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Handout images courtesy of Netflix show scenes from South Korea's "Squid Game". — AFP photos

SQUID GAME: SOUTH KOREA'S LATEST CULTURAL PHENOMENON

A dystopian vision of a polarized society, Netflix smash hit "Squid Game" blends a tight plot, social allegory and uncompromising violence to create the latest South Korean cultural phenomenon to go global. It features South Korea's most marginalized, including the deeply in debt, a migrant worker and a North Korean defector, competing in traditional children's games for the chance to win 45.6 billion won (\$38 million) in mysterious circumstances. And losing players are killed.



Director Hwang Dong-hyuk (center) directs a scene of "Squid Game".

The juxtaposition of innocent childhood pastimes and terminal consequences - coupled with high production values and sumptuous set design - has proved wildly popular around the world. Within days of its release last month, Netflix's top executive said there was "a very good chance it's going to be our biggest show ever".

It is the latest manifestation of the ever-

growing influence of South Korea's popular culture, epitomized by K-pop sensation BTS and the subtitled Oscar-winning movie "Parasite". Critics say that regardless of its Korean setting, the show's themes and its critique of the ills of capitalism are relevant everywhere - doubly so with the coronavirus pandemic exacerbating global inequalities - and are key to its ubiquitous appeal.

"The growing tendency to prioritize profit over the wellbeing of the individual" is a "phenomenon that we witness in capitalist societies all over the world," Sharon Yoon, a Korean studies professor at the University of Notre Dame in the United States, told AFP.

War and poverty

Netflix in February announced plans to spend \$500 million this year alone on series and films produced in South Korea. "Over the last two years, we've seen the world falling in love with incredible Korean content, made in Korea and watched by the world on Netflix," its co-CEO Ted Sarandos said at the time. "Our commitment towards Korea is strong. We will continue to invest and collaborate with Korean storytellers across a wealth of genres and formats," he added.

South Korea's history is chequered by war, poverty and authoritarian governments, which artists have responded to by exploring power, violence and social issues. That has created a vibrant cultural scene whose different forms have established ever larger foreign audiences over

the decades.

At first K-dramas became hugely popular with Asian television audiences, before South Korean cinema was garlanded with awards at European festivals, K-pop developed huge fan bases around the world, and "Parasite" took Korean-language film mainstream. Auteur Bong Joon-ho's Oscar winner is a vicious satire about the widen-



ing gap between rich and poor, exploring the meaning of modern-day poverty in what is now the world's 12th largest economy.

'Bloody, unfamiliar and abstruse'

"Squid Game" director Hwang Dong-hyuk finished his script a decade ago but failed to attract funding as investors were reluctant and called it "too bloody, unfamiliar and abstruse". The filmmaker's previ-

ous works have dealt with themes including sexual abuse, intercountry adoption and disability, all loosely based on real-life events.

And the television series - his first - makes clear references to several traumatizing collective experiences that have shaped the psyche of today's South Koreans, including the 1997 Asian financial

crisis and the 2009 layoffs at Ssangyong Motor, both of which saw people take their own lives. "South Korea became a very unequal society relatively quickly and recently, during the last two decades," Vladimir Tikhonov, professor of Korean studies at the University of Oslo, told AFP.

Social mobility had become "much less possible" now than before 1997, he said, "and the trauma of deepening inequality... is spilled onto the screens". Netflix offers



depictions of poverty, and it's become a way of looking down on the backwards rest of the world," he told AFP. "The unique thing about 'Parasite' and 'Squid Game' is that while the works depict poverty and class inequality, they do so in a way that exerts Korea's technical and cinematic modernity." — AFP

Michael Keaton confronts US opioid crisis in 'Dopesick'

Before he became Batman, Michael Keaton made his dramatic film debut in "Clean and Sober," an unflinching look at drug addiction during the United States' 1980s cocaine craze. Three decades later, he is ready to take on a similar theme. Ahead of next year's superhero movie "The Flash" - in which Keaton plays an older version of Batman - he stars in "Dopesick," a television drama about America's newest drug epidemic: the opioid crisis. "I tend to not want to revisit anything," said Keaton. "But this is societal, and has a much larger canvas or a bigger story to tell."

