

Article

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Cinema and Literature: A Study of *Laaz* as an Assamese Adaptation



Cinema is often regarded as one of the greatest creations of the modern era, its formal journey beginning in 1895. From its very inception, cinema has drawn inspiration from other art forms, particularly literature and painting. The French critic André Bazin, who enriched the discipline of film studies, asserts that theatre and literature are indispensable for the existence of cinema, claiming that cinema cannot survive without these two foundations. In world cinema, the earliest films frequently explored theological narratives. Works such as *The King of Kings* (1927) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) drew directly from the Bible. Similarly, Greek poetry and classical drama also found cinematic expression, underscoring the deep interconnection between cinema and literary traditions.

In Indian cinema, too, the literary foundation has been profound. Filmmakers like Satyajit Ray and Pramathesh Barua

adapted works of Rabindranath Tagore and Bibhutibhushan Chattopadhyay, thereby weaving literature into the fabric of Indian cinematic history. Assamese cinema also began with a literary root: *Jaymati* (1935), directed by Jyotiprasad Agarwala, was inspired by Lakshminath Bezbaruah's drama of the same name. Thus, it can be concluded that literature and cinema share a symbiotic relationship. As Ronald Perrier writes in *From Fiction to Film*, "The study of literature casts lights on the meaning in the film and the study of the film can illuminate the full value of the literature" (102).

Adaptation and Theory

In academic discourse, the transformation of literature into cinema is termed adaptation. The systematic analysis of such films falls under the discipline of adaptation theory, which investigates the methods, possibilities, and consequences of translating literature into

film. A filmmaker adapting a text may choose to follow the original closely or produce a version that diverges significantly.

Scholars generally categorize adaptation into three main types:

1. **Loose adaptation** – where the filmmaker prioritizes themes and content while departing from the source material.
2. **Literary adaptation** – where the text is transferred almost directly onto the screen with minimal cinematic intervention, often failing to highlight the filmmaker's originality.
3. **Faithful adaptation** – where cinematic techniques are employed to remain loyal to the spirit of the text while creating a distinctly cinematic experience.

Pradip Borah, in his discussion of adaptation, emphasizes the key elements that emerge when literature is filmed: the relationship between literature and cinema, the necessary methods of negotiation, and the shifts in meaning that arise from directorial choices, audience reception, and cinematic techniques.

***Laaz* as an Assamese Literary Adaptation**

Within Assamese cinema, Manju Borah's *Laaz* (2004) occupies a significant place in the discourse of adaptation. The film is based on Arun Goswami's short story *Maasmariya Sualir Laaz* and was released in November 2004. It went on to feature in the Indian Panorama and several international film festivals in 2005.

At 82 minutes, *Laaz* presents the struggles of Ila, a young girl from a fishing family, portrayed by the child artist Jaffrin. The narrative revolves around Ila's deep

interest in education despite the harsh socio-economic conditions of her family. Her mother, suffering from severe anaemia, becomes psychologically withdrawn and irritable, no longer showing the affection she once did. Her father, afflicted with respiratory illness, struggles to fish and provide for the household. Yet Ila, despite hardships, excels in her studies, consistently standing out in class.

The film's most poignant moment arrives when Ila confesses to her headmaster that she has been absent from school not out of neglect but because she lacks even a single undergarment to wear under her frock. Through this revelation, the film poignantly conveys the theme of dignity, shame, and the structural barriers to education for the marginalized.

Comparison of Story and Film

In the discussion of adaptation, the question of fidelity plays a crucial role and, in many cases, creates obstacles in the evaluation of the adapted text. In literature-based cinema, audiences often approach a film with prior familiarity, having already read or studied the original work. Consequently, viewers already possess knowledge of the plot, structure, and characters before encountering the cinematic version. Theorists have long debated the problem of fidelity to the source text.

Renowned American film theorist Linda Hutcheon argues that fidelity should not serve as the central criterion in adaptation studies:

“An adaptation's double nature does not mean however, the proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis. For a long

time, ‘fidelity criticism,’ as it came to be known, was the critical orthodoxy in adaptation studies, especially when dealing with canonical works such as those of Pushkin or Dante ... And, as George Bluestone pointed out early on, when a film becomes a financial or critical success, the question of its faithfulness is given hardly any thought” (Hutcheon 6–7).

Hutcheon thus emphasizes that the “double nature” of adaptation should not be confined to issues of fidelity. For decades, fidelity criticism functioned as a kind of critical orthodoxy in adaptation studies. Yet, as Bluestone notes, when a film achieves commercial or critical success, the issue of fidelity to the source rarely surfaces as a matter of concern.

At the core of Hutcheon’s and Bluestone’s perspectives lies the recognition that an adaptation should be understood as a new text in its own right. Even when the thematic concerns of the source remain intact, the filmmaker’s creative vision and cinematic language shape the adapted version into an original work. Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine the differences between the source text and the adaptation, rather than simply measuring the latter against the former.

