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BRIDGING WORLDS OF STORYTELLING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MAḤMÛD TAYMÛR AND LAKSHMINATH BEZBAROA IN THE EVOLUTION OF ARABIC AND ASSAMESE SHORT FICTION

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ABSTRACT
This research paper explores the parallel contributions of Maḥmûd Taymûr (1894–1973), the pioneer of the modern Arabic short story, and Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864–1938), the father of Assamese short fiction, in shaping the literary traditions of their respective cultures. Despite their separation by geography, language, and socio-political contexts, both writers played pivotal roles in transitioning short fiction from oral, folkloric, and moralistic traditions to a refined, modern literary genre. Taymûr's writings, influenced by European masters such as Maupassant and Chekhov, embody realism, psychological exploration, and social critique, reflecting the tensions of early twentieth-century Egyptian society. Conversely, Bezbaroa, inspired by Assamese folklore and reformist zeal, infused his stories with satire, humour, and social commentary, addressing issues such as women's status, colonial exploitation, and cultural identity.
The comparative study reveals striking similarities in their thematic preoccupations, love, human suffering, social evils, and reform, as well as in their stylistic approaches, where clarity, humour, and symbolic imagery dominate. Both writers gave voice to the marginalised, blended tradition with modernity, and transformed storytelling into a tool for cultural regeneration. By situating their works within their respective historical and intellectual contexts, this paper highlights how Taymûr and Bezbaroa bridged worlds of storytelling, creating a legacy that resonates across Arabic and Assamese literatures. Their contributions underscore the universality of short fiction as a medium for social critique, artistic innovation, and the affirmation of cultural identity.
KEYWORDS: *Maḥmûd Taymûr, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Short Fiction, Realism, Satire, Cultural Identity*

INTRODUCTION
The short story, as a literary form, occupies a central position in the cultural and intellectual histories of both the Arab world and Assam. Emerging in the crucible of modernity, journalism, and colonial encounters, the Arabic and Assamese short story traditions reflect not only artistic innovation but also the pressing socio-political concerns of their societies. While geographically and linguistically distinct, the works of Maḥmûd Taymûr (1894–1973) in Egypt and Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864–1938) in Assam illustrate striking parallels in their roles as transitional figures who laid the foundations of modern short fiction in their respective traditions. Their stories resonate as literary voices of transition, bridging the oral, folkloric, and moralistic narratives of the past with the psychological realism, satire, and social critique characteristic of modern short fiction.

The Arabic short story's journey to maturity cannot be divorced from the intellectual climate of the *nahḍa* (Arab Renaissance), a cultural revival spurred by translations of European works, the proliferation of printing presses, and the rise of newspapers in the nineteenth century. As Sabry Hafez observes, the short story was ideally suited to periodicals because of its brevity and its ability to engage with contemporary issues.[1] Its early phases, from the "embryonic" stage of writers like Labîbah Hâshim and Jibrân Khalîl Jibrân to the experimental works of Muḥammad Taymûr, prepared the ground for Maḥmûd Taymûr, who is widely regarded as the

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first master of the Arabic short story in its modern form.[2] His stories blended European influences, Chekhov's psychological subtlety, Maupassant's narrative economy, and Tolstoy's moral questioning, with Egyptian realities, portraying peasants, labourers, and middle-class characters grappling with modernity, poverty, and existential struggles.[3] In doing so, Taymûr transformed the Arabic short story into a vehicle for both aesthetic expression and national identity.

By contrast, Assamese short fiction emerged under the shadow of colonial modernity and cultural subjugation. The American missionaries' establishment of the *Arunodoi* magazine in 1846 marked the beginning of prose modernisation in Assamese literature, but it was the founding of *Jonaki* in 1889 that provided the true cradle of the Assamese short story. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, whose short story "Xeuti" inaugurated the form in Assamese, soon came to be hailed as the "Father of Assamese short stories". [4] Drawing inspiration from Assamese folklore, oral tales, and satirical traditions, Bezbaroa shaped short fiction into an art form that could simultaneously entertain and reform society. His stories, such as *Bhadari* and *Patmugi*, combined humour, irony, and pathos to expose social evils like child marriage, caste discrimination, and blind imitation of colonial lifestyles. [5] In this sense, Bezbaroa fulfilled a role like that of Taymûr: both mobilised short fiction as an instrument of cultural awakening and moral critique, while situating it firmly within the lived experiences of their people.

