A Comparison of "Concerning My Daughter" and Its Film Adaptation

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Abstract

In recent years, South Korea's film industry has grown rapidly. Among its many films, adaptations of novels make up a notable portion. Well-known examples include "Silenced" and "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982". Among these, both the novel and film "Concerning My Daughter" have also secured their places in the market. The novel *Concerning My Daughter* has been called "a mother's monologue questioning the entire era". After its publication, it sparked significant response in South Korea. It won the prestigious Shin Dong-yup Prize for Literature in 2018 and is regarded as the most discussed feminist work since "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982. The film "Concerning My Daughter" was released in 2024, directed by Lee Mi-rang and starring Oh Min-ae, Im Se-mi, and Ha Yun-kyung. Using very subtle and restrained shot language, the film deeply discusses social issues such as mother-daughter relationships, aging crises, and LGBTQ acceptance. After its release, it sparked broad social discussion and resonance and has been praised as a profound and moving work of realism. Based on intertextuality theory, this paper compares the novel and film "Concerning My Daughter". It finds that although the two differ significantly in their approaches, both portray vivid and full-bodied characters. Each in its own way allows the audience to genuinely understand the themes of "acceptance" and "understanding".

Keywords

Concerning My Daughter, Intertextuality studies, Generational differences, Film adaptation strategies

Introduction

Concerning My Daughter is a full-length novel written by South Korean mid-career author Kim Hye-jin, first published in South Korea in 2017. With its acute social insight and profound empathy, the book deeply explores contemporary South Korean societal issues such as mother-daughter relationships, the empty nest phenomenon among the elderly, and the struggles of the LGBTQ + community, generating widespread social resonance. The Chinese edition was introduced and published by Guangxi Normal University Press in 2022. Through extensive inner monologues of the mother, the novel sharply and realistically portrays the vast generational gap and emotional rift. It is not only a private story between a mother and daughter but also a broader social panorama depicting the elderly in empty nests, gender discrimination, and the social pressures faced by homosexual individuals. Author Kim Hye-jin successfully situates individual family conflicts within the framework of larger structural social issues, revealing the epochal roots behind personal predicaments. The novel *Concerning My Daughter* has been hailed as "a mother's soliloquy that questions the entire era". Following its publication, it generated significant resonance in South Korea. It received the 2018 South Korean Shin Dong-yup Literature Award and was recognized as the most-discussed feminist text since"Kim Ji-young, Born 1982".

The film adaptation of Concerning My Daughter was released in 2024, directed by Lee Mi-rang and

starring Oh Min-ae, Im Se-mi, and Ha Yoon-kyung. With its exceptionally subtle and restrained visual language, the film delves deeply into social issues such as mother-daughter relationships, the crisis of aging, and homosexual identity. After its release, it sparked widespread social discussion and resonance, earning acclaim as a profoundly moving work of realism.

The film tells the story of tension and deep affection between an ordinary elderly care worker mother and her independent daughter. The mother, diligent throughout her life, firmly believes that traditional values ensure her daughter's happiness. However, she discovers that her daughter's life has taken a path entirely different from her expectations, not only does the daughter hold an unstable job, but she also lives with her same-sex partner, Re-in [1]. Unable to understand her daughter's choices, the mother is filled with anxiety, fear, and a sense of alienation. At the same time, a childless woman living a lonely and bleak old age whom the mother cares for at work, seems to foreshadow the mother's fears for her daughter's future. A childless woman loses her place at the care facility due to financial hardship. The mother steps forward to advocate for her. Over time, this advocacy effort becomes deeply intertwined with her own difficulties in facing her daughter. In the end, these two parallel events compel the mother to begin breaking down the beliefs she has held onto all her life and to reconsider the meanings of love, family, and what truly constitutes "normal".

Theoretical foundations of literary adaptation

Film adaptation of novels is an extremely rich and widely discussed field, involving numerous theoretical and practical approaches. These include, but are not limited to, theories of faithful adaptation, hierarchical theories, and theories of intertextuality. These theories not only assist screenwriters and directors in their creative work but also guide critics in analyzing adapted works. Among them, the theory of intertextuality has drawn considerable attention. Intertextuality theory represents a revolutionary shift in the field of literary criticism in the 20th century, with its core proposition fundamentally challenging the traditional understanding of textual independence. First introduced in the 1960s by French critic Julia Kristeva, who drew upon and developed Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism and Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic perspectives, this theory emphasizes that no text exists in isolation. Instead, every text absorbs, transforms, and responds to other texts, collectively forming a vast, dynamic, and boundless network of texts. This theory provides an exceptionally profound and liberating perspective for the study of film adaptation [2-4].

