



Disability, Agency, and Adaptation: Comparing *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *Laal Singh Chaddha* (2022)

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Abstract

This article compares representations of disability, agency, and social participation in Robert Zemeckis's *Forrest Gump* (1994) and Advait Chandan's *Laal Singh Chaddha* (2022). Rather than treating achievement as evidence that disability has disappeared, it examines how these related films negotiate disabling barriers, family support, education, movement, military service, work, and intimacy. A comparative qualitative reading of narrative, dialogue, performance, framing, editing, and sound identifies six recurring areas of representation. Because *Laal Singh Chaddha* adapts *Forrest Gump*, the study distinguishes inherited plot structures from transformations arising through changed historical settings, character relationships, and audiovisual choices. Both films challenge certain expectations about disabled protagonists by granting their central characters narrative authority and varied social roles. At the same time, their exceptional-success plots risk suggesting that recognition must be earned through unusual accomplishments. The comparison contributes to disability and film studies by showing how adapted popular narratives can affirm agency while retaining unresolved tensions between inclusion, individual resilience, and structural inequality.

Keywords: Disability representation; *Forrest Gump*; *Laal Singh Chaddha*; film adaptation; comparative film analysis; ableism; cinematic form; Hollywood and Hindi cinema; disability studies; Bollywood



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Introduction

Popular cinema does more than place characters with disabilities on screen. It organizes the viewer's access to their experiences through narration, casting, performance, camera position, music, editing, and the reactions of other characters. These choices can reproduce assumptions about dependence or exceptionalism, but they can also make visible the social barriers that limit participation. Disability scholarship has long questioned representations that reduce a person either to an impairment or to a triumphant figure whose accomplishments supposedly cancel that impairment (Longmore, 2003; Mitchell & Snyder, 2001; Norden, 1994). This article examines that tension in two commercially prominent films linked by adaptation: *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *Laal Singh Chaddha* (2022).

The films follow men who are underestimated in childhood yet participate in education, public life, work, friendship, and parenthood. Such narrative similarities are not independent evidence that US and Indian societies share an identical view of disability. *Laal Singh Chaddha* is an acknowledged Hindi-language adaptation of *Forrest Gump*. Its comparable episodes offer a means of examining what an adaptation preserves and what it changes: the school gatekeeping

scene, the childhood running sequence, a military rescue, the protagonist's business venture, and the later family reunion all invite paired close reading. This relationship is the study's comparative rationale, not a methodological inconvenience to be set aside.

The principal question is how the two films construct disability and agency through their recurring narrative and audiovisual arrangements. Subsidiary questions ask how institutions and families respond to the protagonists, which film-form choices make their experiences intelligible, and how the Indian adaptation repositions inherited story material within different historical and cultural settings. The article does not claim that either protagonist ceases to be disabled when he runs, graduates, joins the army, or becomes a parent. An individual's achievements and a person's disabling experiences may coexist. The more useful inquiry is whether recognition depends on unusually successful performance and whether the stories make social structures as visible as personal determination.

The analysis compares six domains already evident in the films: childhood and family support; schooling and access; running and bodily movement; military service and responsibility; economic participation; and love, care, and fatherhood. These areas are not treated as universal stages of disability experience. They are recurring plot functions chosen for comparative interpretation. The argument is that both films extend the range of roles available

to disabled protagonists while retaining a potentially restrictive ideal of the exceptionally successful individual. Where the remake differs, its changes are read as adaptation choices rather than as general truths about “Eastern” or “Western” culture.

Disability, Rights, and Screen Representation

Disability studies distinguishes impairment from the disabling effects of environments, institutional rules, social expectations, and unequal access. The social model directs attention away from the individual as the sole “problem” and toward the barriers through which people are excluded (Oliver, 1990). Human-rights approaches additionally emphasize autonomy, dignity, participation, and the responsibility of institutions to ensure equal treatment. Lawson and Beckett (2021) argue for understanding the social and human-rights models as complementary rather than as successive explanations that simply replace one another. These perspectives are useful when a principal describes admission rules as neutral while the narrative reveals who is excluded by their application.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes that long-term impairments interact with barriers that may hinder participation on an equal basis with others (United Nations, 2006). This definition is not a claim that talent, success, or care makes a disability disappear. In the present article, “person with a disability” is used where it is relevant to the theoretical discussion, while the characters are otherwise named. Derogatory expressions

found in the films are discussed as features of character speech, not adopted as the article's own vocabulary. Although disability is one of many categories of marginalization, the two-film corpus concerns specifically disability representation; treating every form of marginalization as equivalent would obscure this focus.

