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Adaptation and Transformation in Children's Literature: A Study of *The Little Mermaid* (2023)

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ABSTRACT: Children's literature has long served as a foundation for storytelling traditions that combine imagination, moral instruction, and cultural values. With the rise of cinema, many classical fairy tales have been adapted into films, leading to significant transformations in narrative form and meaning. These adaptations often reflect changing social norms, ideological perspectives, and audience expectations. This study examines the adaptation of children's literature into contemporary cinema, focusing on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* and its 2023 live-action adaptation, *The Little Mermaid* (2023 film). Children's literature has traditionally combined imagination, moral instruction, and cultural values, and its cinematic adaptations often involve significant transformations in narrative form, character construction, and ideological meaning in response to evolving social and cultural expectations. The focus of this research is to analyze how the original fairy tale is reinterpreted in the 2023 film, particularly in terms of narrative structure, character agency, and thematic orientation. Special attention is given to the shift from the original tale's themes of sacrifice, silence, and tragic longing toward more contemporary themes of empowerment, self-expression, and emotional fulfillment. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative comparative approach combining literary analysis and film studies. It compares the source text with its adaptation through narrative analysis (plot development, characterization, and structure) and ideological analysis (themes of identity, voice, gender roles, and agency). In addition, it considers cinematic techniques such as visual representation, music, and performance to understand how meaning is constructed in the film medium. Preliminary findings suggest that the 2023 adaptation significantly reconfigures the original narrative by softening its tragic elements and emphasizing individual autonomy and self-realization. These changes reflect broader cultural and industrial shifts in children's media, where contemporary values such as empowerment, inclusivity, and emotional positivity increasingly shape the reinterpretation of classical fairy tales.

Keywords: Adaptation theory; Children's literature; Ideology; Intermediality; Narrative transformation

1. Introduction

Children's literature has historically functioned as a powerful medium for transmitting cultural values, moral lessons, and imaginative narratives. Among its most enduring

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forms, fairy tales occupy a central place, blending fantasy with ethical instruction. With the development of cinema, these stories have increasingly been adapted into films, transforming not only their narrative structures but also their ideological meanings. Film adaptations do not merely reproduce original texts; rather, they reinterpret them in ways that reflect evolving social norms, cultural expectations, and audience sensibilities.

This paper examines the adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837) into its contemporary cinematic counterpart, *The Little Mermaid* (2023). While Andersen's tale is characterized by themes of sacrifice, silence, and tragic longing, the 2023 adaptation reimagines the story through a lens of empowerment, self-expression, and emotional fulfillment. This shift raises important questions about how children's literature is reshaped to align with contemporary ideologies.

The 2023 film is also a live-action reimagining of Disney's 1989 animated adaptation, rather than a direct screen translation of Andersen's tale alone (Musker & Clements, 1989; Marshall, 2023). The 1989 film is therefore treated here as an important adaptation context, while the principal comparison remains between the 1837 literary work and the 2023 film.

The central argument of this paper is that the 2023 film significantly reconfigures the original narrative by transforming its protagonist's agency, altering its thematic focus, and employing cinematic techniques that emphasize voice and individuality. Through these changes, the adaptation reflects broader cultural and industrial shifts in children's media.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The study of adaptation has evolved into a significant field within literary and film studies. Linda Hutcheon conceptualizes adaptation as both a product and a process, emphasizing that adaptations are not secondary or inferior copies but creative reinterpretations shaped by context (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 8). From this perspective, film adaptations of fairy tales are understood as cultural rearticulations rather than direct translations.

Similarly, Jack Zipes highlights the ideological nature of fairy tales, arguing that they are continuously reshaped to reflect dominant social values (Zipes, 2012, p. 15). Fairy tales, therefore, are not static narratives but dynamic forms that evolve across time and media.

Scholarship on Disney's earlier adaptation establishes that Ariel's voice and autonomy are contested rather than self-evident. Henke et al. (1996) examine the construction of female selfhood, power, and voice across Disney heroines, while Tseëlon (1995) interprets the mermaid's lost voice and bodily transformation in relation to patriarchal subjectivity. Spencer (2014) proposes another reading of Andersen's tale and its Disney adaptation through identity performance. Do Rozario (2004) situates Disney princess narratives within fairy-tale and film-musical conventions, including their relationships with parental authority and antagonistic figures.

