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Reimagining Cultural Contexts: A Comparative Study of Cross-Cultural Remakes and their Impact on Audience Perception

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the cross-cultural adaptation phenomenon in film, where film stories, characters, and themes are remade to fit other cultures. The research considers how adaptations reinforce and subvert mainstream cultural narratives through comparative case study and reception analysis to explore implications for cultural representation and authenticity. Cultural and discourse analysis are complemented with interviews and questionnaires to inform understanding about audience interaction with remakes. The results provide insightful advice for film studies researchers and industry practitioners dealing with globalization and cultural translation in filmmaking.

Keywords: cross-cultural remakes, cultural representation, audience perception, cultural authenticity, film adaptation

Introduction

Cross-cultural remakes are on the rise owing to the ever-changing cultural exchange of movie scripts between cultures brought about by globalisation. The values, hopes, and controversies of the producing and consuming cultures are depicted in such culture interpretations that transcend translation. Consistent with the mythology of American frontiers, Seven Samurai (1954) itself was remade as The Magnificent Seven (1960) in both a change of geography and a movement from collectivist to individualistic heroism. Laal Singh Chaddha (2022) does the same, incorporating local cultural signifiers within a universally familiar tale framework by translating Forrest Gump (1994) into the vocabulary of Indian sociopolitical history and spiritual trends.

Adaptation theorists like Hutcheon (2006) posit that adaptation constitutes a process of rewriting culture—a palimpsest in which every version has hints of its precursors but carries new cultural markings. Such scholarships are carried forward by this research by integrating empirical audience reception data to show how perceptions by the viewers are influenced by cultural proximity with the content.

Additionally, Han and Lee (2025) highlight that remakes are agents negotiating hybrid identities in a transnational era. They are symptomatic of cultural hegemony (when the dominant cultures are imitated) and cultural agency (when indigenous stories are claimed by local filmmakers). This research addresses these tensions critically through bringing together textual analysis and audience understanding with the objective to deconstruct the ideological work involved in cross-cultural remakes.

Objectives of the Study

• To analyze how cinematic elements (narrative, character arcs, mise-en-scène, and genre) are strategically altered in remakes to appeal to targeted cultures.

• To evaluate how audiences from different socio-cultural backgrounds perceive authenticity, resonance, and narrative believability in remakes.

• To understand how cultural translation modifies narrative structure, character development, and thematic emphasis.

Research Questions

• RQ1: How do cross-cultural remakes adapt central themes, characters, and narrative arcs to align with localized socio-cultural sensibilities?

• RQ2: What is the effect of these cultural adaptations on audience perception, particularly in terms of authenticity, relatability, and emotional engagement?

Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative exploratory research design is employed, supported by content analysis, discourse analysis, and empirical responses.

• **Pairing Strategy:** 12 sets of original-remake films between East-West and intra-Asian remakes were selected based on cultural and narrative divergence.

• **Discourse and Thematic Coding:** Changes in the structure of narratives, character development, ideological trajectory, and symbolic themes were tracked through a coding system.

• **Surveys and Interviews:** 50 respondents aged 18–45 were surveyed to assess relatability, authenticity, and cultural influence.

A comparative review analysis was undertaken in which more than 500 reviews on IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, and Letterboxd were thematically categorized to determine sentiment patterns and estimate audience sentiment.

This triangulated method enhances internal validity and reduces subjective bias in interpretation.

Theoretical Framework

The study integrates three interrelated theoretical paradigms:

- **Adaptation Theory (Hutcheon, 2006):** Adaptations are interpretive acts, transforming themes and stories for new cultural settings.
- **Encoding/Decoding Model (Hall, 1980):** Audiences decode media texts based on cultural positioning, explaining varied receptions.
- **Cultural Translation Theory (Wang, 2025):** Film remakes are intersemiotic translations that reshape emotions, ethics, and ideologies.

Literature Review

Linda Hutcheon (2006) describes adaptation as intertextual and transformative. Bassnett and Lefevere (1990) argue that cultural translation involves ideological and emotional shifts. Wang (2025) extends this to film, noting how adaptations become new cultural texts. Kraidy (2005) emphasizes hybridity in global media, where local aesthetics and global narratives merge. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model underlines that audience responses are shaped by cultural codes and expectations.

