

***Asam Garam*: A Short Film Screenplay Adapted from Dee Lestari's Short Story About the Journey Through Grief**

Deby Christi¹, Dwi Setiawan²

Master's Program in Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
E-mail: deby.christi@gmail.com¹, dewey@petra.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

This creative work, a short film screenplay adapted from Dee Lestari's short story *Asam Garam*, explores the experience of loss and its impact on an individual's life, the journey through grief, and the process of overcoming grief toward acceptance. These elements are elaborated through a short film screenplay grounded in Kübler-Ross's (2014) theory of loss and stages of grief, as well as the dual process model of coping with bereavement proposed by Stroebe and Schut (1999). The screenplay is also developed using the adaptation principles outlined by Hutcheon (2006) and Desmond and Hawkes (2006). The narrative centers on Gaspar, a skeptical journalist mourning the death of his father, who is assigned to interview the owner of a popular shop in Papua that sells a mysterious black salt said to make anyone cry without reason. His encounter with the shop owner gradually enables him to accept his loss. This story demonstrates that multiple losses can lead to a series of subsequent losses that shape an individual's psychological wounds, that the grieving process varies across individuals and is inherently non-linear, and that crying can serve as an initial step toward healing.

Keywords: acceptance, adaptation, grief, loss, short film screenplay

INTRODUCTION

Literary works possess enduring vitality because they consistently create space for interpretation across multiple media. One medium that is particularly effective in both preserving and expanding the meaning of literary works is film, achieved through the process of adaptation. Linda Hutcheon (2006) defines adaptation as an explicitly acknowledged form of transposition from one work into another medium, which may involve shifts in medium, genre, point of view, or narrative context. Through adaptation, literature is not only preserved in its existence but also undergoes a transformation of meaning, allowing it to remain relevant to changing times while fostering intermedial dialogue between text and film.

The adaptation of popular literary works into film plays a significant role in expanding audience reach, strengthening cultural impact, and driving the growth of the creative industry. The popularity of literary works often serves as initial capital for film production, as such works already possess an established and potential readership (Woodrich, 2017). In Indonesia, the resurgence of popular literature and the success of its film adaptations have contributed substantially to the national creative economy (Anggraini, 2024). Film adaptations are no longer limited to cinematic products alone but frequently evolve into cross-media Intellectual Property (IP) ecosystems encompassing diverse business sectors and cultural phenomena.

One Indonesian author whose works are frequently adapted into film is Dee Lestari. She is widely recognized as an influential contemporary writer, known for her exploration of modern themes, philosophical reflection, and innovative, dynamic writing style. Since the publication of her debut novel *Supernova* (2001), followed by works such as *Perahu Kertas*, *Rectoverso*, *Madre*, and *Filosofi Kopi*, Dee Lestari's writings have achieved not only commercial success but also significant academic recognition.

The successful adaptation of *Filosofi Kopi*, in particular, has developed into a sustainable IP that extends beyond the cinematic medium.

An interest in Dee Lestari's work motivated the writer to adapt her latest short story, *Asam Garam*, featured in the short story collection *Tanpa Rencana* (2024), into a short film screenplay. The story centers on the themes of loss and grief, symbolized through black salt believed to evoke tears. Grounded in cultural research on black salt in Papua and informed by Dee Lestari's personal experiences of loss, *Asam Garam* presents an emotionally compelling narrative that blends factual reality with elements of magical realism. The story stands as one of the most powerful representations of the core themes explored in *Tanpa Rencana*: loss, grief, and acceptance.

The adaptation of *Asam Garam* into a short film screenplay is further grounded in cultural and narrative considerations, particularly the limited representation of Papuan culture within Indonesian cinema. In this adaptation, the narrative perspective is shifted by positioning Gaspar as the main character—a skeptical journalist who embarks on both a physical and spiritual journey toward accepting his grief. The short film format is selected for its effectiveness in conveying personal conflict, character transformation, and strong symbolism (Desmond & Hawkes, 2006). This screenplay serves as an academic inquiry into how literary texts can be translated into cinematic language without losing their essence, how symbolic elements (salt, tears, and journey) can be communicated effectively, and how film can function as a universal space for contemplation on humanity and the experience of grief.

LOSS

Loss is an essential aspect of human life and is inseparable from the process of emotional growth. Kessler (2014) asserts that life is fundamentally defined by loss, which elicits a wide range of psychological and physical responses, including sadness, anger, feelings of emptiness, sleep disturbances, and behavioral changes. The loss of a loved one—particularly an immediate family member—is identified as the most devastating form of loss and one of the strongest stressors in everyday life (Birenbaum et al., 1989, as cited in Abi-Hashem, 1999).

