

# Layers of Inequality: An Intersectional Analysis of Power, Privilege, and Marginalization in *Parasite*

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*Intersectionality, when applied to Film Studies, allows us to analyse how films represent and reflect the experiences of individuals with multiple oppressing identities. Such a study examines ways in which power dynamics and social hierarchies intersect. The paper attempts an intersectional analysis of the 2019 movie Parasite directed by Bong Joon-ho. Set in South Korea, the film examines the experiences of two families: the wealthy Parks and the impoverished Kim family. The film's exploration of class is central to its intersectional analysis and shows how other aspects such as education, gender, race, and economic status intersect. The subplot of the movie, involving the Park family's former housekeeper and husband, is also an example of Intersectionality as they are marginalized not only by their economic status but also by their racial background. The title "Parasite" is a metaphor for the ways in which marginalized individuals or groups are often viewed and treated within society.*

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, oppression, power, class, race, hierarchies, inequality, privilege.

## **Introduction:**

Intersectionality is a critical framework put forth by leading activist and critic, Kimberlé Crenshaw, which focuses on the

interrelation of social categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, and how they interact to shape individual experiences and identities. “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects” (Crenshaw, 2018). In recent decades, this critical approach has become increasingly used in the field of film studies. When applied in the realm of film studies, Intersectionality provides a critical lens to analyse and understand representations in cinema and examines how various axes of identity intersect and influence the portrayal of characters, narratives, and themes in films.

Though Intersectional theory offers valuable insights into power dynamics within films, its application in film studies is limited. The discipline often struggles with inclusivity and representation itself, with certain voices being marginalized or overlooked. Lived realities are often shaped by social dynamics operating together. Recently many studies have come forth in this area, with films being used for the complex and nuanced understanding of Intersectionality. One such example is the recent Academy Award-winning Korean film *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon-ho. An acclaimed South Korean director, Joon-ho has made a significant impact on the world of cinema with his thought-provoking and socially relevant films. *Parasite*, released in 2019, is perhaps his most acclaimed work which won him international fame with the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival and the Best Picture Oscar at the Academy Awards.

In *Parasite*, Joon-ho masterfully explores inequality and power structures in contemporary Korean society by delving into issues of social class, race, and gender. The film presents a compelling narrative that masterfully weaves together the tale of two families on the opposing poles of social structures and how their fates intertwine, bringing them together in a cataclysmic concourse. With his unique storytelling style, visual imagery, and cinematography, Joon-ho resonates with the lives of millions and at the same time, creates a lasting impact by addressing the social problems we see around us. It can be often found that when identity factors overlap, a compounding effect is present which creates compounded disadvantages. An

individual may face disadvantages based on their gender, race, class, and economic stature.

With the help of Intersectional theory as an analytical tool, one can engage in an active interrogation of these oppressed structures, thereby encouraging an unbiased analysis of the film. The movie delves into the complex dynamics of socioeconomic class struggle in contemporary Korean society by portraying the stark contrast between the wealthy Park family, who live in a luxurious mansion, and the impoverished Kim family, who struggle to make ends meet in their cramped basement apartment. Their living condition was carefully crafted by the director to depict their status; as Joon-ho himself says in an interview: “It’s also tied to the state of the protagonist. Semi-basement means you’re half above the ground, half beneath it. They still want to believe that they’re over ground, but carry this fear that they could fall completely below. It’s that Limbo state that reflects their economic status” (Sims, 2019). Both the privileged and marginalized characters go about their lives, and the movie showcases the different ways in which cultural norms and expectations contribute to their varied experiences, thereby creating unique identities.

The film not only examines the class divide but also delves into gender roles, familial expectations, and the impact of societal norms and patriarchal power structures on individual lives. It can be deduced that power is not solely determined by gender or race alone, but by other more deciding factors like wealth and social class. The Kims, who struggle to make ends meet, find themselves infiltrating the lives of the affluent Parks by posing as skilled workers, out of their desire for social advancement. The movie sheds light on the harsh realities faced by those on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder, while at the same time, it exposes the privilege and blatant obliviousness of the upper class. Each member of the Kim household - the father, mother, son, and daughter- navigates their precarious situation in distinct ways, with each grappling with their own set of challenges.