Case Study Analysis

The cross-cultural remake analysis reveals complex alterations in narrative, cultural values, and reception within different cinematic contexts. For instance, Dostana (2008), a remake of the American comedy I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry (2007), retains the basic premise of two straight men who pretend to be gay to enjoy legal benefits; however, it reconfigures the narrative for Indian viewers by placing greater emphasis on bromance and implicit flirting over frank representations of queerness. Such a remake is appealing to Indian cinema's general discomfort with overt non-normative sex, using homoerotic undertones as a way of approaching male friendship while allowing mainstream discourses about LGBTQ+ topics. The film was a box office success, grossing over ₹871 million worldwide, with audiences welcoming its comedy and "safe" treatment of queer subtext, despite critics pointing out that it gave visibility but not actual representation, tending to use comic tropes rather than emancipatory narrative. Similarly, Bang Bang! (2014), a remake of the American spy action-romantic comedy Knight and Day (2010), retains the basic plot but shifts the tone to suit a high-octane musical action-romance. This remake localizes the narrative by using patriotic connotations associated with Indian military intelligence, intercut with musical numbers and exotic locales like Prague and Shimla, which appeal to Bollywood's visual sensibilities. It was a box office success, with box office collections amounting to over ₹340 crore abroad; however, critics faulted it for the absence of narrative sophistication, while audience polls revealed a strong liking for the romantic subplot but distance from the over-the-top action sequences, especially among viewers aged between 25–35 years.

Brothers (2015), based on Warrior (2011), transitions from a concentration on mixed martial arts and individual redemption to a focus on increased emotional melodrama and family tragedy. The Bollywood version adds a dying mother, an alcoholic father, and increased religious symbolism, amplifying emotional stakes so that the sport is secondary to family values. Although it met with divided critical opinion—lauded for performances but faulted for sentimentality, it struck a chord more with viewers in Tier-2 cities, who could relate to father-son reunions. The Tamil movie Ekk Deewana Tha (2012), a remake of the Tamil original Vinnaithaandi Varuvaayaa (2010) by director Gautham Menon, illustrates the difficulties of cross-linguistic and cultural translation. Despite holding onto the same original story, the switch in language and cast chemistry diluted the emotional reality and lost out on capturing subtle cultural realities about Tamil Catholic family dynamics, with the movie thus both critically and commercially flopping. Internet feedback commonly mourned the loss of emotional resonance and clunky line delivery, while several of these Tamil-speaking audience members judged the original as being "irreplaceable.".

Cross-cultural remakes also reflect ideological realignment, as in the case of The Magnificent Seven (1960), the American Western remake of Kurosawa's Seven Samurai (1954). The collectivist morality of the original, based on villagers and samurai banding together against bandits, evolves into a story of rugged individualism and cowboy heroism reflecting post-WWII American ideals. Both films are highly regarded but speak to value systems that are essentially incompatible; film historians commonly use The Magnificent Seven as an instance of cultural appropriation which, however, broke new ground in genre convention. Likewise, Laal Singh Chaddha (2022), the Indian remake of Forrest Gump (1994), relocates the narrative of a mentally challenged man's journey through American history to the Indian setting, incorporating events like the Emergency, Operation Bluestar, and the Kargil

War. The remake focuses on faith, destiny, and motherly love, central tropes in Indian cinema, and localizes the emotional moments through Punjabi and Hindi language and music. While critically well-received, the film was a commercial failure, drawing polarized opinions with older audiences viewing it as nostalgic and younger audiences criticizing its pacing.

The adaptation of Christopher Nolan's Memento (2000) as Ghajini (2008) also illustrates cultural translation that reconfigures narrative sophistication. While Memento has a non-linear and psychologically intricate structure, Ghajini has a linear, emotionally intense revenge drama with songs and action interspersed. The psychological tension is substituted with righteous indignation, and the love interest becomes more prominent, dispelling the original's narrative confusion. Ghajini turned into India's first ₹100 crore film, with Aamir Khan's physical makeover and emotional depth proving crowd-pleasers, albeit with critics criticizing that though Memento was stimulating on the intellectual level, Ghajini was satisfying on the emotional level. Partner (2007), the romantic comedy inspired by Hitch (2005), reworks the plot of a dating coach surmounting emotional hurdles by incorporating traditional Indian values and comedy. The remake recasts the love coach as a "morally upright matchmaker," mellowing gender dynamics and emphasizing family sanction. Its box office success is owed to the comedic chemistry of Govinda and Salman Khan, as audiences enjoyed its "clean fun," even though critics found it to be regressive.

