out from other forms of art exhibition in the preceding capitalist epoch.

Tripartite division correlations in culture for Jameson include the first period dominated by market capitalism and its aesthetic corollary, realism; the second was a period of monopoly and imperialist capitalism that gave rise to modernism; and the third period, the current one of late capitalism, was consistent with the postmodernist aesthetic (Jameson 3–4). Jameson sets apart the postmodern mode of production as a cultural “dominant” in the wake of concepts like depthlessness, waning of affect, and pastiche, which, according to him, relate to the postmodern form of production and experience (Jameson 10). According to Jameson, postmodernism is, therefore, a cultural form that has developed in the wake of the socio-economic order of present-day capitalism. Another significant difference between high modernism and postmodernism is what he calls the “waning of affect.” When we look at modern things like human figures, we often find a human expression that reflects an inner experience, such as in Edward Munch’s *The Scream*, which epitomizes modern alienation and anxiety. In contrast, Jameson holds that in the postmodern era, feelings are waning (Jameson 11).

Postmodernism rejects traditional modes of depth, such as the Freudian model of conscious and unconscious or the existential model of authentic and inauthentic. The idea of a subject as a monad of individualism is a 19th- and early twentieth-century capitalist-bourgeois notion. Jameson notes how critics of alienation and anxiety gave way to the subject’s fragmentation or death (Jameson 15). Jameson further describes the waning of affect through the process by which the subject has lost his active ability to create a sense of continuity between the past and the future and to organise his temporal existence into one coherent experience. This reduces his cultural production abilities to random and eclectic “piles of fragments.”

Pastiche is another main characteristic of postmodernism for Fredric Jameson. Pastiche, like parody, is an imitation of some unique style, but it is an empty, neutral practice that lacks the intention of parody (Jameson 17). The postmodern artist is reduced to pastiche because he cannot create new artistic forms; he can only copy old ones without creating new meaning. The existence of an autonomous subject has been an essential part of art and cultural production in modern times. Still, with the waning of affect, the artist’s unique individuality has been reduced to a neutral, objectifying form of communication. With the fragmentation of subjectivity, it is still being determined what postmodernist critics and authors should do besides appeal to the past by imitating dead styles—an empty parody. Pastiche leads to what is referred to in architectural history as “historicism,” or, according to Jameson, random cannibalism (Jameson 19). Pastiche is now apparent in all spheres of cultural production but reaches its epitome in global American-centered television and Hollywood culture. The past is described as a glimmering mirage. When the past is represented through pastiche, the result is a “loss of historicalness,” which Jameson calls “Pop history,” a history founded on the pop images produced by commercial culture (Jameson 20). One of the manifestations of this pastiche pop history is nostalgic or retro films and books, which present the appearance of historical accounts.

Jameson furthers how boundaries between high and low culture have been transgressed, with popular culture integrating with forms of high culture to produce one big, varied consumer culture. He also argues that postmodernism is not only culturally dominant but has become a premium consumer product, with aesthetic production integrated into the general production of consumer goods (Jameson 31). Jameson further says that the aesthetic field with the most substantial ties with the economic system is architecture, which has strong links with real estate and gives rise to a tide of postmodern architecture epitomized in the grandeur of shopping malls. He analyses the postmodern features of Los Angeles's Westin Bonaventure Hotel, which he calls a full-bloom postmodern building (Jameson 38). Like other postmodern buildings, this one does not blend into its surroundings but attempts to be a total space or a whole world, introducing a new form of collective behaviour. He sees the entire space of the Bonaventure Hotel as an allegory of the new hyperspace of the global market dominated by corporations of late capitalism (Jameson 40). In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson often laments the shortcomings of postmodern culture and has a sense of inevitability. He proposes to treat postmodernism in line with Marxist thought by accepting something without surrendering judgement and allowing ourselves to grasp this new historical form.