Film scholars have documented the recurrence of restrictive disability images, ranging from the threatening or pitiable figure to the exceptional individual whose virtue or achievement becomes the condition of social acceptance (Norden, 1994; Safran, 1998; Whittington-Walsh, 2002). Such plots may challenge a stereotype while also creating a new expectation: that disabled people must display extraordinary resilience, athleticism, military service, wealth, or self-sacrifice to be valued. Botha and Harvey (2024) likewise show that recent fictional films can combine sympathetic portrayals with discourses that preserve ableist power. Their findings warn against assuming that every affirmative ending is politically uncomplicated.¹

One further concern is the distinction between empowerment and what is sometimes called inspirational exceptionalism. Audiences are invited to admire a protagonist who seems to do everything others believe impossible, but the dramatic force of such a plot depends on the persistence of low expectations about disability. An achievement-based story may thus confer visibility on one highly unusual character while offering little account of those whose needs,

impairments, or opportunities differ. The critical issue is not that joy, sport, success, and family life should be excluded from disability narratives; it is that they should not become the test of whether a disabled person's life is worthwhile. This concern is especially important in the present films, where emotional payoffs follow repeated scenes of overcoming other people's disbelief.

Attention to film form is essential here. Performance and dialogue can make a character's perspective accessible, while a cut to an official's reaction can reveal how that perspective is judged. A sound bridge can connect bodily movement with emotional release; a recurring composition can turn the school entrance from a site of initial exclusion into a later site of return. These are interpretive observations about narrative construction, not measurements of audience attitudes. The article therefore asks how the films offer viewers particular ways of seeing, without claiming to know how every audience member responds.

Method and Comparative Design

The study uses purposive, comparative textual analysis informed by qualitative content and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Stemler, 2015). The materials are the two complete feature films, with particular attention to matched sequences that recur across the source film and its adaptation. Repeated viewing of the relevant passages supports comparison of plot function, staging, framing, cutting, music, voice-over, character positioning, and spoken

evaluations of difference. Film quotations are used sparingly because subtitle translations and release versions can vary; descriptive scene evidence carries the principal argument.

The six analytical domains were because they offer a transparent way to compare matched episodes: family support, education, running, military service, enterprise, and intimate relationships. Their recurrence within this two-film corpus does not amount to evidence of thematic “saturation” across cinema generally. Rather than count every verbal statement as an independent finding, the analysis asks whether a scene primarily foregrounds an institutional barrier, an interpersonal response, a formal pattern, or a claim about agency. It then checks how the corresponding sequence is reproduced or altered in the adaptation.

The analysis is interpretive, not an experimental measure of the audience's attitudes. It does not claim to isolate the effects of individual editing decisions or to test the filmmakers' intentions. The method compares observable properties of matched scenes and the different meanings encouraged by their placement in each film's narrative. If a particular passage combines a character's spoken affirmation of equality with a cut that singles out the child as exceptional, those elements can be held in tension instead of reduced to a binary label of “positive” or “negative.” This procedure is particularly useful for adaptations, since equivalent

plot events can carry distinct meanings through changes to performance, sound, or historical reference.

The sample is intentionally narrow. Both films provide broadly affirmative narrative roles for their protagonists and are connected through an explicit remake relationship. Accordingly, the study cannot establish the prevalence of positive or negative disability representations in Hollywood, Bollywood, the United States, or India. It can evaluate the strengths and limitations of a single narrative pattern as it is carried between production contexts. Interpretations of cultural specificity are therefore confined to demonstrable changes in setting, narrative history, characters, and audiovisual form, not extrapolated to national character or social mentality.