Finally, Chachi 420 (1997), a remake of Mrs. Doubtfire (1993), is about a father cross-dressing as a nanny to stay near his kids. The Indian remake adds an element of honor, marriage, and fatherhood, with a focus on patriarchal role redemption according to Indian family ideals. It continues to be a popular favorite, especially among family audiences who appreciated Kamal Haasan's performance as both heartwarming and funny.

**Audience Survey Data Summary:**

50 participants (ages 18–45):

Most of the participants (68%) expressed that they liked remakes made specifically for their own culture. This indicates that familiarity and identification with a film are crucial in cross-cultural remakes. Further, 72% of the participants mentioned that the use of musical and emotional appeals made Indian remakes particularly fascinating. They believed that these appeals were necessary in ensuring audiences. In spite of this appeal, only 54% of the respondents said they were familiar with the original versions of at least three of the chosen films. This indicates that most audiences make decisions without knowing everything. Also, 43% stated they preferred remakes more when the plots were in line with family values. This indicates just how much family themes are valued in Indian cinema. However, only 18% believed that the remakes had more intricate stories than the originals. This indicates that even though remakes were able to relate with audiences emotionally and culturally, they were seen to have less intricate stories than the films they were remakes of.

IMDb/Rotten Tomatoes Trends (selected films):

- *Ghajini (2008)*: IMDb rating 7.3; Audience reviews frequently praise emotional depth and action scenes.

- *Memento (2000)*: IMDb rating 8.4; Highly rated for narrative complexity.

- *Laal Singh Chaddha (2022)*: IMDb rating 5.5; Mixed audience response; user reviews often mention pacing and emotional tone.

- *Bang Bang! (2014)*: IMDb rating 5.5; Audience polarized between praising visual appeal and criticizing lack of originality.

- *Dostana (2008)*: IMDb rating 6.1; Review themes include humor and LGBTQ+ visibility framed through heteronormative comfort zones.

Box Office Comparison Snapshot (in INR):

- *Ghajini (2008)* – ₹115 crores (first ₹100 crore Bollywood film)

- *Bang Bang! (2014)* – ₹340 crores (globally)

- *Dostana (2008)* – ₹87 crores

- *Laal Singh Chaddha (2022)* – ₹60 crores (underperformed against expectations)

- *Brothers (2015)* – ₹82 crores (moderate success)
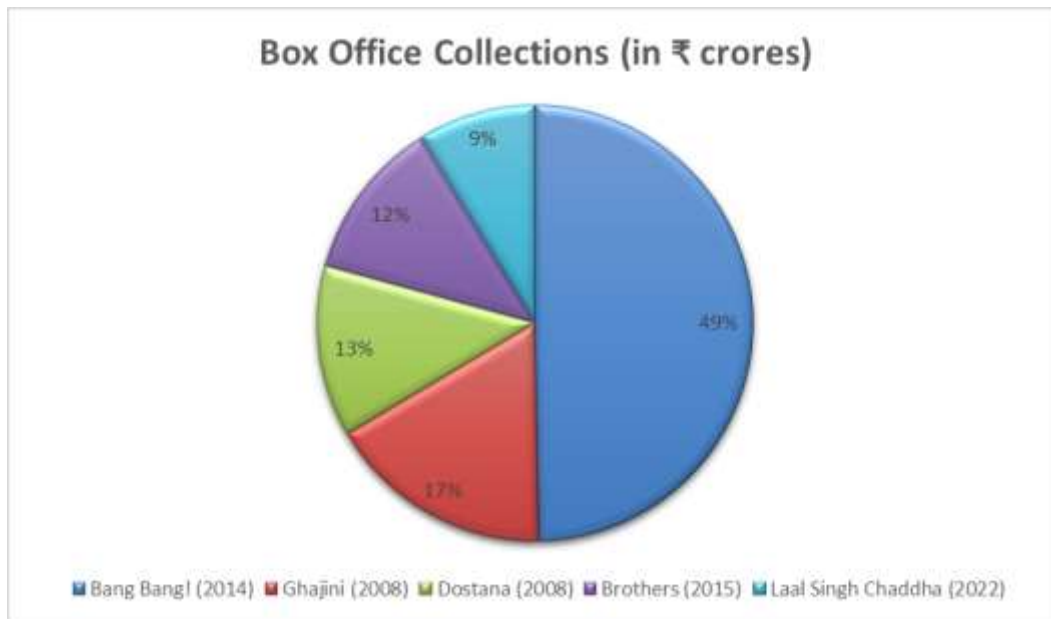
Analysis and Discussion

The research findings reveal that cross-cultural remakes are not simple linguistic or narrative transpositions but are actually culturally situated reinterpretations negotiating ideology, emotion, and identity. By comparing remake pairs from various cultural backgrounds, certain prevalent patterns are found that contribute to larger discourse in adaptation theory, audience reception, and cultural translation.

