



A Voice of Transition: Maḥmūd Taymūr and the Evolution of Arabic Short Fictiossn

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the pivotal role of Maḥmūd Taymūr (1894–1973) in the evolution of modern Arabic short fiction, positioning him as a transitional figure between traditional Arabic narrative forms and the modern short story genre, shaped under the influence of European models. As one of the foremost representatives of *al-Madrasa al-Ḥadītha* (The New School), Taymūr imbued his stories with realism, psychological depth, and social critique, transforming Arabic prose from moralistic tales and *maqāmāt* into structured narratives that addressed the complexities of modern life.

The paper examines Taymūr's literary background, moulded by his father's extensive library and his exposure to Western literature during his travels in Europe. His works embody a synthesis of local Egyptian realities and international literary techniques, influenced by Maupassant, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov. Themes such as hypocrisy, social inequality, the condition of women, and the tensions between tradition and modernity dominate his short stories, whilst his innovative use of dialogue, irony, and satire bestowed upon Arabic prose a new artistic dimension.

Through an analysis of Taymūr's short stories and critical writings, this paper contends that he acted as a "voice of transition", bridging heritage and modernity and paving the way for later Arabic writers such as Yūsuf Idrīs and Naguib Mahfouz. His contributions established the short story as one of the most dynamic genres within Arabic literature, securing its role as a medium of both artistic expression and social reform.

Keywords: Maḥmūd Taymūr, Arabic Short Story, Realism, Psychological Fiction, Social Critique, Modern Arabic Literature, etc.

Introduction

The evolution of Arabic short fiction in the twentieth century reflects a complex interplay of literary experimentation, cultural negotiation, and ideological reorientation. Among the pioneering figures who shaped this transformation, Maḥmūd Taymūr (1894–1973) stands as a critical voice of transition, bridging the romantic idealism of early Arabic prose with the emerging realism and psychological depth that would come to characterise modern Arabic storytelling. His contributions mark a decisive moment in the maturation of the Arabic short story, not merely as a literary form but as a vehicle for social critique, aesthetic innovation, and national consciousness.

Born into a family steeped in literary tradition, Taymūr inherited a rich intellectual legacy. His father, Aḥmad Taymūr, was a renowned bibliophile and scholar of Arab heritage, whilst his brother, Muḥammad Taymūr, is credited with writing the first short story in Arabic literature.¹ This familial environment provided Maḥmūd Taymūr with both the resources and the impetus to pursue literary excellence. His early exposure to European literature, particularly the works of Maupassant, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov, infused his narrative style with psychological nuance and structural precision, distinguishing his work from the rhetorical flourishes of earlier Arabic prose.²

Taymūr's literary career coincided with a period of intense cultural flux in Egypt and the broader Arab world. The collapse of Ottoman authority, the rise of nationalist movements, and the encounter with Western

modernity created fertile ground for literary innovation. In this context, Taymûr's short stories emerged as subtle yet potent commentaries on the tensions between tradition and modernity, rural and urban life, and individual agency versus societal constraint. His narratives often centred on marginalised figures—hopeless, injured, or defeated, whose psychological depth and moral ambiguity challenged the didactic conventions of earlier Arabic fiction.³

Stylistically, Taymûr's work reflects a synthesis of indigenous narrative traditions and imported literary techniques. He retained the Arabic *maqāma*'s attention to linguistic elegance and moral reflection, whilst adopting the European short story's emphasis on plot economy, character development, and thematic unity. This hybridisation allowed Taymûr to craft stories that were both culturally resonant and formally innovative. His conscious effort to root the short story in Egyptian literary life, drawing upon rural experiences, colloquial speech, and local customs, helped to establish the genre as a legitimate and dynamic form within Arabic literature.⁴

Taymûr's role in the literary magazine *al-Kâtib al-Miṣrî*, launched in 1945, further underscores his commitment to literary modernisation. Through this platform, he engaged with contemporary debates on language, identity, and artistic responsibility, positioning himself as both a practitioner and a theorist of the short story.⁵ His essays and reflections reveal a deep concern with the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of storytelling, advocating for a literature that is both socially engaged and artistically refined.