Film Analysis: Six Linked Domains

Family Support and Childhood Exclusion

Both narratives begin by showing a child's impairment through the response of institutions and neighbors. The films make parental advocacy central to the protagonists' early access to public life. In *Forrest Gump*, the school principal invokes an IQ threshold as the apparent basis for redirecting Forrest into another educational setting, whereas Mrs. Gump insists that he should receive the same opportunities as other children. *Laal Singh Chaddha* retains the gatekeeping situation, but restages it through Laal's mother negotiating entry to school. The common structure is inherited through adaptation; the differences lie in the forms

of authority and persuasion dramatized within each scene. The scenes ask not whether either child has become “normal,” but whose decision determines the child's opportunity to learn.

The repeated image of a child being helped or encouraged to walk has an emotional function, yet its symbolism should be handled carefully. Mobility and independence are important to the protagonists' particular stories, but walking is not a universal condition of agency or human worth. In the relevant sequences, the camera's attention to the children's bodies is balanced by attention to family members, other children, and the social situation in which bodily difference acquires meaning. The comparison places the emotional encouragement offered by the mothers beside the institutional expectations that make such advocacy necessary. It also asks whether the films' preference for overcoming adversity leaves less space for forms of access that do not depend on dramatic individual achievement.



Figure 1. Paired childhood scenes: *Laal Singh Chaddha* (left) and *Forrest Gump* (right). Source: Frame images from the films (1994; 2022).

Table 1 summarizes the corresponding education sequences as scenes rather than reproducing extensive, edition-dependent dialogue transcripts. The parallel situations make the

adaptation structure visible. Their significance lies in their shared critique of narrow judgments of ability and in their differing presentations of institutional power. Botha and Harvey's (2024) concern about the coexistence of inclusion and conventional disability stereotypes remains pertinent: the mother who insists on opportunity can be celebrated even as the institution itself remains largely unchanged.

Table 1. School access and family advocacy

Analytical feature	<i>Forrest Gump</i> (1994)	<i>Laal Singh Chaddha</i> (2022)
Gatekeeping	A principal cites an IQ-based admission threshold.	School entry is restricted through judgments about Laal’s aptitude.
Response	Forrest’s mother insists on equal educational opportunity.	Laal’s mother advocates for access and challenges the exclusion.
Representational tension	Family intervention is foregrounded; institutional change receives less attention.	The adapted scene retains that imbalance while altering the negotiation.

Schooling and the Conditions of Recognition

The education episodes expand the protagonists' futures beyond the expectations expressed by administrators and peers. Forrest's progress into college and his place within the Alabama football program are established plot developments in the American film. Laal likewise proceeds through schooling in the Indian adaptation. These outcomes allow the films to place the protagonists in spaces from which others initially sought to exclude them. The scenes, however, should not be interpreted as evidence that academic success is available to

every person with an intellectual disability given sufficient motivation. School admission, support, and equitable treatment are questions of rights as well as personal effort (Lawson & Beckett, 2021; United Nations, 2006).

There is also a question about how institutions appear as characters within the films. The principals and other authority figures are recognizable obstacles, but the eventual graduation images can encourage the viewer to think of exclusion as a hurdle the protagonist has personally conquered. The school itself is not necessarily shown to have become accessible for all children who encounter similar barriers. The supportive mother becomes the narrative agent of change, a moving figure who also bears a strikingly individualized responsibility for making inclusion possible. A rights-based reading therefore values the mothers' advocacy while asking what responsibilities lie with institutions rather than families alone.

Formal repetition reinforces this argument: the school environment first appears as a point of scrutiny, whereas later educational scenes situate the characters among their peers and family supporters. The paired graduation images create an accessible visual shorthand for expanded participation. The endings are gratifying, but they also privilege credentials as evidence of a protagonist's social value. Recognizing this ambiguity makes the films more analytically interesting than either celebrating their optimism uncritically or dismissing it as wholly

misleading. In both cases, the central question is whether the surrounding society changes or the individual alone must demonstrate fitness for it.



Figure 2. Graduation scenes: *Laal Singh Chaddha* (left) and *Forrest Gump* (right). Source: Frame images from the films (1994; 2022).

Running, Pursuit, and the Spectacle of Ability

Running is the most readily recognizable motif shared by the films. As children, Forrest and Laal are pursued by bullies and urged to run by a friend. Editing accelerates the passage from vulnerability to movement, while shouted encouragement and music intensify the experience of release. In *Forrest Gump* the breaking away from leg braces makes bodily movement spectacular; the remake reworks the pursuit and escape for a different landscape and cast. The scene's power rests not merely in the fact that the protagonist can run but in the audiovisual shift from being targeted to taking control of his own direction.

