Xenophobia within the Immigrants in the Netflix's Squid Game Series

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Abstract

The study aims to find out about the types of xenophobia, and its realization as well as the justification of that matter which appears in some scenes by the characters of Netflix's the Squid Game series. The analysis used descriptive qualitative as a method to meet the objectives of the study. The source of the data in this study is taken from episodes 1 to 6 of the Squid Game series aired on Netflix. Xenophobia which mostly happened to the immigrants found in the series due to the existence of the two immigrant characters. To analyze the data, the theory of types of xenophobia which proposed by Harris (2002). The isolation hypothesis is the most dominant type found in the study due to feeling isolated in most of the scenes just because they are immigrants and they feel like they have no right to mingle with the natives.

Keywords: Xenophobia, squid game, Netflix, types of xenophobia, sociology

INTRODUCTION

Migration resulted in different social classes in society which happened in the country an immigrant migrated to. When immigrants move to a place in pursuit of greater possibilities and have the willingness to work for less money, it usually causes problems for the locals who subsequently lose their employment as a consequence. That frequently leads to animosity between natives and immigrants, which can result in xenophobic behavior on the part of natives as a method to express their hostility toward immigrants. Xenophobia is a phrase used to describe the hatred of outcasts and immigrants. That manifests itself in various forms, such as via conversations with others and different points of view. Xenophobia develops because a person feels as though immigrants have expanded on their home nation of origin (Ogunnowo, Joshua, 2019). This kind of problem can not be solved right away because it is the root problem of xenophobia and it is inevitable. There are significant long-term distinctions among the demographics of migrants and non-migrants as a result of rising xenophobia toward immigrants and refugees, that adds directly to their weakness and mistreatment.

Xenophobia poses a stronger danger to the values that include community harmony, social justice, and equality among individuals. Misago, et al. (2015) evaluated UNHCR's xenophobia-related activities and concluded that, in the absence of UNHCR projects, xenophobia regarding refugees, particularly in South Africa, may have occurred. Racism, discrimination based on race, xenophobia, and related intolerance represent a significant threat to the overall community that serves as protection for persons of significance. Although UNHCR and its affiliated organizations have been working hard to address this safety problem locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally, there is still more to be done.

This research took Squid Game as a subject of xenophobia which happened to the characters who are immigrants and are victims of xenophobia. A South Korean drama series called Squid Game was developed by Netflix in 2021 and is currently being viewed by millions of viewers worldwide. This nine-episode thriller series has the potential to draw viewers in with its original plot. Squid Game has an ironic quality since it blends games for children with life-or-death tasks. The two opposing social strata of the wealthy and the destitute are addressed simultaneously in the program. The affluent were intended to be at the mercy of the poor, giving them little opportunity to change their dismal circumstances. All of these reasons encourage people to find out who is in charge of the killing machinery. In a certain study conducted in 2020, it was stated that the Squid Game has multiple comparisons to issues like poverty, social injustice, and inequalities among genders, which we may use as an indication of the many difficulties we have in implementing government policies into practice, according to Mukarromah et al. (2020). From an axiological

perspective, the study of the Squid Game series leans more strongly toward moral or ethical issues. The relationship between ethical concerns can be seen as a result of the unusual behaviors that occur amid civilization. There was no depth discussion about the reason it happened. Thus, it should be explored more. This study intended to explore more about the reason xenophobia happened in the series.

