Character Construction in The Excranization of Danur: From Risa's Perspective in The Novel to The Film's Visual Interpretation

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Abstract

The building of the primary character, Risa, during the excranization process from Risa Saraswati's novel Danur to its Awi Suryadi-directed film adaptation is examined in this study. The study focuses on the novel's use of first-person narrative to depict Risa's character and how the movie uses visual and cinematic aspects to do the same. This study examines the narrative strategies, character growth, and emotional depth that are communicated through textual versus visual storytelling using a comparative analysis method. The theoretical framework, which focuses on character representation and the change in perspective from internal (literary) to outward (cinematic), is founded on adaption theory and narratology. The results show both losses and improvements in the adaption process, revealing notable shifts in the way Risa's inner thoughts, emotional challenges, and supernatural encounters are conveyed. Character adaption in horror genres, especially in Indonesian literature and film, is better understood thanks to this research.

Keywords: Excranization; Character Construction; Adaptation Theory; Danur; Perspective Shift

INTRODUCTION

The adaptation of literary works into cinematic narratives has long been a site of creative transformation and critical inquiry. Excranization, the process of translating textual experiences into visual forms, challenges creators to navigate the complexities of narrative voice, character development, and thematic fidelity. Within the landscape of Indonesian horror literature, Danur: I Can See Ghosts by Risa Saraswati emerges as a compelling case study of such adaptation processes. This article examines the construction and re-construction of the central character, Risa, as she transitions from the introspective pages of the novel to the visual and performative space of the film directed by Awi Suryadi. Through this lens, the study explores broader issues of narrative authenticity, cultural negotiation, and emotional resonance in adaptation. The process of excranization, or the adaptation of literary works into motion pictures, often entails significant changes in narrative structure, thematic emphasis, and character development. Danur: I Can See Ghosts, authored by Risa Saraswati, exemplifies such transformations within Indonesian horror literature. Based on the author's real-life experiences, the novel presents a psychological and spiritual journey through the unique first-person perspective of Risa, a young girl who can perceive and communicate with ghosts. However, the 2017 film adaptation directed by Awi Suryadi visually reinterprets Risa's persona and her supernatural encounters, leading to notable shifts in her characterization. Adaptation is not merely the transfer of plot and characters across media but a process of re-creation shaped by audience expectations, visual narrative techniques, and cinematic conventions. As Hutcheon (2006) asserts, adaptation involves both re-contextualization and re-interpretation, functioning simultaneously as a process and a product. Similarly, Stam (2005) highlights that adaptation

engages in intersemiotic transposition, reshaping narratives to fit the affordances of the new medium. The term "excranization" specifically addresses the shift from textual to visual storytelling, emphasizing the externalization of internal narrative elements through cinematic techniques (Kavoori et al., 2017). In the novel, Risa's character is introspective and psychologically complex, developed primarily through internal monologue and emotional reflection within a first-person narrative framework. In contrast, the film externalizes Risa's inner world through performative elements, mise-en-scène, cinematography, and audiovisual symbolism (Forceville, 1999; McFarlane, 1996). These shifts raise important questions about agency, identity, and emotional representation within adaptation practices. Character construction plays a pivotal role in narrative transformation. According to Chatman (1978), characters in literature are "independent existents," crafted through narrative discourse such as internal monologue and authorial commentary. Eder (2008) further proposes that characters are cognitive constructs, assembled by audiences based on narrative cues, encompassing narrative role, character traits, and emotional engagement. Phelan (1989) emphasizes that characters evolve through ethical decisions and emotional progression, shaping audience perception over time. Meanwhile, Smith (1995) highlights the concepts of alignment and allegiance, where audiences' access to and investment in characters' experiences determine their emotional attachment. Adaptations often necessitate strategic choices about which internal traits to externalize, which relationships to emphasize, and how to maintain psychological depth within a visual medium. Consequently, adaptations like Danur not only translate the narrative but also reinterpret the character of Risa to fit cinematic conventions, sometimes leading to a more dramatic, and occasionally sensationalized, portrayal. Character construction is not solely an aesthetic or narrative choice but also embodies ethical and cultural dimensions. In the context of Indonesian education and cultural narratives, character values such as honesty, tolerance, discipline, and social care are emphasized as foundational virtues (Afriana & Mandala, 2018). These values align with broader expectations of politeness and emotional intelligence, which are critical in shaping both fictional and real-world interactions. Afriana (2018) underlines that character reflects human behavior values related to relationships with God, self, others, and the environment, deeply rooted in religious, legal, cultural, and moral norms. In horror narratives like Danur, emotional authenticity and moral resonance become central to audience engagement. Thus, the adaptation of Risa's character reflects not only a change in narrative voice and medium but also a negotiation of deeper ethical and cultural values embedded in Indonesian society. This study aims to analyze the portrayal of Risa in both the novel and its film adaptation, focusing on changes in narrative perspective, psychological depth, and visual representation. By applying theories of adaptation, narrative structure, and character construction, this research seeks to uncover how the excranization of Danur mirrors broader tendencies in Indonesian horror cinema and contributes to understanding the balance between textual authenticity and visual storytelling.

