

Tears And Tales: A Thematic Exploration of *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi* in Comparative Perspective



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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the thematic richness of Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî's *Al-'Abarât* and Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Surabhi*, two cornerstone works in Arabic and Assamese literature, respectively. Both collections address universal human experiences while reflecting the socio-cultural contexts of their authors' eras. Al-Manfalûṭî's *Al-'Abarât* delves into themes of loss, moral conflict, and societal injustice through emotive storytelling that critiques materialism, colonial influence, and social inequality. Stories like *Al-Yatîm* and *Al-Hijâb* encapsulate human vulnerability and the enduring struggle between tradition and modernity. Similarly, Bezbaroa's *Surabhi* navigates societal complexities through satire, empathy, and moral reflection. His narratives challenge superstitions, caste prejudices, and rigid social norms, advocating for reform and intellectual awakening in Assamese society. Stories like *Bapiram* and *Fatema Bibi* highlight the struggles of marginalized individuals within oppressive structures.

This comparative analysis underscores how both authors employed storytelling to critique societal flaws and advocate for moral and cultural progress. The study bridges the thematic parallels between these culturally distinct works, emphasizing their shared focus on human resilience, ethical introspection, and the transformative power of literature. By examining these works side by side, the paper reveals their enduring relevance as reflections of the human condition and as vehicles for social critique and reform.

KEYWORDS: *Al-'Abarât*, 'Surabhi', Societal Critique, Human Resilience, Moral Reflection, Cultural Reform, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a profound medium to reflect human experiences and societal realities, transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries.¹ The two seminal works titled *Al-'Abarât* (Tears) by Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî and *Surabhi* by Lakshminath Bezbaroa have the utmost importance in the realm of narratives. Though writing in distinct cultural contexts, both authors offer deep insights into the human condition and societal challenges through their masterful storytelling. By exploring themes such as love, loss, social injustice, and moral introspection, these collections contribute significantly to Arabic² and Assamese literary traditions, respectively, while maintaining universal appeal.³

Al-'Abarât, a celebrated work in Arabic literature, showcases al-Manfalûṭî's exceptional ability to blend emotive prose with sharp social critique. Composed of original stories and adaptations, the collection delves into universal themes such as the fragility of love, the burden of social expectations, and the moral dilemmas individuals face. Stories like *Al-Yatîm* (The Orphan) poignantly explore loss and resilience, while *Al-Hijâb* (The Veil) critiques the clash between tradition and modernity. Through his evocative narratives, Al-Manfalûṭî highlights the struggles of the oppressed, critiques materialistic societies, and reflects on the enduring tension between ethical principles and societal norms.⁴

Similarly, *Surabhi*, a pioneering short story collection by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, marks a transformative period in Assamese literature. Published in 1909, it captures the complexities of Assamese society through stories infused with wit, empathy, and incisive social critique. Bezbaroa's narratives address issues such as caste discrimination, superstition, and the plight of marginalized individuals. For instance, *Bapiram* critiques societal ignorance and superstition, while *Fatema Bibi* examines the intersection of caste, religion, and identity. Bezbaroa's skillful integration of moral teachings with engaging storytelling underscores his commitment to societal reform and intellectual awakening.⁵

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The thematic parallels between *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi* reveal how literature, despite emerging from different cultural contexts, can converge in its exploration of universal human experiences. Both collections emphasize the transformative power of empathy, resilience, and moral reflection. This paper aims to undertake a comparative thematic analysis of these works, highlighting their shared critique of societal flaws and their enduring relevance as literary masterpieces. By examining the intersections of cultural and ethical concerns in *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi*, this study underscores the universal role of literature in addressing the complexities of human life.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The comparative study of Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî's *Al-'Abarât* and Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Surabhi* draws upon these two works' rich thematic and cultural dimensions. Both collections have been extensively discussed for their literary significance, social critique, and emotional depth.

