

# *Parasite*: An Interpretation of the Portrayal of Characters in Korean Realistic Films

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## Abstract

Realistic films are not uncommon in the development history of Korean films, and even some of them are rampant, but *Parasite* shows that in real life, the success of this film cannot be separated from the actor's interpretation of the characters in the film and the director's grasp of the character shaping. Multi-dimensional depiction and interpretation of the film's character image was shaped fuller of three-dimensional sense. Although the film focuses on the social life of different classes in Korea, it surpasses the apparent pessimism caused by the difference between the rich and the poor, and skillfully uses violence aesthetics to present the fate tragedy of characters of different classes.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of character image shaping and design, this paper will interpret the characters with different endings and their fates in the movie *Parasite* by taking the three families of President Park, Kim Ki-taek and former housekeeper Moon Kwang as examples.

**Keywords:** realistic film, character image building, realism, destiny tragedy

## 1. Introduction

At the 92nd Academy Awards, *Parasite*, directed by South Korean director Bong Joon-ho, won awards for Best Picture and Best Director, marking a historic moment. The South Korean film *Parasite* shook the dominance of American Hollywood films in the Best Picture category at the Oscars, becoming the first non-English speaking country to win the Best Picture Oscar. Bong Joon-ho brought realism into the typified creation of *Parasite*, while blending the aesthetics of violence into the narrative of the film, using a variety of narrative techniques to write about the tragic fate of characters from different social strata and the three-dimensional authenticity of character roles in a Korean story.

## 2. The Tragic Fate of Characters from Different Social Classes in Real Society

### 2.1 The Class Mark in Social Life

Film directors have always been keen to use the language of images and lenses to express the issue of social class differentiation in the current society, and to infiltrate their views and ideas into film creation, which is finally presented to the audience. From Bong Joon-ho's previous works, it can be seen that the social class differentiation in South Korea is very serious. He has always been concerned about the real-life state of South Koreans. When Bong Joon-ho portrays this social issue, he does not focus on the upper class, but turns the lens to the majority of small characters at the bottom of

society, focusing on showing the living environment and state of the bottom layer of South Korean characters. *Parasite* tells the tragic fate experienced by the upper-class Park family and the bottom-class Kim Ki-woo family and the former housekeeper Moon-gwang family in real society.

At the beginning of the film, it is described that Kim Ki-woo, at the bottom of society, was recommended by a friend to go to the rich Park family to be an English tutor for his daughter. Later, Ki-woo slowly planned to let each member of his family replace the original art tutor, driver, and live-in housekeeper. Until the Park family planned to go camping, Ki-woo's family reveled in the luxury villa, imagining if they were the masters, but all this ended with the former housekeeper entering the basement to find her husband and discovered Ki-woo's family hiding in the basement, and the secret of Ki-woo's family and the former housekeeper was revealed. The former housekeeper Moon-gwang hid her criminal husband in the dark basement of the Park family, providing food for her husband all year round, but lost her job as a housekeeper due to Kim Ki-woo's plan, moved out of the Park family, and the only source of income in the family was cut off, and Moon-gwang faced the problem of survival in this society again. Kim Ki-woo came to the Park family to be a tutor, saw the living environment of the upper class, and after returning home, he planned with his family to replace the art tutor, housekeeper, and driver, so that they could have more income and stand in this society. The Park family is a happy family with a happy marriage, but the bottom-class Kim Ki-woo and the former housekeeper Moon-gwang family have lost their principles for survival, kindness and innocence, concealment and deception, and the Park family and Kim Ki-woo, the former housekeeper family form a sharp contrast. From the living environment of the three families, the director metaphorically expresses three different social classes: the rich class living in a luxury villa of the Park family; the poor class living in a semi-basement of Kim Ki-woo's family; and the marginal class living in the dark basement of the former housekeeper's husband. Director Bong Joon-ho focuses on the image presentation and metaphorical expression of the lower and bottom characters, and the tragedy of the three families has both the reasons of the cruel reality and the factors of human nature. In order to

survive, the bottom layer of society tries every means to achieve the purpose of survival, they have no ability to change this cruel society, and can only choose to drift with the tide in the torrent of the times. In today's era, how to survive in society has always been the most concerned issue of people. In order to survive, the former housekeeper Moon-gwang hid her husband in the employer's basement to escape imprisonment; in order to survive, Kim Ki-woo and his family planned to lay off the original employees of the Park family, but they got the job that should not have belonged to them, and looked forward to a new hope for life. The character image shaping of the former housekeeper Moon-gwang's family and Kim Ki-woo's family in the film represents the thousands of small character families in a specific real society in South Korea. The audience who has experienced that era seems to see their own shadow in the film.

## 2.2 Tragic Character Fates Under Multiple Blows

The film *Parasite* is imbued with a tragic tone, and the lives of the three families presented in the movie are also a kind of tragedy. The director, through the tempting wages and income that the protagonist faces, shows Kim Ki-woo's fear of exposure. He plans to kill the former housekeeper's husband at the birthday party of the Park family's son, but fails and is injured instead. The former housekeeper's husband emerges from the basement and rushes to the party scene, killing Ki-woo's sister and injuring Ki-woo's mother, and then Ki-woo's father, enraged by the "smell discrimination," kills President Park. Under the multiple blows of family, work, and life, the rich character images are perfectly shaped. Personal fate is inseparable from the era in which they are located, and the tragic fate of the characters in the three families in the movie bears the mark of the times.

From the movie, it can be seen that the director did not directly comment on the goodness or badness of that specific era, nor did he interpret the content presented behind the movie from a third-person perspective. Instead, he left the living environment, state, and psychology of different social strata in that specific era, as well as the judgment of the real society and different social strata shown in the movie, to the audience to think about.