Loss may occur as a single event or as multiple, cumulative experiences; it may be sudden or gradual, and it can take place in both the past and the present (Abi-Hashem, 1999). An inability to process loss—especially unresolved loss from earlier life stages—can impair psychological functioning and lead to maladaptive coping behaviors. Loss resulting from sudden death is often more difficult to accept due to the shock it induces and the prolonged denial phase it can create (Kübler-Ross, 2014). During childhood, experiences of loss become even more complex due to limited emotional and cognitive capacity, often rendering grieving children “forgotten mourners.”

This theoretical framework of loss is applied to examine the experiences of Gaspar, the protagonist in the short film screenplay *Asam Garam*. Gaspar endures layered losses: the sudden death of his mother during childhood and the death of his father in adulthood. Unprocessed grief from his early years intensifies the impact of subsequent losses, leaving Gaspar emotionally vulnerable. This vulnerability manifests in sleep disturbances, decreased work performance, withdrawal from daily routines, and destructive behaviors such as excessive alcohol consumption and smoking. Accordingly, loss theory serves as a conceptual foundation for understanding Gaspar's internal conflict and his emotional journey toward acceptance.

STAGES OF GRIEF

Grief is a complex emotional experience with far-reaching physical, psychological, emotional, and social effects (Mirhosseini et al., 2025). For most individuals, the grieving process unfolds naturally; however, under certain conditions it may develop into Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD), which is characterized by difficulty accepting the loss, impaired daily functioning, and persistent feelings of emptiness and loss of meaning in life (Prigerson & Maciejewski, 2008).

The model of the stages of grief proposed by Kübler-Ross and further developed by Kessler (2014) identifies five common responses to loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages do not represent a linear progression but rather serve as a conceptual framework for understanding the emotional dynamics individuals experience when confronting loss. Sudden death tends to intensify responses of anger and depression, which are understood as adaptive reactions rather than pathological conditions. Acceptance signifies an individual's ability to acknowledge the reality of the loss and to begin reconstructing meaning in life without negating the presence of sorrow.

In this study, the stages of grief theory is applied to analyze the emotional journey of Gaspar, the protagonist in the short film screenplay *Asam Garam*. Among the five stages, three are most prominently experienced by Gaspar: anger, depression, and acceptance. He harbors unresolved anger and guilt, undergoes normative depression resulting from layered losses, and gradually moves toward acceptance through processes of reflection and emotional expression. Accordingly, the stages of grief are understood as an inner journey that enables individuals to rediscover meaning in life after loss, with tears serving as a symbolic marker of transformation toward acceptance.

THE DUAL PROCESS MODEL OF COPING WITH BEREAVEMENT

The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement, proposed by Stroebe and Schut, explains that grieving individuals oscillate between two primary orientations: loss-oriented tasks and restoration-oriented tasks (Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Pihkala, 2025). Loss-oriented processes involve emotional engagement with grief, such as sadness, longing, and preoccupation with the deceased, while restoration-oriented processes focus on adapting to everyday life, reorganizing roles, and forming a new sense of identity following loss. These two orientations are equally essential and operate not in a linear or hierarchical manner, but as complementary components within the broader adaptive process.

This model emphasizes the importance of maintaining a dynamic balance between confronting loss and continuing with life, as an imbalance toward either orientation may impede healthy adjustment. In this study, the Dual Process Model is applied to explain the grieving journey of Gaspar, the main character in the short film screenplay *Asam Garam*, who oscillates between emotional engagement with the loss of his parents and the practical demands of his professional life as a journalist. Accordingly, grief is understood as a process that unfolds alongside daily life, rather than as an experience separate from it.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

This creative work is an adaptation that may be regarded as a secondary work without being subordinate, as it involves reinterpretation, evaluation, revision, improvisation, innovation, initiative, and reconstruction. This approach is consistent with Hutcheon's (2006) view of adaptation as a creative process that inherently involves re-interpretation and re-creation, often understood as forms of appropriation or salvaging. As a result, this adaptation functions as a creative transformation that stands independently as an autonomous work. In developing the short film screenplay, the writer adopts

structural strategies based on Edgar and Marland (2019), including identifying key scenes from the original short story, adding new scenes to enhance narrative development, and continuously evaluating the screenplay to preserve the spirit and thematic essence of the source material.

The short film has an approximate maximum duration of 30 minutes and is primarily situated within the rites of passage genre, which frames grief as an inevitable life phase essential to human growth (Snyder, 2009). It is supported by elements of magical realism, characterized by the blending of reality and fantasy (Bowers, 2004), as reflected through symbolic components such as black salt, the Iluagimo spring, communal belief systems, and the protagonist's transformative journey. The film targets audiences of fictional short films, literary adaptations, and contemplative narratives, particularly those interested in Papuan culture or perspectives from Eastern Indonesia. Employing a third-person omniscient point of view, the film offers insight into the emotional states of its characters and is well suited for distribution via digital platforms such as YouTube and Over-The-Top (OTT) streaming services, enabling broader audience reach in the contemporary media landscape.

