

A Western story in an Indian frame: A philosophical engagement with the cross-cultural adaptation of *The Last Leaf* into *Lootera*

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Abstract: This paper examines Vikramaditya Motwane's Indian film adaptation *Lootera* (2013), inspired by O'Henry's short story *The Last Leaf*, to highlight the transformation that occurs in a cross-cultural adaptation. Focusing on the philosophical aspect of the narrative regarding human suffering and hope, this paper shows a shift in the perception of these concepts when they are recontextualized in an Indian environment. The film employs a causal effect to expand the short story into a feature-length film by integrating the Indian motif of *karma* philosophy. This paper reflects on the connection between human creativity and spirituality advocated by ancient Indian knowledge. The objective of the paper is to highlight the underlying Indian philosophy that marks the artwork distinctively Indian, suggesting a cultural deviation. Through the analysis of this narrative, our aim is to offer a resolution of human suffering through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems. Insights of key adaptation theorists and thinkers like Dudley Andrew, Linda Seger, Seymour Chatman, Sri Aurobindo, Kapila Vatsyayan, and other scholars play crucial role in the analysis of this study.

Keywords: *karma*, hope, suffering, creative instinct, spiritual freedom

Introduction

When a literary work is adapted for the screen in a different cultural environment, it does not simply translate the source but transforms it to suit the sensibility of new audiences. This paper analyses the Indian film adaptation *Lootera* (2013), inspired by O'Henry's short story *The Last Leaf* (1907), to address the key elements of cross-cultural adaptation, along with a philosophical intervention that deepens the constitution of the storyline. Murray Smith (2008, 50) suggests that

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many experimental and avant-garde films convey philosophical ideas, which encourages the viewers to become deeply involved in the structure and aesthetics of film. *Lootera*'s aesthetic beauty lies in its origin, in a four-page-long short story that deals with the deeper questions of life regarding human suffering and hope. The objective of this paper is to explore how the themes and characters of a narrative, when adapted into an Indian cultural setup, reflect the cultivation of philosophical ideas that implicitly lie underneath any story. The objective leads to the philosophical enquiry posing the question of why humans suffer and what offers an Indian perspective to resolve such suffering.

Methodology

The study critically analyses the Indian film adaptation *Lootera*, a cross-cultural adaptation inspired by O'Henry's short story *The Last Leaf* from an Indian philosophical perspective. This research relies upon the adaptation theories given by key theorists, such as Dudley Andrews's concept of "Borrowing" in the book *Concepts in Film Theory* (1984), Seymour Chatman's insight on "character" in the book *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1978), Linda Seger ideas on execution and adaptation of themes in *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film* (1992), Thomas Leitch's apprehension of cross-cultural adaptation in the article "What Isn't a Cross-Cultural Adaptation, and, If You Know That, Then What Isn't a Cross-Cultural Text?" (2018).

Including this, for philosophical engagement in cross-cultural adaptation, the study takes into account the works of key thinkers including Mahadevan et al. in *Introduction to Indian Knowledge System: Concepts and Applications* (2025) to underline the difference between Western and Indian paradigms of human suffering, Sri Aurobindo's analysis of Karma philosophy in *The Renaissance in India and Other Essays on Indian Culture* (1997), Kapila Vatsyayan insight on creativity and artist in *Bharata: The Natyasastra* (1996) under "The Text and the Interpreters", Andreas M. Krafft, and Rajneesh Choubisa's perception of hope and its interpretation in both Western and Indian philosophy in *Hope for a Good Life* (2018) under "Hope in the Indian Psychology Context: Philosophical Foundations and Empirical Findings." Additionally, the existing scholarships, such as Karen Buckenham's article "Creativity and Spirituality: Two Threads of the Same Cloth" (2011), Dharendra Mohan Datta's "The

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Contribution of Modern Indian Philosophy to World Philosophy” (1948), Sergei Nizhnikov’s “The Concept of Spiritual Creativity” (2017), Bruce R. Reichenbach’s “The Law of Karma and the Principle of Causation” (1988) play a crucial role in the analysis of this study.

Background and context

The Last Leaf is a short story by the 19th-century American writer O’Henry, which was first published in 1907 in the collection “The Trimmed Lamp and Other Stories”. The story revolves around the character Johnsy, who is an artist, lives in Washington Square, a colony for poor artists, with her friend Sue. Johnsy desires to paint the Bay of Naples, but she fell ill with pneumonia due to her circumstances. She loses all her hope and starts to believe that when the ivy vine on the wall outside her window loses all its leaves, she will die too. However, her neighbour Behrman, a failed artist, tricks her by painting the last leaf on the wall to release Johnsy from her dilemma. Johnsy recovers, but Behrman catches pneumonia while painting the leaf, and he dies.