Broader work on Disney princess representation likewise offers a framework for examining changing models of femininity. Muir (2023) studies the Disney Princess phenomenon across films and related cultural practices, drawing attention to variations in the way femininity is constructed. This makes the movement from sacrifice to

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apparent self-determination a question for critical comparison, rather than a straightforward indication that later versions have abandoned earlier gender expectations.

Recent research directly addressing the 2023 film provides a more specific context. Akimoto (2025) compares changing gender norms and racial diversity between Disney's 1989 and 2023 films; Rikhana et al. (2024) identify representations of women's empowerment through Ariel's choices and social relationships; and Myisha et al. (2024) analyze the 2023 film's multicultural casting and narrative representation. However, Richardson (2024) argues that revisions to the earlier musical's racial tropes do not necessarily resolve the ideological limitations of the remake. Gammon and Phan (2025) document the racialized and gendered backlash to the 2023 film in Vietnam. These studies suggest that empowerment and inclusivity should be assessed critically alongside the film's narrative and audiovisual choices.

Within children's literature studies, fairy tales are often seen as tools for moral education and identity formation. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that modern adaptations challenge traditional norms, particularly in relation to gender roles, agency, and voice.

From a film studies perspective, adaptations involve a shift from textual to audiovisual storytelling. This transition introduces new elements; such as visual imagery, music, and performance, that contribute to meaning-making in ways that written texts cannot.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative comparative approach, combining literary analysis with film analysis. The primary corpus consists of: Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837) and *The Little Mermaid* (2023) directed by Rob Marshall.

The analysis is conducted on three levels: 1) Narrative Analysis: Examining plot structure, character development, and narrative progression, 2) Ideological Analysis: Focusing on themes such as gender roles, identity, voice, and agency, and 3) Cinematic Analysis: Considering how visual representation, music, and performance shape meaning in the film. By comparing these elements across both texts, the study identifies key transformations in narrative and ideology.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Narrative Transformation

The narrative transformation between *The Little Mermaid* (1837) and *The Little Mermaid* (2023) reflects not only a shift in storytelling form but also a broader reconfiguration of ideological, cultural, and gendered discourses across time. Andersen's original tale emerges from a nineteenth-century European context deeply influenced by Romanticism and Christian morality, in which suffering, renunciation, and spiritual transcendence are central narrative values. The little mermaid's desire for an immortal soul situates her journey within a metaphysical framework that privileges self-sacrifice as a path to moral elevation (Andersen, 1837). Scholars such as Jack Zipes argue that classical fairy tales often function as didactic narratives that reinforce dominant moral and social codes, particularly those surrounding gender and obedience (Zipes,

2012). In this sense, the mermaid's voicelessness and physical pain can be read as symbolic of the constraints imposed on women within patriarchal structures, where silence and endurance are valorized traits.

Moreover, Andersen's tale encodes a model of femininity grounded in passivity and unreciprocated devotion. As noted by Marina Warner, the fairy-tale heroine is frequently constructed as a figure whose virtue lies in her capacity to suffer and wait, rather than to act (Warner, 1995). The little mermaid's refusal to kill the prince, even when it is her only means of survival, reinforces a moral logic that privileges altruism over self-preservation. Her ultimate transformation into sea foam, followed by a deferred promise of spiritual redemption, underscores the narrative's investment in transcendence rather than earthly fulfillment. Thus, the original tale operates within what may be understood as a disciplinary framework, where desire is regulated and agency is subordinated to moral law.

In contrast, the 2023 film adaptation rearticulates this narrative through the lens of contemporary values, particularly those associated with individualism, gender equality, and cultural inclusivity. Ariel is no longer defined primarily by sacrifice but by curiosity, determination, and a desire for self-definition. This shift aligns with what Linda Hutcheon describes as the adaptive process of "repetition without replication," in which texts are reinterpreted to resonate with new audiences and ideological contexts (Hutcheon, 2006). The film transforms Ariel from a passive subject into an active agent who participates in her own rescue and challenges the structures that seek to contain her. Her relationship with Prince Eric is also reconfigured as reciprocal and dialogic, reflecting modern expectations of romantic equality (Marshall, 2023).