Kristeva points out that a text is like a "mosaic", whose meaning is always composed of fragments from other texts [5]. This means that whether it is a novel, film, painting, or music, any cultural product grows from the soil of pre-existing texts. Through methods such as quotation, allusion, imitation, parody, or even refutation, they establish countless connections with other texts.

Applying this theory to film adaptation leads to a revolutionary conclusion: an adapted film should not be simply regarded as a "derivative" or "offspring" of the original work but should be seen as an independent, new text coexisting with the original. It is no longer a one-way, hierarchical process of "replication" but a two-way, equal process of "dialogue". Film adaptation thus becomes active reading, a personal interpretation, and a critical commentary on the original work [6].

The greatest contribution of intertextuality theory to adaptation practice lies in its liberating nature. First, it liberates the adaptor. The adaptor is no longer burdened by the moral constraint of "faithful reproduction" but is encouraged to assume an active "authorial" role, engaging with classic original texts through the lens of contemporary values, aesthetic tastes, and social concerns. This transforms adaptation into a creative act of interpretation [7].

Second, it revitalizes classic texts. From the perspective of intertextuality, the meaning of a text

is not fixed upon its completion but continuously generated and transformed through subsequent citations, adaptations, and reinterpretations. Each adaptation presents an opportunity for the classic to be "reborn", allowing it to regain new vitality within a new cultural context.

Ultimately, intertextuality theory fundamentally reshapes the relationship between film and literature. The two are no longer in a hierarchical relationship of source and derivative or branch and leaf but exist as equal nodes within the cultural network. They nourish and interpret each other. When audiences appreciate an adapted film, they experience not only a single story but also the complex interplay and resonance between two artistic forms, two temporal perspectives, and even multiple cultural symbols.

In summary, intertextuality theory transcends the traditional debate over "fidelity" and elevates adaptation to a highly creative and reflective cultural practice. It teaches us that true adaptation is not replication but dialogue, not an end, but a beginning. Each adaptation allows an ancient text to speak again through a new medium, participating in the endless circulation of cultural meaning. However, it is also important to emphasize here: There is no "single correct" theory of adaptation. The best approach to adaptation is to respect the spirit of the original work while fearlessly embracing the unique power of cinematic art, creating an experience that is both familiar and entirely new [8].

The current state of Korean novel adaptations in film and television

In recent years, adaptations of Korean novels into films have become an indispensable and core force within the Korean film industry, characterized by their far-reaching influence, commercial success, and artistic value. These adaptations no longer merely provide entertainment but also serve as a "social mirror", capturing the national sentiment with precision and sparking widespread social discussion and change.

At the heart of this phenomenon lies a precise grasp of contemporary relevance. Film studios tend to select novels that have already resonated socially as blueprints for adaptation, ensuring that the core of their stories directly addresses the pressing social issues in contemporary Korea [9].

For example, the film "Silenced", adapted from Gong Ji-young's novel of the same name, stands as a landmark case. The movie not only exposed the sexual violence tragedy at a school for deaf and mute students in Gwangju, but also through its significant social impact, directly contributed to the revision of South Korea's Special Act on the Punishment of Sexual Violence Crimes, commonly referred to as the "silenced law". This film perfectly illustrates the powerful capability of Korean film adaptations to draw from reality and, in turn, influence reality.

Another phenomenal work, "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982", achieved widespread recognition by precisely adapting Cho Nam-joo's novel of the same name. It portrays the pervasive gender discrimination experienced by an ordinary woman within her family, workplace, and society. Successfully pushing the issue of "feminism" to the forefront of public discourse. This not only sparked extensive discussion in South Korea but also across East Asia as a whole. South Korean film adaptations of novels have thus evolved into an efficient cultural converter, transforming social reflections from literature into widely accessible and compelling mass visual products [10].

Comparison between novel and film

Shift in perspective

First, in the transition from novel to film, the most notable change is the shift in narrative perspective. The novel is entirely narrated from the mother's first-person point of view. This narrative perspective creates a unique emotional tension and cognitive dimension in the novel, profoundly influencing the reader's perception of the story, characters, and themes.

