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POVERTY, SOCIAL OPPRESSION, AND HUMAN DIGNITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF YUSUF IDRIS'S *Arkhas Layâlî* (THE CHEAPEST NIGHTS) AND BHABENDRA NATH Saikia's *Srinkhal* (THE CHAIN)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of poverty, social oppression, and human dignity in Yusuf Idris's Arkhas Layâlî (The Cheapest Nights) and Bhabendra Nath Saikia's Srinkhal (The Chain) through a comparative study of their socio-realist perspectives. Both writers are concerned with the lives of ordinary people, and the social and economic problems that determine human experiences. The impact of poverty, social inequality and restrictive social conditions on the characters' life, their dignity, freedom and relationships are discussed in the study. It also looks at how the two authors used short fiction to reveal societal problems and express sympathy for the impoverished. The study tries to find out how social realism presents the realities of Egyptian and Assamese society by examining the thematic similarities and dissimilarities between the two works. Through their portrayal of marginalised people and everyday difficulties, Idris and Saikia highlight the ability of short fiction to expose societal inequalities and explore the human consequences of poverty and oppression.

KEYWORDS: *Poverty, Social Oppression, Human Dignity, Yusuf Idris, Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Arkhas Layâlî, Srinkhal, Egyptian and Assamese Society, etc.*

INTRODUCTION

Literature plays an important role in portraying human experiences and social realities. It not only portrays individual lives but also shows the economic, cultural and social conditions that affect them. Among different literary approaches, social realism focuses on the actual problems of society, particularly poverty, inequality, oppression, and the struggles of ordinary people. The short story lends itself well to these problems, it can contain important dimensions of human existence in concise narratives and realistic characters.

Yusuf Idris (1927–1991) was a prominent Egyptian writer who made a significant contribution to modern Arabic short story. His stories often depict the lives of ordinary people, and focus on poverty, social inequity and economic hardships. Idris by his realistic description of the Egyptian society exposes the difficulty of the underprivileged. His short story collection *Arkhas Layâlî* offers a significant platform for understanding his treatment of social problems and human suffering.

Similarly, Bhabendra Nath Saikia (1932–2003) was an important Assamese writer whose short stories capture the complexity of ordinary life. His short stories generally deal with family relationships, economic hardship, loneliness and social restrictions. Saikia, through simple language and realistic characters, explores the relationship between individuals and their social environment. His short story collection *Srinkhal* offers an opportunity to study the effect of social and economic conditions on individual freedom and human dignity.

Idris and Saikia may belong to separate linguistic and cultural traditions, yet their works provide opportunities for comparative literary analysis. Both writers focus on the ordinary people and the difficulties they experience within their respective societies. Poverty can reduce opportunities for individuals and create personal and familial hardships. Social oppression can restrict freedom and reduce human dignity. Their representation in literature helps readers understand the relation between the suffering of a person and the broader societal conditions.

The present study examines the representation of poverty, social oppression, and human dignity in Yusuf Idris's *Arkhas Layâlî* and Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *Srinkhal*. It tries to bring out the major similarities and dissimilarities in their social-realist perspectives keeping in mind the different circumstances of the Egyptian and the Assamese society. This comparison is intended to highlight the importance of the two writers in reflecting social inequality and the suffering of ordinary individuals in modern short stories.

A Brief Life Sketch of Yusuf Idris

Yusuf Idris was one of the most important writers and novelists produced by Egypt and the Arab world. He was particularly known for his close connection with Egyptian village life and its people. Because of his remarkable ability to portray ordinary people and their experiences, he was given the title "the Chekhov of the Arabs," after the great Russian writer Anton Chekhov.[1]

He was born on May 19, 1927, in a small village called al-Bayrum, in the governorate of al-Sharqiyya, Egypt.[2] After completing his primary education, he enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine at Cairo University. During his university years, he became involved in political activities against British

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occupation. He served as executive secretary of the Committee for the Defence of Students and later as secretary of the Students' Committee. In 1951, Idris graduated in medicine, specialising in psychiatry, and began working as a doctor at *Qasr al-Aini* Hospital. However, he resigned from his medical position in 1960 to devote himself to writing. He subsequently worked as an editor for *Al-Jumhuriyya* newspaper and joined *Al-Ahram* as a writer in 1973.