The transformation from tragedy to fulfillment signals a fundamental ideological shift: whereas the original tale frames suffering as virtuous and necessary, the adaptation foregrounds happiness and self-realization as desirable outcomes.

3.2. Character Agency and Voice

The theme of voice is central to both versions of the story, yet it is constructed and ideologically loaded in fundamentally different ways. In The Little Mermaid, the mermaid's loss of voice is not merely a narrative device but a symbolic mechanism through which her agency is erased and redefined. By surrendering her voice, she surrenders her primary means of self-definition, communication, and resistance, becoming a figure whose subjectivity is mediated entirely through others, particularly the sea witch and the prince (Andersen, 1837). Within this framework, the mermaid's silence becomes a form of symbolic violence, as it renders her desire visible only through suffering while denying her the ability to articulate it.

Furthermore, the absence of voice in Andersen's tale intensifies the asymmetry of power between the mermaid and the human world she longs to enter. The mermaid's inability to speak to the prince ensures that her love remains unacknowledged and unreciprocated, reinforcing the tragic logic of miscommunication and structural silence. In this sense, voice is not simply lost; it is systematically excluded from the conditions of recognition within the human world.

In contrast, the 2023 adaptation reconfigures voice as both a literal and symbolic site of empowerment, even when it is temporarily taken from Ariel. In The Little

Mermaid, Ariel is established from the beginning as a character defined by curiosity, emotional expressiveness, and intellectual desire. Her silence after making the pact with Ursula is therefore framed not as total erasure but as a temporary disruption of an otherwise active subjectivity. Through visual storytelling techniques, including facial expression, body language, and underwater cinematography, the film compensates for the loss of spoken voice by amplifying non-verbal forms of communication (Marshall, 2023).

Musical sequences further function as emotional extensions of Ariel's interiority, allowing her desires and frustrations to remain legible to the audience even in the absence of speech.

This cinematic strategy reflects what Linda Hutcheon describes as adaptation as "re-interpretation through medium-specific transformation," where meaning is reconstructed through the affordances of film rather than direct replication of textual elements (Hutcheon, 2006). In this sense, Ariel's silence is not equated with complete disempowerment but is instead embedded within a broader multimodal system that preserves her agency. Unlike Andersen's mermaid, whose silence isolates her from all recognition, the filmic Ariel remains narratively visible and emotionally intelligible to both characters and audience.

Ultimately, the shift from silence to voice across the two versions of the story reflects a broader transformation in narrative ideology. In Andersen's tale, silence functions as a condition of sacrifice and erasure, reinforcing a worldview in which female desire must be endured rather than articulated. In the 2023 adaptation, however, silence is temporary, mediated, and ultimately overcome, allowing voice to function as a marker of empowerment and self-definition. This transition redefines the protagonist from a passive object of narrative suffering into an active subject of meaning-making, illustrating how contemporary adaptations reshape classical texts to reflect evolving understandings of agency, identity, and expression (Andersen, 1837; Marshall, 2023).

3.3. Thematic Reorientation

Thematic evolution further illustrates the ideological transformation of the narrative between *The Little Mermaid* (1837) and *The Little Mermaid* (2023). In Andersen's original tale, the dominant thematic structure is anchored in unrequited love, sacrifice, and spiritual transcendence. The little mermaid's journey is defined by renunciation: she willingly abandons her voice, her underwater identity, and ultimately her bodily survival in pursuit of an idealized human love and an immortal soul (Andersen, 1837). This trajectory reflects a moral universe in which desire is subordinated to higher spiritual or ethical ends, and where suffering is framed as a necessary condition for moral elevation. Within this framework, the mermaid's emotional world is structured around absence rather than fulfillment. Love is experienced as distance, loss, and silence, and her inability to achieve reciprocation reinforces a thematic logic of unattainable desire. The narrative ultimately resolves not through earthly satisfaction but through spiritual reconfiguration, as the mermaid is offered the possibility of a transcendent afterlife. This ending situates the tale within a metaphysical worldview in which meaning is deferred beyond the material world.