"It shines a light on white-collar America and its guilt," he told a Television Critics Association panel. The series, streaming on Hulu from October 13, is based on Beth Macey's non-fiction book "Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors and the Drug Company that Addicted America." It explores how Purdue Pharma aggressively pushed OxyContin, a highly addictive prescription painkiller blamed for the country's opioid crisis that has caused half a million US overdose deaths since 1999.

Purdue executives last year pleaded guilty to criminal charges that included defrauding federal health agencies by downplaying the addictive nature of the medication, and paying illegal kickbacks to doctors. Macey, a journalist based in Virginia, charted the lost lives of ordinary victims including high school football stars and middle-class moms, in the Appalachian region of the eastern United States seen as the epicenter of the epidemic.

Unlike the early decades of the "war on drugs," which focused on locking up abusers - including crack addicts, often from urban and minority communities - now "70 percent of all overdoses that happened last year were opioids," said co-star Rosario Dawson. "This is affecting people across the nation - across the world." In the television series, Keaton plays a doctor

in a small mining town, and Dawson a government narcotics agent, who each begin to uncover the scale of the burgeoning crisis. Both are amalgams of multiple real-life people interviewed by Macey.

'Expose this'

Kaitlyn Dever ("Booksmart") also stars as a mine worker who injures her back and is prescribed OxyContin. She "is completely unprepared of what is to come in her life, and ends up suffering and going down just a total rabbit hole, and has no control over it," said Dever. That was a common fate for thousands of Americans, who were prescribed incredibly potent opioids for often relatively minor injuries, by doctors receiving bonuses from the big pharmaceutical firms such as Purdue. Once their doctors eventually cut off their prescriptions, and pills were changed to make them harder to abuse, many turned to buying street heroin



US actor Michael Keaton attends the Hulu premiere of "Dopesick" at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) on Oct 4, 2021 in New York City. — AFP

just to stave off horrific withdrawal effects known as "dopesickness."

Ordinary addicts became drug mules, forced to take perilous trips to smuggle narcotics back from cities to their rural communities, and paid by dealers in heroin that only exacerbated their struggles. "If you really look at the exponential damage often done by white-collar crime compared to some kid - I'll say inner city but it could be a kid out in the country selling a bag of weed to maybe help pay his rent... how do you even compare the two?" said Keaton. The 70-year-old actor was born and raised in Pennsylvania, close to the heart of a region where the crisis "infiltrated every class group." — AFP

Nobel-winning writer Gurnah vows to keep talking migration

Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah on Friday pledged to keep speaking out on migration and other hotly-contested issues, branding Brexit "a mistake" and European governments' policies "inhumane". The 72-year-old novelist, whose decades-spanning body of work is rooted in colonialism and immigration, landed literature's top award Thursday for his unflinching portrayal of their effects on the refugee experience.

"I write about these conditions because I want to write about human interactions and... what is it that people go through when they are reconstructing lives," he told reporters at a news conference in London. "I didn't know it was going to happen," he said of scooping the accolade. "You write the best you can, and you hope it will succeed and do well."

But the acclaimed author of 10 novels and several short stories was at pains to point out he would keep speaking candidly on the issues that have shaped his work and world view. "I'm speaking because this is how I would speak... whether I had won the Nobel prize or not. I'm not playing a role, I'm saying what I think."

'I'm from Zanzibar'

Gurnah, the fifth African-born writer to win the literature Nobel, fled to Britain from Zanzibar in late 1967, later acquiring British citizenship. Growing up speaking Swahili, he had also learned English on the Indian Ocean archipelago, which was a British protectorate until unification with Tanzania. Despite going on to write his literature in English, Gurnah retains links with, and an identity shaped by, his homeland that has informed his novels.