Three hypotheses were put forth by Harris (2000, p. 50) to explain xenophobia. Namely, the isolation hypothesis, the bio-cultural hypothesis, and the scapegoating hypothesis.

a. The Scapegoating Hypothesis

The sociological theory is primarily responsible for the scapegoating hypothesis's development. In the framework of societal transition and change, it situates xenophobia. Due to limited resources, including housing, work, education, and health care, together with high expectations during transition, racism toward immigrants is explained. Scapegoating theory often explains xenophobia in terms of significant social and economic causes. To complement this social view, Tshitereke (1999) adds a psychological level of explanation. In terms of frustration and relative hardship, he conceptualizes xenophobia. According to relative deprivation theory, "a sensation of relative deprivation is a major psychological component in causing social instability." This results from a personal sense of unhappiness brought on by the idea that one is receiving less than they believe they are entitled to. Social unrest is prone to occur when aspirations and realities diverge (De la Rey, 1991: 41). According to Tshitereke, violence is not always the result of relative deprivation.

b. The Isolation Hypothesis

According to the xenophobic scapegoating theory, the immigrant is utilized as a scapegoat, someone to blame for society's problems and individual annoyances. The foreigner becomes a target for hatred and violence in this way. However, there is an underlying presumption here, because foreigners are always made the victim. Why the immigrant, and not another social group or individual, comes to represent unemployment, poverty, and suffering is not made clear by the hypothesis. It doesn't explain why the defining characteristic of such scapegoating is nationality. The isolation theory of xenophobia, on the other hand, places foreignness at the core of hatred against foreigners. Morris (1998) in his study about xenophobia in South Africa stated that 'There is no denying the harsh environment Apartheid's huge emphasis on maintaining boundaries hurt people's capacity for tolerance of difference.' South Africans are unable to accommodate and, in fact, differences difference as a result of the establishment of strict borders both inside the nation and between it and other countries. The notion of isolation contends that South Africans perceive differences as hostile and harmful (Morris, 1998). According to this view, the simple fact that immigrants are strange causes xenophobia. It exists as a result of how unique and unfamiliar foreigners are.

c. The Biocultural Hypothesis

The biocultural theory places xenophobia at the level of apparent difference, or otherness, that is, in terms of the physical, biological, and cultural distinctions displayed by African immigrants to the nation. For instance, Morris claims that Congolese and Nigerians "are immediately identified as the "Other"." Due to their physical characteristics, they are generally immediately identifiable by their demeanor, their manner of dress, and the fact that they are unable to speak an indigenous language, making it simple for locals to identify and blame them. Hairstyles, accents, vaccination marks, clothes, and physical appearance are biological-cultural traits that might be interpreted as indexical markers or signifiers. They do so in a way that makes foreignness and difference readily apparent. As indicators, these characteristics frequently serve as a starting point for xenophobic behavior (Harris, 2002)

METHODS

A qualitative descriptive design approach was used in this study. According to Vockell & William (2008:101), qualitative research is defined as the comprehensive, individualized, and process-focused approaches used to comprehend, interpret, explain, and create a theory about a phenomenon or environment. To comprehend the "what and why" of human behavior, qualitative research provides a detailed examination of the issue. The data of this study were the sentences that contain xenophobia that characters have dialogues within the Korean series Squid Game. The source data of this study was taken from the conversation of the characters, namely, Ali, Saebyeok, Sangwoo, Gihun, Minyeo, The Boss, The Broker, and Jiyeon, in which include the xenophobia statements uttered by those characters in the Squid Game series. It was in the form of a video series and conversation transcript displayed on Netflix with a total of 9 episodes but only 6 episodes were used in this study. Harris's (2002) theory of types of xenophobia will be used

in this study to find out which type dominate what character feel in the Squid Game series.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The result showed three types of xenophobia proposed by Harris (2000) in this study dominated by the isolation hypothesis due to most of the time, the immigrant characters in the Squid Game series feeling isolated in a foreign land. The following table presented the data of the types of xenophobia in Squid Game series.