Yusuf Idris established a distinctive literary approach that influenced many later writers. Through his mastery of language and realistic portrayal of characters, he represented different sections of Egyptian society, particularly ordinary people and those facing difficult social conditions. His first published short story, *Anshudat al-Ghuraba* (Song of the Strangers), appeared in the magazine *Al-Qissa* in March 1950.[3] Later in 1954, he published his first short-story collection, *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest Nights). This short story collection was hailed as a major literary contribution to Egyptian short fiction. Other collections followed, including *Jumhuriyyat Farhat* (Farahat's republic), *Alaysa kadhalika?* (Isn't it?), *Hadithat Sharaf* (An incident of Honour), *Akhir al-Donia* (The End of the World), *Qaa al-Madinah* (Dregs of the City), *Lughat al-ay-ay* (The Language of Screams), *Al-Nadahah* (The Summons), *Bayt min lahm* (House of Flesh), *Ana Sultan Qanun al-Wujud* (I am sultan of the law of existence), *Aktoloha* (اقتلها), and *al-Atab ala al-Nazar* (Vision at Fault).[4]

In addition to short stories, Yusuf Idris made important contributions to Arabic drama, journalism, and novel. His notable plays include *Al-Mukhattatin*, *Al-Farafir*, and *Al-Bahlawan*. His most important novels include *al-Hiram* (The Sin), *al-Aib* (The Disgrace), *al-Baida* (The White), and New York. Several of his literary works were adapted into films, including *Al-Haram*, *Al-Ayb,* and *Qa' al-Madina.*

Yusuf Idris passed away on August 1, 1991, in a hospital in London while undergoing treatment for a brain haemorrhage, leaving behind a distinctive literary legacy.[5] His death marked a great loss to modern Arabic literature, as he was regarded one of its most creative figures. He was especially distinguished in the short story form, where he showed a natural ability to present deep human emotions and experiences within a brief and suggestive style.

A Brief Life Sketch of Bhabendra Nath Saikia

Bhabendra Nath Saikia is an eminent novelist, short-story writer, playwright, and film director from Assam, India, who was honoured with the *Padma Shri* (a prestigious award) in 2001 for his services to the literature, culture and cinema of Assam. He has made significant contributions to almost all aspects of literature and culture, including drama, short stories, novels, essays, autobiography, and children's literature. He won many literary awards, including the *Sahitya Akademi Award* for his short story collection *Srinkhal* in 1976, and the Assam Valley Literary Award in 1990. He had the unique distinction of having won the National Awards for each of his seven Assamese films.

He was born on 20 February 1932 in Fauzadari Patti (Kirtan Ghar Road) in Nagaon district of Assam.[6] He passed his matriculation examination in 1948 and the Intermediate examination in Science in 1950, both with first division marks. He completed his graduation degree in 1952 with honours in Physics from Cotton College of Gauhati University. He received a post graduate degree in Physics from the Presidency College of Calcutta University in the year 1955-56. He obtained his PhD degree in physics from the University of London in 1961. He also obtained a Diploma from the Imperial College of Science & Technology, London in 1961. After completing his studies, he began his professional career as a Reader in the Department of Physics at Gauhati University. He was also the founding editor of *Prantik*, a fortnightly Assamese magazine, and *Xafura*, a children's magazine.