This paper argues that Maḥmûd Taymûr's oeuvre represents a transitional phase in the evolution of Arabic short fiction, one that negotiates between inherited literary forms and emergent modernist sensibilities. By examining his thematic concerns, stylistic innovations, and cultural engagements, the study seeks to illuminate Taymûr's pivotal role in shaping the Arabic short story as a genre capable of articulating complex human experiences and social realities. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of how literary forms evolve in response to historical pressures and intellectual currents.

The following sections will explore Taymûr's narrative strategies, his engagement with realism and romanticism, and his influence on subsequent generations of Arab writers. Special attention will be given to his treatment of character psychology, his use of setting as a symbolic device, and his negotiation of linguistic registers. Through close readings of selected stories and contextual analysis, the paper will demonstrate how Taymûr's work embodies the tensions and possibilities of a literature in transition.

Biographical Account of Maḥmûd Taymûr:

Maḥmûd Taymûr (d. 1973) occupies a distinguished place in the history of Arabic literature as a pioneering figure in the development of the Arabic short story. Born on 16 June 1894 in Cairo, Egypt, Taymûr was nurtured in a household steeped in literary and scholarly traditions. His father, Aḥmad Taymûr (1871–1930), was a renowned scholar and bibliophile whose extensive library, known as the Timurid Collection, became a cornerstone of Egyptian literary heritage. Aḥmad Taymûr's intellectual pursuits in Arabic philology, history, and literature laid the foundation for Maḥmûd's literary sensibilities.⁶

Maḥmûd's literary lineage extended further through his brother, Muḥammad Taymûr, who is credited with writing the first Arabic short story in its modern form. This familial influence proved instrumental in shaping Maḥmûd's early engagement with fiction. Following Muḥammad's untimely death in 1921, Maḥmûd Taymûr took up the mantle of literary innovation, dedicating himself to refining and expanding the Arabic short story as a genre.⁷

Taymûr's early education was marked by exposure to both classical Arabic literature and European literary traditions. He was deeply influenced by the works of Guy de Maupassant, Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, and Ivan Turgenev, whose psychological realism and narrative economy resonated with his artistic aspirations. These influences are evident in Taymûr's emphasis on character depth, moral ambiguity, and social critique, elements that distinguished his stories from the rhetorical and didactic prose of earlier Arabic fiction.⁸

His literary career gathered momentum in the 1920s and 1930s, a period of cultural and political transformation in Egypt. Taymûr's stories often reflected the tensions between tradition and modernity, rural and urban life, and individual agency versus societal constraint. He was particularly adept at portraying marginalised figures, peasants, labourers, and emotionally wounded individuals, whose inner lives were rendered with empathy and psychological insight. This thematic focus marked a departure from the romantic idealism of his predecessors and signalled a shift towards literary realism in Arabic prose.⁹

Taymûr's commitment to literary modernisation was not confined to fiction alone. He was an active contributor to *al-Kâtib al-Miṣrî*, a Cairo-based literary magazine launched in October 1945, which became a hub for intellectual and artistic discourse. Through this platform, Taymûr engaged in debates on language reform, national identity, and the role of literature in society. His essays and editorials reveal a deep concern with the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of storytelling, advocating for a literature that was both rooted in Egyptian experience and open to global influences.¹⁰

One of Taymûr's most significant contributions was his call for an Egyptian literature that authentically expressed local traditions, sentiments, and environments. He believed that literature should reflect the lived realities of its people, and he sought to incorporate colloquial speech, rural settings, and indigenous customs into his narratives. This approach not only enriched the thematic and stylistic range of Arabic fiction but also helped to establish the short story as a legitimate and dynamic literary form in Egypt.¹¹

In terms of literary output, Taymûr was prolific. His stories span a wide range of genres, including realism, romanticism, social critique, and historical fiction. He was particularly skilled at crafting compact narratives that conveyed complex emotional and moral dilemmas. His mastery of dialogue, setting, and symbolic imagery enabled him to create stories that were both artistically refined and socially resonant. Scholars have compared his influence on the Arabic short story to that of Naguib Mahfouz in the novel and Tawfiq al-Hakîm in drama.¹²