The plot of *Squid Game* strongly resembles Fredric Jameson's theory on the postmodernist development of society, touching upon issues like personal identity, individualism, and coherence in a manner that points towards schizophrenia—the same element Jameson employs. In assessing the contemporary relation with time, the individual has lost the sense of temporal continuity, becoming debilitated by his own linguistic mechanisms in stepping beyond a fragmented present. Accurately portraying Jameson's theory, the protagonists are trapped inside a nostalgic representation of a long-gone past, unable to design a coherent presentation of the present or the future (Jameson 16). The characters are isolated and disconnected, and the postmodern is indissolubly tied to the present—a present with fractures in temporality shaped by capitalist rules and mass production; the consumer society holds the set of rules for adapting to the present moment, which is, in fact, a continuous change. The rupture between the internal and external realities of *Squid Game* is augmented by the subtle mind games played upon the players, distorting their principles and dissolving empathy.

Many inspections have been directed based on the survival game series *Squid Game* from various standpoints. Many have conducted investigations on scenes showing brutal massacres and injustice, and stereotypes that analyse the postmodern aspect of the series as a horror series that deals with the concept of capitalism in South Korea. Even after winning the enormous profit, Player 456 could not indulge in money for over a year. He is still horrified and traumatized by how the game and the situation it created gave rise to dark realities in human nature, and the psyche's fantasies about what he would do with the money come vivid and clear at the outset: he could get his daughter back, pay for his mother's operation, etc. After getting the money, he continues living like the man he was in the past until he is shaken out of his indifference. His hope in humanity was rekindled. The viewers could find some obvious reasons why he came to a frozen state; nevertheless, the idea that there may be psychodynamics to social mobility is worth further discussion and consideration.

From a psychological perspective, the survival game show provides a safe space to fantasize about what we would do with the money. Moreover, we would win the game without getting our hands dirty and suffering the ethical and moral consequences. In other words, it is an invitation to indulge in what Andrew Samuels calls "Economic Sadism" (Samuels 112). He says that most people have pretty nasty fantasies of getting rid of rivals, attaining superiority, and eliminating awkward otherness whenever they are encountered. What Samuels is getting at here in Jungian terms owns the shadow. Jung writes:

"When one tries to be excellent and outstanding, and perfect, all the more the shadow develops a definite will of its own and becomes autonomous... They cannot see that in striving to be marvellous, admirable, or superior, they simultaneously constellate within themselves destructive opposites—impulses and fantasies they do not understand" (Jung, Structure and Dynamics 569).

In other words, the economic sadism and violence we capture in *Squid Game* could be dupable. The series reveals the collective struggle of a group of individuals who are driven into dire economic conditions and painful psychological circumstances. A Jungian perspective allows us to view the game as part of an individual's quest through the shifting planes of experience and time. Jungians present the idea that "the move towards the future is always accompanied by a sacrifice and a death" (Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* 231). Psychological growth requires the destruction of an old stage of being for a new one to emerge, a process Jung calls individuation. The protagonist in *Squid Game* repeatedly undergoes these symbolic deaths as he loses friends, faith, and identity, mirroring what Jung identifies as the dissolution of the old ego structure before the new psyche can emerge.

Players in *Squid Game* negotiate their mental faculties through survival and desperation. When human beings are the only hope for survival in times of trouble, people exhibit their most primal traits. The series demonstrates that when pushed to the edge, the psyche reveals its shadow, which resonates deeply with Jung's view that the shadow "contains those qualities the ego has ignored or suppressed" (Jung, *Structure and Dynamics* 568). This part of the unconscious becomes violently active in the players' fight for survival.

As mentioned in Reicher's work, de-individuation also plays an important role in the game. Guards, workers, and soldiers are concealed through masks and uniforms which symbolise their fading identity. De-individuation occurs primarily among players whose unified individual identity vanishes in interaction with one another, diminishing responsibility or accountability while increasing obedience to authority (Reicher 47). This aligns with the psychological reality portrayed in the games, where anonymity leads to violence without guilt and hierarchy fosters blind compliance.

