

Paper

Subrat Jyoti Neog

From Page to Screen: A Study on Screen Adaptations from Assamese Literature

Abstract

Literature has long been a source of inspiration for filmmakers. Film adaptation has been a common activity since the invention of cinema in nineteenth-century Europe. This trend is still going strong almost a century later. McFarlane asserts “Filmmakers' reasons for this continuing phenomenon appear to move between the poles of crass commercialism and high-minded respect for literary works” (6). Raja Harishchandra, directed by Dada Saheb Phalke in 1913, was the first movie ever made in India. It was an adaptation of a well-known traditional folktale. The first Assamese film, "Joymati," was adapted from the drama "Joymati Konwari" by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. Several excellent films based on Assamese literature have been produced in Assam. By contrasting the adapted films and the literary sources, the research study will analyze the screen adaptations of certain Assamese literary texts and attempt to determine what imitation and innovation are produced in them. In this research paper, Bhaskar Hazarika's "Kotha Nadi" based on Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Burhi Aair Sadhu, Manju Borah's "Ko: Yad" Based on Anil Panging's novel "Ko:Yad" and Manju Borah's "Dao Huduni Methai" based on Rashmi Rekha Bora's short story "Dao Hudur Gaan" will be discussed thoroughly in the light of adaptation theory.

An adaptation is an altered version of a book, movie, or other literary work. Since the days of Greek tragedies, texts have been adapted for the theatre. Linda Hutcheon, in her book "The Theory of Adaptation", says, "Adaptations are not new to our time. Shakespeare transferred his culture's stories from page to stage and made them available to a whole new audience." (2). Dudley Andrew asserts "The making of a film out of

an earlier text is virtually as old as the machinery of cinema itself" (10). The term "Adaptation" was first employed in a scientific context. When this concept was originally studied, humanities academics regularly compared adaptations to their original texts, frequently giving "original" writings preference. When academics like Brian McFarlane, Deborah Cartmell, and Imelda Whelehan outlined the detrimental

effects of source text bias, this methodology started to change. More recently Linda Hutcheon says, "Adaptation has its aura, its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." (6) Texts and images are transformed into movies through adaptation. Linda Hutcheon has made an effort to defend adaptations throughout her book, which are typically referred to as "minor and subsidiary" and "definitely never as good as the "original." She views this criticism of the adaptation as "abusive" (Hutcheon XII). She characterizes adaptation as a form of creative and evolutionary art. In "Theories of Adaptation: Novel to Film", Bela Balazs says, "Adaptation takes the important and omits the unnecessary without changing the meaning of the text. Adaptation translates original written text into another creative form called cinema. Adaptation is an interrelation between literature and cinema, an entirely new entity. Literature provides the raw material for a film adaptation to create new visual forms and thematic content. It is a distinctive work of art." (94) In "The English Novel and the Movies", Michael Klein and Gillian Parker mention there are three types of adaptation: first, "most films based on classic novels attempt to give the impression of being faithful, that is, literal, translations. "second "retains the core of the structure of the narrative, while significantly re-interpreting, or in some cases de-constructing, the source text." Third "regards the source merely as raw material, as simply the occasion for an original work" (10). In the research paper "A study on Screen Adaptation from Literature with special reference to Chetan Bhagat's Novels"(2) by Manmeet Kaur and Rastogi

Kapoor mention two major schools of adaptation that Morris Beja classifies in "Film and Literature": First, the screenwriter believes that integrity of the original work be preserved, and therefore that it should not be tampered with and should in fact be uppermost in the adapter's mind. Second, the screenwriter believes that it's proper and, in fact, necessary to adapt the original work freely in order to create -- in the different medium that is now being employed -- a new, different work of art with integrity. Karen Kline developed a typology of "paradigms" of criticism of adaptation that tries to explain various forms of film adaptation: "Materialist," "Translation," "Pluralist," and "Transformative" (Agatucci, 2)

When a filmmaker adapts a literary piece for the screen, the issue of fidelity is raised. Cinema is a unique medium used by directors of movies. As a creator, the film director's philosophy and vision should be evident in the finished product. The film directors, who faithfully recreated the original literary materials, are criticized by several critics and academics. Take the film "Kabuliwala", directed by Tapan Sinha, as an example. A few critics harshly attacked Tapan Sinha for changing the text written by Rabindra Nath Tagore in the original. Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopal Krishna, Kumar Sahani, and others who were reconstructing the original literary texts first received a great deal of criticism, much like Tapan Sinha. The situation is different right now. In contemporary society, the adaptations for the big screen are accepted. In recent years, the screen adaptations of many Assamese filmmakers have been favourably received by both audiences and critics.