1. Narrative Realignment as Cultural Translation

Indian versions have the tendency to alter narrative pace in a bid to allow for emotional transmission and melodrama, typically via the inclusion of musical numbers and pictorial spectacle. This adaptation of the narrative is an example of Wang (2025) calling it intersemiotic translation in which cultural values are translated not just but interpreted anew. Examples of such films include Ghajini, which substitutes Memento's intellectual structure with emotional receptivity and thereby adheres to Bollywood's traditions of story-telling through sentiment.

2. Character Reinvention and Ideological Mediation

Recontextualization of heroes in an ethical paradigm is one of the common trends seen. Western heroes who possess individualistic leanings or morally dubious characters often tend to be reimaged in Indian remakes as morally superior, emotion-expressive, and family-oriented characters. Partner reworks the film Hitch's dating coach, for instance, into a culturally appropriate matchmaker, which is not only a change of character type but also an ideological translation of relational ethics and gender roles in the Indian cultural setting.This is consistent with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which presumes audiences decode the media along lines that reinforce or subvert mainstream codes.

3. Emotional Intensification and Viewer Identification

The Survey data reveals Indian audiences to be more emotionally engaged with emotionally resonant storytelling with a stronger emphasis on national identity, familial relationships, and moral straightforwardness. The popularity of such tropes in remakes, as seen in Brothers or Laal Singh Chaddha, reflects cultural closeness and emotional identification as authenticity determiners. While only 18% of those questioned put remakes down as superior in narrative sophistication, 72% felt more emotionally invested in local versions. This disparity suggests a gap between critical assessment and affective reception, one that critics such as Hutcheon (2006) note is central to the adaptive process.

4. Strategic Ambiguity in Representational Politics

Some remakes take a model of symbolic visibility without narrative transgression. Dostana incorporates LGBTQ+ themes by way of comedy subtext, so that a heteronormative audience can enjoy queer representation while not having its implicit implications detailed. The experience is a quintessential case of a broader cultural logic of "safe transgression," with progressive elements inserted only up to a point of non-transgression of prevailing norms. Such adaptation strategies imply not only aesthetic agendas but political calculations that go into re-making practices.

5. Remakes as Sites of Cultural Agency

While there are remakes of most Indian stories in Western content, they naturally reinterpret them in keeping with local values and narrative power. Chachi 420 or Laal Singh Chaddha movies are not merely remitting Western narratives but reinterpret them with the visions of honor, familial redemption, and spiritual destiny. Remakes, according to Han and Lee (2025), are double-coded: they are both markers of cultural hegemony and local independence. This is the essence of the dynamics of adaptation in the globalized media today.

Conclusion

This study builds upon current scholarship in adaptation, cultural translation, and audience reception by exploring how remakes across cultures are spaces of ideological negotiation and emotional recalibration. Through a comparative analysis of 12 original-remake film pairs, the study shows that remakes are not reactive copies but proactive cultural interventions that reconfigure narrative structure, character relationships, and thematic orientation to be responsive to localized sensibilities.

The study shows that Indian adaptations favor highlighting emotional intensity, family commitment, and moral absolutism over innovative storytelling or structural complexity. They reflect, and in turn, shape, dominant social values like collective identity, cultural pride, and religious destiny. They thereby reaffirm culturally resonant themes and, at the same time, suppress or reinterpret controversial issues by adopting willful ambiguity. The reinterpretation of characters, plots, and emotional arcs illustrates the way in which these adaptations are acts of cultural creation rather than translation.

Evidence of reception by the audience also points to the importance of cultural proximity as a determinant of attention. Most of the participants showed stronger preference for emotional connection, cultural affinity to the musical environment, and congruence of shared values than formal equivalence with the original work. This supports the theoretical contention that audience interpretation is heavily grounded in culture-based references (Hall, 1980) and that successful adaptation tends to come from emotional engagement more than text fidelity.

The study highlights remake as being at the forefront of the debate on representation and identity politics in the global but culturally dispersed media environment. For directors, the challenge is balancing authenticity, originality, and audience expectation with the need to provide narrative coherence. For academics, remakes present a rich terrain for the analysis of cultural authority, hybrid identity, and the complex negotiation between global media flows and local storytelling cultures.

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