

Living Stories of Tagore: Fidelity and Transformation in the Adaptations of “Kabuliwallah” and “Punishment”

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Abstract

Adaptations borrow from canonical texts, transform the original texts and get a life of their own. In fact, numerous film/television adaptations become more popular than the original texts. This paper is a critical analysis of the television adaptations *Kabuliwallah* and *Punishment*, both of which are two episodes in the series titled *Stories* by Rabindranath Tagore that was critically acclaimed after it was released on the Epic channel in 2015. The director of the adaptation taken for study is Anurag Basu, who tailored it in agreement with his own visual schemes and rhythms. This article proposes to examine, as indicated in the title, the transformation that has occurred while the original text is being shifted to the visual medium. The research methodology is established on the adaptation theories of fidelity and transformation framed by the major theorists in the field. In the process, the issue of fidelity arises, and this article clarifies how the narrative method, plot, characterisation, and setting of the original text are captured in the television adaptation, though certain changes have been made due to the change in the medium. From the findings, it is concluded that a new work of art is created after passing through innumerable ups and downs.

Keywords: *Fidelity and Transformation; television adaptations; original text; visual medium; a new work of art*

1. Introduction

This article critically discusses how Television adapts a work of art, transforms it according to the contemporary needs and tastes of society and makes history, though reproducing the original to a certain extent with respect to characters, plots, settings, and narratives in the two continuous episodes of the small-screen adaptations of *Stories by Rabindranath Tagore*, directed by Anurag Basu and telecast as a web series-Season 1 on the Epic channel in 2015.

<https://www.epicon.in/tv-shows/stories-by-rabindranath-tagore/season-1>

Jonathan Bignell, in his introduction on adaptation and television historiography, says that the story becomes a visual medium rather than a text. Henceforth, it co-opts and assimilates the elements borrowed into technology and ultimately launches its home within a larger media milieu. Due to this progression, adaptations have become dynamic redefinitions that satisfy the viewers. It is mentioned that it is “similar to the way adaptation works in its Darwinian, evolutionary context, where organisms claim a niche to which they

are best fitted, and continually develop in a complex competitive environment” Bignell, 2019, p. 149). In due course, television adjusts the written texts with collaborative periodic stories, visual narration, presentation, production restraints, and the preferences of the audience.

Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s (1861-1941) literary works and his revolutionary ideas have never become obsolete, even after three centuries that have crossed myriad changes in the field of literature as well as film adaptations. Tagore caught the attention of the world by receiving the Nobel Prize for *Gitanjali*, a collection of religious lyrics, in 1913. He is a multi-talented person who has exposed his extraordinary skills in poetry, drama, prose, music, acting and painting too at a later stage in his life. Nearly one hundred stories were written by Tagore in collections like *Galpaguchchha* (1891-1895), *Glimpses of Bengal Life* (1913), *Hungry Stones* (1916), *Mashi* (1918), *Broken Ties* (1925), *The Parrot’s Training* (1944), and *The Runaway* (1959). What makes him interesting and his works adaptable for movies/television series is the fact that Tagore has an intense sense of curiosity about

anything fresh and ground-breaking, and hence cinema is no exception. We learn from Ahmed (2022) that

Tagore did not hesitate to temper his works in order to accommodate them to the specificities of the celluloid medium. Hence, it can be safely said that Tagore introduced the issues of change, modification, and improvisation (in literary works), arguably for the first time in cinema history, that have later formed the basis of adaptation discourse in terms of inter-media transmutation of literature. (p. 107)

2. Literature Review: Fidelity and Transformation

Directors are in need of innovative ideas for their films and, henceforth, grab them from canonical texts belonging to a different century. It is well understood that "a literary adaptation creates a new story; it is not the same as the original; it takes on a new life, as indeed do the characters" (Hayward, 2022, p.4). Concurrently, a filmmaker can also construe the source text by retaining the root of the original as is outlined by means of a narrative mode of adaptation, "fidelity and transformation," as contended by Dudley Andrew. It is also stated that adaptations 'must intuit and reproduce the feeling of the original'. Such an argument is "the most frequent and most tiresome" (1984, p.100), to which this paper attempts to offer an elucidation through two television adaptations based on the writings of Tagore, "Kabuliwallah" and "Punishment". These episodes are selected to argue that the choice of the media and the stars will determine the makeover process of adaptation, and also, it will remove segments which have been adjudged "uncinematographic or of no interest to the viewers" (Hayward, 2022, p.5). In addition, Cartmell and Whelehan (2007) observe on television adaptations that