Joon-ho crafts the plot of *Parasite* in a way that intrigues and astounds his viewers. As commented by an Intersectional theorist, “One mechanism of resistance from subordinated groups has been to

use collective actions to destabilize dominant ideologies” (Hankivsky, 2014). Hence the members of the Kims family decide to con the wealthy Parks in the guise of tutor, art therapist, driver, and housekeeper. The Parks, who are unaware of this deception, unknowingly perpetuate this cycle of exploitation and rely fully on the Kims for their domestic needs.

Gender dynamics within these intersecting class structures is also beautifully portrayed in *“Parasite”*. The mother of the Kim family played by Jang Hye-jin, is a strong, resilient, and resourceful working-class woman who is quite practical and ready to take on multiple roles to make ends meet. In the beginning of the film, the son’s friend, a college graduate hailing from an upper class family, visits the Kims and gifts them a “Scholar’s Stone” (which, according to his grandfather, will bring good fortune). While Mr Kim and his son hope it will turn their luck around and gets carried away by its ‘metaphorical’ significance, Mrs Kim instantly comments that they would have preferred some food (Joon-ho, 2019, 08:01). Towards the end of the film also we find her taking some very practical decisions to ensure the family’s safety and remaining calm even in the most intense moments of the thriller. In sharp contrast, the mother of the Park family, played by Cho Yeo-jeong, is a wealthy spoilt housewife who is a victim of substance-abuse and incapable of doing any chores on her own. She lives a life of privileges capsuled in her ‘perfect’ world and is quite oblivious to the misfortunes suffered by common people in the real world. The film shows a sequence of flood caused due to heavy rain the Kims and other lower class families who lived in the lower part of town had their homes flooded and all their belongings drowned and lost, while the Parks residence, situated uptown, is unaffected. The next day, we find Mrs Park commenting to her friend on the phone that the rain was a blessing and will keep their garden green (Joon-ho, 2019, 1:44:33). The next day after the rains, the director has skilfully shown the contrast of both the classes; while the wealthy has a whole wardrobe of clothes to choose from, we find those affected by the flood selecting clothes from a pile in the camp where they are forced to take shelter (Joon-ho, 2019, 1:42:31).

It is also worth mention that the daughter of the Kim family, Kim Ki-jung, is portrayed as a very resourceful, creative and intelligent young woman. She takes various decisions to help her family and can be seen as a mastermind behind their exploitation of the Parks. However, her gender intersects with her economic and social class, limiting her opportunities and reinforcing traditional gender roles. Her brother mentions to his friend that despite her skills, they can't afford classes for her. In the beginning of the movie we find her using her creative skills to forge a college certificate for her brother so that he can present himself as a qualified tutor before the Parks. Seeing her skills at Photoshop, her father comments, "Wow, does Oxford have a major in document forgery? Ki-jung would be top of her class" (Joonho, 2019, 11:30). Later we find her presenting herself as a western-educated art student in order to be an art therapist for the Park's young son. Similarly, Mrs Kim who had once won a silver medal in a field sport called hammer-throw in her youth, was evidently unable to follow her dream. Though her medals and accolades from her sporting days decorate their semi-basement home, it has become long forgotten. Every member of the Kims household is portrayed as creative or skilled in one way or other except Mr Kim, who always seem to be living in a far-fetched fantasy world, hoping to one day cross the line between the social classes.