In the context of *Al-'Abarât*, critics have lauded al-Manfalûṭî's ability to blend emotive storytelling with a sharp focus on moral and societal issues. Stories such as *Al-Yatîm*⁶ and *Al-Hijâb*⁷ are frequently cited as exemplars of his narrative craft, reflecting themes of loss, resilience, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Al-Manfalûṭî's work is noted for its capacity to evoke empathy and introspection, addressing universal human concerns while critiquing materialism and social inequality. Scholars have also emphasized the enduring relevance of *Al-'Abarât* in Arabic literature, highlighting its role in shaping modern prose through its poignant exploration of human emotions and societal dynamics.⁸

Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Surabhi* has similarly received acclaim for its incisive portrayal of Assamese society during a period of cultural transformation. Scholars have highlighted Bezbaroa's skillful use of satire and empathy to address critical societal issues such as caste discrimination, superstition, and the struggles of marginalized communities. Stories like *Bapiram* and *Fatema Bibi* have been particularly noted for their vivid characters and insightful critique of societal norms. Bezbaroa's narrative approach is often celebrated for its ability to intertwine personal dilemmas with broader social commentary, making *Surabhi* a cornerstone of modern Assamese literature.⁹

The comparative thematic exploration of *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi* underscores the universality of their narratives despite their distinct cultural origins. Both works delve into human resilience, the critique of societal flaws, and the enduring struggle for moral integrity. By examining these texts side by side, this study seeks to highlight the shared role of literature as a tool for societal reflection and reform, bridging cultural and linguistic divides while addressing the complexities of the human condition.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, comparative literary analysis to explore the thematic intersections of Mustafa Lutfi Al-Manfalûṭî's *Al-'Abarât* and Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Surabhi*. The methodology involves a close reading of selected stories from both collections, focusing on their thematic content, narrative techniques, and socio-cultural contexts.

Data Collection

The primary texts, *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi*, serve as the foundational materials for this research. Key stories such as *Al-Yatîm*, *Al-Hijâb*, *Bapiram*, and *Fatema Bibi* are analyzed for their narrative structure, thematic focus, and cultural relevance. Secondary sources, including scholarly critiques, journal articles, and historical studies, are incorporated to provide a broader understanding of the works' literary and cultural significance.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by thematic and socio-cultural frameworks that emphasize universal human experiences and societal critique. The study examines how both authors address themes of love, loss, moral reflection, social inequality, and resilience. Attention is given to the narrative strategies used by al-Manfalûṭî and Bezbaroa, including their use of empathy, satire, and moral introspection.

Comparative Approach

The comparative approach highlights the cultural and historical specificities of Arabic and Assamese societies while emphasizing the shared human concerns reflected in both works. This method allows for an exploration of how these authors, writing in different linguistic and cultural contexts, converge in their critique of societal flaws and advocacy for moral reform.

Outcome and Contribution

The study aims to contribute to comparative literary studies by bridging Arabic and Assamese literary traditions. It seeks to demonstrate the universal relevance of *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi* in addressing human struggles and societal dynamics, underscoring literature's role as a transformative force across cultures.

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Biography of Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî:

Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî (1876–1924) was a renowned Egyptian writer, essayist, and poet who left an indelible mark on modern Arabic literature. Born in the small town of Manfalûṭ in Upper Egypt, al-Manfalûṭî was deeply influenced by both his religious upbringing and his formal education at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. His studies at Al-Azhar exposed him to Islamic scholarship and Arabic literary traditions, shaping his literary style and moral outlook.¹⁰

Al-Manfalûṭî's works are characterized by their emotive power, linguistic elegance, and sharp social critique. He is best known for his collections *Al-'Abarât* (Tears) and *Al-Nazarât* (Reflections), which showcase his ability to intertwine personal emotions with broader societal issues. His writing often addresses themes of love, loss, morality, and social justice, capturing the struggles of individuals against oppressive societal norms and materialistic values.

In addition to his original works, he was known for adapting and translating Western literary works into Arabic. Through his adaptations, such as his version of Alphonse Karr's *Sous les Tilleuls* (*Majdûlîn*), he introduced Arab readers to European romanticism and humanist ideas. His translations were not mere reproductions but creative reinterpretations that aligned with Arab cultural and moral sensibilities.¹¹

Al-Manfalûṭî's literary legacy lies in his ability to evoke empathy and moral reflection through his writings. His works continue to resonate with readers for their universal themes and their profound critique of societal flaws, making him a pivotal figure in the history of Arabic literature.