Bhabendra Nath Saikia made a significant contribution to Assamese literature and culture through his short stories, novels, plays and films. His major collections of short stories are: *Prahari*, *Brindaban*, *Gahbor*, *Sendur*, *Srinkhal*, *Taranga*, *Ei Bandaror Abeli*, *Akash*, *Upakanta* and *Sandhyabhraman*. His notable novels include *Antarip* and *Ramyabhumi*, which explore human relationships and the complexities of society. As a playwright he has written various plays for stage and mobile theatre, including *Andhakup*, *Maharanya Nilakantha*, *Dinbandhu*, *Gadhuli*, *Brindaban*, *Paramananda*, and *Swarnajayanti*. He also contributed significantly in Assamese cinema through films like *Sandhyarag*, *Anirban*, *Agnisnan*, *Kolahal*, *Sarathi*, *Abartan*, *Itihas* and *Kaal Sandhya*. He is known for his realistic portrayal, simple language, psychological insight and deep understanding of Assamese society. He became one of the most important figures of modern Assamese culture through his literary and cinematic achievements.

Bhabendra Nath Saikia died on 13 August 2003 in Guwahati at the age of seventy-one and is survived by his wife Preeti Saikia and two daughters Sangita and Rashmi.[7] His death marked the end of the life of one of the most prominent literary and cultural personalities of modern Assam.

About "*Arkhas Layâlî*" (The Cheapest nights)

Arkhas Layâlî (The Cheapest Nights) is Yusuf Idris's most well-known and first collection of short stories, published in 1954.[8] The collection has been translated into several European, Asian, and African languages and has frequently appeared in anthologies of Middle Eastern literature. One of its central concerns is the life of Abdul Karim, a poor peasant who works hard to support his family. Through the experiences of the protagonist Abdul Karim, Yusuf Idris explores various themes such as poverty, social injustice, overpopulation, socio-economic inequality, compassion, emotional alienation, and the importance of moral integrity and humane values. Due to the limitations of a single paper, the study does not adequately address all the aspects raised by *Arkhas Layâlî*. As a result, poverty, social oppression and human dignity will be discussed below:

Poverty and Economic Hardship in *Arkhas Layâlî*:

In *Arkhas Layâlî*, Yusuf Idris portrays poverty as a serious social problem that affects the daily lives of ordinary Egyptian people. Through the character of Abdul Karim, a poor peasant and father of six children, the writer shows how economic hardship leads to hunger, anxiety, and family difficulties. Poverty is not just a matter of not having enough

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money, it also limits personal freedom, and prevents people from enjoying ordinary social activities.

Abdul Karim's financial condition is clearly shown when the narrator says:

" وليس معه قرش صاغ واحد[9]

("He has not a single piastre in his pocket")

This quotation shows his terrible poverty and inability to even fulfil his fundamental necessities.

The story also highlights the family's struggle to obtain sufficient food. The narrator says:

"ثم الأولاد لا ريب قد جاعوا ساعة المغرب، وأكلوا الفلفل بآخر رغيف"[10]

("Then the children must surely have become hungry at sunset and eaten the pepper with the last loaf of bread")

This passage describes the struggle of poor families to get their daily food.

Abdul Karim's responsibility for six children increases his economic difficulties. He experiences a sting of poverty, and as a result, having sex with his wife reflects psychological and social loss. He pays the high price by giving birth to a newborn. The narrator expresses his dissatisfaction in saying:

"بعد شهور كانت النساء كالعادة يبشرنه بولد جديد، وكان هو يعزي نفسه على السابع الذي جاء في آخر الزمان، والذي لن يملأ طوب الأرض بطنه هو الآخر."[11]

(After a few months, the woman, as usual, informed him that a new baby had been born, and he was feeling sorry for himself because the seventh baby had finally been born at the end of time, all the bricks of the earth would never fill up this one either.)

It is a metaphor of the heavy burden of feeding a big family with limited financial resources. Yusuf Idris through the story of Abdul Karim presents poverty as a condition of food, family life, personal independence and human dignity. The story shows a realistic image of rural hardship and points to the suffering of economically disadvantaged people.

Social Oppression in *Arkhas Layâlî*

In *Arkhas Layâlî*, Yusuf Idris presents the social oppression in the form of poverty, helplessness and poor living conditions of the ordinary people. The protagonist, Abdul Karim, is a poor villager who is unable to fulfil his familial obligations. His economic condition doesn't provide him with any comfort, independence or enjoyment. Through his experiences, Idris exposes the various forms of hardship faced by the lower sections of society.