All the female characters in *Parasite* are portrayed as both victims and agents of oppression. Patriarchal norms and expectations are forced upon them in addition to the class divisions perpetuated in society. While there is no explicit mention of race, the Kim family is shown as Korean, while the Park family is more western in their ways. This racial difference intersects with economic social class difference to compound and exacerbate their existing inequalities. The Kim family's economic status is central to the plot of the movie, depicted by their life in the basement which is symbolic of their low class status. They live a liminal existence where without constant struggle one will sink and fall. They have to climb steps to come above and work odd jobs in order to make ends meet. The Parks, on the other hand, live in a luxurious mansion with workers and house helps to make their life

easier. This intersection of economic and social class highlights the ways in which multiple forms of oppression can compound and reinforce one another.

Furthermore, education is depicted as a tool for reinforcing social hierarchies. The stark contrast between the Kims' lack of access to quality education and the Parks' privileged upbringing highlights how educational opportunities can perpetuate inequality. Both the youngsters of the Kim family is shown to be quite smart and talented. Even the son's college-educated friend comments that the son, Kim Ki-woo, is academically gifted and more deserving to tutor the rich girl of the Park household than any of his other 'graduate' friends (Joon-ho, 2019, 09:09). While the teenage daughter of the Park household lacks even basic English grammar skills and is being given tuitions to supplement her school studies.

The film also skilfully portrays a subplot to further emphasize the concept of Intersectional existence by portraying a lower class couple living secretly in the basement of the Park's mansion. It is the Park family's former housekeeper, Moon-gwang and her husband, Geun-sae. The husband has been hiding in the basement to escape from loan sharks who are searching for him. They have been living off the Parks like the Kims, but for them it's not the hope of social advancement, but rather simply the need to survive. As the theory of Intersectionality stipulates, people can experience privilege and oppression simultaneously, often depending on what situation or specific context one is in. Here, we find that the Kims have the privilege over the former housekeeper and her husband, while at the same time they are inferior to the Parks.

Intersectionality emphasizes the importance of time and space in any analysis, focusing on how an individual experiences and understands oppression in relation to when and where they live and interact (Hankivsky, 2014). In a scene when the Parks family go camping and the Kims have the whole mansion to themselves and have a great time, Mr Kim comments that they are actually living in a mansion. To which Mrs Kim, being a realist, says that if the Parks were to come home right then, they would all have to "scatter like

cockroaches”, showing how their fantasy of living there is actually temporary (Joon-ho, 2019, 1:01:22).

The director Bong Joon-ho has crafted the plot using many symbolisms and visual treats to clearly show the intricacies of class distinction in society. Stairs is used very symbolically throughout the film to depict the rise/ descent to social class. The characters have to navigate steps to rise from their humble surroundings and similarly they are shown to descend stairs to show an ultimate return to their own home. There seems to be no escape or hope for social advancement for them. This recurring signifier symbolizes that class distinctions are indeed very paramount and when coupled with other identity-signifiers like race or education, it only further oppresses individuals. Just when we imagine that life can be no lower for the Kims, we discover the husband of the former housekeeper who lives underground in the basement of the mansion, insinuating that when one goes down the stairs, the influence of exclusion gets more pronounced. In a letter to his father in the climax, the son writes idealistically that he will become rich one day and buy the Park mansion and he (the father) will only have “to walk up the stairs”, signifying their crossing the barrier of the socioeconomic divide.

Food is also shown as an indicator of economic and social divide. The Kims’ gradual rise in the economic ladder is symbolised through the food they consume. In the beginning of the movie, we find the Kims having only bread and cheap beer, which gradually improves to having food from a driver’s cafeteria and there’s even a scene of them dining at the same pizzeria where they used to work. Whereas at the Parks household, there is always an assortment of rich and expensive fruits served. Towards the end there is a scene where Mrs Park instructs the cook, Mrs Kim to cook her young son’s favourite, Rom-don, a cheap dish made with noodles. She tells her to add expensive steak to it in an attempt to modify this cheap low-class meal (Joon-ho, 2019, 1:18:39). There’s also a scene (the Parks have gone out camping for a day) where the Kims daughter munches on a snack, only to realize later that it was dog-food, showing how even the dogs of the wealthy are privileged. (Joon-ho, 2019, 1:00:24).