Biography of Lakshminath Bezbaroa

Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864–1938) is celebrated as one of the foremost literary figures in Assamese literature and is often referred to as the "Sahityarathi" (Charioteer of Literature). Born in a culturally rich family in the village of Ahatguri, Nagaon, Assam, Bezbaroa's upbringing was deeply rooted in Assamese traditions, which profoundly influenced his literary endeavours.¹²

Bezbaroa's contribution to Assamese literature is immense and multifaceted, encompassing poetry, short stories, plays, essays, and satirical writings. His pioneering short story collection *Surabhi* (1909) marked a significant transformation in Assamese literature, introducing modern narrative techniques and a focus on social realism. Through stories like *Bapiram* and *Fatema Bibi*, Bezbaroa addressed critical issues such as caste discrimination, superstition, and the plight of marginalized communities. His works are celebrated for their wit, empathy, and incisive critique of societal flaws.¹³

In addition to his literary contributions, Bezbaroa was an ardent advocate for Assamese cultural identity and language preservation. He played a pivotal role in revitalizing Assamese literature during a time when it faced challenges from colonial policies and the dominance of other regional languages. His leadership in organizations like the Assam Sahitya Sabha further solidified his role as a cultural and literary pioneer.

Bezbaroa's legacy extends beyond literature. His works continue to inspire readers with their moral depth, cultural resonance, and commitment to social reform. As a pioneer of modern Assamese literature, Lakshminath Bezbaroa remains an enduring symbol of Assamese cultural pride and literary excellence.

Summary of *Al-'Abarât* by Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî

Al-'Abarât is one of the most iconic works by Mustafa Lutfi Al-Manfalûṭî, the celebrated Egyptian writer renowned for his eloquent prose and deep emotional resonance. The book is a collection of short stories, many of which were written by Al-Manfalûṭî himself, while others were adapted and Arabized from various sources. These stories reflect his personal experiences, emotional depth, and his keen observation of societal issues during his time. The stories are not just narratives but serve as mirrors reflecting the social and moral dilemmas faced by individuals in a rapidly changing world.

Among the stories originally written by Al-Manfalûṭî are:

1. **The Orphan (Al-Yatîm)** – A poignant tale of loss, longing, and the struggles of an orphaned child.
2. **The Veil (Al-Ḥijâb)** – A story that delves into the significance of the Islamic veil, touching on themes of tradition, cultural identity, and the tension between modernity and faith.
3. **The Abyss (Al-Hâwiya)** – A narrative exploring human vulnerability and the consequences of moral decay.
4. **The Punishment (Al-'Iqâb)** – A reflection on justice, guilt, and redemption.

In addition to these original works, Al-Manfalûṭî adapted and Arabized other stories, infusing them with his unique literary style and emotional depth. These include:

1. **The Martyrs (Al-Shuhadâ')**
2. **The Memory (Al-Dhikrâ)**
3. **The Reward (Al-Jazâ')**
4. **The Sacrifice (Al-Ḍaḥīyya)**

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The stories in *Al-'Abarât* address a range of pressing social issues that were hotly debated in Al-Manfalûṭî's era, many of which remain relevant today. These include:

- The role of the Islamic veil as both a religious symbol and a cultural marker amidst the challenges of modernization.
- The moral corruption and social inequality exacerbated by foreign colonization.
- The cultural and behavioural shifts resulting from blind imitation of Western lifestyles.
- The emotional and psychological struggles of youth, including sorrow, pain, and unfulfilled longing.

Al-Manfalûṭî's writing is infused with empathy for the oppressed and the marginalized. His characters often grapple with profound moral and emotional dilemmas, reflecting the broader struggles of society. Through his stories, he critiques the growing materialism and loss of ethical values in a world increasingly influenced by colonial and Western ideologies.

The title *Al-'Abarât* translates to "The Tears," aptly capturing the emotional core of the book. Al-Manfalûṭî sheds tears for the world's injustices and offers his readers consolation through his words. In the preface, he writes: "The wretched in this world are many, and a miserable person like me cannot erase their misery and suffering. At the very least, I offer them these tears, hoping they may find consolation and solace in my weeping."

This heartfelt declaration underscores his deep compassion for humanity and his belief in the transformative power of literature. His stories are not mere entertainment but are imbued with a moral purpose. They encourage readers, particularly the youth, to reflect on their actions, embrace ethical principles, and aspire to a life of integrity and virtue.

Al-'Abarât remains a timeless masterpiece, celebrated for its profound emotional depth, eloquence, and moral guidance. It stands as a testament to Al-Manfalûṭî's literary genius and his commitment to addressing the social and moral challenges of his time. Through this work, he not only captured the hearts of his readers but also left an enduring legacy that continues to inspire and provoke thought across generations.¹⁴

Summary of *Surabhi* by Lakshminath Bezbaroa:

Surabhi (1909), the first short story collection by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, holds a distinguished place in Assamese literature. The book comprises twelve stories that explore various facets of Assamese society, including *Geeta*, *Firingatir pora Khandab Dâh*, *Nistarini Devi or Fatema Bibi*, *Bapiram*, *Lombodar Deka*, *Laokhola*, *Mulk Guin Guin*, *Mister Fipson*, *Bhuruki Bau*, *Madhaimalati*, *Pratham Darshanot Opoja Prem*, and *Jatiramor Jat*. Through these narratives, Bezbaroa masterfully delves into themes like love, sacrifice, social inequality, superstition, and the struggles of marginalized communities.