Taymûr's legacy extends well beyond his own writings. His literary style, thematic concerns, and narrative techniques influenced a generation of Arab writers, playwrights, and novelists. He helped to establish the short story as a central genre in modern Arabic literature, paving the way for its further development in the hands of later authors such as Yaḥyâ Ḥaqqî, Maḥmûd Ṭâhir Lâshîn, and Zakariyyâ Tâmir.¹³

He passed away on 25 August 1973, leaving behind a body of work that continues to be studied, anthologised, and celebrated. His contributions to Arabic literature are not merely historical; they remain vital to contemporary discussions on narrative form, cultural identity, and the social function of fiction.

In sum, Maḥmûd Taymûr's life and work embody the spirit of literary transition in the Arab world. He was a bridge between classical traditions and modernist experimentation, between inherited forms and innovative techniques. His biographical trajectory, from a literary household in Cairo to the forefront of Arabic fiction, illustrates the transformative power of literature in shaping cultural consciousness and artistic expression.

The Evolution of Arabic Short Fiction:

The Arabic short story, as a literary form, has undergone a remarkable transformation from its pre-Islamic oral roots to its modern manifestations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Its evolution reflects broader cultural, political, and aesthetic shifts across the Arab world, shaped by indigenous traditions, colonial encounters, and global literary currents. This note traces the historical trajectory of Arabic short fiction, highlighting its major phases, stylistic developments, and key contributors.

The Arabic short story first appeared with the development of the printing press in the nineteenth century, around 1870, in daily newspapers and weekly magazines. This was largely because the short story, being concise, was suitable for publication and could be read without much expense. By the end of the nineteenth century, Egyptian, Lebanese, and Syrian newspapers and magazines had increased the publication of short stories, as well as original or translated novels. These were influenced by Western literature and by the global vision of human struggle, which had been clearly articulated in the literary works of authors such as Franz Kafka.

During this time, Arab writers referred to this kind of creative writing with terms such as *Riwaya*, *Qissah*, or *Hikayah*—words that denoted forms more specific than what is known and accepted today as the short story. Egyptian authors such as Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Maḥmûd Taymûr, Tawfiq al-Hakîm, and Yûsuf Idrîs played an important role in shaping the modern short story in Arabic literature. Later, many Syrian authors, including Zakaria Tamer, Fâris Farzû, Ghâda al-Sammân, and Muḥsin Yûsuf, emerged as some of the most distinguished figures, contributing significantly to the development of this literary form.

The Arabic short story can be classified into three distinct stages:

1. The Embryonic Stage (from the early nineteenth century to 1914):

The works of authors such as Salîm al-Bustânî, Labîba Hâshim, Khalîl Jibrân, and Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî fall into this stage. Their stories were often characterized by melancholy and adapted techniques from the Western short story.

2. The Experimental Stage (1914–1925):

Also called the traditional stage, it represents an early attempt to establish an authentic voice. Writers such as Muḥammad Taymûr and Ṭâhir Lâshîn recognized the need to study the techniques of Western literature and began to apply them in unconventional ways, paving the way for the next phase.

3. The Formative Stage (from 1925 to the present):

Opened by Maḥmûd Taymûr, this stage saw the rise of a new narrative style that emphasized character development and psychological analysis, with a more realistic approach. By the 1960s, the short story had achieved a distinguished level of establishment with its defining artistic features: brevity in length, a limited time frame, critical and detailed descriptions, prose language, a minimal number of characters, and an ambiguous or open ending that leaves the reader to imagine and interpret.¹⁴

The Development of the Short Story in Modern Arabic Literature:

The short story in modern Arabic literature did not appear fully formed but instead passed through several significant stages of development before reaching the artistic maturity it enjoys today. Each stage reflected the social, cultural, and intellectual conditions of its time, and together they represent the gradual transformation of Arabic prose into a vehicle of imagination, social critique, and aesthetic refinement.