Scent or smell has also been used brilliantly by the filmmaker to convey the idea of class distinctions. We find the patriarch of the Park household clearly explaining how the smell of the low class individuals can be identified and how it verifies their liminal existence. He says towards the end of the film: “that smell crosses the line. It powers right through the back seat...you sometimes smell it on the subway....people who ride the subway have a special smell...” (Joon-ho, 2019, 1:28:35). There is also a reference here to ‘an invisible ever-present line’ that divides the different social strata in society. The Parks, especially the father, is very wary of his workers crossing that line. He does not care about those positioned below him in the socio-economic hierarchy. It is not just because he considers them boring or insignificant, but because he does not want the mixing of the two worlds. “I respect those who work in one field (of work) for a long time” is something he often tells Mr. Kim. It is simply because such people have exhausted their resources and are less likely to advance to a better paying job and would always be stuck at a lower-income position. This embodies the notion of the privileged about the status quo and a world without much social or economic mobility. In a scene after the interval in the movie, we have a tensed situation where the young boy of the Parks smells Mr and Mrs Kim separately (who were, by then, working as their cook and driver), and commenting that they have the same smell. He even goes on to add that even his art therapist (the daughter of the Kims) have that same smell (Joon-ho, 2019, 51:37). Finally, during the powerful cataclysmic turn of events in the climax, we again find Mr Park scrunching up his nose when he has to retrieve the car keys from under the dying body of the psychotic husband of the former housekeeper. That was the last straw. Seeing this, Mr. Kim snaps and loses his mind, finally stabbing Mr Park on the chest (Joon-ho, 2019, 1:54:48). Finally we find the elder Kim fleeing the place and descending the stairs to the basement of the mansion, signifying his return to his low-class life.

The title of the movie is significant because it can be considered a metaphor for the myriad ways in which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups are viewed and treated in the society at large. In the beginning, the Kim family can be considered “parasites”



as they infiltrate the lives of the upper class Park family with deception and manipulation. The metaphor of the parasite highlights how the Kims feed off the resources of the Parks, taking advantage of their privilege. Mrs. Kim, foreshadowing a later event in the movie, compares her husband to a cockroach at one point. The bug extermination scene at the beginning of the film is a significant example where the filmmaker references the concept of a parasite. Plants like liana plants and creepers over the walls of the rich neighbourhood is another example, as these are fast-growing parasite-plants which can cause damage to its host. It does not necessarily mean that the Kims are the sole parasites in Bong's eyes. It is the society at large that considers them as parasites.

People as parasites often pose a threat to those in power and privilege as we see around us in real life. On the other hand, it also reflects the broader societal dynamics of class divisions and how the lower classes are exploited by the wealthy. The upper class become too dependent as the story develops and the power dynamics come into play. Later in the movie, it can be noted that the Parks have become "parasites" as they are now fully relying on the Kims for their day-to-day chores. They too are leeching on the Kims for their existence. The film subtly suggests that the wealthy like the Parks are able to maintain their privileged position in society by exploiting and utilising the labour of the less fortunate. Hence, it can also be interpreted as a critique of the capitalist system and how such systems of oppression perpetuate inequality. The former housekeeper and her husband (living in the basement) are also parasites, and in the end, we find the husband saluting Mr Park when he finally gets to meet him. In the film, there is a final message or realization - that class identity cannot be fully transcended or overcome as exemplified by the fate of the Kim family. Overall, the metaphor of the parasite in *Parasite* serves as a powerful commentary on the myriad ways in which societal structures perpetuate inequality and exploitation, and its implications on the individuals at the intersections of various identities.

In conclusion, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* offers a thought-provoking commentary on the interplay of social class, gender, and power dynamics within society. The film challenges viewers to question

the deep-rooted inequalities that are prevalent around them, and at the same time, with its compelling storytelling and nuanced character development, present a unique work of art.

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