The comparative approach adopted in this paper seeks to highlight the significance of reading Taymûr and Bezbaroa side by side. Comparative literature, as a discipline, allows us to transcend national boundaries and examine the shared anxieties and aspirations of different literatures.[6] While Arabic and Assamese literatures belong to distinct linguistic families and historical contexts, the socio-cultural forces shaping their short story traditions were strikingly similar: the encounter with colonialism, the challenge of preserving cultural authenticity, and the necessity of adapting indigenous forms to the demands of modernity. Both traditions underwent a threefold evolution: an initial stage of translations and adaptations, a transitional phase of experimentation, and a formative phase in which figures like Taymûr and Bezbaroa crystallised the genre.

Maḥmûd Taymûr's role in this trajectory is particularly significant. As an active member of *al-Madrasa al-Ḥadîtha* (The New School), he moved Arabic short fiction beyond the rhetorical flourishes of earlier prose to a disciplined art of realism and psychological exploration. Collections such as *al-Shaikh Jumʿah* (1925) and *Dunyâ Jadîdah* presented everyday Egyptian life with unprecedented authenticity, portraying flawed but human characters negotiating despair, love, and moral ambiguity.[7] Through his editorial involvement in *al-Kâtib al-Miṣrî*, Taymûr also articulated a critical vision for Arabic literature, urging writers to combine artistic finesse with social responsibility.[8] In his view, literature had to remain faithful to local traditions while also engaging with global currents of thought.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa's contribution lies in his ability to balance folklore with modern satire, thereby creating a uniquely Assamese short story tradition. His collections *Surabhi* (1909), *Sadhukathar Kuki* (1910), and *Junbiri* (1914) not only provided a repertoire of stories but also a blueprint for future Assamese prose writers.[9] Critics have compared his satirical style to that of Charles Dickens, noting how his humour masked sharp social critique. Bezbaroa's insistence on linguistic purity and his efforts to protect Assamese identity against Bengali dominance reflected his conviction that literature must serve as a tool of cultural preservation as well as social reform.[10]

Placing Taymûr and Bezbaroa together allows us to see how two writers, separated by geography yet united by historical circumstance, shaped the destiny of short fiction in their societies. Both confronted the erosion of cultural traditions under colonial pressures; both embraced the short story as the ideal medium for capturing the tensions of modern life; and both left behind legacies that continue to inspire subsequent generations. Their works reveal how literature, even when grounded in the local, can speak across borders and illuminate universal human concerns.

This paper, therefore, argues that Maḥmûd Taymûr and Lakshminath Bezbaroa represent "bridging figures" in the evolution of Arabic and Assamese short fiction. Taymûr bridged classical Arabic narrative forms and modern realism, while Bezbaroa bridged oral folklore and the modern short story. The study will proceed by first outlining the historical contexts of the Arabic and Assamese short story traditions, then examining the thematic and stylistic features of Taymûr's and Bezbaroa's works, before concluding with a comparative analysis of their contributions. By situating these two figures within their respective national and cultural contexts, while also reading them comparatively, the paper seeks to illuminate the broader dynamics of world literature and the universal role of storytelling in cultural transformation.

Biography of Maḥmûd Taymûr

Maḥmûd Taymûr (1894–1973) is widely regarded as one of the founding fathers of the modern Arabic short story. Born on 16th June 1894 in Cairo, Egypt, into an aristocratic family steeped in literary and scholarly traditions, Taymûr's intellectual upbringing shaped his trajectory as a writer. His father, Aḥmad Taymûr Pasha (1871–1930), was a noted philologist, historian, and bibliophile who

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established the celebrated Timurid Library, later donated to the Egyptian National Library (*Dâr al-Kutub*). This vast collection of manuscripts and rare works created a fertile intellectual environment that nourished Maḥmûd's literary sensibilities.