(1) The Stage of Beginnings and Foundation

The earliest phase in the history of the Arabic short story can rightly be called the stage of beginnings and foundation. This was the period when the genre first took root in the Arab world, influenced primarily by external forces but gradually acquiring its own unique identity. During this stage, the short story was shaped by three main currents: translation, didactic and reformist narratives, and stories of entertainment.

(2) The Stage of Translation:

With the movement of migration and the encounter between Arabs and Europeans in the early nineteenth century, many Arab intellectuals felt the urgent need to awaken their societies from intellectual stagnation. Translation became the most effective tool for this cultural revival. Young Arab scholars and writers began to translate European works into Arabic, introducing new literary genres, themes, and techniques.

One of the earliest figures associated with this effort was Muḥammad 'Uthmān Jalāl, who, in 1829, translated a selection of European stories and plays into Arabic. These translations were not mere linguistic exercises but also cultural acts, bridging the gap between Western narrative traditions and Arabic prose. Through this, the short story began to make its first appearance in the Arab literary scene, albeit still under the strong shadow of Western models.

(3) Stories of Education and Social Reform:

Soon, Arab writers realised that the short story could serve purposes far beyond entertainment. It could educate, reform, and instil values within society. A historical precedent for this idea was set much earlier by Ibn al-Muqaffa', whose translation of *Kalīla wa Dimna* introduced a body of didactic fables to Arabic prose. These tales, filled with wisdom, moral lessons, and allegory, established the narrative as a medium for intellectual and ethical guidance.

Similarly, al-Jāḥiẓ, the great Abbasid prose writer, demonstrated how storytelling could engage with social realities. His *Kitāb al-Bukhālā'* (*The Book of Misers*) combined humour with sharp social critique, reflecting everyday life whilst subtly advocating reform. Such works prepared the ground for later writers of the modern period, who sought to harness the short story as a tool for spreading awareness, reforming social norms, and educating the masses.

(4) Stories of Amusement and Entertainment:

Another dimension of early Arabic storytelling was amusement and entertainment. It is undeniable that literature, and particularly the story, has always carried an element of pleasure and escapism. Yet even in such narratives, educational or moral aims often accompanied entertainment.

The most striking example is *Alf Layla wa Layla* (*One Thousand and One Nights*), a monumental collection of tales that reached the Arab world through translation and adaptation. While the origins of this work remain uncertain, the author and exact time of composition are unknown, it became an integral part of Arabic literary heritage. When it was absorbed into Arab culture, the tales were expanded, embellished, and reshaped with remarkable creativity. In this way, *One Thousand and One Nights* represents both the entertaining and moralising functions of narrative, embodying the Arab talent for reimagining and refining foreign material.

(5) The Stage of the Artistic Short Story:

Having passed through the initial phases of translation, didactic use, and entertainment, the short story eventually matured into a true literary form in the early twentieth century. This stage, often described as the phase of the artistic short story, marked the genre's emergence as an independent and fully recognised branch of Arabic literature.

By this time, newspapers and journals had become the cradle of modern Arabic prose. These periodicals, which flourished during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, provided the first genuine platform for the short story. They not only published translations of Western works but also encouraged original Arabic writing. As literacy spread and readership expanded, readers began to seek stories not merely for instruction or amusement but as a distinct literary genre with its own identity.

Scholars differ as to which story may be considered the first true example of the modern Arabic short story. Some attribute this honour to *Al-Qiṭār* (*The Train*), published in al-Sufūr newspaper in 1917, whilst others argue it was *Sanatuhā al-Jadīda* (*Her New Year*), which appeared in Beirut in 1914. Regardless of which text is accepted as the earliest, what is certain is that the press acted as the primary incubator of the short story in its artistic form.

Characteristics of the Early Artistic Short Story:

By the early twentieth century, the Arabic short story had begun to display features that set it apart as a literary genre. Among the most important characteristics were:

- (i) **Emotional impact:** Stories aimed to influence readers, inviting them to view life from new perspectives.
- (ii) **Defined characters:** A limited number of characters were introduced, each serving a clear role within the narrative.
- (iii) **Surprise endings:** Many stories concluded with unexpected or ironic endings, heightening their artistic effect.
- (iv) **Structured plots:** Narratives followed a coherent structure, with conflict, climax, and resolution, in contrast to the loose and digressive prose of earlier times.