The stories serve three primary objectives:

1. **Rectification of Individual Character:** Bezbaroa highlights the moral dilemmas faced by his characters, encouraging integrity and self-awareness.
2. **Reformation of Society:** His works challenge societal norms, advocate for education, and call for social progress and reform.
3. **Exposure of Societal Malpractices:** Bezbaroa critiques issues like superstition, hypocrisy, and corruption with sharp wit and insightful commentary.

Blending social critique with artistic expression, Bezbaroa's writing is satirical yet empathetic, portraying flawed characters with compassion while addressing systemic injustices. Stories like *Mister Fipson* and *Bapiram* satirize greed and elitism, while *Laokhola* and *Mulk Guin Guin* reveal the impact of societal pressures on individuals.

Surabhi remains a timeless work, celebrated for its insightful exploration of human nature and its enduring call for moral and social reform. Bezbaroa's contribution to Assamese literature, through this collection, established the short story as a profound medium for addressing societal complexities and remains a cornerstone of Assamese literary heritage.¹⁵

DESCRIPTION

The paper titled "Tears and Tales: A Thematic Exploration of *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi* in Comparative Perspective" delves into the profound thematic intersections of two iconic works: Mustafa Lutfi Al-Manfalûṭî's *Al-'Abarât* and Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Surabhi*. These collections, emerging from the distinct cultural milieus of Arabic and Assamese literature, converge on universal human experiences such as love, loss, societal critique, and moral resilience.

Through *Al-'Abarât*, al-Manfalûṭî addresses the emotional struggles of individuals against the backdrop of societal oppression and materialistic values. Stories such as *Al-Yatîm* poignantly depict the plight of the vulnerable, while *Al-Hijâb* navigates the conflict between tradition and modernity. His emotive prose not only critiques the moral and social inequalities of his time but also evokes a universal empathy that transcends cultural boundaries.

On the other hand, Bezbaroa's *Surabhi* captures the complexities of Assamese society during a transformative era. Stories like *Bapiram* and *Fatema Bibi* critique caste discrimination and superstitions, reflecting Bezbaroa's commitment to societal reform

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and intellectual awakening. His narratives, infused with wit and empathy, resonate deeply with the moral and cultural ethos of Assamese literature.

The paper employs a comparative methodology, highlighting the thematic parallels between these works while acknowledging their cultural distinctiveness. The analysis underscores how both authors use storytelling to critique societal flaws and advocate for moral progress. By bridging the literary traditions of Arabic and Assamese cultures, the study emphasizes the universality of literature in addressing human struggles and fostering societal reflection.

Ultimately, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on comparative literature, illustrating how diverse cultural texts can converge in their exploration of shared human experiences. It affirms the enduring relevance of *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi* as masterpieces that inspire empathy, introspection, and a commitment to societal betterment.

Comparative Analysis: Common Themes

The core of the paper lies in its comparative analysis of the thematic elements found in *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi*. Despite the distinct historical, cultural, and geographical contexts of the two works, the paper identifies several overlapping themes:

