THE WORK ALIENATION PHENOMENON AND PROLETARIAT

KKANGPAE IN FILM PIETA

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ABSTRACT

Film director and controversial screenwriter Kim Ki Duk has a unique way of executing his ideas. In producing his works, Kim Ki Duk often uses social phenomena and does not refrain from social criticism. Through the critically acclaimed Pieta (2012), Kim Ki Duk illustrates the social phenomena taking place amidst the South Korean proletariat, portraying the effects of capitalism. Through this research, it attempts to present the related social phenomena depicted in Pieta under the lens of Marxist Sociology of Literature. A qualitative-descriptive method is applied, specifically through the sampling of several scenes relevant to the topic, then analyzed further. The research eventually carries the conclusion that Pieta presents two existing phenomena within the South Korean proletariat: work alienation and kkangpae. Accordingly, this research concludes that the two phenomena are correlated, being the receiving end of a domino effect caused by the existing capitalist system, now on a global scale.

KEYWORDS: Capitalism; Marxism; Sociology of Literature; Work Alienation; Kkangpae; Korean Film Studies

INTRODUCTION

Kim Ki Duk, a Korean film director and screenwriter known for his controversial works, uses his art to extend criticism towards existing social phenomena. Kim Ki Duk ‘executes’ his ideas through a unique narrative and cinematographic style, as demonstrated by one of his most remembered works, Pieta. Pieta sets the viewer’s attention to the raging social-economic problems of the Chenggyecheon proletariat, where Kim Ki Duk attempted to portray the realities of the proletariat at the bottom of the global capitalistic food chain.

Karl Marx opines that the proletarian class of society (“proletariat”) are those members of the lower classes who are oppressed by the upper classes (bourgeoisie) for the latter’s economic gains. A distinguishing characteristic of a capitalist society, according to Marx, is the separation of society into upper and lower classes; the upper classes here being the bourgeoisie who control the means of production i.e. capital; the lower classes, also referred to as the proletariat or working classes, work for the capitalists and must submit to their rules. (Magnis-Suseno, 1999: 120-121).

The proletariat, however, should not be limited to the workers; there too exists a layer of
society who are not, strictly, workers, but are also members of the lower classes, called Lumpenproletariat. Marx opines that beggars, prostitutes, scavengers, swindlers, and people of similar ‘trades’ would be parasites in a future social revolution (Bourdin, 2013: 5). The term Lumpenproletariat itself was further developed by Marx in the German Ideology, where he criticized Max Stirner.

Pursuant to the elaborations above, the writer therefore formulates the urgency on addressing how under a Marxist Sociology of Literature lens, the film Pieta portrays the social phenomena engulfing the proletariat at the receiving end of a capitalist system. Building on said problem statement, this research’s ultimate purpose is to provide a description on Pieta’s portrayal of work alienation and k Kangpae, utilising a qualitative-descriptive approach.

Subtopics of this research have been previously discussed: Hendrawan (2017) writes of alienation as experienced by workers in a capitalistic society, analysing Marx’s works on the matter. Januar Wijaya (2015) discusses the representation of premanisme in a historical documentary regarding Indonesian national struggle with a semiotic approach, presenting important symbolism. Additionally, Jean-Claude Bourdin (2013) had previously discussed the Lumpenproletariat at length through several academic journals translated into English. Lastly, Yoon Jang-ho (2017) discussed social hierarchy of the urban slums as depicted under Pieta. What distinguishes this research and previous works is the use of Marxist Sociology of Literature in analyzing Pieta’s portrayal of social phenomena within the proletariat.

THE CONCEPT OF WORK ALIENATION

Alienation in work is the deepest of all alienations (Magnis-Suseno, 1999: 93); this maxim reiterates Marx’s opinion that ‘work’ is one of the basic activities for all humans. Through work, humans may make themselves feel alive and real. Marx states that work is a characteristic activity of humankind, that humans must be able to produce something so they may survive, as humans are different from animals who are one with nature, whereas humans exist on a distinct ‘nature’ created by themselves. Additionally, Marx opines that work is the human’s way in channeling their abilities, inherent in part with their social nature—humans are inherently interdependent with each other especially in matters of production (Magnis-Suseno, 1999: 93-97).