"I'm from Zanzibar, there's no confusion in my mind about that," he explained. "My experience of both work as well as living has been here in Britain. But that is not entirely what constitutes your imaginary life or imaginative life. So I don't feel the question of where do you come from is one that answers the question of what your work does."

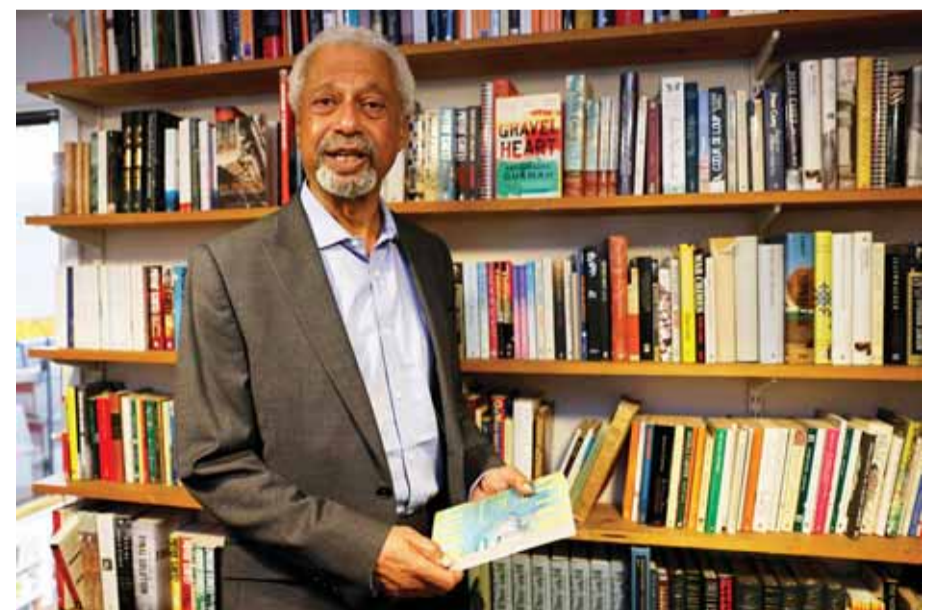
Self-deluding

After more than five decades in the UK, Gurnah argued there is now less blatant racism and greater awareness of the issue, but that the country's institutions remain "just as mean and just as authoritarian as they were". He cited the "Windrush" scandal, which saw immigrants from the Caribbean targeted by the government in recent years despite moving to Britain legally in the 1950s and 1960s, and the hostile treatment of asylum-seekers. "This seems to me to be just

Lack of compassion

The Nobel winner was also unsparing in his criticisms of other European countries' politics, such as Germany, which he argued has not "faced up to its colonial history". His latest book, "Afterlives", chronicles a little boy stolen from his parents by German colonial troops who later returns to his village to find his parents gone and his sister given away.

Gurnah said current European governments' headline reaction to increases in immigration from Africa and the Middle



Zanzibar-born author Abdulrazak Gurnah poses for a photo call prior to attending a press conference, after he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, in London on Oct 8, 2021. — AFP

a continuation of the same ugliness," the writer noted.

Meanwhile, Gurnah said he was "suspicious of the force" behind Britain's withdrawal from the European Union last year, which proponents campaigned for in 2016 partly on the basis of limiting immigration and recapturing "lost freedoms". "Maybe there is something nostalgic in that but there is also perhaps something self-deluding about that," he added. "Quite simply, I think it's a mistake."

East was both heartless and illogical. "In this terrified response - 'who are these people who are coming?' - (there) is a lack of humanity, a lack of compassion. "Also, there is not only no moral but no rational grounds: these people are not coming with nothing, they're coming with youth, energy, potential. "To simply focus on the idea that 'here they are, they're coming to snatch something from our prosperity' is inhumane." — AFP