1. **Social Critique and Injustice:** Both works serve as critical reflections on the societies in which they were created. *Al-'Abarât* critiques the socio-political conditions in Egypt under colonial rule, emphasizing the alienation and oppression felt by individuals in a system that privileges the few at the expense of the many. Similarly, *Surabhi* critiques the rigid societal structures in India, focusing on themes such as class disparity, caste dynamics, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Both works use their respective narratives to expose how social injustice permeates the fabric of everyday life, and how these injustices are internalized by individuals.
2. **Human Emotion and Resilience:** Both *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi* emphasize the depth of human emotion, particularly sorrow, suffering, and resilience. The characters in both works experience personal tragedies—loss, exile, and emotional turmoil—and their emotional struggles are depicted with great empathy. These works do not just dwell on sorrow but also the characters' capacity for endurance and resilience in the face of overwhelming circumstances. In this way, both works offer a profound meditation on the human condition, exploring how individuals navigate personal crises while remaining tied to larger societal forces.
3. **Cultural Identity and the Quest for Self-Definition:** Another shared theme between the two works is the exploration of cultural identity and the search for self-definition. In *Al-'Abarât*, Al-Manfalûṭî examines how colonialism has affected the cultural identity of Egypt and how individuals grapple with the loss of their indigenous cultural practices and values. Similarly, in *Surabhi*, the characters wrestle with questions of cultural and personal identity, often confronting the tension between traditional values and the pressures of modernity. Both works reflect a deep concern with how external forces—whether colonial domination or social expectations—shape and sometimes distort personal and collective identities.
4. **Narrative Technique:** Both Muṣṭfâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî and Lakshminath Bezbaroa employ a blend of narrative styles that combine storytelling with philosophical reflection. *Al-'Abarât* is known for its reflective and essayistic approach, where Hussein's meditations on society and politics are interwoven with narratives of individual lives. Similarly, *Surabhi* uses a narrative structure that often blends personal storytelling with social commentary, offering insight into the character's emotional and psychological states. This blend of narrative and reflection allows both authors to use their works as vehicles for exploring larger philosophical and social themes, ultimately making these works not just stories but also powerful critiques of their respective societies.

Here, it may be stated that *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi* offer profound insights into the human experience. Despite the works emerging from vastly different contexts—one from the colonial struggles of Egypt and the other from the socio-cultural milieu of India—both share a deep commitment to exploring universal themes. The paper argues that these works serve as exemplary models of how literature can bridge cultural divides, allowing readers to reflect on shared human experiences that transcend geographical and temporal boundaries. Through their exploration of suffering, resilience, social injustice, and identity, both works continue to contribute to their respective literary traditions and offer timeless reflections on the human condition.

CONCLUSION

The comparative exploration of *Al-'Abarât* by Taha Hussein and *Surabhi* reveals the profound thematic resonance shared between these two works despite their distinct cultural, historical, and geographical contexts. Both texts emerge from societies undergoing significant social and political upheaval—Egypt under the shadow of colonialism and India grappling with its social complexities. Through their exploration of universal themes such as social injustice, human emotion, resilience, and cultural identity, *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi* transcend their contexts to offer timeless reflections on the human condition.

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In *Al-'Abarât*, Al-Manfalûţî's critical examination of Egyptian society under colonial rule highlights the personal and collective suffering resulting from the exploitation and alienation imposed by external powers. The work's deep engagement with issues of social inequality and political corruption speaks to the struggles of marginalized communities, both in Egypt and, by extension, in other colonized nations. Al-Manfalû's portrayal of human suffering is not one of mere despair; rather, it underscores individuals' resilience and capacity to confront adversity in the face of overwhelming societal forces.

Similarly, *Surabhi* delves into the emotional and psychological landscapes of its characters, who are entangled in the rigid social structures of India. The work critiques the constraints imposed by cultural norms, particularly those related to class, caste, and gender, and explores how these norms shape individuals' identities and experiences. Like Hussein, the author of *Surabhi* reflects on the emotional depth of human experience, focusing on the sorrow and resilience of characters who navigate the complex terrain of personal tragedy, societal expectations, and individual yearning for freedom.

Both works share a thematic preoccupation with the quest for cultural identity. Al-Manfal's *Al-'Abarât* examines the loss of indigenous cultural practices in the face of colonialism and the struggle for a redefined national identity. Likewise, *Surabhi* interrogates the tension between traditional values and the forces of modernity, with its characters caught in a conflict between ancestral cultural identities and the changes sweeping through their society. In both texts, cultural identity is not fixed; it is an evolving concept, shaped by personal experiences, societal pressures, and external forces.

The narrative techniques employed by both Al-Manfalûţî and Bezbaroa, the author of *Surabhi*, further enrich the thematic depth of their works. The combination of personal reflection, storytelling, and philosophical inquiry creates a narrative space that allows for the exploration of broader societal concerns through the lens of individual lives. This structure enables the authors to make sweeping socio-political critiques while maintaining a profound emotional engagement with the experiences of their characters.

In conclusion, *Al-'Abarât* and *Surabhi* demonstrate the power of literature to explore and critique the social and emotional landscapes of different cultures while revealing shared human struggles. Despite emerging from different historical and cultural moments, both works offer a window into the universal human experience, addressing themes that resonate across time and space. By examining these works in tandem, we gain a deeper appreciation for how literature can bridge cultural divides and highlight the enduring complexities of identity, society, and human emotion.

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