Thus, ideally, working should be something that brings happiness, yet the reality contradicts this proposition almost completely, especially under a capitalistic system. Within this system, humans no longer work freely and universally, but it becomes a form of obligation at the core of their own survival, thus making humans alienated from work itself. Magnis-Suseno (1999) opines that there exist two types of alienation in working: alienation of the self and alienation from others. Alienation of the self covers three aspects: Firstly, that creation of goods no longer brings joy to the creator as the creation now belongs to the factory (or owner thereof), and that the creator shall no longer see their creation and its utility to others; Secondly, that humans only work to fulfil their basic physical needs, which causes them to lose touch from their own selves; Thirdly, humans no longer work to channel their skills and talents, but to merely fulfil their physical needs, thus, impoverishing the self.

Marx further illustrates that if humans are alienated from their own selves, then they too are alienated to their fellow Man—an alienation of self thus also alienates people from their social
nature. Empirically, there exists two matters that are contrary to the interests of the worker, that being (1) the existence of private property, which causes division of the classes, thus each person is therefore in possession of their own interests and will pursue it to the most desperate ends and (2) alienation between workers and bourgeoisie, thus giving birth to competition (Magnis-Suseno, 1999: 101-102).

Alienation of workers could also be caused by separation of workers from the owners, that being in this context, between the possessors of the tools—means of production—and the possessors of the working force. In correlation with the existence of private property, this means that a person in need of work must submit himself to an owner of property or master in return for wages. Accordingly, owners, or capitalists, live on the work of the proletariat, while the proletariat will eternally be enslaved to the capitalists. On said premises, Marx disagrees with the concept of private property, which ultimately contributes to alienation of men (Magnis-Suseno, 1999: 105).

THE CONCEPT OF KKANGPAE

Kkangpae is a term that arose after the Korean War (1950-53), being a combination of two different words from two different cultures (American and Korean): kkang is a localized version of the English ‘gang’, while pae is short for the Korean paeguri meaning ‘group’ (Yang, 2014; Song, 2014).

Other terms similar and closely associated to kkangpae include jopok, geondal, and yangachi. Jopok is short for jojik pokryeokbae which means one who uses violence (and is from) an organisation (Shin, 2006, 118). Geondal has the meaning of one who refuses to live a serious life (in a social context). Lastly, yangachi means low-life or low-living; the word itself originates from the word dongyangachi, which means beggar, thus yangachi is used to refer someone as a criminal or one that comes from a low social class.

Out of the aforementioned, kkangpae is the most frequently used. Kkangpae refers to one who uses violence to resolve conflicts; in other words, a kkangpae seizes what they desire through extortion, manipulation, and exerting pain over others. Such actions are done to maintain their ego and reputation within a social environment (Kim, 2019).

SOCIAL PHENOMENA IN PIETA

1. Work Alienation Phenomena

1.1) Alienation from oneself

Work alienation is portrayed firstly through the experiences of the characters Hoon Chul and Myeong Ja. Hoon Chul and Myeong Ja were initially confused on how to pay their debts according to the deadline. Thus, Hoon Chul attempted to seek help by lending funds from his friends to no effect. Myeong Ja then blames Hoon Chul for agreeing to the insurance/loan, as follows:

명자 : 그리게, 왜 보험을 투자를 찍었어
The dialogue excerpt above explains why Hoon Chul forcefully signed the loan. Hoon Chul states that there was no way to survive except by signing the loan, despite the risky consequences they had to face, which was, for Hoon Chul, was the use of coercion and torture by the debt collector, Lee Kang Do. Hoon Chul and Myeong Ja’s desperation marked an inherent helplessness experienced by the proletariat. The events portrayed are in line with an opinion of Marx: the helplessness of the lower classes provides opportunity for the upper classes to continue to oppress them (Imron, 2020: 90).

Kang Do’s torture of Hoon Chul eventually causes Hoon Chul to lose his right hand, thus living in a handicapped, limited manner. Hoon Chul’s handicap thus forces Myeong Ja to become the bread-bringer of the family so they may continue to survive; Myeong Ja does so by selling under-priced snacks on the street, living in a spiteful internal anger where she often blames Hoon Chul who had brought them into a situation worse than before. This is portrayed by the following lines:

명자 : 굶고 죽기 싶지 않으면 입을 떡쳐하고 있어.
네가 그 놈에 안 벌려서 너가 이렇게 안 살아.

Translation:
Myeong Ja : Shut up if you don’t want to starve.
We won’t be living like this if you don’t borrowed money from that bastard.
Myeong Ja blames Hoon Chul’s disability, though Hoon Chul refuses to be blamed completely. Myeong Ja responds with anger and tells Hoon Chul to refrain from commenting. She further comments that their life would be severely different had Hoon Chul not borrow money from Kang Do to begin with.

