

## Between Text and Screen: The Polemics of Film Adaptation in Indonesia

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### Abstract

Adapting a novel for the screen has elicited both positive and negative responses in Indonesia. This paper aims to unpack the polemics of the film adaptation involving the authors, the audience, and the moviemakers. Considering the various motives that filmmakers hold when adapting a novel, this article will investigate the reasons that influence moviemakers to make a film adaptation. Employing documentation studies, this qualitative study looks into online sources and scrutinizes the polemics surrounding film adaptation in Indonesia. With an emphasis on adaptation theory, this research investigates the discourses, challenges, and culture that underpin film adaptation in the Indonesian context. The result of the study reveals that the Indonesian public has various views, both negative and positive, towards film adaptations. Meanwhile, the moviemakers should consider various factors, including profit, personal, religious, and historical preference, when making an adaptation.

**Keywords:** *Film Adaptation, Polemics, Fidelity, Indonesian Cinema, Adaptation Motives.*

### Introduction

Film adaptations of literary works frequently spark controversies in Indonesia, particularly regarding fidelity. The term fidelity in film adaptation denotes to how well and exact the film encapsulates the essential elements of the original work [1] [2]. In relation to this notion, Pearce and Weedon [3] assert that sceptics of film adaptations of literary works have historically evaluated the success or failure of the movie on the grounds of its fidelity to the original manuscript. There have also been notions and sentiments that books are better than movies [4]. In the Indonesian context, many spectators who have read and adored novels, hope that the film adaptation will remain authentic. They were displeased and upset since some elements in the film contradict the novel's original content [5] [6]. Filmmakers make changes and adaptations to adapted literary works based on various factors. This is when a filmmaker's ingenuity comes into play, as the adaptation process is not as simple as it appears and adapting works that have already been published becomes an arduous task [7]. Apart from the fact that adaptation films require a reinterpretation of the text, they are also influenced by various factors ranging from personal, aesthetic, economic, and political [8]. As a result, adaptation filmmakers must make alterations because of aesthetic, economic, and even political motives.

Film adaptations of novels have been released widely in many cinemas and platforms in Indonesia. Most of the adaptations are from best-selling novels of most celebrated Indonesian authors. Novels such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia* (Earth of Mankind), Habiburrahman El-Shirazy's *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (Verses of Love), and Achdiat Kartamihardja's *Atheis* (Atheist) are categorized as best sellers. The adaptations of these novels have sparked debates among filmmakers, authors, and the general public. For instance, the novel's author, Akhdiat K. Miharja, believes that the film fails to capture the novel's spirit. Meanwhile, in 2019, when a filmmaker Hanung Bramantyo adapted Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Bumi Manusia* (The Earth of Mankind), netizens voiced their displeasure. In August 2019, well-known Indonesian author, Saut Situmorang, posted a critique of the film *Bumi Manusia* on his Facebook page, claiming that the film did not accurately portray the novel *Bumi Manusia*. But there are those who enjoy the film adaptation of *Bumi Manusia*. Furthermore, the film adaptation bringing Islamic issues like *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (Verses of Love) and *Perempuan Berkulung Surban* (Woman with

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a Turban) have also received mixed reactions, including negative responses from films that spawned controversy [9]. Audiences criticized the film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* for serving as a platform for polygamy advocacy.

Numerous theoretical studies on film adaptations, such as those conducted by Ardianto [10] and Woodrich [11], have discussed fidelity in film adaptations and how literary texts are transformed during film adaptation or sailing of literary works into films but have avoided discussing the polemics surrounding film adaptations, one of which is caused by the filmmaker's alteration of the adapted text's originality. Meanwhile, Maldawati [12] and Andani [13] focus on adapting the novel's inherent parts into the cinema without delving into the motivations or external causes that motivate filmmakers to modify these elements. Suwastini [14] investigates the relationship between literary and film adaptation studies. Additionally, she explores the hierarchical structure of film studies and film adaptations. Adaptation studies, she concludes, are negligible. Indeed, he asserts that these investigations are mutually advantageous. Indeed, the film adaptation has been rated as negative and low in terms of position [15].

This study was conducted to fill a research gap found in the above studies which did not address the polemics of film adaptation in Indonesia. The study of film adaptation polemics in Indonesia provide insight into society's expectations and criticisms of film adaptations and the filmmakers' responses to these expectations and criticisms. This article unpacks film adaptations' polemics in Indonesia, based on the phenomena mentioned above. In relation to this polemic, we first examine the divergent perspectives of film directors, novelists, and the public or audience. From the differences and debates between them, we describe the differences and debates concerning the film adaptation's elements. Given that these polemics are frequently associated with filmmakers' creativity and adaptation of adapted literary works, this article then specifically explain the motives in making film adaptation which elucidate pros and cons responses. This research is expected to contribute to the study of film adaptations, which is not only limited to comparing the intrinsic elements of literary works and the results of film adaptations, but also explores interdisciplinary relationships between literature, film, and various other fields such as economics, culture, and social sciences.