Many adaptors chose to persist with well-established televisual practices, retaining as many as possible of the words of the source text, reproducing dialogue and translating some descriptive passages into spoken words. (p.185)

In the course of the study, it is doubted "whether strict fidelity is even possible" (Stam, 2000, p. 55), and it is therefore understood that the adaptation constantly simplifies "the ideological underpinnings of a compulsive infatuation with fidelity" (Chopra, 2017, p.176). It is specified by Cobb (2008, pp.281-282) that there is an expectation of faithfulness among the shared audience of a book and the film. Such a prospect

will be confined to a 'compare-and-contrast analysis' that should be avoided. Instead, the focus has to be on the shift to 'a language of authenticity' to make the adaptation successful. It is evident that the popular adaptations confront easy fidelity-based judgment. On these grounds, the technical versions of the text have to be viewed prolifically as a forceful, interrelated presentation of associations between texts, rather than a derivative copy. Henceforward, to move away from dualistic accuracy, intertextuality is indispensable.

It is argued by Imelda Whelehan that the academic study of literary adaptations for film and television has enlarged collective respect but continues to face prejudgment, particularly within English and Media Studies. The determined dominance of the fidelity model has been the major issue recognised, which judges adaptations predominantly by how authentically they replicate the implications, themes, and standards of the basic text. Henceforth, this method is criticised and suggests a transition from fidelity-based criticism towards a more malleable and interdisciplinary understanding of adaptation. Ultimately, the readers are encouraged to identify the diverse expressive dimensions of writing, film, and television, while questioning rooted preferences that privilege scripts over screen forms. Further, it is argued that although research on adaptations has advanced gradually from the 1960s, it remains between literary criticism and film studies. Further, the author elucidates that these two have resisted giving a stable approach between them. Instead, many critics have sought to establish similarities by often comparing novelists with film auteurs (Cartmell & Whelehan, 2013, pp.3-4).

Based on Thomas M. Leitch's (2008, pp.22-24, 29-31) views on the two futures of Adaptation Studies, the author identifies two possible futures for adaptation studies. He argues that one prospect is controlling and outdated, while the other is more forceful and rationally creative. Accordingly, one is the Traditional Future in which Adaptation is studied under the Sign of Literature. Leitch calls this a "bleak and servile future" because adaptations exist only to serve literature rather than being treasured as original works in their own right. Whereas the other is the new future where adaptation is analysed under the sign of Literacy that is directed to a dynamic future. By comparing both, he concludes that though the first is supreme, aims at fidelity, where reading is focused and adaptation is

evaluated as secondary, the second is open to reinterpretations, rewritten and transformed, an independent creative act, focuses not just on reading but also writing, equal interaction between literature and films and critical thinking, along with creative engagement are concentrated fairly than simply stabilizing literary authority.

As stated by Linda Hutcheon and O'Flynn, a film adaptation is the adapter's creative interpretation or interpretive creation of the novel work, moulded by the director's artistic visualisation, wherein social, ethnic, political, along with historical situations influence its form and meaning (2012, p.18). Furthermore, it is opined by her that, as a substitute for viewing changes from the source as faults, the analysis of adaptations must discover why these changes occur based on the revisions in setting, characterisation, narrative structure, or plot that often mirror the demands of the different medium and the cultural milieu of production. Through this approach, adaptations can be recognised as self-regulating creations that produce new meanings while preserving an association with their source text.

According to McFarlane (1996), adaptation should be considered as a transformation from one medium to another rather than as an unassuming imitation of the source text. Therefore, a distinction has been shown between transferable and non-transferable elements that are termed narrative and enunciation. The first one is the happenings, characters, and actions, which can mainly be shifted between media, and the other is the mode in which the story is communicated. As it is understood, literature and films practise dissimilar dramatic techniques; enunciation must be reconstructed fairly rather than directly transferred. Similar to Hutcheon's opinions, it can be found that McFarlane also sees two valuable lines of investigation:

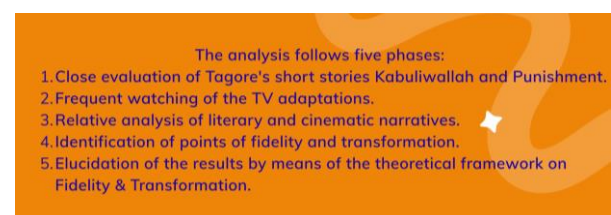
(a) in the transposition process, just what is it possible to transfer or adapt from novel to film; and (b) what key factors other than the source novel have exercised an influence on the film version of the novel? (p. 22)

3. Materials and Methodology

The primary materials for this research are the two short stories of Rabindranath Tagore, "Kabuliwallah" and "Punishment", along with their parallel television adaptations, *Stories by Rabindranath Tagore*, directed by Anurag Basu. From this anthology series, only two consecutive episodes are taken for the study. These

two texts and their analogous screen versions form the core corpus for relative analysis. The secondary sources comprise books, reviews, and journal articles along with adaptation theories and screen aesthetics. An analysis of the adaptation theories by Dudley Andrew, Robert Stam, Imelda Whelehan, Deborah Cartmell, Linda Hutcheon, O'Flynn, Thomas Leitch and Brian McFarlane provides the proposed and conceptual groundwork for the exploration.

The analysis implements a qualitative research methodology that utilises comparative textual and graphical analysis to observe the association between Tagore's original short stories and their adaptations. This approach identifies essentials that are retained, changed, omitted, or introduced fresh all through the adaptation process. Consequently, precise attention is given to the narrative method, plot, characterisation, and setting of both the primary sources through converging on the televisual elements such as: Mise-en-scène, Cinematography, Camera angles and movement, Lighting, Costume, Sound and music Performance and acting styles. The critical outline is grounded on Dudley Andrew's theory of adaptation, particularly his concepts of Fidelity and Transformation. Henceforward, the concept of fidelity is used to gauge the level that has been preserved in the visual analysis. Also, the theory of transformation is employed for examining the innovative modifications introduced by the director to accommodate the pictorial medium and the audience expectations within the existing socio-cultural contexts.



Image

Source:

<https://www.canva.com/>

4. Narrative Structure

Although the narrative structure of the original text is in the first person, the "Kabuliwallah" episode brings to visuals the thought process of Mini's father, the unnamed protagonist, who is a writer. His daily routine revolves around his study room and many conversations with Mini as well as his wife are centered there, to which the director has done full justice. His wife, an unnamed character, is only in the background

in the original text and her retorts to Mini are narrated by the protagonist, whereas, the screen brings her to life with added dialogues in different scenes. Her jeering about the fruit seller and her 5-year-old daughter's meaningful retort that he was not a vagabond is an addition on the screen that brings out a social message by the youngest in the story: that all people have equal rights in society. Her role as a dutiful wife is brilliantly portrayed. The flashback method has been utilized by the director in the opening scene itself for effective visual representation, where Kabuliwallah meets the protagonist during Mini's wedding celebrations and henceforth, jumps backwards to flesh out the dramatic rendezvous of Mini with the dry fruit seller, where Mini calls out the rhythmic "Kabuliwallah, Kabuliwallah!" (Tagore, 1994, p. 130), in a childishly mesmerizing voice. In contrast, the next consecutive episode, "Punishment", skips the flashback narrative of the source text. It is an entirely different story of Tagore, but is amalgamated with "Kabuliwallah", and we visualise that the latter ends with Mini's marriage to Upendra. Here, the original text is narrated in the third person, and the director makes Mini the protagonist here too, whereas in the original text, the role is played by a revolutionary character, Chandara. The concluding scene has a voice-over narration by the editor of the next episode, which is about domestic violence and the consequent murder in the story. Thus, the techniques utilized for narrating both these stories satisfy the narrative technique discussion of Katerina Perdikaki (2016, p. 78) who observes that "monstration, i.e. the deployment of visuals, is inherent in the cinematic mode" and further declaration that "the way in which the verbal and the visual modes interact" to produce meaning ultimately, demystifies the theories on fidelity to the source text.