Although the short story was not originally native to Arabic culture, Arab writers quickly mastered the form. They infused it with their own traditions, experiences, and perspectives, creating stories that spoke directly to Arab realities whilst drawing upon global techniques.

The short story in modern Arabic literature is the product of a long and dynamic evolution. Emerging first through translation, then serving as a tool for moral and social reform, and later providing entertainment, it

eventually grew into a sophisticated artistic form in the twentieth century. Newspapers and journals acted as the initial platform for its development, while writers drew on both indigenous traditions and foreign influences to give the short story its unique voice in Arabic literature.

In this way, the Arabic short story reflects both continuity with the past and innovation in the present, a genre that began as borrowed but became, over time, authentically Arab in character and spirit.¹⁵

Maḥmūd Taymūr: A Voice of Transition in Arabic Fiction

The Egyptian short story writer Maḥmūd Taymūr occupies a distinguished place among the pioneers of Arabic narrative. He is regarded as one of the most prolific and influential figures in the formative stages of the Arabic short story. His writings, marked by both richness in quantity and refinement in quality, exerted a clear impact on the trajectory and development of Arabic fiction.

Taymūr was deeply influenced by Western short story traditions while remaining firmly rooted in the classical Arab culture in which he was raised. He grew up in an eminent literary household, where classical learning thrived under the influence of his father, Aḥmad Taymūr, a renowned scholar, and his elder brother, Muḥammad Taymūr, widely credited with writing the first Arabic short story in modern form. In such an environment, Maḥmūd Taymūr absorbed both Arab literary heritage and European narrative models, enabling him to become a true transitional figure in modern Arabic fiction.

His literary output was vast, comprising nearly thirty short story collections in addition to several novels and plays. As Sabri Hafez observes, Taymūr succeeded in “achieving a sensitive balance between the various elements of the short story, creating convincing human characters and mature, well-structured fictional situations, rich in substance, form, and conflict”.

Among his most significant short story collections are *Zâmir al-Ḥayy* (*The Piper of the Neighbourhood*), *Dunyâ Jadîda* (*A New World*), and *al-Shaykh Sayyid al-‘Abîṭ*. His first collection, *al-Shaykh Jum‘ah* (1925), and his last, *Bint al-Yawm* (*Daughter of the Day*, 1971), frame a long and productive career that spanned decades of literary change. His stories are often marked by a romantic spirit, expressed in a language that is simple, accessible, and well-suited to the short story form. Through this stylistic clarity and human focus, Taymūr helped to consolidate the short story as a legitimate and widely read literary genre in Arabic literature.

Taymūr’s role in the Arabic short story was not confined to sheer productivity. His works, widely published in newspapers and journals, played a crucial role in popularising the genre and embedding it in the cultural consciousness of the Arab world. For decades, Arabic fiction remained strongly influenced by his school of storytelling, which emphasised the creation of distinctive characters, tightly constructed plots, and the kind of narrative economy pioneered by the French short story master, Guy de Maupassant.

Indeed, Taymūr himself acknowledged Maupassant’s formative influence. In a symbolic gesture, he signed his first collection with the title “The Egyptian Maupassant”, a discreet yet significant declaration of his indebtedness to this European writer whose artistry shaped world literature. Yet in Taymūr’s hands, these techniques were naturalised into the Egyptian and Arabic context, producing stories that spoke to local realities and universal human concerns alike.