## Research Method

A documentation study is used to uncover the polemics of recent film adaptations involving the audience, writers, and directors. The data collected on social media platforms (like Facebook and YouTube), collated online news, and articles, where stakeholders-including filmmakers, literary authors, critics, and audiences-dispute with one another. Selection criteria were formulated as follows: (1) posts/news/articles that directly discuss Indonesian film adaptations; these should include (2) threads that have high public participation; and (3) materials that reflect polemical viewpoints (e.g., fidelity to source material, artistic consideration, and moviemakers' motives, such as personal, profit, religious and historical). The traces were gathered, and from there, they were organized and thematic coded. Finally, selective coding converts them into coherent narrative. This is altogether conducted within direct quotations and patterns of discourse and ensures a systematic examination of how adaptation conflicts manifest in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

## Result and Discussion

### Polemics of Film Adaptation: Novelists, Moviemakers, and Spectators

Indonesian Novelists, filmmakers, and public have varying perspectives and responses on film adaptation. Numerous novelists like Motinggo Busye, Armijn Pane, Asrul Sani, Romo Mangunwijaya, and Achdiat K. Mihardja, have expressed dissatisfaction and criticism with the outcome of their work's film adaptation [5] [16] Romo Mangunwijaya, a renowned Indonesian novelist, even declined to have his name included in the film adaptation of his novel, *Roro Mendut*, since he believed the film director failed to interpret the novel adequately [6]. Mangunwijaya's response indicated he sincerely hopes that the film adaptation will preserve and accurately represent the novel's essential elements. This can be categorized as faithful adaptation, which is defined as recreating the source material in film form with an emphasis on recreating the narrative structure, dialogue, and character development as precisely as possible [17].

The Indonesian well-known postcolonial novelist, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, previously rejected Hanung Bramantyo, an Indonesian famous director, who wanted to adapt his novel, *Bumi Manusia*, for the screen. Responding to Bramantyo's wish, Pramoedya Ananta Toer states:

"I am so sorry, dude. Not that easy. So that you know, this novel *Bumi Manusia* (Earth of Mankind) has been offered by Hollywood Director (Oliver Stone) for 60 thousand dollars and I have not even given it. Sorry if I look like I do not support young people's progress. But this is my life. I can only write. My writings are my spiritual children who must be able to support my family both materially and immaterially." [18]

The rejection of Hanung Bramantyo's offer by Pramoedya Ananta Toer demonstrates the novelist's idealism. Despite an enticing offer from an American director, Pramoedya Ananta Toer declined to allow his novel to be filmed. Regarding the phenomenon of film adaptations of existing stories, Bahruddin and Yurisma [19] argue that the Indonesian film industry has commodified the film to make a profit by attracting the attention of the audience, particularly those who have read or are familiar with the stories. Pramoedya Ananta Toer's above denial can be interpreted as an indication of his opposition to the commodification of literary works for the film industry.

Andrea Hirata, another Indonesian novelist, emphasized that the adaptation of his novel into a film must be able to maintain the values contained in the novel [20]. By stating that filmmakers must capture the novel's spirit, Hirata does not require that all of the novel's elements be incorporated into the film. The viewpoint of Hirata reflects loose adaptation, which means borrows a few general ideas from the source material, which are then independently developed [17]. Hirata will accept the offer and the results of the film adaptation so long as the film is able to capture the spirit of the novel. Andrea Hirata's stance is more receptive than Pramoedya Ananta Toer's refusal to adapt his story without establishing certain conditions. Hirata appears to be more amenable to compromise with filmmakers adapting his novels than Mangunwijaya, who prefers faithful adaptation.

Apart from the Indonesian writers who condemn film adaptations, some advocate for them for commercial reasons. According to Bower [21] writers of plays, novels, short stories, and serials have benefited financially from the film adaptation industry. The public may assume that the writer is money-driven, but on the other hand, the public may conclude that the writer is deserving of honours and benefits from a film version of his excellent literary work. Sapardi Djoko Damono, a prolific Indonesian poet and novelist is one of the writers who embraces film adaptation for the sake of author's profit. He asserts the following opinion about the adaptation:

"Typically, the producer looks at the book first, determining whether it is selling well or not; if it is, a film must be developed, as individuals who read the book want to see the film as well. If a producer approaches me (about adapting a novel into a picture), I am delighted; if I am compensated, I will do it." [22]

Damono realized that filmmakers would be interested only in films based on a noteworthy and potentially successful literary work. Damono's knowledge is correlated with filmmakers' interest in the literature they wish to make a profitable one. Being a writer, Damono regards the producers as those who can financially assist him; hence, he is happy that his work is recognized. Murray [23] describes a best way for a writer when he wants to earn money through filming his book, namely by giving the book to the director and the director will give him money (of course if the book is considered worthy of being filmed).