Inspired by the story, the film *Lootera*, written by Vikramaditya Motwane and Bhawani Iyer, represents the recently independent India, primarily set in West Bengal. Pakhi, the female protagonist, is the rich daughter of Zamindar (landlord) Soumitra Roy Chaudhary, who lives in a big mansion and desires to be an artist. The first half of the film focuses on Pakhi’s growing love and affection for a conman, Varun. Pakhi proposes marriage to Varun, but he betrays and runs away on the night of their marriage ceremony. Varun’s betrayal results in Roy Chaudhary’s tragic death, leaving Pakhi devastated; hence, the film justifies the title *Lootera*. The second half of the movie resonates deeply with the short story, when Pakhi takes a journey and secludes herself in the mountains of the Himalayas. She watches the leaves falling from the tree and thinks that she, too, will die when the last leaf falls. Varun eventually finds Pakhi and makes the last leaf as his last gesture to convey his love.

Karmic causality as narrative expression

The motif of *karma* (causality) has been very prevalent in the Indian storytelling tradition. In simple terms, it suggests a causal effect, though there lies a philosophical meaning attached to it from an Indian perspective. Unlike universal causation, which focuses on actions and their consequences in general, *karma* specifically focuses on the doers

of the actions and their effect on the doers. The law of *karma* is rooted in ethical consideration, depending on the intention and desires of the doers, further resulting in bad and good *karma* (Reichenbach 1988, 399-400). Motwane, while adapting the four-page-long short story for a 2-hour and 17-minute feature film, has used the motif of *karma* philosophy to extend the plot and give the film an Indian sensibility. Before putting forth the central themes of the story, like suffering and hope, the film develops a backstory by focusing on the actions of the characters, which eventually lead them to the central themes. Leitch (2018, 9) observes that cross-cultural adaptation is not limited to national boundaries. When a text is transported across different eras, historical contexts, or genres, it undergoes a process of ‘reculturation’, reshaping its meanings to engage new audiences.

The plot moves with Pakhi’s actions, who comes from a privileged background, falls in love with Varun and proposes marriage to him. Varun, on the other hand, rejects her proposal due to his own troubled past. Ghosh (2023, 269) observes that Pakhi’s character is largely shaped by the privileges of her class status and the excessive affection of her father, making her a self-centred individual. This social and familial privilege enables her reckless behaviour, usually at the cost of others’ well-being. Ethically speaking, Pakhi’s desire does not show any bad intentions towards Varun, yet the rejection hurts her ego, as she is the only child of a wealthy Zamindar (landlord) and is not accustomed to rejection. She almost imposes herself upon Varun to satisfy her own craving. If an action is done with greed, it suggests selfish habits and attachments, whereas when actions are done without desire, it reinforces positive qualities and leaves no lasting impression or pain of attachment (Reichenbach 1988, 401). However, Varun betrays her and runs away on the day of his marriage to Pakhi. Varun’s action to abandon Pakhi is motivated by his past life, as he has grown up as an orphan under his uncle’s influence, and feels obligated to do what his uncle wants him to do. His actions are ethically wrong and derive from personal gains, as he first agrees to the marriage and then later changes his mind. Varun constantly compares his life of scarcity to the *Zamindar*’s abundance and perceives his existence as an amalgamation of lacks, justifying his acts.

The wrong intentions behind these acts lead the protagonists towards suffering and an eventual desire to be free from the suffering. Seger (1992, 148), drawing on Aristotle, reminds us that it is not enough to know what to say, but it is also necessary to understand how

to say it. While adapting the themes and characters of an early twentieth-century American story and situating them in the socio-cultural context of newly independent India in the 1950s, the narrative reflects the transformed motivations of characters as per the new cultural codes. The second half of the movie emphasises the suffering of the characters, which arises from their past actions. Pakhi secludes herself in nature and seeks redemption rather than revenge from Varun, as she says, “*Mujhe bas mukti chahiye sab se*” / “I just want to be free”. Similarly, when Varun realises that Pakhi’s deteriorated state may be a consequence of his own wrongdoing, he starts seeking something beyond personal gain. The motivation to create a masterpiece painting for Varun is not only an artistic aspiration alone, but it also comes from a sense of guilt over his past actions. The narrative of the film shows that *karmic* causality functions as an executive principle in the Indian storytelling tradition. The law of *karma* is emphasized here as the “present life in its beginning is determined by the past” (Datta 1948, 555). It suggests that the moral worth of every action is preserved, and everyone gets their due either in this life or another. “No doubt, too, the idea that our present sufferings are the results of our past action, imparts a calm, a resignation, an acquiescence to the Indian mind which the restless Western intelligence finds it difficult to understand or tolerate” (Aurobindo 1997, 129).