In this sense, Maḥmūd Taymūr may rightly be described as a voice of transition in Arabic fiction. He bridged the gap between inherited narrative traditions and the emerging modernist sensibilities of the twentieth century, balancing romantic imagination with realistic observation, and fusing Arab cultural identity with European literary innovation. His work laid the foundations for subsequent generations of Arabic short story writers, ensuring that the genre would flourish as one of the most vital forms of modern Arabic literature.¹⁶

Findings:

- i. Maḥmūd Taymūr occupies a distinguished position as a pioneering figure in the development of the Arabic short story.
- ii. His works represent a transitional phase between classical Arabic prose forms and the modern short story genre influenced by European models.
- iii. Taymūr was nurtured in a rich literary household, where his father Aḥmad Taymūr’s scholarly pursuits and his brother Muḥammad Taymūr’s pioneering short stories shaped his literary orientation.
- iv. He successfully integrated the Arabic *maqâma*’s linguistic elegance with the European short story’s economy, psychological realism, and structural precision.
- v. Taymūr’s thematic concerns revolved around social inequalities, hypocrisy, women’s conditions, and the clash between tradition and modernity.
- vi. His stories frequently portrayed marginalised and ordinary figures, reflecting empathy and psychological depth in their depiction.
- vii. He was heavily influenced by European masters such as Maupassant, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov, which enriched his narrative style.
- viii. His career coincided with a period of cultural flux in Egypt, marked by the decline of Ottoman authority, nationalist movements, and encounters with Western modernity.

- ix. Taymûr was prolific, producing nearly thirty short story collections, alongside novels and plays, across several decades.
- x. His first collection, *al-Shaykh Jum'ah* (1925), and his last, *Bint al-Yawm* (1971), frame his long literary journey.
- xi. His language was marked by simplicity, clarity, and closeness to everyday life, making his works accessible and appealing.
- xii. His stories were widely published in newspapers and journals, which helped popularise the short story genre across the Arab world.
- xiii. He played a significant role in al-Kâtib al-Miṣrî magazine, engaging in debates on language reform, national identity, and literary responsibility.
- xiv. Taymûr advocated for Egyptian literature to reflect authentic local traditions, sentiments, and environments, incorporating rural settings, colloquial speech, and indigenous customs.
- xv. He was instrumental in consolidating the short story as a recognised and dynamic genre in Arabic literature.
- xvi. Scholars compared his contribution to the short story with that of Naguib Mahfouz in the novel and Tawfîq al-Ḥakîm in drama.
- xvii. His works revealed a balance between romantic imagination and realistic observation, blending Arab heritage with modernist techniques.
- xviii. He acknowledged Maupassant's influence by signing his early works under the symbolic name "The Egyptian Maupassant."
- xix. His literary output covered realism, romanticism, social critique, and historical fiction, always marked by psychological depth and human focus.
- xx. His influence extended beyond his time, inspiring later writers such as Yûsuf Idrîs, Mahmoud Tahir Lashin, Yahya Haqqi, and Zakaria Tamer.
- xxi. His legacy is considered a bridge between inherited traditions and modern literary innovation in the Arab world.
- xxii. The evolution of the Arabic short story itself passed through three stages, embryonic, experimental, and formative, with Taymûr representing the formative stage.
- xxiii. His contribution helped establish the Arabic short story as a legitimate, sophisticated, and socially engaged art form.
- xxiv. Maḥmûd Taymûr is remembered as the "voice of transition" in Arabic fiction, linking heritage with modernity and preparing the ground for the flourishing of the short story in modern Arabic literature.

Conclusion

Maḥmûd Taymûr stands as one of the most influential voices in the development of modern Arabic short fiction, embodying the delicate transition from traditional narrative forms to the refined artistic structures shaped by European influence. His literary journey reflects both continuity and change: continuity in his deep grounding in Arab cultural and linguistic heritage, and change in his embrace of realism, psychological depth, and the modernist techniques that gave Arabic prose a new vitality. By blending the elegance of the classical *maqâma* with the economy and precision of the European short story, Taymûr carved out a distinct narrative style that spoke to both local Egyptian realities and universal human experiences.

His prolific output and commitment to publishing in newspapers and magazines ensured that the short story was not merely an imported genre but one firmly embedded in Arab literary consciousness. More than a writer, he was a reformer who saw literature as a vehicle for social critique, cultural identity, and moral reflection. As a "voice of transition," Taymûr bridged the gap between heritage and modernity, laying the groundwork for later writers such as Yûsuf Idrîs and Naguib Mahfouz. His legacy continues to define the Arabic short story as one of the most dynamic forms of modern Arabic literature.

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