5. Plot

Exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution are the five factors which develop the plot of a narrative. In the episode, "Kabuliwallah", the televisual portrayal begins towards the closing scene of the previous episode, when Rahamat is released from Jalpaiguri Sub-Divisional jail and goes straight to meet Mini. Wedding arrangements for Mini are in full swing when Rahamat enters and meets her father. The protagonist is reminded of Mini as a five-year-old and how she got acquainted with the fruit seller. Rahamat has left his daughter in Afghanistan to earn for his livelihood, and this separation has kindled his filial

affection towards Mini. At the climax, on a dreadful day, he is arrested and sentenced to a long-term jail punishment. However, he meets Mini on her wedding day and later receives some money from Mini's generous father to travel to Afghanistan to meet his own daughter. The narrative closes here in the source text, whereas in the episode, the viewers get a chance to visualize Mini's marriage to Upendra, the hero of the consecutive episode, "Punishment". The next episode begins with a naive Mini's responsibilities as a daughter-in-law who is left to deal with her haughty sister-in-law all alone. Devendra and Upendra are affectionate brothers owning a flourishing tea estate. Fate plays hard in their lives, resulting in the seizure of their estate by the British. A drastic change occurs when the viewers are left to visualize the horrible death of Radha in the climax scene. Devendra, in a fit of fury during an argument with his wife, hits her with a vase, using his full strength, and she is thrown from the first floor to the ground and dies a wretched death. Upendra, whose only intention was to save his brother from the sentence, throws the blame on Mini. Mini, a passive wife, is dumbfounded and never speaks after that scene. The action falls when Mini is arrested and faces trial. The resolution happens when Mini refuses to open up, even after Upendra tries to take the blame on himself and ultimately, the elder brother accepts that he has committed the murder. Mini accepts the death sentence wholeheartedly without uttering a word, whereas in the text, the last words "to hell with him" (Tagore, 1994, p. 151) create a shiver down the spine of the reader. As Linda Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2006, p. 34) have stated in their seminal work, "a text can not only survive the shift from one form to another, but it can also thrive in ways not previously possible in the original form". One such form is this small screen adaptation.

6. Characterization

Casting is vital in a film, just like a director. An actor should possess the skill to fit the character and bring life to the story. The character is expected to propel the plot to the final resolution and, henceforth, should cater to a dynamic acting style that is decided by the director to match the film's tone. From the view of the audience, in an adaptation, only an actor who builds the quintessence of the character in the fiction deserves to be appreciated. Pitches observe that Stanislavsky's approaches to acting, reveals how the character is developed to become a complete whole

“which ‘bit by bit’ sets the actor on the road to inspiration” and therefore under certain advantageous conditions, “stimulate unconscious creativity”, furthermore, “the actor’s behaviour on stage appears second nature, spontaneous and real” (Pitches, 2005, pp. 26-27). With the plot in the backdrop, the actors become “to some extent autonomous beings”, and they are so because “of the televisual codes and individual scenes/episodes that construct them”, though they partially recapitulate the expressions of the text (Pearson, 2007, p.43). But Tagore’s characters are introduced by the ubiquitous narrator. He peeks into their minds and hearts and speaks for them. But in the case of the audio-visual text, the characters of Tagore are brought to life with an alluring beauty in a traditional Bengali background. In “Kabuliwalla”, the writer and his wife are “rather progressive people” and this is portrayed magnificently when Mini doesn’t understand the statement, “Are you going to your *śvaśurbāri*?” (Tagore, 1994, p. 132). This extends to the subsequent episode where Mini’s books are sold due to the financial crisis and undeniably reveals that she has been brought up as a modern woman and also shows willingness in committing herself to family responsibilities. Her bonding with a stranger is atypical in an entirely conventional ambience. The dry fruit vendor develops filial affection because he misses his daughter in Afghanistan. His fatherly affection is revealed through the hilarious games between them on a regular basis. In the final scene, the writer understands the real bond between them and permits him to meet Mini before the wedding. The viewers too understand the generosity of the writer when he gives away his savings that has been secured for the wedding celebrations to Kabuliwallah for travelling to Afghanistan.