Human nature is usually divided into good and evil, not good is evil, and at the same time,

human nature is also framed and limited by the traditional values of life. Bong Joon-ho has always wanted to break this traditional inherent limitation in order to guide the audience to re-judge and measure human nature from a dialectical critical perspective.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Bong Joon-ho has a more complex and diverse portrayal of human nature, examining human nature from a moral theoretical height.

### 3. Creating a Three-Dimensional Realistic Sense of Character Roles

#### 3.1 *Environment: Contributing to the Three-Dimensional Character Image*

A good movie needs not only an ups and downs of the plot to connect the film's lens language but also the creation of typical character images to further deepen the theme of the movie. Therefore, the creation of character images plays an important role in the quality of the movie. The creation of characters is usually divided into two types: flat and round. Flat characters have a single personality, are rigid and flawed, and have no flexibility; round characters have a multifaceted personality and are smooth and adaptable. It is clear that the character images of Kim Ki-woo's family and the former housekeeper's family in the movie *Parasite* belong to well-shaped round character images. When creating round character images, directors or screenwriters need to use the environment, details, and contradictions in which they are located to make the characters vivid and three-dimensional. Because people have different concepts and psychological states in different environments, all of which are influenced by the environment.

#### 3.2 *Desire: Shaping Diverse Character Roles*

According to Propp's classification of character roles and functions in folktales, they have duality: character and actant. The foundation of character images is the character, which is manifested in the issue of how the character "does it"; while the plot motivation of the actant is manifested in what the character "does." Only with both can the character image be full, and can it better complete its narrative function. In the movie, Ki-woo's family lives in a semi-basement, and through the small window connecting with the ground, an occasional drunkard who urinates indiscriminately appears. The appearance of this drunkard seems to have nothing to do with the development of the plot on the surface, but it reflects on the side

how embarrassing the life of a family of four at the bottom is. Because of this, later through the conspiracy, Ki-woo's family replaced all the help around President Park, and it seems to be a very smart family, but in fact, it is just a "parasite" that depends on others for survival.

The former housekeeper Moon-gwang belongs to the motivational actant of assistance. She hid her criminal husband in the dark basement of President Park's house, providing food for her husband all year round. However, due to Kim Ki-woo's family, she lost her job as a housekeeper, moved out of President Park's house, and the only source of income in the family was cut off. Moon-gwang is facing the problem of survival in this society again. President Park's family is a happy family with a happy marriage, but Kim Ki-woo and the former housekeeper Moon-gwang's family have lost their principles for survival, kindness and naivety, concealment and deception, and President Park and Kim Ki-woo, the former housekeeper's family form a sharp contrast.

#### 3.3 *Details and Contradictions: Portraying Real Character Images*

Roland Barthes once interpreted the significance of details in narrative, he said, "Any detail that seems to have no meaning or function contains a certain meaning. Everything is meaningful."

Details are a means of portraying real and three-dimensional character images in movies, and the deep connotation and meaning depend on the treatment of details. In *Parasite*, the detail of the staircase is particularly touching. This scene's detail is a direct expression of the huge gap between the two families' class status, full of great artistic tension. When Ki-woo first went to the Park family for a lesson, the camera followed Ki-woo all the way. Ki-woo came out of his home and walked a section of the stairs to the ground, climbed a long steep slope to the gate of the Park family's courtyard, and then walked up the stairs to the sunny courtyard of the Park family, entered the living room of the Park family to see Mrs. Park, and finally, followed Mrs. Park up the stairs to the bedroom of the Park family's daughter. The director used a series of shots to express the gap between the bottom layer and the rich class, as well as the difficulty of the poor becoming rich, especially when Ki-woo climbed the steep slope, using a downward shot to make people feel the high status of the rich and the lowly position of the

bottom people. Ki-woo's family took advantage of the Park family's camping trip to revel in the Park family's home, imagining that they were the masters of the luxury villa. When the Park family suddenly returned due to the rain, Ki-woo's family fled back to their home, following the road, the steep slope, and the stairs all the way down, they ran down the steep slope, ran down the long stairs, crossed the underground tunnel and continued to run down the long stairs and a section of the dilapidated stone steps, step by step being washed back to the damp underground nest. This section used an upward shot to express the insignificance, embarrassment, and lowliness of Ki-woo's family.

Establishing contradictions between character roles in the movie is an important means of advancing the plot<sup>3</sup>. Ki-woo, in order to "once and for all," entered the dark basement to kill the former housekeeper's husband but was caught from behind by the former housekeeper's husband with a tool and dragged desperately, and was finally hit on the head by the former housekeeper's husband with a rock until he was bleeding. The former housekeeper's husband rushed into the crowd of people who were having a party, and quickly stabbed Ki-woo's sister in the chest with a sharp knife. Ki-woo's mother saw that she was fighting with the former housekeeper's husband and finally killed the former housekeeper's husband with a barbecue skewer. Ki-woo's father saw President Park turn over the body of the former housekeeper's husband and pinch his nose, remembering that President Park said that the Kim family had a "subway smell" and a "basement smell," and the emotions that Ki-woo's father had been holding back in his heart completely burst out, and he stabbed President Park to death with a knife. Faced with strong contradictions and conflicts, Ki-woo's family and the former housekeeper's husband chose to break out, and the outbreak of contradictions to a certain extent also means the production of the tragic fate of the characters<sup>4</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

When the director shapes the character images in the movie, he does not deliberately exaggerate or process them, but shapes the most real and rich character images through the environment, details, and contradictions, which is also the director's brilliance. This way of shaping back to the life of a specific era makes

the character images displayed three-dimensional, real, and credible. The portrayal of the environment, details, and contradictions in the movie makes the character images full of a sense of three-dimensionality, and a vivid character image with prominent character traits is the key to truly leading the audience into the core of the movie.

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