His elder brother, Muḥammad Taymûr, is credited with writing the first modern Arabic short story, *Mâ Tarâhu al-'Uyûn* (What the Eyes See). Muḥammad's influence was decisive in introducing Maḥmûd to European literature and to the stylistic innovations that shaped the Arabic short story. Following Muḥammad's premature death in 1921, Maḥmûd resolved to carry forward his brother's literary mission, dedicating himself to refining and expanding the Arabic short story as a genre.[11]

Taymûr's early education at the Egyptian Royal Primary and Secondary School was disrupted when he contracted typhoid, which left him partially deaf and forced him to abandon his studies at Cairo's Agricultural College. This illness, however, became a turning point, allowing him to immerse himself in reading and contemplation. He travelled to Switzerland for treatment, where he became familiar with European literature, particularly French and Russian works. The writings of Guy de Maupassant, Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, and Ivan Turgenev profoundly shaped his artistic vision, especially in their use of psychological realism, structural economy, and nuanced depictions of human character.[12]

In 1925, Taymûr published his first short story collections, *al-Shaykh Jum'ah wa Qiṣṣah Ukhrâ* and *ʿAmm Mutwallî wa Qiṣṣah Ukhrâ*, in the magazine *al-Sufûr*. These marked the beginning of a prolific career that spanned nearly five decades. Throughout his lifetime, he produced around thirty short story collections, as well as novels, plays, essays, and travelogues, which were eventually compiled into twenty volumes. Among his most celebrated collections are *Zâmir al-Ḥayy* (The Piper of the Neighbourhood), *Dunyâ Jadîda* (A New World), and *al-Shaykh Sayyid al-'Abîṭ*. His last collection, *Bint al-Yawm* (Daughter of the Day), appeared in 1971.

Stylistically, Taymûr was both a romantic and a realist. His early stories bore traces of romantic idealism, while his later works demonstrated a sharper realism, often portraying peasants, labourers, and socially marginalised figures with empathy and psychological depth. His narrative style was marked by simplicity, accessibility, and a keen focus on human character. Scholars have compared his role in shaping the short story to that of Naguib Mahfouz in the novel and Tawfîq al-Ḥakîm in drama.[13]

Beyond his creative works, Taymûr was actively engaged in literary debates. As a contributor to *al-Kâtib al-Miṣrî*, a Cairo-based literary magazine launched in 1945, he participated in discussions on language reform, national identity, and the role of literature in society. His essays reveal a deep concern for crafting literature that was both socially engaged and artistically refined.

In recognition of his contributions, Taymûr received the State Prize for Literature in 1949 and was elected to the Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo. His legacy extended far beyond his own writings, influencing later generations of Arab writers such as Yaḥyâ Ḥaqqî, Maḥmûd Ṭâhir Lâshîn, and Zakariyyâ Tâmir.

Maḥmûd Taymûr passed away on 25 August 1973, leaving behind a vast body of work that continues to be studied and celebrated. His life and career embodied the spirit of transition in Arabic fiction, bridging classical traditions and modernist experimentation, while articulating the complexities of Egyptian society through the short story form.

Biography of Lakshminath Bezbaroa

Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864–1938) occupies a seminal position in the canon of modern Assamese literature. Widely hailed as the father of modern Assamese prose and drama, Bezbaroa's oeuvre reflects a profound engagement with the cultural, linguistic, and political transformations of colonial Assam. His literary career flourished during the Jonaki Era, a period of romantic resurgence and linguistic self-assertion, where he emerged not merely as a writer but as a cultural reformer and satirist of rare calibre.

Born in Aahatguri, Nagaon, in British India, Bezbaroa was raised amidst the shifting tides of colonial administration and vernacular revival. His early education in Sibsagar and later in Calcutta exposed him to the intellectual ferment of the Bengali Renaissance, while his marriage to Pragyasundari Devi, niece of Rabindranath Tagore, further embedded him within Bengal's literary elite. Yet, Bezbaroa remained resolutely committed to the Assamese language and its literary traditions, often deploying satire and irony to critique both colonial modernity and indigenous orthodoxy.