In the episode “Punishment”, the character Mini, now addressed as Mrs Mrinalini, propels the entire plot by fighting silently against male supremacy, though it takes her life as an ultimatum. She is an epitome of equanimity and does not yield to her husband’s transformation, which stands as proof of Tagore’s progressive ideas. Also, the two brothers reveal fraternal bonding to a greater extent. Upendra in the text responds to Ramlochan, “*Thākur*, if I lose my wife I can get another, but if my brother is hanged, how can I replace him?” (Tagore, 1994, p. 145). This is proof of his love towards Devendra. Devendra is seen to be indecisive during a major crisis in the family and remains in the background of the episode, as in the

text, and lets horrible events happen before him. The director has removed the character Ramlochan, and Mr Montgomery is an addition to the screen who engages in fraudulent means to seize the tea estate. Radha, Devendra’s uncivilized wife who is killed by her husband in a fit of fury, shatters the peaceful ambience of the home before her murder and even after her death, terrible consequences follow till Mrinalini is hanged to death. Of all the other aspects in the adaptation, characterisation maintains fidelity to the exceptionality of the key characters labelled in the short story.

7. Settings

Visual story-telling is engaged by the film-maker through setting of the background including properties, costume and make-up of the artistes, cinematographic lighting and the movement of the characters across the screen. Cinema’s predominant focus on mis-en-scene can never be overlooked as Tagore himself “promotes preserving the ‘spirit’ of literary texts in adaptation rather than its verbal content.” (Ahmed, 2022, p. 108). Such as in the case of the episode “Kabuliwallah”, the setting of Mini’s home which is behind a mountain and though the props reveal their artificiality, the bright camera light that is truly an all-embracing contribution towards the aesthetics of the visual medium matches the jubilant nature of Mini of the text. Mini’s house, father’s study room, dining hall and the green lawn are too visual clues for the perfectly set ambience. Chiaroscuro technique is put into use, effectively during the wedding scene where against the dark background of the study room, the camera lingers over the bride’s face. Costumes typically represent Bengali culture and the make-up is so mild that one wouldn’t get a clue about it. The quick and jumping movements of Mini, her mother’s slow-paced yet charming activities, the exceptionally thoughtful actions of the father, as well as the light hearted and at the same time grim manoeuvres of Kabuliwallah seem to allure the audience. The corresponding lines about the titular protagonist, “Dressed in dirty baggy clothes, pugree on his head, bag hanging from his shoulder, and with three or four boxes of grapes in his hands, a tall Kabuliwallah was ambling along the road” (Tagore, 1994, p. 130), have been manifested on screen faithfully. Concurrently, in “Punishment” the setting of the in-law’s home is almost darker throughout, than the previous episode to reflect the desolation of their family relationship. Contrastingly, in the scene where

Upendra and Mini return on a carriage after visiting her ailing mother, the court proceeding scenes are totally brighter. The cold ambience of the jail is visualized by the low-key lighting that focuses on Upendra and Mini to reflect melancholy in their present condition. Further, the camera is angled on both these characters, fluctuating between them to create the chiaroscuro effect.

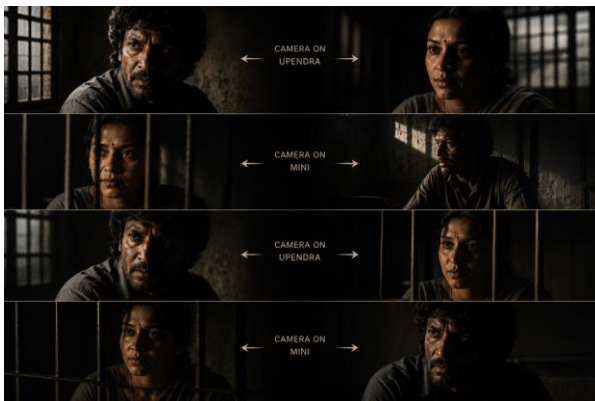


Image Source: ChatGPT (Chiaroscuro Effect on Upendra & Mini)

Limited props have been used except for the kitchen vessels and as for the make-up, all characters are cinematographed dull-looking to befit the bloody scene that is enveloped by the unforeseen betrayal. As Perdikaki (2017) says in his article,

The emphasis placed on setting in these cases, which results in the concomitant adaptation shifts, relates to an effort to reproduce the bygone era as convincingly as possible so as to ensure the audience's full immersion in the story world. (p. 8)

The director draws the attention of the audience by recapitulating the text drafted in a totally different period and to different readers.