Themes of suffering and hope: Western and Indian perspectives

Themes such as suffering and hope deal with fundamental questions about human life, pain, and existence, making them philosophical in nature. However, the psychology behind these themes varies across cultures. Seger (1992, 132), while discussing the importance of themes, suggests that themes constitute almost every strong narrative, whether it is a novel, a play, or a story. Themes shape both the storyline and the characters, and provide depth to the adaptation. *The Last Leaf* revolves around the themes of suffering and hope, which Motwane and Iyer adapted for the screen by employing a borrowing approach, through which they have reframed these themes from an Indian perspective and elevated them to a level of transcendence. Andrews (1984, 98) says that “in the history of the arts, surely borrowing is the most frequent mode of adaptation. Here the artist employs, more or less extensively, the material, idea, or form of an earlier, generally successful text”. The portrayal of suffering and hope is the key idea that is not simply taken but transformed in the film

Lootera, suggesting the differences between Western and Indian psychological perspectives associated with these concepts. In the process of adaptation, creators don't just copy famous texts; they transform them in such a way that removes or challenges their original status, which is called 'excanonation' (Geal 2020, 23). The film does not remove, but indeed challenges the Western positioning of human suffering by portraying it as a path of self-discovery. The Indian approach to looking at the problem of suffering is different from the Western lens.

From the viewpoint of Western psychology, the physical behaviour of an individual determines the mental status. "The 'positive psychology' paradigm of the West has taken a superficial account of feelings and behaviour dynamics of an individual" (Mahadevan et al. 2025, 357). Looking at the narrative of Johnsy, we observe that in her case, pneumonia works like a catalyst for her mental imbalance. Focusing on the external cause behind her sickness, the doctor questions Sue if she had a man in her mind, and if that is not the case, then "it is the weakness" (O'Henry 1907, 29). Johnsy's psychological decline is related to the disease, as it has been introduced like a human who is making people sick around, as O'Henry describes it in his humorous style, "Mr Pneumonia was not what you would call a chivalric old gentleman. A mite of a little woman with blood thinned by California Zephyrs was hardly fair game for the red-fisted, short-breathed old duffer" (Ibidem). He indicates towards Johnsy's physical weakness, who is unable to endure such a cruel disease.

In contrast, Indian psychological traditions provide a more holistic framework, integrating body, mind, and consciousness. The philosophical view of body, mind, and consciousness goes beyond external realities to engage with inner experiences, examining how human suffering emerges from the imbalance between the external environment and internal feelings. Suffering can turn into a medium that mediates the journey toward the inner self or pure consciousness. "Understanding the manifestations of consciousness is only possible by self-experimentation and deep contemplation of one's experience" (Mahadevan et al. 2025, 363). In the film, Pakhi also struggles with asthma, a physical disease, yet it does not alone dictate her suffering; it is rather her wounded ego, a subjective feeling that leads her to such a state of depression where she seeks death through falling leaves. Unlike Johnsy, who remains a passive receiver of her material circumstances and shows little capacity to transform her suffering

internally, Pakhi actively engages with her inner dilemma through writing, as it becomes a meditative and transformative act for Pakhi, allowing her to observe, contemplate, and gradually transcend her suffering. Her practice resonates with the concepts of self-experimentation, reflection, and mindfulness, reflecting the Indian emphasis on the pursuit of *Purusha* (pure consciousness).

The second and most important theme of the story is hope, which is a universal concept, though it is understood in different ways. In Johnsy's case, hope becomes an outward achievement or goal. When she first encounters the leaf outside her window, she desires to paint the Bay of Naples, reflecting an individualistic approach to life where personal accomplishment is evoked through hope. Pakhi's hope, on the other hand, is relational and focuses more on inner satisfaction rather than on outer gain. Pakhi's hope towards life is filled with contentment as she feels completion in Varun's love. The act of forgiveness heals Pakhi's wounded ego, and she becomes able to make peace with her soul. Krafft and Choubisa (2018, 138) explore the concept of hope and its perception in Indian and Western philosophy, suggesting that Nietzsche views hope as an illusion that delays suffering, whereas Vivekananda sees it as a driving force for infinite aspiration and altruistic love.