His autobiographical work, *Mor Jibon Xuworon*, offers a candid and often humorous account of his life, revealing the tensions between memory, identity, and historical circumstance. In this text, Bezbaroa reflects on the uncertainties surrounding his own birth date, noting with characteristic wit that such details are unlikely to "affect the balance-sheet of anyone's life".[14] This self-effacing tone

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permeates much of his writing, which is marked by a keen awareness of social contradictions and a commitment to vernacular expression.

Among his most influential works are the satirical essays *Kripabor Borbaruah*, the farcical play *Litikai*, and the short story *Patmugi*. These texts exemplify Bezbaroa's mastery of genre and his ability to weave folklore, oral tradition, and performative idioms into modern literary forms. His drama reflects a nuanced understanding of conflict, characterisation, and dialogue, often drawing upon indigenous dramatic structures while engaging with colonial themes.

Bezbaroa's literary interventions were not confined to aesthetics alone; they were pedagogical and political. He played a pivotal role in standardising Assamese prose, promoting vernacular education, and fostering a sense of regional identity. As Gitashree Tamuly observes in her doctoral thesis, Bezbaroa's life and work must be situated within the broader "panorama and perspectives of life in colonial modern situations," where questions of caste, ethnicity, and linguistic nationalism were deeply entangled with literary production.[15]

His writings also reflect the dilemmas of the modern Assamese intelligentsia, who navigated the contradictions of colonial rule, regional identity, and pan-Indian nationalism. Bezbaroa's literary persona, at once satirical, reformist, and deeply rooted in Assamese cultural idioms, embodied these tensions with remarkable clarity and wit.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa passed away in Dibrugarh in 1938, leaving behind a corpus that continues to inspire literary scholarship, cultural revival, and pedagogical innovation. His legacy is not merely that of a writer but of a cultural architect who helped shape the contours of Assamese modernity. His works remain central to discussions on regional nationalism, linguistic identity, and the aesthetics of satire in South Asian literary history.

Evolution of Arabic and Assamese Short Fiction

The short story as a literary form has often been regarded as the most effective vehicle for capturing the realities of life within a compact framework. Its brevity allows writers to focus sharply on specific human experiences, social issues, and cultural transformations, while also providing a medium accessible to a wide readership. Both Arabic and Assamese literatures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the gradual development of the short story as a genre, influenced by the socio-political environments of Egypt and Assam, respectively, and shaped by encounters with Western literary models. In this sense, the evolution of Arabic and Assamese short fiction reveals both parallel trajectories and unique cultural adaptations.

(a) Arabic Short Fiction: From Riwâya to the Modern Short Story

The Arabic short story began to appear in its embryonic form in the late nineteenth century, with the rise of the printing press and the proliferation of newspapers and magazines. The Egyptian literary journal *al-Waqâ'i' al-Miṣriyya*, published in 1828 under the editorship of Rifâ'a al-Ṭahṭâwî, was among the first periodicals to provide a platform for prose writing.[16] By the 1870s, Egyptian, Lebanese, and Syrian journals such as *al-Ḍiyâʾ* and *al-Muqtaṭaf* had begun publishing translated short stories, influenced heavily by French, Russian, and English literature.[17]

Scholars classify the development of Arabic short fiction into three major phases. The first, termed the "Embryonic Stage" (early nineteenth century–1914), was characterised by adaptation and translation. Writers such as Salîm al-Bustânî, Labîba Hâshim, and Khalîl Jibrân experimented with narrative forms, though often with sentimental and moralistic tones.[18] The second, the "Experimental Stage" (1914–1925), saw writers like Muḥammad Taymûr and Ṭâhir Lâshîn begin to develop a distinctively Arabic voice in short fiction, borrowing from Maupassant and Chekhov while embedding Egyptian realities (Hafez 274).[19] The third, the "Formative Stage" (1925 onwards), was marked by the contributions of Maḥmûd Taymûr, who combined realism, psychological depth, and social critique. His collections, such as *Shaykh Jumʿa* (1925) and *Dunyâ Jadîda* (1933), established the short story as a dominant genre of Arabic literature (Ḍayf 152).[20]

Maḥmûd Taymûr's works depicted ordinary Egyptians, peasants, labourers, and women, struggling with poverty, hypocrisy, and the clash between tradition and modernity. His stories reflected a transition from rhetorical prose to compact narrative structures, aligning Arabic fiction with global literary standards while retaining cultural authenticity.[21] Thus, the Arabic short story matured into a genre that was at once modern and nationally resonant.