Special Study 1: (Assamese Folk Tales into Film)

Bhaskar Hazarika's debut film "Kothanodi" (2015) won the Best Feature Film in Assamese at the 63rd National Film Awards. The story of the film is based on traditional indigenous folktales of Assam. Bhaskar Hazarika picked up four stories from Burhi Aair Sadhu (Grandmother's Tales), a collection of oral folktales by the doyen of Assamese literature Lakshminath Bezbaroa. The four tales are- Tejimola, Champawati, Ou Kuwori and Tawoiekar Sadhu (The Story of Tawoi). The film renders four folktales, not as separate episodes but as a single. Indeed, all four stories are beautifully interconnected. The story Tawoiekar Sadhu is about Poonai, a fish trader, and his wife Maloti. Poonai, who, on the advice of his Tawoi (Father's friend), keeps burying his newborn babies. The story Tejimolar Sadhu is about Tejimola, a teenage girl, who suffers tremendous abuse from her evil stepmother. The story of Ou Kuwari is about a tribal woman who gives birth to an Outenga (Elephant Apple) who is accused of being a witch and kicked out of her home by her husband. The story of Champawati is about a greedy mother who arranges a marriage for her daughter with a python in the hope that it will bring fortune to their family.

Reconstruction of folktales in films is not a new trend. A filmmaker tries to interpret the tales with a new approach through the reconstruction of folktales. Imposing a new thought, Bhaskar Hazarika reconstructed four folktales in the film. Through reconstruction, the filmmaker Hazarika tries to erase the established concept or age-old tradition.

Notably, the filmmaker attempted to express the workings of the unconscious mind and synthesise these workings with the conscious mind in his films by reconstructing folktales. Bhaskar Hazarika allowed his narratives to develop non-logically so that the result represents the operations of the unconscious. The filmmaker takes the gist of Ou Kuwariar Sadhu and presents the story in his way. He omitted many things from this original tale. For instance- In the original tale, the king had two wives, and his younger wife gave birth to an Outenga (Elephant Apple). The marriage of Outenga (Elephant Apple) was also part of the original tale. However, the filmmaker dropped these kinds of narratives in the film. The relationship between the tribal woman and the outing (Elephant Apple) has been newly interpreted by the filmmaker. The Outenga (Elephant Apple) has been presented as a symbol of the tribal woman's sorrow. The limitation of the tribal woman is not accepted by her husband, who kicked her out of the home. After that, the outenga (Elephant Apple) tried to follow her as if the sorrow of her life follows her. One day the father of Tejimola, Devinath, and a businessman encounters the woman, and after that, Devinath resolves to unearth the mystery of the outing. This narrative indicates that Devinath understood and tried to hide her sorrow. Reconstructing the outenga (Elephant Apple) tale, the filmmaker tried to present society's patriarchal attitude and witch-hunting problem. Bhaskar Hazarika reconstructed the story of Tawoiekar sadhu. In this story, a man always followed the dictation of his 'Taiwoi' (a father's friend). He buried his newborn child. Though he was not interested in following Taiwoi's advice, he

followed it as he believed everything would be all right one day. The character Taiwoi is a symbol of our destiny. Everything that happens for the best type of tone is reflected through this narrative.

In the story of 'Tejimolar Sadhu', the filmmaker omitted a lot of original narratives. He focused only on the inner conflict of Tejimola's stepmother. Bhashkar Hazarika created the character of Tejimola's stepmother with surrealistic elements. The character represented two different worlds. The outer world of the character reflects her general actions. At midnight, she often went to meet a devil-like character and talked with him about her anxieties. These conversations visualised the inner world of the character. Erasing the physical and mental gap between the conscious and subconscious mind of the character, the director tried to create a reality where real and unreal actions and thoughts are assimilated and influence life.