Table 1. Types of xenophobia in Squid Game series

Types	Frequency	Percentage (%)
The scapegoating hypothesis	11	18.3
The isolation hypothesis	38	63.3
The biocultural hypothesis	11	18.3

The Scapegoating Hypothesis

In this category, it views xenophobia in the context of societal development and transition. In episode 2 minutes 31:48 – 33:20, the boss uttered some violent words towards Ali and said "Damn it. Go and ask the rest of the employees if they got their paychecks yet. I can't pay anyone till I get the cash! Dumbass! Hey, I got the pain everywhere, Ali. I can't go to the hospital because I have no money." Upon the request for Ali's right to his wage, the boss replied with inhumane words because he did not prepare the money and wanted to take the money for himself, yet, he dares to use Ali's fellow employees who are also foreigners that come from poor country like Ali as the scapegoat for his reason of going away irresponsibly. Words like "you little shit, don't touch me!", "Let me go, son of a bi…!" At the same minute also came from his mouth as Ali tried to take the money away from the boss's hand because it was seen that the boss took the money and tried to run away, neglecting Ali's right to get his money. Although the lack of resources and perceived or actual dangers from immigrants generate resentment in the locals, it does not immediately lead to violence on their part. Instead, it irritates them (Harris, 2002). Thus, using anger in solving a problem, especially dealing with a person who comes from another country might create a different reaction than somebody from a similar country because the fuel of anger might cause an effect on the boss as if something from him will be taken away without his permission.

The Isolation Hypothesis

The scapegoating hypothesis defines xenophobia as the immigrant being utilized as a scapegoat, someone to blame for societal problems and individual nuisances. The isolation hypothesis on the other hand makes foreigners a target for hostility and violence (Harris, 2002) which also could result in the immigrants feeling isolated after being treated the way they do not deserve. In episode 2 minutes 15:35 – 18:20, Ali said "I can't, I have no money. I can't pay your money back." As a sign that he has no power and right to receive any kind of help including the money that was offered to him. After receiving the money, Ali did not forget to show how grateful he was by saying "I'm sorry. Thank you. Thank you" Without forgetting to bow many times as a sign of politeness that should be followed in South Korea to show gratitude towards another person especially elders or someone who has power in which Ali did not have. The ethical relationships within the polity serve as the normative environment for xenophobia. Life inside groups and societies, with all its cultural, political, and economic complexity, deeply shapes the individual (Sundstorm & Kim, 2014). The next minute, 31:48 – 33:20, when Ali demanded his right to his boss at work, he desperately said "Look what working here do to my body, I couldn't afford a hospital either. I'm going back to my hometown, please give me the money." He lost 2 fingers while working in the factory, yet the boss did not send him to hospital or even hand him some money. Ali truly has no power in the country which makes the boss a criminal upon his doings. In contrast to refugees, who lack actual rights entirely because they are stateless, criminals maintain some level of rights since they are citizens of a certain nation-state. The government may have essentially abandoned the criminal in their circumstances, although the government's ideals might have concealed this. However, it shows how a particular vulnerability occurs as a result of a rightlessness brought about by statelessness (Carter, 2010).

The Biocultural Hypothesis

This hypothesis tells more about the appearance, physical features, accent, etc. that could easily make them a target. In episode 2 minutes 15:35 – 18:20, Ali stuttered asking for help from the native. "B… B… Boss, do you have a cell phone on you? I just want to make one call, just once." He made it clear that he only asked

for the native's help once even though he sounded hesitant in asking for it and stuttered upon calling him. The biocultural hypothesis can also be found in the accent, or the pronouncement of certain words (Harris, 2002). In another scene, Ali tells the native about his age "Ali is 33 years old" He refers to himself as Ali, because he wants to sound polite if he uses his name instead of using a personal pronoun. "Jeoneun" or I should be used in the sentence to refer to himself in politeness as they are not close to each other but as he wanted to sound more polite, he used his name Ali to refer to himself. Korean personal pronouns encode traditional Korean social hierarchy (Sohn, 2001).