Numerous writers whose writings have been adapted for the screen reveal an equivocal perspective. On the one hand, they strive to maintain idealism in their literary works, but they also have economic motivations. Asma Nadia allows her novels to be adapted in the screenplay writing. She has been also engaged in the stages of the filmmaking process. However, even Asma Nadia expressed an interest in being engaged in the director selection and filming process. For Nadia, the act of translating her works into films expands her potential for *da'wah* [24]. *Da'wah* or proselytization through films interweaves with religious motivations or elements influencing the film making [25] [26]. Asma Nadia's request may avert filmmakers' process arbitrarily modifying literary works without regard for the authors' perspectives. On the one hand, Asma Nadia's permission for filmmakers to adapt their films and her desire to maintain the values of *da'wah* in her novels demonstrate ambivalence.

Eka Kurniawan, the Indonesian novelist who was nominated for The Man Booker Prize in 2016, also invited his novel *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* (Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash) to be filmed and was involved in the adaptation personally. He involved in the writing of the screenplay for the film adaptation of his novel with the film's director [27]. Eka Kurniawan's involvement

in making the film adaptation to some extent resembles the role of Asma Nadia. Their participation in the actual making of the film can ensure that the crucial messages in the novels are transmitted.

The director who adapted the novel *Bumi Manusia*, Hanung Bramantyo, had some personal motivations that spurred him to undertake the adaptation. Personal motives would fall under the general 'tributes' to the authors of the adapted works which reflect respect for great authors who have created several masterworks [8]. Bramantyo is the fan of Pramoedya's work. He read the works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer with the New Order Regime and in post-Reformation era [28]. These impressions and interests motivated Hanung to attempt the first adaptation of the novel *Bumi Manusia*.

The making process and outcomes of the film adaptation of *Bumi Manusia* elicited positive and negative comments from the Indonesian public, resulting in a debate. On August 16, 2019, a famous author, Saut Sitomurang, issued a scathing critique of the film *Bumi Manusia* on his Facebook page. He stated, "*Emangnya Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Pram) itu ada berapa sih?! Kok film Hanung Bramantyo ini katanya berdasarkan karya Pram?!*" (How many Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Pram) are there?! How is it possible that Hanung Bramantyo's film adaptation is based on Pram's work?!). Situmorang believes that the film adaptation of *Bumi Manusia* does not accurately depict Pramoedya Ananta Toer's work. Saut Sitomurang also questioned the film's starting with the anthem Indonesia Raya, although the film was screened at the XXI cinema, a symbol of capitalism. According to Hanich [29], the audience may predict as well as expect that the film's plot would resemble (and sound like) their mental construction of the novel. Sitomurang was disappointed and harshly criticized the film because he expected to see important elements from the novel *Bumi Manusia* that he had read.

The polemic of the film adaptation of *Bumi Manusia* also received comments from the Indonesian public at large. Yulianto [30] voiced unhappiness with the Minke character, which was performed by Iqbaal Ramadhan. Iqbal was deemed unqualified to play the Minke role. Yulianto, on the other hand, was receptive to the director's adjustments in adapting the novel *Bumi Manusia*. Meanwhile, Puthut E.A. [31] responded to public members who complained and supported, by posing issues such as whether the film version of *Bumi Manusia* was awful, so would the novel *Bumi Manusia* be poor as well. He also commented on the belief that the film will be a failure, despite the fact that the film has not yet been made. Puthut E.A. shares a similar sentiment with Yulianto in that the process of film adaptation necessitates adjustments to the novel's content since not all plot points can be accommodated in the film. In relation to this understanding, Guo [32] states that there is one juncture on which audiences and critics generally concur: film adaptations of literary works cannot convey the full multiple meanings of the original text.