One important aspect of social oppression in the story is the economic inequality between rich and poor. Abdul Karim sees the comfortable lifestyle of others, but can't even enjoy simple pleasure. His wish to go to the coffee shop and spend time there is a sign of his need for normal entertainment.

The narrator describes this desire as follows:

"وليس معه قرش صاغ واحد، حتى يذهب إلى «غرزة» أبو الإسعاد، ويطلب القهوة على البيشة، ويتبعها بكرسي الدخان، ويجلس ما شاء بعد ذلك على ريحة القهوة والكرسي، يراقب حريفة «الكوتشينة» من صبيان المحامين، ويستمع إلى ما لا يفهمه في الراديو."[12]

("Not a wretched piastre with which to take himself to Abou El Assaad's den, for instance. There he could order a coffee and then smoke a water-pipe and stay till all hours, or sit and watch solicitors' clerks at their game of cards, and listen to the radio blaring out things he didn't understand.")

This passage reflects the differences between what Abdul Karim wants and what he can afford. Because of his financial restrictions, he can't afford even the most basic forms of enjoyment.

The story additionally emphasises the psychological impacts of poverty and illiteracy. Abdul Karim is helpless facing the problems of life due to his lack of education and financial resources. The narrator explains his condition:

"وعبد الكريم معذور، فالحيرة التي كان فيها أوسع منه، والمسألة أنه رجل على نياته، لا يقرأ الليل ولا يكتبه، والجيب خالٍ، والليلة شتاء، والشاي يكوي رأسه، وجهلة السهر من أمثاله قد غيبهم النوم منذ سنة مضت في سابع أرض."[13]

("Abdel Karim was not to blame, for the confusion he was facing was beyond his capacity. The truth was that he was a simple, straightforward man who neither knew how to read nor write, and his pocket was empty. It was a winter night, and the tea was scalding hot. People like him, who stayed awake late into the night, had long since fallen asleep, as though they had disappeared beneath the seventh layer of the earth.")

This statement emphasises the social and psychological helplessness of the protagonist. His educational and financial deprivation restricts his capacity to overcome problems that surround him. Through this character, Idris shows that social oppression can also arise from illiteracy, economic inequality and the lack of opportunities.

Idris further exposes social neglect through his description of the village environment. The poor condition of the houses and their surroundings reflect the neglected lives of the people. The narrator describes the setting as follows:

"وانبسط الظلامُ الكثير أمامه؛ حيث تُعشِّش البيوت المنخفضة الداكنة، وترقد أمامها أكوام السباخ كالقبور التي طال عليها الإهمال."[14]

("Darkness spread before him where the low grey houses nestled close to one another, with heaps of manure piled before them long neglected graves.")

The graves are compared to forgotten tombs, a strong image of desolation and abandonment. The village is not just the backdrop of the story but also symbolises the awful living conditions of the people who live there.

The ending of the story also shows the continuation of Abdul Karim's suffering. His hard luck does not change even with the birth of his seventh child. He has a growing family and more responsibilities. The narrator explains his situation:

"وَبَعْدَ شُهُورٍ وَسَنَوَاتٍ كَانَ عَبْدُ الْكَرِيمِ لَا يَزَالُ يَتَعَثَّرُ فِي جَيْشِ النَّمْلِ مِنَ الصِّغَارِ الَّذِينَ يَزْحَمُونَ طَرِيقَهُ فِي ذَهَابِهِ وَأَوْبَتِهِ"[15]

("And months and years passed, yet Abdul Karim continued to struggle his way through the countless little children who crowded his path whenever he went out or returned home.")

This phrase highlights the continuous growth of Abdul Karim's family and the burden it places on his difficult life. The ending suggest that Abdul Karim is caught in a cycle of poverty and frustration. Over time, nothing changes for him, illustrating how disadvantaged people often continue to suffer when the social and economic situations around them remain unchanged.