Secondary or less important characters or events of the original texts have been given priority whenever they are reconstructed. In the Champwati story, the original writer focused on the marriage of Champwati and the python that later turned out to be the God of the forest. On the other hand, the filmmaker does not cover this marriage. Instead, the second incident of the original tale- the marriage of Elagi's daughter with a real python- has been portrayed as the main narrative in the film. The cultural tradition of Assam has been beautifully presented in the film. Through the character of the tribal woman of the outenga (Elephant Apple) tale, the tribal culture of Assam has been presented and a picture of a traditional marriage

ceremony is shown through the marriage of Banalatika, the friend of Tejimola.

Special Study: 2 **(Assamese Novel into Film)**

Manju Borah's 'Ko: Yad' won the National Film Award for Best Mishing Language Film. The film Ko: Yad is based on the novel of the same name by Anil Panging. Anil Panging's novel was published serially in 'Sadin'-a quarterly published newspaper. In making this novel into a film, Manju Borah has omitted many things from the novel, and the filmmaker has included many things herself. The novel is made into a film called 'Ko: Yad' without distorting the essence of the novel. This adaptation can be called a faithful adaptation. In many ways, director Borah has deviated from the original novel and turned 'Ko: Yad' into a better film by adding her creative inputs to the film's content or applying the cinematic style.

First, at the beginning of Anil Panging's novel, we learn that Poukam has lost his mother, his children have betrayed him, and the river and the boat have left him. The novel describes how these things happened. However, the film does not tell us at first that the children, the river, the boat, etc., have all betrayed him. The film starts with a depressed, distrustful Poukam, whose life is fluently portrayed through a few shots without dialogue. Then, the flashback depicts Poukam's childhood life. The film does not explain the reasons for Poukam's grief at the beginning, as in the novel, and for this reason, the curiosity of the audience has increased.

Secondly, boating in the river to pick up firewood is the main job of Poukam's

father. He is passionate about his job. He taught Poukam his job very well. The novel does not describe this aspect in detail. However, the film takes this seriously. Several shots depict how the father taught his son how to sail in the river and how to pick up firewood. In one sequence we see the father teaching the job to his 8/9 years old son Poukam. In the next sequence, the old father and around 20-year-old Poukam are picking up firewood. The transition of these two sequences is outstanding. The sequences beautifully signify the bonding of the father-son relationship. The director beautifully conveys much of the story through a few shots of his father's ageing.

Third, the novel shows the child Poukam expressing his feelings through various dialogues. But the child Poukam has no dialogue in the film. Instead, his silence and expression express everything. For instance, there are no emotional dialogues in the film where his father tells him not to cry when he loses his mother. Omitting dramatized descriptions of the novel, Manju Borah makes the film realistic.

Fourth, Manju Borah omits the long arguments of Ladai Budhi and other women with the forest department employees, which are available in the novel. The director has omitted these long stories because they may hinder the understanding of the essence of the main story. This is Borah's achievement as a director.

Fifth, the novel tells the story of the love between Binay Phukan, a ranger in the Barahi forest, and a Mishing girl named Padmaja. The director Borah did not include this sub-story in the film either. Therefore, it can be seen that Manju Borah has deviated

from the text of Anil Panging's novel many times and created an original visual text.

There are examples of literature being influenced by the film in the same way that literature is influenced by film. We know that the popularity of Peter Jackson's *'Lord of the Rings'* played an active role in the rise of the waning genre of fantasy literature. Many writers have focused on the fantasy genre due to the popularity of Lord of the Rings. Similarly, the fifth book in the Harry Potter series was written at the time of the release, "Of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone", the first film of the series in 2001. The book describes the physical appearance of the characters Lee Jordan and Angelina Johnson. The author describes these two characters in his fifth book, which does not describe what these two characters are like in previous books. The research journal "Literature and Cinema Known Ways of Interaction in the 21st Century" states – "Some elements of the movie can be reflected in the literary work when the screen version of one part of the book is being produced simultaneously with the process of writing another part. For example, such a situation happened in a series of books about Harry Potter. The moment of the release of the first movie – 'Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (2001)' – they have coincided with the time of writing of the fifth book, "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix". In this book, two minor heroes – Lee Jordan (an actor – Michael Bakari Jordan) – and Angelina Johnson (an actress – Danielle Tabor) acquire new details in the description. Lee Jordan is described as a tall boy with dreadlocks on the head, and Angelina Johnson was given the following characteristics: a tall black girl with long

braids. Such details were published in books, thanks to the actors who played in the movie – until the fifth book, the author did not comment on the appearance of these characters in any way. Thus, the visual embodiment became inseparable from the literary source in many respects. In particular, Harry Potter's world exists not only consistently – at first in the book, and after- in cinema, but also parallel– in literature and cinema” (6)