In contrast, the 2023 adaptation reorients the narrative toward themes of empowerment, identity formation, and emotional fulfillment in The Little Mermaid. Ariel's journey is no longer structured around renunciation but around exploration and self-discovery. Rather than seeking to escape her identity, she seeks to expand it, negotiating between two worlds without fully rejecting either. Her desire is framed as legitimate curiosity rather than transgressive longing, aligning the narrative with contemporary cultural values that emphasize self-expression and individual autonomy. In this sense, the film replaces the logic of sacrifice with a logic of growth, where transformation is understood as development rather than loss.

This thematic reorientation reflects broader shifts in cultural expectations surrounding gender representation in media. Contemporary narratives increasingly prioritize protagonists who demonstrate agency, adaptability, and emotional resilience rather than passive endurance or self-erasure.

3.4. Cinematic Techniques and Meaning-Making

The transition from text to film introduces new dimensions of storytelling that significantly reshape the adaptation's meaning, particularly through the sensory and multimodal nature of cinema. Unlike the literary form of The Little Mermaid, which relies primarily on narration, symbolism, and reader imagination, the 2023 adaptation of The Little Mermaid constructs meaning through visual, auditory, and performative layers that work simultaneously to produce emotional and narrative depth. Visual design plays a crucial role in this transformation. The use of saturated underwater color palettes, dynamic lighting contrasts between the ocean and the human world, and fluid camera movement creates an immersive aquatic space that externalizes Ariel's emotional intensity. As David Bordwell argues, classical and contemporary cinema often relies on visual composition and spatial design to guide audience perception and emotional alignment, shaping how viewers interpret character subjectivity (Bordwell, 1985). In this sense, the film does not simply depict Ariel's world but constructs it as an affective environment that mirrors her curiosity and desire for expansion.

Music functions as another central narrative mechanism that replaces and extends the expressive limitations of textual narration. In musical cinema, songs operate not merely as entertainment but as structured moments of psychological revelation. As noted by Rick Altman, film musicals use song sequences to externalize inner emotion, transforming subjective experience into shared audiovisual performance (Altman, 1987). In The Little Mermaid, musical numbers allow characters to articulate feelings that are otherwise constrained by narrative circumstances, including desire, fear, and aspiration. Ariel's musical expressions function as extensions of her interiority, ensuring that even when her spoken voice is absent, her emotional presence remains fully accessible to the audience. This creates a layered form of communication in which music becomes a substitute for dialogue while simultaneously intensifying emotional resonance.

Performance further deepens this representational complexity by anchoring meaning in embodied expression. The film's reliance on facial micro-expressions, gesture, and bodily movement allows Ariel's subjectivity to be communicated through non-verbal semiotics. As Christian Metz explains, cinema operates as a language system

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in which meaning is produced through signs that extend beyond spoken language, including movement, framing, and visual emphasis (Metz, 1974). In this context, Ariel's temporary loss of voice does not equate to narrative silence; instead, her emotions are redistributed across her physical performance and cinematic framing. Her gestures toward the surface, her reactions to unfamiliar human environments, and her expressive responsiveness to other characters collectively construct a continuous emotional narrative that remains legible without dialogue.

Moreover, the actor's performance plays a crucial role in sustaining character continuity and psychological depth. In film theory, performance is often understood as a bridge between narrative structure and audience empathy, enabling viewers to access interior states through external signs. This is particularly significant in the portrayal of Ariel, whose emotional world is communicated through embodied vulnerability and curiosity rather than verbal articulation. The camera's frequent focus on close-ups reinforces this intimacy, drawing attention to subtle shifts in expression that signal emotional transformation and narrative development.

Taken together, these cinematic techniques demonstrate how the adaptation reconfigures storytelling from a primarily linguistic medium into a multimodal system of meaning production. The integration of visual aesthetics, musical expression, and embodied performance allows the film to construct a more immediate and sensorially rich representation of Ariel's inner life. Rather than relying solely on narrative description, the film translates emotion into perceptible audiovisual experience, thereby expanding the expressive possibilities of the original tale while reshaping how agency, desire, and identity are communicated to the audience.

The transition from text to film introduces new dimensions of storytelling that significantly shape the adaptation's meaning. Visual elements such as color, lighting, and underwater cinematography create an immersive environment that enhances emotional engagement.