Human Dignity in *Arkhas Layâlî*:

In *Arkhas Layâlî*, Yusuf Idris explores human dignity through the life of Abdul Karim, a poor villager whose financial condition affects his self-respect, personal freedom and relationships with others. The story reveals that poverty doesn't

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just deprive people of the basic things they require, but it may put them in situations where they feel incapable of living with dignity. Idris illustrates the hardships of the common individual who wants to keep his self-respect despite difficult circumstances through the protagonist's experiences.

One important aspect of human dignity in the story is Abdul Karim's personal pride. He wants to spend the evening with the other villagers but his lack of money prevents him from enjoying their company. He also stays away from Sheikh Abd al-Majid because of their previous disagreement. The narrator says:

"لا يستطيع أن يتنحنح ويطرق باب الشيخ عبد المجيد؛ لأنه أول الأمس فقط، دفع رجل من فوق مدار الساقية، فأوقعه في الحوض، وأضحك عليه الشارد والوارد."[16]

("He could not bring himself to knock on Sheikh Abd al-Majid's door, for just the day before yesterday, he had pushed him from the edge of the irrigation channel into the water reservoir, making him an object of ridicule among all who witnessed the incident.")

This incident reveals how personal conflicts and public embarrassment affect human relationships. The fact that Abdul Karim cannot approach the Sheikh indicates their connection is broken and that he is afraid of additional humiliation. Idris believes that human dignity is intimately tied to self-respect and how people are treated by others.

The story also provides the emotional relationship between Abdul Karim and his wife. He is frustrated and dissatisfied with his family life, but he has a moment of tenderness toward her. The narrator states:

"وكان يعرف طريقه، فطالما علمته ليالي البرد الطريق، وعثر آخر الأمر على امرأته، ولم يزغدها، وإنما أخذ يطقطق لها أصابع يديها، ويدعك قدميها اللتين عليهما التراب بالقنطار"[17]

("He knew his way in the dark from long habit on cold winter nights. And when he found his wife, he did not nudge her. He took her hand and began to crack her knuckles one by one, and to rub against her feet, caked with tons of dirt.")

This expression reflects the human side of the protagonist Abdul Karim. Under the rage and frustration, he still has affection and tenderness for his wife. It shows that even in a destitute home there is still human dignity and emotional needs. This is how *Arkhas Layâlî* shows human dignity in the form of self-respect, personal relationship and the desire for a decent life.

About *Srinkhal* (The Chain)

Srinkhal (The Chain) is a notable collection of Assamese short stories, written by Bhabendra Nath Saikia and first published in 1975.[18] This collection of short stories contains fourteen stories and it occupies an important place in the current Assamese short story literature. The collection shows Saikia's thorough observation of society and his great compassion for the lives of common people. It demonstrates Saikia's expertise in portraying human feelings through simple yet profound narratives, contributing significantly to modern Assamese literature. For this collection of short stories, Bhabendra Nath Saikia received the prestigious *Sahitya Akademi Award* in 1976, recognizing his literary excellence and impact.[19]

The story *Srinkhal* focused on the protagonist Ambika, a widow with five children, young and beautiful, who is struggling to keep her family afloat in the face of hunger and poverty, after the death of her husband Nilokanto. It presents the arrival of a set of pigeons in Ambika's life, which lead her like links in a chain, to a series of intense moments of turbulent conflict within herself. The pigeons had been set to free in a grand public meeting near her village, to spread the message of peace. Ambika manages to capture four such birds, planning to sell them and buy some necessities for the house. But her hungry children want to have a meal of pigeon meat. Meanwhile, Kalidas, a wealthy friend of her late husband, tries to take advantages of her vulnerable condition, but Ambika resists his advances. Through the experiences of the protagonist Ambika, Saikia explores various themes such as poverty, economic hardship, social restrictions, family problems, loneliness, emotional suffering, struggle of a poor widow, gender inequality, and conflict in human relationships. Due to the limitations of a single paper, the study does not sufficiently discuss all the aspects raised by *Srinkhal*. As a result, poverty, social oppression and human dignity will be discussed below:

Poverty and Economic Hardship in *Srinkhal*

Poverty and economic hardship are the central themes of Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *Srinkhal*. The story is about the difficult economic condition of Ambika, a poor widow who has to support her five children following the death of her husband Nilakanta. Ambika works at other people's houses and is paid only a small amount of rice for her labour. She had spent the whole day at the *dhenki* (A wooden foot-pedal device for pounding rice), and had been paid two seers of rice. This detail clearly reflects the economic insecurity of poor rural women.