Based on the passage provided above, it can be stated that Hoon Chul and Myeong Ja had experienced what was described as alienation of the self. This too is in-line with Marx’s thoughts on the matter: that alienation of the self takes place when an individual no longer sees work as a channel of self-actualisation and realisation, but merely as a means to survive, i.e., the only means of not dying from hunger (Magnis-Suseno, 1999).

Additionally, the involuntary nature of work is an important aspect of a worker’s alienation of the self. Myeong Ja feels that she is forced to ‘replace’ Hoon Chul as bread-bringer, that she shouldn’t be the one selling food from dawn to dusk. Another supporting aspect is that Myeong Ja’s selling of food on the street is also manifestation of the impoverishment of the self. Self-impoverishment in the meaning of Marx is that one works not to channel their skills and talents, but only to live from the money earned form it (Elster, 1986).

1.2) Alienation from Others

Alienation of others, in the meaning of Marx, is also reflected within Pieta, particularly in the character Yoon Mi Hyeon. Mi Hyeon is a factory worker who chose to end his life so that he may be freed of the suffering that is living, due to the burdens he had to bear: Yoon Mi Hyeon committed suicide by poisoning himself with alcohol to avoid loans he could not pay.

Mi Hyeon constantly works so he could earn money to fulfil his life needs. However, the factory job causes Mi Hyeon to lose his social nature; the long, exhausting hours and damning monotone routine causes him to become isolated from his social environment. One day, Mi Hyeon receives a call from one of his friends, Jong Bok, who asked him to meet and whether or not he had time to do so, illustrated by the following excerpt:

미현 : 나? 난 안 바빠. 여기 곧 철거되잖아. 그래서…뭐 주문이 없어.
나만 빚을 밖에 없대.

Translation:
Mi Hyeon : I’m not busy. Here will be torn down soon, So, there’s no orders coming All I have left are debts.

(00:23:18 – 00:23:57)

The above dialogue illustrates that Mi Hyeon no longer has much work as Cheonggyecheon would soon be evicted under larger government projects. Said eviction caused a decrease in incoming orders, thus making Mi Hyeon’s income as something of an uncertainty. Being faced
with the circumstances, Mi Hyeon had to figure out a way to earn enough income and find enough money to pay off his debts.

The chain of events causes massive stress to Mi Hyeon as he could not figure out a way to pay his debts. Great stress compromises one’s mental health, thus, it is not rare for one to choose to end their life so they may be freed of that stress. In another passage, Kang Do confronts the now-expired Mi Hyeon:

강도 : 아저씨! 아저씨! 아저씨!
개새끼. 죽으면 끝이야? 끝이야?!
못 책임은 새끼.

Translation:
Bastard. Do you think it’s over when you die?
Damn it, you unresponsible bastard.

Within the excerpt above, Kang Do discovers an expired Mi Hyeon in his working area. Thinking that Mi Hyeon was fast asleep, Kang Do slapped Mi Hyeon across his face several times until he realized that he was indeed dead. Kang Do then found a suicide note addressed to Mi Hyeon’s mother. Having read the letter, Kang Do ridiculed Mi Hyeon as being irresponsible.

The dialogues presented above illustrates Mi Hyeon’s alienation of others. Mi Hyeon had isolated himself due to the pressing nature of his debts and his work, even refusing (or being unable to) socialize with his peers. This is in line with the Marxist maxim that one who alienates oneself from others will find a decrease in their social nature. Mi Hyeon demonstrates this fully, by choosing to end his life due to the shame and stress of being largely indebted.

Mi Hyeon’s story thus reflects *Pieta*’s depiction of the social phenomena of alienation due to work taking place in the lower classes. The alienation suffered by the low-class workers did not arise suddenly; in contrast, the alienation was caused by exploitation of the working man by the upper classes, with wages disproportionate to the effort required to perform the work. In *Pieta*, the exploitation experienced by workers exposes them to a damning routine where they continuously question the essence of ‘working’ itself. With this in mind, the workers do not perceive working as a channel to actualize themselves, but merely an activity so they may earn money to fulfil their physical needs, i.e., survival, in a very modern and urban context.