METHOD

This research applies a qualitative content analysis method, with a focus on comparative analysis between the novel *Danur* and its film adaptation. The study explores character construction, particularly Risa's portrayal, from the textual perspective in the novel to its visual representation in the film. The primary data includes:

1. The novel *Danur* by Risa Saraswati (2011), focusing on descriptions and character development related to Risa's character.
2. The film *Danur* (2017), examining visual representations, including casting, costume design, camera angles, and body language.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed the framework of character construction in adaptation studies (Kavoori et al., 2017) The study compared the textual and visual portrayals of Risa in both media. The character's psychological depth, internal conflicts, and relationships with other characters were cross-examined. A coding system was developed to categorize significant traits, behaviors, and changes between the novel and the film. Ten key scenes were analyzed for this comparative study. These scenes were selected based on their narrative significance in both media formats. To systematically conduct the analysis, the study follows a multi-step process as illustrated in the figure 1: Data Analysis below:

Figure 1: Data Analysis
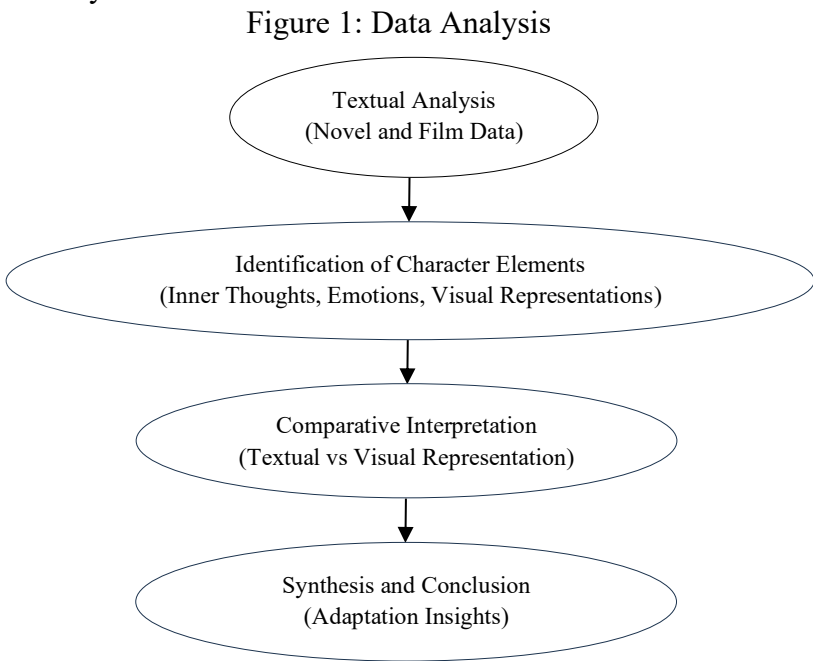
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the findings from the comparative analysis of Risa's character construction in the novel *Danur* and its film adaptation. The experiment involved a detailed textual analysis of Risa's character in the novel and a visual analysis of her portrayal in the film. The following results highlight the key differences and similarities in character construction between the two media, based on a comparison of the novel's narrative and the film's visual representation.

Table 1. Character Traits and Emotional Expression

Trait	Novel	Film	Differences
Fear	Extensive internal monologues	Close-up shots, dark lighting	Novel emphasizes psychological depth: film uses visual cues for fear.
Courage	Narrated through Risa's actions	Portrayed through actor's posture	Film emphasizes physicality over internal narration.
Empathy	Direct thoughts, conversations	Depicted through interactions with other characters	Empathy conveyed more through visual expressions in film.

In the novel, Risa is presented as an introspective and emotionally complex character, with frequent internal monologues that reveal her fears, courage, and empathy. These monologues contribute significantly to the development of her character. In contrast, the film adaptation relies more heavily on visual cues such as facial expressions, body language, and cinematography to convey Risa's emotional state.

Table 2. Visual Representation of Risa's Character

Scene	Novel Description	Film Representation	Visual Techniques Used
Risa's Fear of the Supernatural	Described as a feeling of dread in her thoughts	Dark, shadowy lighting with Risa's tense body language	Low-key lighting, close-ups on facial expressions
Risa's Empathy Towards Ghosts	Depicted through Risa's internal dialogue and care for the spirits	Soft lighting, gentle camera movement as she interacts with the ghosts	Warm lighting, wide-angle shots highlighting Risa's interaction with ghosts

The film adaptation utilizes various cinematic techniques to construct Risa's character visually. Key scenes from the film were analyzed for the depiction of Risa, including lighting, color palettes, and camera angles. Risa's character is often shown in darker, isolated spaces to reflect her internal struggles, a technique used to visually represent her psychological depth.