8. Result and Discussion

From the study made on the two consequent episodes of Tagore's television adaptation, we find that the narrative technique has been modified, names of the characters have been changed, role of Mini's mother have been tinted, flashbacks and voice over narration are an additional innovation to suit the visual medium. The director has scrupulously transformed the plot of "Punishment" in scenes of murder, trial and the final execution of Mini. Further, the professions of the brothers too undergo a variation from farming to owning an estate, to manifest the significant continuity of the two episodes. Studying the characterisation in

both the episodes, we find that the visualisation of the major characters, Mini, Kabuliwallah, Devendra, Upendra and Radha matches the written text. Transformations are made on Mini's mother's presence that gets an impressive picture in the visual medium; the addition of Mr Montgomery as a new character to trigger the dreadful plot of the story and omission of Ramlochan. Further, as we observe the mis-en-scene, it reveals the inevitability of the background, costumes, make-up and the additional properties on a monitor to bring the passage to life. We find that the display is exceedingly colourful throughout in the first episode, whereas a sole light source is utilised to produce a darker background in the subsequent one for creating the visual effect. No doubt, this is a primary requisite of the new medium. Thus, it is apparent in both these episodes that "how mis-en-scene – lighting, camera angles and other cinematic treatments – can add new dimensions to an adaptation" (Sen, 2017, pp. 121-122).

While discussing the representation of women in the Web Series, it is analysed that the director has depicted dominant womenfolk as equally competent as those of the writer. He has captured "strong female characters who break the patriarchal stereotypes and emerge as progressive, empowering and resilient women" (Yadav, 2025, p. 128). Needless to say, the director shows fidelity to the original plots of the two texts, yet not without transformation. As Robert Stam (2000) observes,

The literary text is not a closed, but an open structure (or, better, structuration, as the later Barthes would have it) to be reworked by a boundless context. The text feeds on and feeds into an infinitely permutating intertext, which is seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation. (p.57)

This sort of permutation reaches the viewers who are entirely in a different cultural context, and it can be ameliorated by another director too in a further cultural context. In accordance with these changes, it can be agreed with Iain Robert Smith's emphasis in the introduction of his work, "the blurring of boundaries is ultimately more productive" (2009, p.4). If boundaries are imprecise due to the challenges faced by the director, a creative reinterpretation occurs that enriches both the source and the adapting medium. Henceforward, "Kabuliwallah" and "Punishment" exist both as a short story and a television adaptation. Eventually, the transformation has become more

productive and newer possibilities have been formed than keeping the classifications completely distinct.

Putting forth the limitations of the paper, it is mentioned that in the cinematic medium, songs occupy a special place to entertain the audience. The study has not analysed their role and categories. MacFarlane (1996, p. 146) states that he hadn't paid attention to the musical dimension of the films though the various transferable and non-transferable elements have been analysed in his work. It is interpreted by Hutcheon that films stand alone from stages in various ways. As it is discussed, the separate sound effects of film allow music, voice-overs, and the non-vocal to amalgamate (2004, p. 110).

9. Conclusion

This research article has studied the television adaptations of the two short stories of Tagore with regard to the theories of fidelity and transformation. Through the detailed examination of the primary and secondary resources, it is explored that the characterisation of Kabuliwallah, Mini, Upendra, Devendra and Radha is reproduced precisely, and the major female character Mini displays audacity in her decision as narrated by the author of the text. In addition, the director has removed descriptions that are unsuitable for the small screen and added sections which highlight the mood of the speaker, enhance the setting, carry the plot forward and shape the narrative techniques. Also, the series is situated in a cultural context that is quite far away from the period of Tagore's writings. As a result, the core meaning of the original text is reproduced by transforming it to match the medium specificity and the varied cultural context. On the whole, the significance of the findings has a larger impact on future research of film/television adaptations. It is found that fewer theorists have investigated this area of research, and more contributions are needed to elaborate on the theories, as well as practice in Southeast Asia. In the future, practitioners will comprehend the broader implications of adaptations as a creative interpretation rather than just a reproduction.

To discuss the limitations, it is noted that though sixteen short stories are screened in the series, only two episodes have been taken for analysis. Additionally, many other television adaptations have not been researched yet. As briefly mentioned in the introductory paragraph, we observe that the new-

fangled medium will justify by itself the question of fidelity to the author's words and the setbacks arising out of transformation. Based on the findings, it is concluded that the most sought-after short stories of a Nobel Laureate have taken a novel appearance on the screen and are still fresh and alive.

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