The identities of the characters also undergo significant upheaval. In the series, individual identities are tested, dissolved, or reforged through high-stake life-and-death realities. The task of identity formation is vital in Jungian discourse, where identity stands as a combination of personal attributes and an expressed self-image. The dissociation between the "I" and the "self" in *Squid Game* occurs through the constant threat of death and temptation of wealth. Jameson notes that late capitalism creates fragmented subjects incapable of coherent selfhood, resulting in a postmodern "schizophrenic" sense of time and identity (Jameson 27). The series captures this fragmentation: Gi-hun's inability to envision a stable future, Sang-woo's ethical collapse, and Sae-byeok's dissolution of familial identity all point to the decentered self -Jameson describes.

Behavioural economics also provides clarity in understanding the players' actions, especially loss aversion. Kahneman argues that individuals experience the pain of loss twice as strongly as pleasure from gains (Kahneman 281). This becomes evident when the players vote to return to the game despite its fatal nature; the psychological burden of debt and poverty is so severe that risking death seems more tolerable than facing continued financial misery. Reciprocity bias emerges when alliances are formed and broken, showing that emotional indebtedness often guides actions more than rational choice. Gi-hun's repeated attempts to help others despite strategic disadvantages reflect this bias, aligning with Kahneman's theory that human decisions are often based on emotion rather than calculation (Kahneman 97).

The players reveal the primal nature of human survival as they navigate the boundaries between past, present, and future. The struggle to survive the game creates a confusing state of identity in the characters. They are repeatedly confronted with moments where they must choose between moral codes and survival instincts. These liminal states become the psychological breaking points that reveal their deeper unconscious patterns. Jung writes that individuation requires confronting both the shadow and the self simultaneously, and that this confrontation "tests the strength of the ego against the unconscious" (Jung, *Archetypes* 239). The characters undergo this test in multiple forms: betrayal, loyalty, sacrifice, and moral collapse.

The survival instincts exhibited in the characters reveal what depth psychologists refer to as the drive for psychic wholeness. Central to this is the instinct for locating the self. Jung states that locating the self allows one to grow and develop one's personality and external behaviours. Under this framework, the players move beyond the boundaries of the psyche and try to survive the uncanny realities of the game. The liminal zones that the players undergo are deeply significant in the misconception of the temporal order of their lives. The characters' movements across boundaries are not simply physical but psychological and symbolic, representing transitions between states of consciousness. These transitions reflect Jameson's assertion that in postmodernity, time collapses into a perpetual present dominated by capitalist logic (Jameson 11). The characters thus exist inside an artificial temporality, one constructed by the game-makers and governed by the laws of late capitalism.

The psychology of trauma is another key element in this context. Psychological trauma is a long-lasting, complex, and deeply personal experience that distorts a person's behaviour, emotions, and cognitive processes. Players who enter the game are likely to have endured trauma from both past and present. They carry the burdens and guilt of their familial and economic failures, as well as the inner psychological impact that distorts their thoughts and behaviours. The difficulty the protagonist faces in coming back to the world and to his daughter indicates the narrative's core theme: an individual's struggle in coping with trauma. Gi-hun's inability to use his prize money signifies a significant disturbance in his identity formation. This conclusion is highly significant because everything we have in life is placed before our vision. Thus, trauma limits our ability to make decisions and categorisations and hinders identity formation.

The symbolic elements within the series reveal the depth of psychological conditions. The most important symbolic reflection is the players' colour choice—the green tracksuit worn by the players, symbolising innocence and vulnerability, and the pink uniforms of the guards, symbolising authority, control, and de-individualised violence. These symbolic images depict the disturbance of the psyche in its quest toward its own transformation. The game uses several metaphors allegedly associated with children. While these experiences are considered fun or joyful for children, they are expressed in the game as derivative of trauma and violence. Through colour symbolism, the Korean series brings the audience into a symbolic paradigm to understand the depth of human experiences that offer insights into survival, struggle, and the will to endure fear.