Table 3. Actor's Portrayal through Body Language

Scene	Novel (Internal)	Film (External)
Fear	Described as overwhelming, paralyzing thoughts	Actor tenses, shrinks away from ghosts, wide eyes
Empathy	Inner dialogue expressing care for the ghosts	Actor's gentle touch, calm demeanor towards the spirits

The actor playing Risa in the film uses body language to convey emotional depth. For example, in scenes where Risa experiences fear, her posture and facial expressions are key to understanding her internal struggles. This differs from the novel, where such emotions are narrated directly. The film's reliance on actor performance emphasizes visual storytelling, with much of Risa's emotional arc conveyed through her body language and facial expressions rather than through dialogue.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that when Risa in *Danur* is adapted from the novel to the movie, her character development changes significantly. Although the character's fundamental qualities and emotional growth are constant, the ways in which these qualities are communicated vary depending on the particulars of each media. The findings showed that, in order to depict Risa's emotional and psychological depth, the novel and the movie use distinct narrative techniques; the novel relies on internal conversation, while the movie concentrates on external, visual signals.

Internal vs. External Representation

The reader has direct access to Risa's psychological state through the detailed presentation of her innermost feelings and thoughts in the novel *Danur*. Risa's dread, bravery, and empathy all of which are mostly expressed through internal monologues can be thoroughly examined thanks to this interior viewpoint. (Culler (2000), n.d.) asserts that internal monologues are an essential literary fiction device that allow readers to delve into a character's emotional depth. The movie version, on the other hand, is forced to portray these subtleties of feeling without the benefit of direct access to Risa's mind. To elicit comparable feelings, the directors instead use visual strategies including lighting, camera angles, and actor performance. According to (Hutcheon, n.d.), who points out that adaptations frequently give precedence to visual and aural components over the internal narrative structures of their original material, this transition from internal to external representation is common in adaptations.

The film's visual clues, especially the close-ups of Risa's facial expressions and the use of low lighting, are especially good in capturing her anxiety and inner turmoil. According to the analysis, the movie employs subdued lighting to evoke a feeling of vulnerability and loneliness, a tactic frequently employed in horror movies to increase suspense (Thompson, n.d.). By letting the viewer "read" Risa's feelings from her facial expressions and body language, these visual techniques aid in making up for the absence of internal monologue. This supports (Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006), n.d.) claim that semiotics, in which body language and facial expressions serve as symbolic representations of a character's inner state, can be used in visual storytelling to convey complicated emotions.

Visual Techniques in Character Construction

The film's use of body language and cinematography to communicate a story visually strengthens Risa's character development. The movie adapts Risa's evolution by emphasizing actor performance and cinematographic techniques rather than depending on descriptive passages like in the novel. Scenes that show Risa's terror and compassion for the spirits are very clear examples of this. The actor portrays Risa's emotional development through body language, while the cinematography, which employs close-ups, dim lighting, and delicate camera motions, depicts the nuances of her encounters with the otherworldly beings (Hasson, 2017). In order to adjust Risa's emotional trajectory and depict the change from an introspective narrative to a more external, action-oriented portrayal, several visual strategies are essential. Moreover, the consistency in Risa's core traits across both the novel and the film indicates that the adaptation process has succeeded in retaining the essence of her character. According to (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007), successful adaptations often strike a balance between remaining faithful to the source material and making necessary adjustments for the new medium. In the case of *Danur*, the adaptation maintains Risa's emotional depth, but the visual medium requires that this depth be conveyed through a combination of visual symbolism and actor performance rather than through internal monologues.

Actor's Portrayal through Body Language

In the *Danur* movie adaptation, Risa's body language portrayal is essential to transferring her inner emotional journey from the book to the screen. In contrast to the novel, which explores Risa's ideas and mental state in great detail, the movie uses nonverbal clues to convey her maturation, empathy, and terror. The anxiety that the novel portrays through internal monologues is outwardly communicated by Risa's stiff body language, which includes protective actions like a stooped posture or dragging her limbs inward when she feels afraid. In a similar vein, her growing empathy for the spirits is communicated through gentle movements and honest body language, which convey her compassion and emotional connection without the need for words. These physical shifts from protective to more forceful and open postures also reflect Risa's psychological growth, demonstrating her journey from

empowerment to fear. This is further enhanced by the actor's facial expressions, which use subtle yet powerful gestures like a wrinkled brow or a soft smile to indicate emotional shifts like dread or comprehension. The power of non-verbal communication in film adaptations is demonstrated by this use of body language, which successfully portrays Risa's internal conflicts and development while emphasizing the actor's role in visually expressing complex emotions in a way that connects with the audience (Nancy D. Feshbach & Seymour Feshbach, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Danur* adaptation confirms that the film effectively captures the essence of Risa's character from the novel, while adapting her emotional journey to a visual format. As discussed in the results, the film uses body language, facial expressions, and posture to communicate Risa's emotions, which were originally conveyed through her internal monologues in the novel. The actor's portrayal of Risa through tense, defensive movements during moments of fear and compassionate gestures as she engages with the spirits visually represents her emotional growth and empathy, mirroring the internal shifts depicted in the novel. The shift from introspective narrative to visual cues confirms that the film adaptation successfully retains the emotional core of the novel while utilizing the strengths of cinema to depict Risa's journey. This conclusion aligns with the findings of (Ekman, 2004) and (Thompson, n.d.), who emphasize the importance of non-verbal communication in film, affirming that the adaptation process preserves Risa's character while presenting her evolution through visual interpretation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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