

Parasite: A defining film on class relations, inequality

Through smell and sight, it depicts the intimacies that bind and the resentments that divide the haves and have-nots

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Aided by brilliant cinematography and acting, Bong Joon-ho's film, though about money, does not trace differences between the rich and poor only through the prism of money (REUTERS)

In a world of growing inequalities, where the divide between the rich and poor is increasing, awarding Parasite as the Best Picture at the Oscars is befitting. A saga of differences between the rich and the poor is in itself not a novel topic. Yet, what makes Parasite one of the most gripping tales of our times, quite apart from its brilliant cinematography and acting, is that though about money, this film does not trace differences between the rich and poor only through the prism of money. Instead, the director, Bong Joon-Ho, presents to us the everyday realities of inequalities through bodily senses, particularly of smell and sight.

Bong Joon-ho provides, at once comic, at once tragic, intersections between two families (same in size, each with four members) — the upper class Park family and lower class Kim family. The Kim family is an unemployed bunch, aspiring to a comfortable life, and, in a fateful (later on, tragic) turn of events, they plot their way into the house and lives of the

Park family. From thereon, they are all interlocked in a web of dangerous intimacies. The Park family members are presented as privileged, entitled, and also “nice” people, who talk politely to their helps. Bong’s genius lies in the fact that unlike previous films on class, the rich do not utter the word “poor” or its synonyms to describe the class that is serving them. Rather, they identify and, therefore, demarcate their service class from themselves through their smell. Park’s son, depicted as an able boy scout, comments that their driver (Kim), new housekeeper (Kim’s wife), and tuition teachers (Kim’s children) all have the same “smell”. In another scene, Park while engaging in a physically intimate act with his wife, comments that Kim has a peculiar smell like those who ride the subway, and this smell is so strong that it seeps right to the back of their Mercedes Benz — an intimacy that he does not like. Kim (and his children), hiding under the table, become privy to this conversation, and it is this comment more than the visible and tangible differences of financial status between them, which leaves a deep mark on Kim — a burning feeling of resentment, which propels him to later on commit a gruesome act.

Parasite also brings the discussion of inequalities to the forefront through “sight”. As audiences, our eyes move “down” as we note the lives of Kim’s family — the underbelly of the city, living in a lower-ground level small, smelly, bug-infested flat, from where they see the world outwards and upwards. In contrast is the Park’s family, living in a mansion, perched on top of a hill, from where they look “down” upon the city. One of the other cinematographic geniuses of this film is the use of stairs — the Kims access their home by climbing down the stairs, whereas the Parks climb up to enter their home. As the movie unravels, we find out that Park’s previous housekeeper has surreptitiously been occupying the basement of their mansion. The lives in this mansion are starkly divided between the above and the below; metaphorically and literally, a below that the above is unaware of.

Richard Sennett was one of the first sociologists to talk about “The hidden injuries of class” (1972) as he drew attention to feelings and affections that mark class realities — respect and honour (or lack thereof in the case of lower classes). Since then, and indeed more recently, scholarship has studied the underbelly of the city through the prisms of affections — resentment, humiliations, anxieties. In the Indian context, a few recent films have made a foray into this field such as Dil Dhadakne Do (2015), which depicts the anxieties and vulnerabilities of the rich with nuance.

The brilliance of Parasite lies in its ability to explain class differences and inequalities, at the opposite ends of the spectrum, through bodily fluids and affections. This is not a Downtown Abbeyesque saga where inequalities are presented as a manual of code of conduct that regulates interaction between the rich and the poor — though “basement” remains central in both depictions. Instead, Bong presents the real yet dystopian, the hopeful yet doomed, the lateral yet vertical, macabre state of inequalities.

Bong Joon-Ho’s brilliant direction brings to the centre bodily fluids as the dividing and defining difference between classes, as he presents to us the resentful and dangerous intimacies between the haves and have-nots.

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The views expressed are personal