### **Motives Beyond Film Adaptation**

The polemics, as mentioned above, about film adaptations in Indonesia is basically interwoven with different viewpoints among authors, film makers and spectators. The true motives of filmmakers for adapting novels, as well as the possible motives of novelists for approving and participating in film adaptations, influence the emergence of polemics. Economic considerations frequently force filmmakers to change and adjust the texts of adapted literary works. If the filmmakers are too faithful to the original text, the film adaptation may be uninteresting, and the audience may be hesitant to watch it. If this is the case, the film's producers will lose. Mosco [33] explicitly states that the novel's film adaptation is a commodification of something valuable with the goal of profit. Mosco's viewpoint, which views the film adaptation from an economic standpoint, provides a study that is more than just an analysis of the film adaptation as a work of art and its relationship with the adaptation's source text. Mosco's perspective in film adaptations is consistent with Murray [34] [35] who claims that studying film adaptations from the sociological, political economy, and media industry perspectives provides a new perspective rather than just a comparative study of literary texts their adaptations.

One of the economic factors when adapting a novel to the cinema is the authors' popularity and the books' sales. Some of the above-mentioned Indonesian authors, including Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Andrea Hirata, and Asma Nadia, are well-known authors whose works are widely read in Indonesia. They also wrote the best-selling novels. Leonesi [36] claims that the contemporary phenomena of transmedia adaptation is supported by a cultural industry that seeks to reap all benefits from a best-selling, award-winning literature. If the novels by famous authors are adapted to film, readers will be naturally curious and eager to view it. Fans of the authors whose works are adapted are crucial film adaptation industry consumers. For instance, the status of *Harry Potter* novels as top sellers enticed the film industry to adapt them [37]. Writers with national and international clout will attract filmmakers to film their works. For instance, the English author Shakespeare is considered a prominent author, explaining

why his works have been adapted [38] Indonesian Writers with well-known names, such as Pramoedya Anantar Toer and Asma Nadia frequently produce works that are well-received by readers.

Economic considerations also play a crucial role in casting the film's actors. Perdikaki [39] demonstrates how filmmakers use famous actors in film adaptations to increase the film's visibility, from promotion to film release. Well-known artists will attract an audience who idolises these artists. Their presence and acting in films will affect the success of films currently showing in theatres [40]. Film adaptations in Indonesia, which are expected to attract a large audience and achieve financial success, feature well-known and even emerging artists. For instance, a primary character in the novel *Bumi Manusia*, Minke, is played by Iqbaal Ramadhan in the film adaptation. He was previously well-known for his role in the successful film adaptation of Pidi Baiq's novel *Dilan 1990* which was released in 2018.

The above-mentioned film adaptation of Asma Nadia's novels features a religious motif, which is related to spreading Islamic values and teachings. Islam has been a frequent topic of discussion in Indonesia's post-reform era, given the religion's increased prevalence in devotional practice and popular culture [41]. Film as a part of popular culture could be an effective medium for disseminating the Islamic values. In relation to the *da'wah* or Islamic propagation motif, the film adaptation of an Islamic-themed novel that is part of popular culture, on the one hand, can be viewed as an attempt to attract Muslim audiences' attention, as Huda [42] describes that not only was the Islamic film successful in attracting non-moviegoers to the theatre, but it was also successful in educating members of Islamic learning groups about their religion. On the other hand, this motif also demonstrates Asma Nadia's dedication as a Muslim woman writer who is cognizant of her responsibility not only to work but also to communicate Islamic values to the community.

Another motive in the film adaptation in Indonesia, apart from the economy, is historical. As a former European colony, Indonesia continues to experience a variety of colonial repercussions [43]. It is crucial for the current generation of Indonesians to comprehend the gloomy history of the country's past. The director of the film *Saidjah and Adinda*, Darwin Mahesa, who made a film adaptation of the novel *Max Havelaar* to deconstruct the film adaptation by the Dutch director, emphasized the importance of film as a medium for colonial historical education for the younger generation because messages related to history are conveyed through audio-visual media [44]. Thus, the making of the film adaptation by Darwin Mahesa was based on motivation related to the history of Indonesian colonization that needed to be reconstructed and made to awaken the awareness of the generation of the Indonesian nation.

## Conclusion

Films based on novels in Indonesia have the potential to stir up controversy due to the public's insistence that film adaptations preserve several vital characteristics from the source material. Filmmakers must utilise their creativity to make alterations and tweaks on the one hand and on the other hand they should consider preserve several important elements in the novel so that it could still represent the spirit of the novel. Failure to negotiate these two sides could potentially make a film adaptation fail to attract public attention. The adaptation from the novels into the films in Indonesia is engulfed by various factors ranging from economic, historical, and religious motives. The process and result of adaptation often spark controversy and disagreement. The length of a film, production funds, aesthetic concerns, and the market for films sometimes necessitate that filmmakers alter the original text to meet the requirements of the film. The challenges of adapting films require a filmmaker to maintain an idealistic approach to converting the principles found in literary works while negotiating and compromising with commercial concerns.

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