The four pigeons that Ambika catches become an important source of possible income. Her first thought is not about to eat it, but how the pigeons can help her family survive. In this connection, an excerpt has been quoted here as follows:

"পাৰকেইটা আকাশৰপৰা মাটিলৈ নামি অহাৰ পিচ মুহূর্ততে অম্বিকাৰ মনলৈ চাঁটকৈ এটা চিন্তা আহিছিল- অন্ততঃ কেইটামান টকা; জগন্নাথৰ ঘৈণীয়েকে আৰু তিনি সেৰমান চাউল দিব; চাউলখিনিৰ লগতে এইকেইটা টকা,-অন্ততঃ দুটা দিনৰ ভাত, মাহটোৰ তেল-নিমখ। ল'ৰা-ছোৱালীকেইটাৰ উৎপাতত দিনটোৰ ভিতৰত সেই চিন্তাটোৱে তাইৰ মনৰ ভিতৰত কেইবাবাৰো লুটি বাগৰ মাৰিছিল; -বেচিব? নেবেচে নহ'লে। এটা ৰান্ধিব নেকি? ল'ৰা দুটাই বৰ আশা কৰিছে! নে এটাইকেইটা উৰাই দিব! দয়াৰাম বুঢ়াই বা কি কাণ্ডখন কৰে! কিন্তু শেষ ৰাতি তাই সকলো উৰণীয়া কথা বাদ দিলে। টকাকেইটাহে আচল কথা।"[20]

(As soon as the pigeons had come down, the first thought of Ambika was–a few rupees; Jagannath's wife would give three seers of rice; with the money she could buy foodstuff to last for two days and buy the salt and oil to last a month. When her children created the ruckus this thought came again and again to her mind: Should she sell the birds? Oh, forget it. Better that she cooked one of them. The boys were so eager to taste the curry. Or should she let them free? What would old man Dayaram do–would he create trouble? But towards dawn, she stopped worrying about these things. Money was the main thing–and so be it.)

This statement reveals the extreme poverty of the family. Even a small amount of money can purchase vital food and basic supplies. Thus, Ambika looks at the pigeons as an opportunity to reduce her immediate economic difficulties.

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Her poverty is clearly expressed when Kalidas asks about her wishes. Ambika does not dream about wealth, luxury or social success. She simply says:

"মোৰনো আকৌ কি মনোবাঞ্ছা! ল'ৰা-ছোৱালীকেইটাৰে সৈতে দুবেলা দুমুঠি পেট পূৰাই খাবলৈ পালেই হয়।"[21]

("Well, I don't have great ambitions. If I and my children can have two square meals a day, that's enough.")

This statement is one of the strongest expressions of poverty in the story. It shows that for Ambika; survival itself is the greatest aspiration.

Social Oppression in *Srinkhal*

Social oppression is another important theme in *Srinkhal*. Saikia portrays a picture of the hardships of Ambika, a poor widow from a rural background. She is economically weak and single woman and hence vulnerable to social pressure, unwanted attention and interference into her personal life. The story illustrates how society throws more limitations on women who do not have the safety or support of a husband.

After Nilakanta's death, Ambika has to manage her family alone. While she still works hard for her children, her position in the village is not free from social problems. Her poverty becomes a reason for others to look down upon her. Dayaram himself admits this when he asks Ambika:

"আৰু তই এইখন গাঁৱত থকাৰ কথা কৈছ। তোক এতিয়া গাঁৱৰ মানুহে মূৰত তুলি লৈ আছে হ'বলা? নে তোক টোকোনা বুলি লেই-লেই চেই-চেই নকৰাকৈ আছে?" [22]

("Oh yes, you're talking about living in this village. Are they looking after you now? Haven't they ill-treated you because you're poor?")