2. *Kkangpae* Phenomena

In continuation of the previous discussion, the improper wages received by the workers subjects them to constant poverty. These conditions are further exploited by the upper classes to give out loans with unreasonably high monthly interest rates (over 60%), thus making it impossible for borrowers to pay their debts. In forcing borrowers to repay their debts, the upper classes hire
‘thugs’ or ‘enforcers.’ These enforcers employed violence in collecting debts, resorting to criminal activities in the form of battery and assault to the highest degrees.

In Japan, China, and Korea, such activities are often carried out through organized means, i.e., organized crime. In Japan, criminal organizations are colloquially referred to as Yakuza, while in China, they are referred to as the Triad; such organizations ‘run’ criminal activities thus resulting in more sophisticated acts of crime and profit from it, including but not limited to smuggling, narcotics, and human and sexual trafficking. In contrast with the Japanese and Chinese practices, however, crime in Korea is often performed by individuals not tied with complex organizations. These individuals are colloquially known as Jopok or Kkangpae, or ‘people of violence’ (Liu et al, 2013: 66-68).

The term khangpae refers to people who consistently use physical and verbal violence to resolve issues. In Pieta, the distinctive characteristics of khangpae is represented by the character Lee Kang Do. Lee Kang Do is a debt collector who works for a private leasing company. As a debt collector, his daily activities involve going from house-to-house demanding repayment of the debts issued to the workers. However, due to the underwhelming economic state of the people of Cheonggyecheon, borrowers are subject to a vicious cycle where they find difficulty in repaying their debts in time and at the proper amount. As a result of this ‘bad credit rating”, Lee Kang Do does not hesitate to torture the workers in order for them to ‘pay up.’

Lee Kang Do himself did not become khangpae all of a sudden, and Pieta provides an interesting outlook to his past. Having lived alone for over 30 years, Kang Do has been isolated from society, and thus finds validation from other individuals and society in general by using violence to ‘demonstrate’ his existence. Kang Do’s brutality also acts as symbol of domination and power so people would not underestimate him.

Kang Do utilizes different forms of brutality from one ‘victim’ to the next, though with workers, especially those he knows do not possess the funds required to fulfil their payments, he can be observed to have higher brutalist tendencies. In the case of Hoon Chul and Myeong Ja, Kang Do threatens to maim Hoon Chul in the event repayment was not made. Not long after, Kang Do then visits Hoon Chul’s shop. Reacting in fear, Hoon Chul attempted to trap Kang Do’s arms in the door several times, enraging the collector. Kang Do eventually breaches into Hoon Chul’s shop and beats him up, as follows:

강도 : (혼출을 때림) 아이씨… 싸발놈이!

Translation:
Kang Do : (beating Hoon Chul) You Bastard!

(00:06:31 – 00:06:39)

Myeong Ja stood still helplessly, though then she attempted to separate the two. Myeong Ja told her husband to wait outside and she will resolve the matter peacefully, as follows:

명자 : (속옷만 입음) 마음대로 하고 일주일만 시간 더 씁요
Kang Do disregarded Myeong Ja’s pleas, despite being given sexual favors in exchange for an allowance of time. Instead of succumbing to Myeong Ja’s invitations, Kang Do hit her, causing her to scream and fall onto the floor. Hearing his wife’s cries, Hoon Chul hurry back into his shop and attempted to assault Kang Do in defense of his wife. Kang Do, however, quickly overpowered Hoon Chul, and forced his hand into a cutting machine, causing his right hand to be severed, leaving Hoon Chul with a bloodied stump.

Seeing the case of Hoon Chul and Myeong Ja’s, Kang Do will not refrain from violence to get what he wants, using physical and verbal violence to retrieve payment from the couple. Kang Do’s actions thus reflect that of a typical kkangpae, who do not refrain from using violence to resolve matters between them and others. Generally, kkangpae use a multitude of methods to retrieve payment, including telephone spams, messages, threats, harassment of family members, breaching into a borrower’s house, and sexual violence (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2007).

Kang Do also uses violence in extracting payment from another debtor, namely Tae Seung. Tae Seung borrowed money from Kang Do to fulfil daily needs, though he was unable to pay it back. To retrieve the borrowed funds, Kang Do brought him to an old abandoned building, as follows:

태승 : 아... 아...내 다리!
강도 : (태승의 부러진 다리를 밟았음.)
태승 : 아!! 다리!!
강도 : 한 마디가 찍 부러졌으니까... 보험금을 찍 받을 만큼이야.