The motif later acquires additional meanings. Forrest's running makes him valuable to his college football team and later becomes an extended journey that others interpret as having

public significance. The latter passages display a gap between the protagonist's personal motivation and the meanings ascribed to him by onlookers and the media. Laal's extended run likewise attracts followers who look for a message he has not claimed to deliver. Adaptation turns a familiar sequence into a new setting while retaining the narrative irony that spectators project a heroic lesson onto someone acting for reasons of his own. The films therefore contain resources for questioning the very exceptionalism they also celebrate.

Forrest is a college football player and later a table-tennis competitor. Laal's running is central to the Hindi film, but it should not automatically be described as an equivalent professional sporting career or a national championship. The analytical point concerns the adaptation of running as an image of movement, escape, social recognition, and projection, not a set of identical sports biographies. Nor does the scene prove that disability is “only in the mind”: such a proposition would contradict the disability models outlined above and discount people whose impairments cannot be represented through running.



Figure 3. Running and sporting imagery: *Forrest Gump* (left) and *Laal Singh Chaddha* (right). Source: Frame images from the films (1994; 2022).

Table 2. Running as an adapted narrative motif

Episode	<i>Forrest Gump</i> (1994)	<i>Laal Singh Chaddha</i> (2022)
Childhood pursuit	Bullying gives way to a running sequence associated with freedom.	A parallel pursuit scene reorganizes the same movement motif.
Later significance	Running is linked to college football and an extended cross-country journey.	Running becomes a widely observed journey; this is not a college baseball subplot.
Critical reading	Public admiration complicates rather than erases experiences of difference.	The public projects meanings onto Laal without necessarily sharing his motivations.

Military Service, Comradeship, and Narrative Agency

Military service supplies another inherited narrative function. Forrest's experience in Vietnam allows the film to link his straightforward conduct to acts of courage, comradeship, and an encounter with national history. The rescue of fellow soldiers is staged through movement, repeated returns to danger, and the relationship between Forrest and his commanding officer. The juxtaposition of peril and an often matter-of-fact narrative voice

produces a distinctive tension between the viewer's awareness of risk and Forrest's own description of events. The formal irony complicates, rather than simply glorifies, military achievement.

Laal Singh Chaddha relocates the military strand to the Kargil conflict and changes the network of comrades and consequences. The film includes Laal's relationship with Mohammed Paaji, an injured former adversary whose later involvement becomes important to Laal's business. This alteration makes the ethical dimension of the adaptation visible: care and the persistence of relationships can take precedence over enemy categories. The films' military episodes should not be taken as evidence that disabled people gain recognition only by serving a nation. Rather, each film chooses an unusually public form of recognition that may expand viewers' expectations while also tethering agency to heroic performance.

Neither production should be summarized as demonstrating how an entire country understands war. Both create particular blends of humor, tragedy, sentiment, and historical reference for their narratives. Close attention to editing, the contrast between action and the protagonist's narration, and the aftermath of rescue offers stronger evidence than unsupported claims that Americans are rational while Indians are emotional. The adaptation's changed

political geography is an identifiable textual difference, not a comprehensive explanation of national culture.



Figure 4. Military encounters: *Laal Singh Chaddha* (left) and *Forrest Gump* (right). Source: Frame images from the films (1994; 2022).

Table 3. Military narratives and adaptation

Feature	<i>Forrest Gump</i> (1994)	<i>Laal Singh Chaddha</i> (2022)
Setting	The Vietnam War.	The Kargil conflict.
Relationship	Forrest's loyalty to fellow soldiers and Lieutenant Dan.	Laal's rescue and his continuing relationship with Mohammed Paaji.
Analytical emphasis	Action, narration, risk, comradeship, and later friendship.	Changed political geography and interpersonal aftermath.

Work, Economic Participation, and Inherited Plot Structure

The protagonists' entrepreneurial success is another shared narrative outcome that changes form in the remake. Forrest enters the shrimping business through a promise associated with Bubba, later working with Lieutenant Dan. Laal develops an undergarment enterprise connected to Bala's plans, with Mohammed Paaji subsequently helping to market its products. The contrast is not “agriculture versus industrialization” as a summary of two national

economies. It is a specific adaptation decision through which shrimp fishing becomes garment production, and the earlier film's ties of friendship and obligation are translated into a different commercial setting.