From the standpoint of emotional resonance, the

novel's narrative perspective allows readers to more directly enter the mother's inner world. Her shock upon learning of her daughter's "coming out", her worries about her daughter's future, and her struggles between traditional beliefs and maternal love are all authentically portrayed through detailed psychological descriptions. For instance, her discomfort upon seeing her daughter's intimacy with her partner, and her inner conflict while secretly looking through her daughter's belongings - these private psychological activities enable readers to empathize with her pain and contradictions, rather than simply labeling her as "open-minded" or "conservative". This makes the emotional transmission more penetrating. In contrast, the film is shot entirely from a third-person perspective from beginning to end. It does not use the mother's inner thoughts as voiceover narration but simply keeps the camera focused on the mother, narrating the story with an objective and calm approach. While this may reduce the sense of immersion compared to the text, it allows for a more tangible experience of the generational differences. It also generates a certain level of resonance and sympathy for the daughter, beyond just the mother.

In terms of character portrayal, the novel's narrative perspective renders the mother's character more three-dimensional. The narrative reveals both her stubbornness as a traditional woman, such as insisting that her daughter has "deviated from the right path", and her hidden tenderness, like quietly preparing her daughter's favorite food or shedding tears when her daughter faces setbacks. This self-revealing narration breaks the stereotype of the "mother" role, showcasing her complexity as an individual. At the same time, the daughter's character is indirectly enriched through the mother's observations and memories, making the tension between mother and daughter feel more authentic. In contrast, the film's approach to character portrayal is somewhat simpler. Through direct visual shots and imagery, the audience can encounter each distinct character more immediately and clearly. While the novel depicts its characters with varying shades of darkness and somber tones, the film, though less reliant on such tonal descriptions, allows the audience to perceive vivid and dynamic characters through its restrained and somber atmosphere.

Furthermore, the novel's perspective lends greater depth to the themes of "generational divide" and "self-awakening". In the story, the mother's narrative evolves from initial incomprehension and resistance to a gradual attempt to understand her daughter. This transformation is fully presented through her point of view. By following the shifts in her awareness, readers can more profoundly grasp how traditional beliefs constrain individuals and how love and understanding can bridge divide. This makes the novel's exploration of family and identity more compelling and prompts readers to reflect on their own relationships with loved ones. In contrast, the film's treatment of these themes may lack some of the novel's tension, but through its linear narrative structure, it allows the audience to gradually sense the changes in the protagonist's state of mind. It is evident that the novel and the film differ significantly in their narrative perspectives. However, these distinct viewpoints achieve similar emotional resonance, create vivid characters, and enable both audiences to smoothly engage with the themes.

Plot changes

In addition to the change in perspective, another notable feature in the film is its omission of a significant conflict between the mother and her daughter's same-sex partner, Re-in, which appears in the novel. This deletion represents a precise adaptation based on the characteristics of the visual medium. Endowing the work with unique artistic value and allowing the narrative to focus more closely on the emotional core and thematic expression. The removal of this conflict enables the film to break away from the traditional narrative framework of "conflict - climax - resolution", creating a linear and more fluid narrative rhythm throughout the movie. In the

novel, intense arguments and emotional distance arising from differing perspectives, while enhancing dramatic tension, can easily fragment the narrative. Such fragmentation is manageable in written form - readers can simply turn the page, but in film, if not handled carefully, the entire work may feel disjointed. By omitting this representative conflict from the book and instead using more subdued visual language. Showing Re-in continuing to work after the clash, the daughter arriving to comfort Re-in upon learning about it and then confronting her mother. The film adopts a softened approach to conflict. This makes the narrative more concise, prevents the plot from becoming overly explosive and distracting the audience. And ensures the story consistently revolves around the central theme of "the mother's understanding and acceptance". This aligns well with the narrative demands of the film's limited runtime.

In terms of emotional focus, the film's removal of the conflict intensifies the theme of "silent empathy". While the novel uses intense confrontations to depict the generational divide between mother and daughter, the film shifts its emphasis to the mother's subtle actions. Without stark opposition to arguments, the audience can pay closer attention to the emotional shifts hidden beneath the mother's silence: From her initial unease upon seeing her daughter with her partner, to the gradual, subtle changes as she begins to accept her daughter's partner. This expression of "profound feeling in quiet moments" makes the emotional bond between mother and daughter appear gentler, renders the mother's transformation more convincing, and evokes deeper empathy from the audience regarding "love and understanding", rather than being dominated by the emotional impact of intense conflict. This approach also lays the groundwork for the film's elevated conclusion.

Regarding thematic expression, the film's omission of conflict broadens the universality of the theme of "bridging divides". The conflicts in the novel are highly individualistic and closely tied to the familial context shaped by the mother's narrative perspective. By removing the conflict, the film places the mother-daughter relationship within the more universal context of "generational differences in understanding". The mother is no longer forced to reflect due to intense confrontation but gradually comes to understand her daughter's choices through everyday moments. This transformation, which aligns more closely with real-life experiences, makes the theme of "embracing traditional values alongside diverse identities" more relatable and resonant for the audience.