Music plays a particularly important role in the film. Songs function as expressions of internal states, allowing characters to articulate emotions that might otherwise remain unspoken (Marshall, 2023). Performance also contributes to meaning-making. Facial expressions, gestures, and physical movement convey Ariel's emotions in ways that compensate for the temporary loss of her voice. Through these cinematic techniques, the film constructs a rich and dynamic representation of the protagonist's inner life.

The analysis reveals that the 2023 adaptation significantly reconfigures the original narrative on multiple levels:

- Narrative Level: The tragic ending is replaced with a resolution centered on happiness and fulfillment.
- Character Level: The protagonist is transformed from a passive figure into an active and empowered individual.
- Thematic Level: The focus shifts from sacrifice and suffering to identity and self-expression.
- Cinematic Level: Visual and auditory elements enhance emotional engagement and reinforce contemporary values.

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These changes reflect broader cultural and industrial trends in children's media, where narratives increasingly emphasize empowerment, inclusivity, and emotional positivity.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837) and Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (2023)

Dimension	Andersen's Fairy Tale (1837)	2023 Film Adaptation
Narrative Structure	Tragic progression ending in loss and spiritual transcendence (sea foam → 'daughter of the air') (Andersen, 1837).	Linear heroic journey with conflict resolution and a happy ending (Marshall, 2023).
Core Motivation	Desire for an immortal soul and unrequited love rooted in sacrifice.	Curiosity, identity exploration, freedom, and emotional connection.
Ending	Tragic-sacrificial ending; love is not fulfilled.	Romantic and narrative closure; Ariel and Eric unite.
Theme of Voice	Voice is permanently lost, symbolizing silence, erasure, and lack of agency (Andersen, 1837).	Voice is temporarily lost but compensated through visual storytelling and expression; agency remains present.
Agency of Protagonist	Passive figure; decisions are constrained by external forces (witch, prince, divine order).	Active heroine; makes choices, resists authority, and participates in defeating Ursula.
Representation of Love	One-sided, idealized, and unattainable love; lack of reciprocity.	Mutual, communicative, and emotionally reciprocal relationship.
Worldview / Ideology	Christian moral framework emphasizing sacrifice, suffering, and spiritual redemption.	Secular, humanistic framework emphasizing self-realization and personal fulfillment.
Gender Representation	Feminine ideal = silence, endurance, and self-sacrifice (Warner, 1995; Zipes, 2012).	Feminine ideal = voice, autonomy, emotional expression, and independence.
Power Structure	Hierarchical and deterministic (royal authority, patriarchal control, divine order).	More fluid and negotiable; protagonist resists and reshapes power relations (Foucault, 1978).
Voice & Communication	Literal silence leads to an inability to communicate or be recognized.	Multimodal communication (music, gesture, expression) maintains emotional intelligibility.
Film/Medium Techniques	Literary symbolism, narration, and allegory.	Visual cinematography, music, performance, and CGI underwater world (Bordwell, 1985; Altman, 1987; Metz, 1974).

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Dimension	Andersen's Fairy Tale (1837)	2023 Film Adaptation
Characterization of Ariel	Ethereal, symbolic figure defined by sacrifice and longing.	Fully developed emotional subject with curiosity, humor, and agency.
Thematic Orientation	Sacrifice, renunciation, and spiritual aspiration.	Empowerment, identity formation, and emotional fulfillment.
Outcome of Desire	Desire is denied and transformed into spiritual reward.	Desire is partially fulfilled through real-world resolution.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that adaptation is not merely a process of retelling but one of reinterpretation shaped by cultural context. The transformation of The *Little Mermaid* from Andersen's original tale (1837) to its 2023 film adaptation illustrates how narratives evolve to reflect changing societal values.

The shift from silence to voice, from sacrifice to agency, and from tragedy to fulfillment highlights the ways in which contemporary adaptations reimagine classical stories for modern audiences. In doing so, they not only preserve the relevance of these narratives but also redefine their meanings.

Ultimately, the adaptation of children's literature into film serves as a mirror of cultural change, revealing how societies reinterpret foundational stories to align with their evolving ideals.

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