Although *Laaz* is a largely faithful adaptation of Goswami’s story, Manju Borah introduces subtle but meaningful changes:

1. **Names and relationships:** Ila calls her mother *Mai* in the film, whereas in the story she calls her *Bou*. This shift carries cultural nuance, aligning the character with a broader Assamese sensibility.

2. **Narrative device:** The story begins with Ila’s own narration, whereas the film introduces a school inspector, impressed by Ila’s intelligence, to articulate the narrative framework. This addition universalizes Ila’s struggle and shifts the mode of storytelling from first-person to external validation.

3. **Setting and atmosphere:** Goswami’s story describes the village environment as littered with garbage and decay. The film, however, depicts a cleaner, aesthetically pleasing rural landscape, perhaps to avoid a one-dimensional representation of poverty and to highlight resilience.

4. **Cinematic embellishments:** The film opens with long shots of rivers, bamboo bridges, and prayers (*Tumi Chitta Britti Moro*), setting a lyrical tone. The use of high-angle shots of Ila’s father fishing, mid-shots of school prayers, and background sound of the *daba* enrich the cinematic texture. These elements are absent in the literary text.



5. **Tone of universality:** While the story remains grounded in a specific community and context, the film expands its scope to represent the plight of women and children across societies.

6. **Conclusion:** The ending remains largely faithful to the story. However, by visually presenting Ila's despair alongside prayers and background sounds, the film softens the bleakness of the text, lending it a more universal resonance.



And among the three modes of engagement of adaptation discussed by Hutcheon, the first is evident in the adaptation of *Laaz*. This is the shift from telling to showing—that is, from the verbal to the visual text. The “verbal” here also includes the printed text. Hutcheon writes:

“The most commonly considered adaptations are those that move from the telling to the showing mode, usually from print to performance” (Hutcheon 38).

In most cases, adaptations are made from oral or printed texts into visual or performative ones. The primary difference visible between these two types of texts lies in the creation of images. Thus, in such adaptations, the visual acquires considerable importance, which naturally brings cinematic techniques to the forefront. Theorists too, while discussing adaptations from print to performance, generally stress the visual dimension, emphasizing the movement from imagination to ocular perception. Through this process, the individual's imagination is concretized into an actual visual form.

Yet, alongside the visual, sound plays an equally significant role. Sound includes dialogues as well as the music and background score employed in the film. Both dialogue and music help audiences grasp the subject matter and become emotionally engaged with it. Hutcheon makes this clear:

“When theorists talk of adaptation from print to performance media, the emphasis is usually on the visual, on the move from imagination to actual ocular perception. But the aural is just as important as the visual to this move. First, there are, as Kamilla Elliott reminds us, many words spoken in films (2003: 78); then there are separate soundtracks that permit elements like voice-overs, music and noise to intermingle. For the adapter, music in film ‘functions as an emulsifier that allows you to dissolve a certain emotion and take it in a certain direction’ (in Ondaatje 2002: 122). Soundtracks in movies therefore enhance and direct audience response to characters and action, as they do in videogames, in which music also merges with sound effects both to underscore and to create emotional reactions. Film sound can be used to connect inner and outer states in a less explicit way than do camera associations” (Hutcheon 40–41).

The first and most obvious difference between the source text *Maasmariya Sualir Laaz* and its adapted version *Laaz* is thus their medium. The original is a printed text, while the adaptation is a visual text. Naturally, therefore, the reader's imagination is externalized and given concrete form through the cinematic medium. Alongside the visuals, dialogue and music—or sound—function as crucial devices that emotionally connect the audience with Ila's life. For instance, the

repeated use of Bihu songs and Assamese folk music in Ila's father's scenes brings the viewer closer to the cultural world of the Assamese rural society.

Significance of *Laaz* in Assamese Adaptation Studies

What makes *Laaz* unique is its dual influence. On the one hand, it faithfully adapts Arun Goswami's story while employing cinematic techniques to enhance narrative impact. On the other hand, the film itself has influenced the literary text: later editions of *Maasmariya Sualir Laaz* feature stills from the film on their cover. This rare case of reverse influence highlights the dynamic dialogue between literature and cinema in Assam.

Thus, *Laaz* demonstrates that adaptation is never a mere act of translation but one of transformation and negotiation. It illustrates how Assamese filmmakers navigate between fidelity to the text and cinematic creativity, producing works that resonate both locally and universally.

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Conclusion

The case of *Laaz* reveals the deep interrelationship between literature and cinema in Assamese cultural production. By retaining the essence of Arun Goswami's story while introducing cinematic variations, Manju Borah universalizes Ila's struggle and situates it within broader social concerns of gender, education, and poverty. The film exemplifies what adaptation theory calls a "faithful adaptation," yet it simultaneously introduces creative departures that enrich the narrative.

More importantly, the film's subsequent influence on the literary text demonstrates a circular exchange between page and screen, underscoring the mutual illumination that Perrier described. *Laaz*, therefore, is not only a significant Assamese film but also an important case study in adaptation theory, highlighting how cinema and literature continue to reshape one another in the evolving discourse of modern storytelling.