The image of a disabled protagonist as a business owner counters narrow presumptions of permanent dependence. Yet these extraordinary fortunes should not be mistaken for typical economic outcomes, nor should wealth be treated as the precondition for personhood. An economic reading must also include access to capital, networks of care, labor, and opportunity. Both stories make success depend on relationships: Bubba and Lieutenant Dan are integral to Forrest's venture, while Bala and Mohammed Paaji shape Laal's plans. These interactions partly resist an individualistic self-made-hero account even when the films' plots culminate in impressive financial success.

The relevant film stills show economic activity and collaboration, but their meaning emerges from narrative context as much as their content. They support a more modest finding: the films allow disabled protagonists to occupy roles of economic decision-making, while their exceptional outcomes leave open how less celebrated people would gain equitable access to work. This is consistent with a rights-oriented rather than an “overcoming disability” interpretation (Lawson & Beckett, 2021; United Nations, 2006).



Figure 5. Scenes associated with enterprise and collaboration: *Laal Singh Chaddha* (left) and *Forrest Gump* (right).

Source: Frame images from the films (1994; 2022).

Table 4. Work and business: shared function, localized detail

Feature	<i>Forrest Gump</i> (1994)	<i>Laal Singh Chaddha</i> (2022)
Enterprise	Shrimping; the idea derives from Bubba and later involves Lieutenant Dan.	Undergarment manufacturing; Bala's plan and Mohammed Paaji's marketing advice matter.
Interpretive point	Economic independence is portrayed through extraordinary success.	The remake preserves the success plot while changing products and relationships.
Limitation	Neither outcome establishes typical employment opportunities for disabled people.	Neither outcome should be read as a national economic generalization.

Intimacy, Caregiving, and Fatherhood

The final recurring domain is intimacy and family. In *Forrest Gump*, Forrest's relationship with Jenny culminates in marriage and care for their son, Forrest Jr. In *Laal Singh Chaddha*, Laal reconnects with Rupa and becomes a parent to their son, Aman. The narrative structures are close because the second film adapts the first. In both, the protagonists' capacity to love and provide care is significant not because it makes them “abled” in place of disabled, but because popular stereotypes have often denied disabled characters mature emotional and familial lives.

The return to a school setting near the conclusion of the Hindi film gives this theme a specific visual shape. Laal accompanying Aman to school recalls his own childhood encounter with educational gatekeeping, transforming an earlier moment of parental advocacy into a later moment of care. The corresponding ending of *Forrest Gump* similarly associates fatherhood with everyday routines and renewed responsibility. The echo across generations is a formal means of establishing continuity. Neither film demonstrates that people with disabilities must marry or have children to be socially complete; a more inclusive reading recognizes care as one possible dimension of agency rather than a compulsory achievement.

These films also reveal the limits of a simple “positive portrayal” framework. The protagonists receive narrative dignity through major accomplishments, while the implications of inaccessible institutions, uncertain employment, or ordinary life without spectacular distinction receive less attention. The films are sympathetic but not beyond critique. Their generosity toward individual characters coexists with conventions that may make recognition depend on their exceptional qualities (Botha & Harvey, 2024; Whittington-Walsh, 2002).

Adaptation and the Limits of Cross-Cultural Generalization

The comparison can also be understood through the different ways the protagonists address an audience. The American film repeatedly uses Forrest's recollection at the bus stop as the framing situation for a life story, allowing the film to alternate between an apparently

unassuming account and spectacularly reconstructed historical events. The Indian film similarly uses narration in transit, but localizes the journey and surrounding interlocutors. Such devices grant the protagonist a speaking position rather than leaving him merely to be interpreted by nondisabled characters. At the same time, the contrast between narration and the images supplied to viewers can invite an audience to see more than the protagonist explicitly states. The ethical question is whether that surplus of meaning broadens subjectivity or uses the character as an unwitting vehicle for others' historical nostalgia.