Special Study: 3 (Assamese Short Story into Film)

Manju Borah's film 'Dao Huduni Methai' is based on the Assamese short story 'Dao Hudur Gan' by Rashmi Rekha Borah. The main message of this story is kept the same by the director and screenwriter Manju Borah. Like the story, the film strongly portrays the impact of rebellion and counter-rebellion on ordinary innocent people from the perspective of a rape victim. After the independence of India, the rise of Bodo nationalism kept Assam's social and political life in turmoil. Many innocent people in Assam lost their lives as a result of communal violence and insurgency. It is against this background that the film 'Dao Huduni Methai' is made. It is worth noting that the film does not analyze the political and social issues of the struggle for the self-establishment of the indigenous people of Northeast India. Instead, the film shows how social and political issues affect the lives of ordinary people.

Manju Borah has added many things to the film. For example, we can talk about the introductory scene of the film. This scene is not described in the original short story. The

opening scene of this film shows some terrorists capturing some innocent people; then a terrorist kills a man in front of everyone in a field and leaves. This scene is a vivid picture of a society crippled by terrorism.

Moreover, the director, Manju Borah, added some notable things at the beginning of the film to clarify the meaning of the main story. The director has shown the following note- “Insurgency related Fatalities have grown to an alarming number in the North-Eastern region of India over the past 35 years. Close to 40,000 people have lost their lives to communal violence and region-based disturbances, insurgency, counterinsurgency operations, and fratricidal wars between early comrades of militant organizations such as ULFA, UPDS, BLTR, and NDFB among others. The majority of the victims are common people who have nothing to do with either the insurgents or the counter-insurgency operations. They have no use for a sovereign Nagaland, and independent Assam or a separate Bodoland. They are the poor Adivasis, the wage-earning Laborers, and the villagers who are busy tilling the land for their precarious survival. Yet they are the ones who have to pay the maximum price.”

This informative note added after the introductory scene in this film is not in the original short story. This note, added by Manju Borah herself, clarifies the main statement and background of the film.

Manju Borah ignores some issues emphasized by short story writer Rashmi Rekha Borah. At the beginning of the story, the writer describes a burning fire. The storyteller speaks of the destructive terror of fire; on the other hand, she sees the excitement and joy of life amid the fire. The

burning fire is also beautifully portrayed as a metaphor for memory at the beginning of the story. However, the film does not reflect what the storyteller wants to convey through the description of 'fire'. It is very difficult to visualize a written text. Who would give the storyteller's description of the fire in the film? Only by visualizing the burning fire can no filmmaker signify the description of the fire given by the writer of the original written text. These are the reasons why the cinematization of literature is considered a challenging task. Regarding the cinematization of literature, the director Manju Borah said:

"The language of the pen and the language of the camera are completely different... A very nice story or novel where the mental conflicts of the characters and social statements are fascinating, but sometimes eventless narrative makes it difficult to film it." (Dutta 90)

Manju Borah has not included the end part of the short story. The film ends with the

death of the heroine of the story, Raimali. But the story shows that after Raimali's death, she becomes a bird and flies to a tree. Everyone in the family tells her to come down from the tree but she says, "I have no choice but to become Dao Hudu...The demon finds me – I have no choice but to sing songs calling death." (Bora, 43). The original story writer adds some elements of magic realism at the end of the short story. Maintaining artistic quality, it is almost impossible to incorporate the elements of magical realism into a small-budget film. Perhaps this is why Manju Borah has omitted the elements of magical realism in the main story.

At last, it can be said that by making literary material more tangible than printed pages, even to the unreached and the unlettered, on a vast scale and giving them an aesthetic delight, cinematic adaptations thereby endow a new route for the literary world.

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 **Dr. Subrat Jyoti Neog is an Associate Professor in the Department of Assamese, Tezpur University, Assam.**