Premise

The premise of the short film screenplay *Asam Garam* centers on a skeptical journalist who, while attempting to resign from his profession, is confronted with profound grief following the death of his father. He is compelled to complete one final assignment: investigating a mysterious black salt in Papua that causes anyone who tastes it to cry. Through this journey, he must choose between confronting his unresolved grief or remaining indefinitely trapped within his emotional wounds.

Theme

The central theme of *Asam Garam* revolves around life rituals, particularly the journey through grief, encompassing loss, mourning, and acceptance. The film seeks to convey a simple yet profound message: sorrow is an inevitable part of human existence and will inevitably seek expression. By allowing oneself to grieve openly—through the courage to cry—individuals can begin the process of healing and recovery.

Plot

In the process of developing the short film screenplay *Asam Garam*, adapted from a short story by Dee Lestari, a macrocosmic analysis was employed by examining the literary text in its entirety, including a scene-by-scene and dialogue-by-dialogue analysis (Desmond & Hawkes, 2006). In the subsequent stage, the writer determined the level of proximity and structured the short film screenplay to articulate a more comprehensive relationship between the original text and the cinematic adaptation in terms of narrative and character development. This screenplay is classified as an intermediate adaptation, as certain narrative elements from the source text are retained, others are omitted, and additional elements are introduced. The adaptation applies an interweaving strategy, whereby all components of the original short story are reinterpreted and rewritten into the short film screenplay, distributed across multiple acts and further developed (Desmond & Hawkes, 2006). Narrative elements such as plot, setting, and character perspectives are interwoven to create parallel emotional resonance.

The short film screenplay *Asam Garam* adopts the four-act East Asian narrative structure known as *Kishōtenketsu*, a structure commonly used in contemplative storytelling. According to Lien (2025), the structure consists of four stages: (1) Act I (*Ki*): the introduction of key elements; (2) Act II (*Shō*): the development of these elements; (3) Act III (*Ten*): the introduction of a twist or new element; and (4) Act IV (*Ketsu*): the resolution and harmonization of all elements.

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One of the most significant additions to the screenplay—strengthening the original short story—is Gaspar's resignation as a journalist, addressed to Dai Nobo. This narrative element does not appear in the original text. It is introduced to create a more emotionally compelling inciting incident and to establish Gaspar's motivation for withdrawing from his productive routine as a result of profound grief following his father's death.

Another key addition to the screenplay is the use of flashback montages depicting Gaspar's memories with his father, which serve as the underlying cause of his tears and unresolved emotional wounds. These flashbacks reappear during the scene in which Gaspar cries at the saltwater spring on Mount Mili, reinforcing the emotional context of his earlier, unconscious reaction upon tasting Pak Irianto's black salt. Such detailed explorations of Gaspar's memories with his father are absent from the original short story, which only briefly references his experiences of loss and grief. This narrative gap is intentionally expanded in the screenplay as a strategic enhancement to deepen character development and emotional impact.

Synopsis

Gaspar (male, 33) is a journalist at *Harian Cenderawasih* in Jayapura who intends to submit his resignation to the editor-in-chief, Dai Nobo (male, 52). However, Dai Nobo agrees to consider the resignation on one condition: Gaspar must conduct a final interview with the owner of a popular eatery near Lake Sentani, *Kedai Asam Garam*, known for selling black salt that is rumored to cause anyone who tastes it to cry without apparent reason.

Gaspar ultimately accepts the condition and meets Pak Irianto (male, 58), the owner of *Kedai Asam Garam*, a Javanese man born and raised in Irian. Through their conversation, Gaspar learns that the black salt has been sourced by Pak Irianto for over twenty years from a saline spring called *Iluagimo*, located in *Jiwika Village* in the *Baliem Valley*, where members of the *Dani* tribe traditionally process the salt.

After returning from his meeting with Pak Irianto, Gaspar conducts a personal experiment by tasting various types of salt, including the black salt. Unexpectedly, he begins to cry while writing his article about *Kedai Asam Garam*, forcing him to stop working and curl up alone in his room, overwhelmed by emotion.

Driven by curiosity, Gaspar later accompanies Pak Irianto on a journey to *Mount Mili* to witness firsthand the saline spring and the traditional salt-making process. The terrain proves extremely challenging for those unaccustomed to mountain trekking. There, Pak Irianto reveals a personal ritual to Gaspar: crying beside the spring as a means of releasing deep sorrow over the loss of family members and loved ones—a grief that once left him devastated for an extended period.