Translation:
Tae Seung : My leg!
Kang Do : (stepping on Tae Seung’s broken leg)
Tae Seung : Oh my god! My leg!!
Kang Do : Since one leg has already broken, that would be enough to
get the insurance money

(00:20:20 – 00:20:46)

Kang Do employed torture against Tae Seung by stepping on Tae Seung’s broken leg and hitting him with a rock. Kang Do did this to deter Tae Seung from failing to repay his debts. Kang Do also coerced Tae Seung into ceding his insurance claims to Kang Do as repayment of the unpaid accounts.

Based on the two illustrations presented, it can be concluded that Kang Do’s violent and brutality actions were caused by Hoon Chul and Tae Sung’s failure to produce repayment in the agreed manner. Kang Do’s violent tendencies are not—in a very rudimentary way—unmeasured, however: Since Tae Seung was still able to repay part of his loan, he was not subjected to the same brutality as Hoon Chul, who had his hand severed in recompense.

From a legal perspective, Kang Do’s actions are in violation of Article 10 of the Moneylending Registration Act of 2002. The article stipulates those lenders are prohibited from extorting borrowers, and whomsoever does so will be subjected to three to five years imprisonment or a fine of KRW50,000,000. Under the Act, Kang Do’s ‘victims’ could have reported his actions to the authorities and had they have done so, they would not have been stuck in the vicious cycle of poverty they were subjected to throughout the film, though, it further illustrates how lower classes have little access to legal means and/or legal institutions do not cover the lower classes as well as the upper classes.

Lee Kang Do’s brutal actions illustrated in Pieta shows how capitalists (herein, the leasing company) utilizes lumpenproletariat (thugs, extorters, etc.) as minions to fulfil their economic satisfaction. Through Kang Do, we can see clearly how the capitalists use lumpenproletariat to incite horizontal conflict amongst the proletariat. Said horizontal conflicts were clearly illustrated through Kang Do, also a member of the proletariat who terrorizes fellow members of the working class to both satisfy his own ego and earn validation from the upper classes.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussions set out in the previous sections, we may produce several conclusions regarding the two social phenomena illustrated in Pieta, that being the alienation of workers and kkangpae. The alienation of workers experienced by the factory workers of Cheonggyeocheon is caused by a painful routine causing their questioning of the essence of work. In Pieta, alienations of self and others were clearly demonstrated. Upon paying closer attention to the narrative of Pieta, the alienation experienced by the workers of Cheonggyeocheon were also caused by disproportional wages, who were not paid in accordance with the effort required to produce work; yet, despite that, they had no choice but to work to preserve their very survival. Due to the extremely underwhelming wages, the workers were forced to borrow money from a private leasing company to fulfil daily needs, with the borrowed funds subjected to unreasonably high monthly interest rates. The low wages in tandem with the high-interest loans, caused the workers to face an unending cycle, which then brings kkangpae into the social environment of the Cheonggyeocheon proletariat.
**Kkangpae** is chiefly represented by the character Lee Kang Do, who goes from house to house collecting debts. In performing his duties, Lee Kang Do does not refrain from violence, extortion, insults, and violence to borrowers who are unable to pay. Kang Do’s *kkangpae* nature is not without explanation, however, as he grew up alone and thus isolated from the rest of society. The isolation, in turns, causes Kang Do’s brutalism, something the character commits to earn validation from his surroundings. Thus, Kang Do despises rejection and chooses violence as the first and foremost method to achieve what he wants.

Based on the illustrations, Kim Ki Duk’s *Pieta* reflects the domino effect as a result of the global capitalistic system: the alienation of the workers of Cheonggyecheon both of their selves and to others resulted in the existence of *kkangpae* upon them; this causation can be called a domino effect as the social issues presented by capitalism is often if not always associated with money (capital). In *Pieta*, ‘money’ becomes the source of all the experiences the characters face while also being the source of the social phenomena that took place in Cheonggyecheon.

Marx states that under a capitalist system, people act only to generate money and gain profit and thus constantly act in their own self-interests, which in turn, causes those with money to constantly oppress and exploit those without money i.e., the proletariat. With this in mind, money may control and decide one’s social character, which may induce one to act beyond human sensibilities: greed, selfishness, violence. Conclusively, a way to counter this domino effect is a reform on worker’s rights, particularly a worker’s right to a fair and equitable salary that allows one to pay for, at the very least, living costs (Magnis-Suseno, 1999: 102-111; Anwar, 2010: 43).

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