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(b) Assamese Short Fiction: From Folktales to Modern Prose

In Assam, the short story developed under very different historical circumstances. The early nineteenth century saw the region suffering under political instability, colonial domination, and cultural marginalisation. The emergence of Assamese prose writing was facilitated by American missionaries, who established the first printing press in Sibsagar in 1836 and published the journal *Arunodoi* in 1846.[22] This journal not only disseminated translations of biblical stories but also published essays, moral tales, and descriptive pieces, laying the groundwork for modern Assamese literature.

The true foundation of Assamese short fiction, however, was laid by Lakshminath Bezbaroa in the late nineteenth century. Known as the "Father of Assamese Short Stories," Bezbaroa published his first story *Jeuti,* in the magazine *Jonaki* in 1889, marking the formal beginning of the genre (Sarmah 48). His subsequent collections, including *Surabhi* (1909), *Sadhukathar Kuki* (1910), and *Junbiri* (1914), combined folk traditions with satire, humour, and social critique.[23]

Bezbaroa described his narratives as *Sadhu* (tales), consciously linking them to Assamese oral traditions. Yet, as critics note, his stories embody the essential features of modern short fiction: single events, engaging openings, and striking conclusions.[24] Works such as *Bhadari* and *Patmugi* expose social evils like child marriage, hypocrisy, and blind imitation of Western customs, while also celebrating Assamese identity and cultural heritage. His blending of satire and folklore gave Assamese short stories a unique voice distinct from their Bengali and English counterparts.[25]

Later, magazines such as *Abahan* (1929) and *Ramdhenu* (1951) nurtured a new generation of Assamese short story writers. Authors like Sayed Abdul Malik, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, and Bhabendranath Saikia introduced psychological realism and urban concerns, paralleling developments in Arabic literature, where writers like Yûsuf Idrîs built upon Taymûr's legacy. [26]

Comparative Dimensions: Convergence and Divergence

A comparative look at the evolution of Arabic and Assamese short fiction highlights both convergences and divergences. Both traditions emerged under colonial or semi-colonial conditions, where literature became a tool for asserting cultural identity. Magazines and periodicals served as the principal incubators for the short story, whether in *al-Ḍiyâʾ* and *al-Ahrâm* in Egypt, or *Arunodoi* and *Jonaki* in Assam.[27]

Stylistically, Arabic fiction under Taymûr leaned towards psychological realism and narrative precision, influenced by European models. Assamese fiction under Bezbaroa, by contrast, drew more from folk traditions, humour, and satire, though it too incorporated realist themes in later decades. Both literatures employed the short story as a means of social critique: Taymûr focusing on hypocrisy, inequality, and alienation in modern Egypt, and Bezbaroa targeting caste discrimination, women's oppression, and cultural erosion in Assam.[28]

Thematically, both literatures foregrounded national concerns. Taymûr helped construct an Egyptian identity in Arabic fiction by grounding his narratives in local realities, while Bezbaroa championed Assamese language and culture against Bengali and colonial dominance. Their legacies continue to inspire subsequent writers, Taymûr's psychological realism influencing Naguib Mahfouz and Zakariyya Tamer, and Bezbaroa's satirical voice echoed in later Assamese writers like Nakulchandra Bhuyan and Mahichandra Bora. [29]

The evolution of Arabic and Assamese short fiction illustrates the adaptability of the short story as a literary form across cultural contexts. Emerging in the late nineteenth century under the influence of print culture, both literatures used the short story to articulate modern realities, negotiate tradition and modernity, and foster national consciousness. Maḥmûd Taymûr and Lakshminath Bezbaroa, though separated by geography and language, served as transitional figures in their respective traditions, one bringing realism and psychological insight to Arabic prose, the other blending folklore, satire, and reformist zeal in Assamese fiction.