The relationship between the films is best understood as adaptation, not as a natural experiment comparing two independent cultures. The remake borrows an identifiable plot architecture and several iconic audiovisual motifs: childhood discrimination, running, military friendship, commercial success, extended separation from a beloved partner, and the child's school entrance. Those continuities cannot by themselves prove shared American and Indian attitudes toward disability. They reflect the creative and industrial decision to adapt an established narrative.

The changed material is nevertheless meaningful. The settings shift from the American South and the Vietnam War to Indian social and political landscapes, including the Kargil conflict; a shrimping venture becomes an undergarment business; and the reworked relations

surrounding the protagonist's military service and enterprise offer new positions through which the story is told. These differences justify a comparative analysis of narrative localization and formal choices. They do not authorize claims that “Eastern” people are essentially emotional, that “Western” people are rational, or that a single pair of films represents the character of two national cinemas.

Table 5 brings the six domains together without collapsing disability into achievement. It identifies both the affirmative possibilities of the shared plot and the constraints of its success-oriented framing. The findings are specific to these two films. Future research could broaden the corpus to include films that do not follow an exceptional-achievement narrative, productions centered on disabled performers, and reception studies attentive to diverse audiences.

Table 5. Six domains of comparison and the adaptation relationship

Domain	Shared narrative function	Locally adapted or revised emphasis
Childhood	Parental advocacy against judgments of difference.	Distinct school setting and negotiations.
Education	Access and later educational attainment.	Changed surrounding institutions and performances.
Movement	Bullying, escape, and repeated running imagery.	Transposition of setting and social witnesses.
Military service	Rescue and the value of comradeship.	Vietnam becomes Kargil; relationships are recast.
Work	Venture rooted in earlier friendship and support.	Shrimping becomes a garment business.

Domain	Shared narrative function	Locally adapted or revised emphasis
Intimacy	Longstanding love, loss, and fatherhood.	The son is Aman rather than Forrest Jr.; school-return motif.

Table 6. Disability models and the interpretive limits of success narratives

Framework	Questions raised by the films	Critical qualification
Social model	Where do schooling, stigma, and peer conduct create barriers?	A heroic individual does not replace accessible institutions.
Human-rights model	How are agency, equal opportunity, family life, and work represented?	Rights are not earned by achievement or wealth.
Film-form analysis	How do editing, performance, sound, and framing make barriers or agency visible?	Formal effects are interpreted; audience responses are not measured.

Conclusion

Forrest Gump and *Laal Singh Chaddha* invite viewers to recognize disabled protagonists as people who form attachments, experience exclusion, make decisions, and take part in public life. The comparison demonstrates that disability and agency are not opposites. The films' school, running, military, employment, and family episodes show how a popular narrative can confront narrow expectations about who belongs in these social spaces. Their close adaptation relationship also makes visible the way comparable narrative functions can be recast through different historical settings and film-form choices.

The most important qualification is that exceptional achievement is not a remedy for disability, nor the basis of a person's right to social participation. The films often award their protagonists recognition through unusual athletic ability, public heroism, financial success, and

devoted family life. These narrative rewards broaden some representational possibilities even as they risk replacing a deficit stereotype with an exceptional-success stereotype. Social and human-rights models of disability help preserve this tension by locating the question of inclusion in institutional responsibilities and social environments rather than solely in individual perseverance.

The study contributes a focused account of how a disability-related narrative travels through adaptation and how film form participates in that process. Its six comparative domains organize close reading but should not be generalized into a universal developmental path. A two-film purposive sample, reliance on selected matched scenes, and the absence of reception evidence limit broader conclusions. Further work comparing a wider range of genres, production practices, and disabled people's own accounts could examine whether more ordinary and less heroic screen lives receive equal narrative attention. The films remain valuable not because they prove that disability vanishes in the presence of talent but because they make questions of recognition, care, and access visible in widely circulating audiovisual storytelling.

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¹ Editor's note: For related CINEJ scholarship on disability in film, see Paftalı et al. (2025), which examines how autism, family, and social attitudes are represented in Turkish films through melodramatic structures and complements the present article's attention to family support and film form. On disability, embodiment, and the cultural logic of the extraordinary, see Garland-Thomson (1997); on disability in the Indian context, see Ghai (2015); and for a general framework for the adaptation of stories across cultural and historical settings, see Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013).