Behrman's painted leaf serves as an illusion that deceives Johnsy into believing in its reality, which prolongs her suffering. Whereas, Pakhi instantly realizes that it is not real but made by Varun, yet it gives her hope to understand the true meaning of love and life. Pakhi's awareness of the truth leads her toward self-realization, as she acknowledges Varun's inescapable circumstances behind his deeds and understands that only forgiveness can provide her peace. Focused observation, or *Dharana*, helps individuals to have self-realization, which leads to self-transcendence that dissolves the ego and makes inner harmony (Krafft and Choubisa 2018, 135). Pakhi's hope to live life lies in its underlying meaning and not in outer desires. According to Snyder, Western psychology conceptualizes hope as a self-centred cognitive and motivational trait, which focuses on the attainment of personal goals. It pushes individuals to enhance their ability to create a goal or objective and then work accordingly to achieve it. Within the framework of Indian philosophy, hope is related to existentialism, where individuals seek inner harmony, fulfilment, and a meaningful life beyond material objectives (Ibid, 156-157).

Artistic creativity: A spiritual realization

The plot of the short story resonates deeply with artists' struggles, driven by a strong urge to create something that gives life meaning. The film adapts Behrman's desire to create a masterpiece painting within a distinctively Indian environment by linking creativity with spirituality. "True creativity occurs only when an artist realizes his own spiritual demands, driven by the personal interest of self-cognition and fulfilment" (Nizhnikov 2017, 528). In Varun's case, creativity provides not only great joy but also helps him recognize his guilt, which brings pain in his life, and he tries to become free from it and feels contentment in his artwork. Chatman (1978, 107) explains, while discussing character, that "a man's nature, environment, habits, emotions, desires, instincts, all these go to make people what they are". From an Indian sensibility, art, artist and creativity always reflect a glimpse of its cultural past related to *Natyashastra*. Artistic creation is not merely a technical exercise but a spiritual and experiential process in Indian culture. Vatsyayan (1996, 140-141) interprets the *Natyashastra* from the perspective of an artist, whether painter, poet, or writer, she says, "is motivated by freedom and emancipation". The creative process becomes a state of *Samadhi* (concentration), which produces a sense of balance where subject and object dissolve, eventually focusing on the communication of the core idea (*sthayibhava*). Varun's desperation to communicate the core idea or *sthayibhava* through his art is deeply relational, where he wants to console his guilty soul to feel free from everything. He works hard in the backyard until his art achieves its true meaning and becomes a vehicle of self-recovery, where he feels his soul in its purest form, distant from pleasure or guilt. "Art is also a meditative process, as both require paying attention, listening, centring and "a return to the source" (Buckenham 2011, 58). Right before Varun's death, when he ties the leaf to the tree, the background song "*Kuch maangnabaakinahi, Jitnamilakaafihai, Zinda huayaarkaafihai*" / "There's nothing left to ask for... Whatever I've received is enough, living even for a moment, is enough" represents a sense of redemption, which comes not from a sense of acquisition but from self-realization (Murti 1970, 213). Varun's concentration towards his art makes him conscious of human suffering, and by reflecting on it, he acknowledges human limitations tied to attachments.

Conclusion

The analysis suggests that within the process of cross-cultural adaptation, the source does not get removed but is transformed in a distinctive environment. O'Henry's short story *The Last Leaf* may seem like a simple story about illness and hope, but it raises deeper philosophical questions regarding human existence, hope, sacrifice, art, and the nature of truth, including why humans suffer, and whether this suffering is meaningless or transformative. The film adapts these key ideas, themes, and characters, allowing them to travel across cultures and open avenues for a philosophical discussion that lies underneath the story. While retaining the core of the original narrative, *Lootera* incorporates an Indian philosophical perspective into the themes of suffering and hope, including the plot structure that is driven by the *karma* philosophy, which resonates with the Indian storytelling tradition. The study reflects on the key factors with which human beings universally wrestle, like ego, desire, guilt, and anger, and carries the discussion forward toward a spiritual understanding of freedom from them. The film suggests that these internal conflicts can be dissolved through love, forgiveness, and creative instinct that give life a feeling of emancipation and not bondage.

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