Characters

The main character in the short film screenplay *Asam Garam* is Gaspar, a journalist working for a leading daily newspaper in Jayapura. He is known for his skepticism toward viral locations and trends, as well as for being a trusted reporter and a source of pride for the editorial leadership. Gaspar functions as the protagonist of the film. His immediate desire (want) is to resign from *Harian Cenderawasih* in order to withdraw into solitude following the death of his father. His deeper need (need), however, is to accept and reconcile with the loss of both his mother and father. Gaspar is characterized by several flaws: he is skeptical, stubborn, emotionally closed off, disconnected from self-awareness, dismissive of others'

perspectives, and excessively self-critical. His comfort zone lies in isolation and total immersion in his work. His resignation is rejected by Dai Nobo unless he completes a final assignment covering Kedai Asam Garam and interviewing Pak Irianto. While fulfilling this task may force Gaspar to confront painful memories of his deceased father, it also raises the emotional stakes of his journey. In response, Gaspar gradually lowers his ego and begins to engage with Pak Irianto's life story. His primary obstacle lies in his inability to open himself emotionally and come to terms with his circumstances. Over the course of the narrative, Gaspar undergoes a dynamic character arc, transforming from a skeptical and closed individual into someone who is open, receptive, and willing to listen to others.

The supporting characters in *Asam Garam* include Pak Irianto, the owner of Kedai Asam Garam, and Dai Nobo, the editor-in-chief of *Harian Cenderawasih*. As a supporting character, Pak Irianto also functions as a mentor figure for Gaspar, as they share a deep emotional bond rooted in their parallel journeys through grief following the loss of family members. Pak Irianto's outward goal (want) is to continue producing black salt with the assistance of the Dani people of the Papuan Highlands. His underlying need (need) is to preserve the memories of family and friends who have passed away. His safe zone is found in his eatery and in the ritual of crying beside the saline spring of Iluagimo on Mount Mili. The other supporting character, Dai Nobo, quietly hopes that Gaspar—once the newspaper's most ambitious and reliable journalist—will overcome his grief and return to an active and purposeful professional life.

Conflict

In the short film screenplay *Asam Garam*, the narrative centers on the protagonist's internal conflict, focusing on the healing of Gaspar's emotional wounds. Gaspar undergoes a significant character transformation, evolving from a skeptical individual into one who becomes more trusting and emotionally open. Although this transformation occurs within a relatively condensed timeframe due to the constraints of the short film format, it remains central to the story's emotional impact.

The primary internal conflict arises from Gaspar's desire to escape his professional routine in an attempt to suppress or forget his grief. This internal struggle intersects with the external conflict introduced by Dai Nobo's final interview assignment, which indirectly compels Gaspar to confront his unresolved sorrow and emotional pain. Through this confrontation, Gaspar is ultimately forced to reengage with life, positioning grief not as an obstacle to be avoided, but as a process that must be faced in order to heal.

CONCLUSION

Within this creative project, the writer highlights several additional insights presented in the short film screenplay *Asam Garam*, which also serve as the concluding findings of the creative and research process. First, grief is not always immediately recognized by the individual experiencing it. Second, grief often manifests as a loss of direction and meaning in life. Third, once an individual reaches the stage of acceptance following loss and bereavement, they are able to coexist with their grief and emotional wounds rather than be dominated by them.

Grief often does not manifest in overt expressions of sadness or tears, but instead emerges as anger, apathy, skepticism, guilt, helplessness, emotional emptiness, or profound loneliness. These emotional states are frequently not consciously recognized by individuals who are grieving. Through this creative work, the writer seeks to illustrate that grief can also be expressed as a loss of purpose and meaning in life. Gaspar, as the protagonist, remains unaware that he is still deeply wounded by grief. His desire to resign from his job and withdraw from a productive routine represents this loss of direction, a

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condition that is further emphasized in his confrontation with Dai Nobo regarding his resignation, where suppressed anger surfaces when his request is denied.

The stage of acceptance is portrayed through several pivotal scenes in *Asam Garam*. One such moment occurs when Gaspar repairs his late mother's broken ceramic teapot using the Kintsugi technique. Kintsugi is the art of mending broken pottery based on the philosophy that beauty can be found in imperfection. As a life philosophy, Kintsugi encourages resilience in times of emotional hardship, suggesting that what is broken can be restored—not to its original form, but into something meaningful and worthy of appreciation. This symbolism reflects Gaspar's gradual ability to reinterpret loss and grief with renewed understanding. Acceptance is further depicted in the scene at his parents' graves, where Gaspar forgives his father and begins the process of forgiving himself, marking a quiet but profound reconciliation with his grief.

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