Discussions

Out of three types of xenophobia in Squid Game series such as the scapegoating hypothesis, the isolation hypothesis and the biocultural hypothesis, the most dominant type of xenophobia happened to be the isolation hypothesis. The pressures like being placed in an unfamiliar and fresh situation where they start a new life causing them to feel isolated from the new people and environment. It is also impossible letting a guard down when somebody especially immigrants moved to a new place. The helplessness and anxiety that Ali and Saebyeok feel as immigrants making them building a high barrier between them and the native. Thus, the isolation hypothesis type truly explained the situation and feeling that immigrants went through. Followed by the most dominant type of xenophobia, the scapegoating hypothesis and the biocultural hypothesis got the least frequency from this study. The Squid Game series is not focusing on the violence about the immigrants, it is more to showing the imbalance socioeconomics status that happened reflecting the society. The only violence the immigrants received from the native is through verbally, and as for the biocultural hypothesis only happened by attacking someone's look. Thus, the two types of xenophobia do not define the result and it tells more about what they feel rather than what they receive.

Certain problems relating to the research subjects needed to be considered in light of the data analysis. The first research question of this study examined the types of xenophobia in the Squid Game series. It was found that there are 3 types of xenophobia found in this study, namely the scapegoating hypothesis, the isolation hypothesis, and the biocultural hypothesis. Xenophobia is described as violence towards immigrants, whatever the form is. One of the violence the

immigrant receive from the Squid Game series can be seen from the data where a native named Minyeo called out Ali, a foreigner from Pakistan whose skin is dark and looking messy which tells that he is not the native of South Korea. She bluntly said "Hey, which country are you from? I bet you don't have visa, do you? You're an illegal alien, right? Hey look here you guys… Why keep the strange foreigner when we could just ditch him?? Is it okay to make the team that way? Huh? Guess I'd better do some major restructuring team while I'm here." Without confirming the facts, she blatantly pointed her finger towards Ali about how he came to South Korea illegally without passport, and by saying illegal alien is offensive enough for Ali whose intention just to create a better life there for his family. This can be included as scapegoating, but also an isolation for Ali who got pointed by just because he is a foreigner. According to Tshitereke (1999), there is a "causal link between relative deprivation, xenophobia, and collective violence." He supports this claim with psychological theories of aggressiveness and frustration. In his study, the violence found as outrageous in which 30 asylum seekers were killed in South Africa in unprovoked attacks. Meanwhile, this study found that the foreigner is used as the scapegoat to create this relationship. There is no other reason for Minyeo to state the harsh statements out of the blue other than the xenophobia that she has in mind. She practiced discrimination and prejudice towards Ali as well as having a national sentiment since Ali is just an immigrant and Minyeo is a small-minded privileged native who would have thought that he just came to South Korea for nothing.

Immigrants also felt isolated during the series, in fact, the isolation hypothesis got the most frequency in this study. Not knowing a thing about where the person come from or simply talk bad about somebody's intention that moved to a country counted as xenophobia as well. In episode 4 minute of 22:50 – 23:25, Gihun asked Ali about where he came from that he has no idea about the place "Pakistan? Where is that?" as if that is the word he never heard before. In episode 5 minute of 07:26 – 08:11, Minyeo stated a hurtful question like "Hey, when you got to Korea, is all you did watch movies??" as if Ali did not work hard enough to be where he was now. Minyeo has this terrible thought about foreigner especially immigrant like Ali only came to South Korea to enjoy the entertainment since the country is famous for that. She still has the prejudice against immigrant like Ali. Xenophobia exists because of the very foreignness of foreigners. It exists becau-

se foreigners are different and unknown (Harris, 2002).

CONCLUSION

The result showed that three types of xenophobia proposed by Harris's (2000) theory are all included in this study which shows different results. The isolation hypothesis is the most dominant type found in the study due to feeling isolated in most of the scenes just because they are immigrants and they feel like they have no right to mingle with the natives. Immigrants were discriminated against and prejudiced by the natives mostly due to their nationality and Ali's and Saebyeok's status as immigrants. Violence happened verbally in the series, This concluded that xenophobia violence could happen verbally and it is not always nonverbal compared to the previous studies..

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