Their contributions affirm that the short story, whether in Cairo or Guwahati, is not merely a literary genre but also a cultural mirror and a vehicle of transformation. As such, the histories of Arabic and Assamese short fiction demonstrate how global literary forms are continually reshaped by local traditions, historical pressures, and national aspirations.

Findings

Here are the Findings from the article *Bridging Worlds of Storytelling: A Comparative Study of Maḥmûd Taymûr and Lakshminath Bezbaroa in the Evolution of Arabic and Assamese Short Fiction* in a clear statement as follows:

(i) Maḥmûd Taymûr and Lakshminath Bezbaroa are recognised as pioneering figures who laid the foundation of modern Arabic and Assamese short fiction, respectively.

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(ii) Both authors transitioned storytelling from oral, folkloric, and moralistic traditions into refined literary short fiction that addressed contemporary social realities.
(iii) Taymûr introduced realism, psychological exploration, and social critique into Arabic fiction, influenced by European writers such as Maupassant, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Turgenev.
(iv) Bezbaroa, inspired by Assamese folklore, oral tales, and reformist zeal, infused satire, humour, and irony into his works to highlight social evils like caste discrimination, child marriage, and colonial exploitation.
(v) Despite cultural and geographical differences, both writers employed the short story as a vehicle for cultural regeneration and social reform.
(vi) Their works reflect a balance between tradition and modernity—Taymûr blending Arabic narrative heritage with European realism, and Bezbaroa merging Assamese folklore with modern satire.
(vii) Periodicals and magazines played a crucial role in the development of short fiction in both contexts: Arabic short stories flourished in *al-Sufûr* and *al-Kâtib al-Miṣrî*, while Assamese stories developed through *Jonaki* and later *Abahan* and *Ramdhenu*.
(viii) Both authors gave voice to marginalised groups—peasants, labourers, women, and socially neglected characters—highlighting their struggles with empathy and depth.
(ix) Their stylistic approaches showed similarities in clarity, symbolic imagery, humour, and compact narrative construction.
(x) Taymûr and Bezbaroa served as "voices of transition" in their respective literatures, ensuring the short story emerged as a distinct and powerful genre.
(xi) The comparative study establishes that short fiction in both traditions became not just a literary form but also a cultural and political instrument for identity formation and social change.
(xii) Their contributions underscore the universality of the short story as a medium of artistic innovation and social critique, transcending boundaries of geography and language.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of Maḥmûd Taymûr and Lakshminath Bezbaroa reveals how two literary figures, working in vastly different cultural and linguistic contexts, converged in their pioneering efforts to shape the short story as a modern literary genre. Taymûr, drawing on European realism and psychological depth, transformed Arabic fiction from didactic tales and *maqâmât* into nuanced narratives that reflected the complexities of Egyptian society and the broader Arab world. Bezbaroa, on the other hand, rooted in Assamese folklore and satire, established a literary voice that blended humour, irony, and social critique, addressing colonial exploitation, caste rigidity, and gender inequalities in Assamese society.

Despite their geographical and cultural distance, both writers exemplify the role of literature as a vehicle for social reform and cultural regeneration. Their works serve as bridges between tradition and modernity, simultaneously preserving local heritage and embracing new literary techniques. By giving voice to marginalised figures and capturing the tensions of their societies, they expanded the scope of short fiction beyond mere entertainment into a powerful medium of intellectual and social transformation.

This comparative lens highlights the universality of storytelling as a human endeavour. The evolution of Arabic and Assamese short fiction through the contributions of Taymûr and Bezbaroa demonstrates that literature transcends boundaries, embodying shared struggles for identity, reform, and creative renewal. Ultimately, both authors secured the short story's place as one of the most dynamic and enduring genres in world literature.

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