7. FINDINGS

The study finds that *Squid Game* is a rich intersection of postmodern cultural critique, archetypal psychological patterns and behavioural economic tendencies. The series embodies Jameson's postmodern fragmentation, Jung's shadow and child archetypes and the cognitive distortions common to individuals under economic pressure. The narrative demonstrates how capitalist systems exacerbate psychological wounds, intensify shadow dynamics and manipulate human decision-making.

8. LIMITATIONS

The study is limited to qualitative interpretation and focuses primarily on Season 1. Psychoanalytic readings are inherently subjective, and cultural interpretations may vary. No empirical audience research was conducted.

9. FURTHER SCOPE

Future research may examine audience responses, trauma theory, colour symbolism, comparative analysis with similar survival narratives, feminist or postcolonial interpretations, and neuropsychological studies of viewer engagement.

10. CONCLUSION

Squid Game is a complex cultural text that reveals the psychological, economic and symbolic operations of late-capitalist society. Through its vivid imagery, moral dilemmas and symbolic evocations of childhood and shadow, the series dramatizes the fractured condition of the contemporary subject. The integration of postmodern theory, archetypal psychology and behavioural economics reveals a narrative that is both socially critical and psychologically profound.

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12. QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is intended to collect responses from viewers regarding their psychological and thematic interpretation of *Squid Game*.

1. According to the article, Jameson's theory of postmodernism helps interpret *Squid Game* primarily as:

- A. A celebration of Korean traditional ethics
- B. A cultural product shaped by late capitalist commodification
- C. A psychological case study of trauma
- D. A moral allegory unrelated to economics

2. The article argues that the "games" in *Squid Game* function symbolically as:

- A. Neutral childhood activities
- B. Archetypal trials representing stages of individuation
- C. Historical reenactments of Korean folklore
- D. Pure entertainment without thematic depth

3. The use of Jung's "Shadow" archetype in the article highlights:

- A. The characters' mastery of social etiquette
- B. The suppressed and destructive impulses revealed under pressure
- C. The triumph of rationality over instinct
- D. The absence of any psychological conflict in the series

4. Behavioural economics is used in the article to explain:

- A. The cultural history of Korean games
- B. The contestants' decision-making under scarcity and risk
- C. The production budget and marketing strategies
- D. The show's influence on global video game culture

5. The article interprets the contestants' participation in fatal games as:

- A. A voluntary celebration of personal freedom
- B. A critique of how late capitalism normalises exploitation
- C. A rejection of modern technology
- D. A symbol of spiritual purification

6. The Front Man is presented in the article as:

- A. A Romantic hero
- B. An embodiment of collectivist ethics
- C. A figure representing institutionalised authority and surveillance
- D. A passive observer of the games

7. The series' bright colours and child-like setting are analysed as:

- A. Purely aesthetic distractions
- B. Techniques to obscure violence
- C. Postmodern strategies that mix innocence with brutality
- D. Attempts to recreate Korean school playgrounds realistically

8. The article's discussion of violence suggests that:

- A. It is random and meaningless
- B. It is ritualistic and symbolic, exposing psychological conflict
- C. It is portrayed as comical and harmless
- D. It is unrelated to capitalist pressures

9. Jung's concept of individuation in the article refers to:

- A. The fragmentation of identity in digital media
- B. A character's journey toward self-integration amid moral dilemmas
- C. The rejection of personal identity in favour of group identity
- D. A simple matter of making practical life decisions

10. The article concludes that *Squid Game* ultimately reveals:

- A. The triumph of childhood innocence
- B. The impossibility of moral growth
- C. The deep interconnection between psychology, capitalism, and survival
- D. A purely national critique with no global relevance