The film's bold decision to omit a significant conflict from the novel does not hinder the deep exploration of its themes. Instead, by creating an atmosphere distinct from the novel's, it allows the audience to more naturally perceive the mother's transformation concerning her daughter.

Ending sublimation

The film "Concerning My Daughter" not only omits a significant conflict but also introduces an ending that differs substantially from the original novel. In the novel, the story concludes with the mother resting after attending the funeral of an elderly woman she had diligently cared for. In contrast, the film's ending is handled more artistically: Following the scene of the mother resting after the funeral, the screen gradually fades to black as the title "Concerning My Daughter" appears.

What follows can be seen as the director's continuation of the story. The mother finds work caring for the elderly again, but unlike her previous job in a nursing home, this role offers greater freedom, allowing her to provide care in the homes of elderly individuals. While assisting an elderly woman to cross the street, the mother notices two young women holding hands and chatting happily on the opposite side of the road. When the traffic light turns green, the mother helps the elderly woman cross the street, all the while watching the two young women. Only after they have crossed does she look ahead. After walking a few more meters, a faint smile appears on her face.

This smile serves as concrete proof of the mother's inner acceptance of her daughter and her partner. Throughout the film, the mother's response to her daughter's emotional choices had been one of silent observation. Her unease upon seeing her daughter with her partner, her inner conflict while organizing her daughter's belongings, all subtly reflecting the constraints of traditional beliefs. However, her smile upon seeing the two young women together breaks this implicit resistance. This smile is no longer limited to a personal understanding of her own daughter but extends to a broader acceptance of diverse emotional choices. It brings greater completeness to the character's arc and offers a warm resolution to the inner struggles previously experienced by both the mother in the film and the audience watching it.

This smile elevates the film's themes of "acceptance" and "understanding" from the confines of the family to the broader social context. In both the novel and the earlier parts of the film, "bridging the generational divide" largely focused on the relationship between mother and daughter. This newly added detail, however, widens the perspective: The mother's smile is no longer directed solely at her daughter but extends to all similar forms of affection. It suggests that the mother's awareness has moved beyond the limitation of "her own daughter" to truly grasp the essence that "love is love". This elevates the theme of "reconciliation between traditional values and diverse identities" from a family narrative to a broader issue of social inclusion, expanding the work's overall scope and impact.

This smile also evokes deep empathy from the audience through its "quiet detail". Compared to intense dialogue or conflict, this fleeting smile carries greater resonance: It avoids deliberate sentimentality yet allows the audience to clearly sense the mother's inner tenderness and release. The smile not only aligns with the film's overall style of "revealing profound emotion in quiet moments" but also touches the heart in the gentlest way, making the emotional conveyance of "understanding and acceptance" feel more genuine and moving.

Conclusion

In summary, while telling the same story, the novel *Concerning My Daughter* and its film adaptation exhibit distinctly different narrative strategies. In terms of narrative approach, the film "Concerning My Daughter" is not a simple transposition of the novel into another medium but a profound re-creation based on the unique characteristics of each art form. The novel uses the mother's first-person perspective to build an immersive textual environment, allowing readers to deeply experience her inner struggles. In contrast, the film employs a third-person, objective camera perspective to balance empathy for both the mother and the daughter. While this sacrifices some of the psychological depth found in the text, it uses visual imagery to make generational differences more immediately perceptible. Despite their different paths, both works achieve equally vivid character development and emotional resonance.

In terms of plot, the film omits the intense conflict between the mother, her daughter, and Re-in, stepping away from the traditional narrative framework. Instead, it uses subdued cinematography to focus on the mother's subtle transformation. This approach avoids a fragmented visual narrative while strengthening the expression of "silent empathy". It allows the central theme of "understanding and acceptance" to become more concise and shifts the focus from individual conflict to the universal issue of generational differences in understanding, making it more relatable to the audience. The newly added detail of the "mother's smile" in the ending is a masterful touch in the adaptation. It not only provides a warm conclusion to the mother's transformation, giving her character arc a satisfying resolution, but also elevates the theme from "acceptance within the family" to "acceptance at the societal level". This expands the scope and depth of the work.

Overall, while the novel and the film differ in their focus on perspective, plot, and conclusion, both center around the core themes of "intergenerational reconciliation" and "inclusive diversity". This adaptation respects the spirit of the original work while fully leveraging the strengths of each medium. As a result, the story of "Concerning My Daughter" transcends text and image, touching audiences and readers through its distinct artistic appeal and prompting deeper reflection on family bonds, identity, and social inclusion.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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