This phrase implies that Ambika's suffering is not only financial but also from the disrespect and unfair treatment she receives due to her economic position. Thus, Saikia highlights the socioeconomic inequality that prevails between the poor and the rich section of the society.

Ambika's relationship with Kalidas further reveals the oppression faced by a single woman. Kalidas starts to make personal comments, and indirect suggestions that make her uncomfortable. He reminds her that he previously wanted to marry her and he constantly makes statements that have an inappropriate meaning. Ambika finds herself in a difficult situation because of his attitude, as she cannot easily express her anger or reject him openly without thinking about the consequences. Though she wishes to stop his visits, her hesitation and fear reflect the social restrictions imposed upon women.

Her helplessness becomes clear when she imagines the possible development of Kalidas's behaviour. She says to Dayaram:

"মই অকলশৰীয়া মানুহ; আজি সি মোৰ লগত মেল মাৰক, কাইলৈ মোৰ হাতৰ ভাত এসাঁজ খাওক, পৰহিলৈ এটা চুকত থৈলা এখন পাৰি শোৱৰক, চ'থাদিনালৈ মোৰ বুকুত-।"[23]

("I am a single woman. Today he comes to chat with me, tomorrow he'd want to share the meal with me; the day after tomorrow he'll ask for a mat to sleep in my place and the next day he'll try to touch me,")

This statement demonstrates her concern of losing her personal space and dignity. She knows that seemingly harmless visits can slowly turn into more serious demands. She is not only worried about Kalidas's behaviour but also about the consequences she will have to face in the village if such a relationship develops.

The story also points out the problem of social surveillance. Dayaram has a habit of watching Ambika and asking her about the pigeons. Kalidas also joins in watching and accompanying her. Although Dayaram claims that he is concerned about her safety, his interference makes Ambika uncomfortable. She is forced to explain herself and be careful about what others think or say. She is afraid that someone from the village may notice the pigeons and make trouble for her and this makes it difficult for her to go to the market. Thus, Saikia shows how the poor and the socially vulnerable are often deprived of privacy and freedom.

Human Dignity in *Srinkhal*

Human dignity is a significant theme in *Srinkhal*, particularly through the character of Ambika. She struggles to maintain her self-respect and personal freedom in spite of her poverty and difficult social circumstances. Saikia does not portray her as a helpless widow but as a woman who knows her position and has the courage to stand up against unwanted interference in her life.

Ambika's dignity is especially seen in her reply to Kalidas, a rich man who seeks to form a close friendship with her. He uses her financial problems to suggest things that start to make her feel uncomfortable. He is rich, and that would help her family out a bit, but Ambika is aware that if she accepts his attention, she might lose her freedom and social status. Ambika refuses to accept the offer of Kalidas as follows:

"তাৰ টকা আছে, পইচা আছে; মাছ খায়, মঙহ খায়, ৰাজভোগ খায়, টাউনৰ হোটেলত খাই নাহেগৈ কিয়?"[24]

("He has money and wealth; he eats fish, meat and royal delicacies. Why doesn't he go and eat at a hotel in town?")

Through this statement Ambika shows her anger toward Kalidas who uses his wealth as a tool to approach her. She asks him why he does not enjoy his money and luxurious food elsewhere instead of troubling her. Her words reveal her determination to protect her self-respect and personal freedom. She is poor, but does not want to be dependent on Kalidas, or to accept his unwanted attentions. Thus, the statement emphasises Ambika's strong sense of human dignity and her refusal to allow economic hardship to compromise her independence.

Thus, through Ambika, Saikia highlights the significance of human dignity, self-respect and personal freedom. Her poverty makes her economically vulnerable, but it doesn't make her morally weak. Her rejection of Kalidas's approaches demonstrates her courage to protect her identity and independence. The story shows that human dignity cannot be measured by wealth or social status; rather, it lies in a person's self-respect and ability to stand against exploitation.

Comparison between *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest nights) and *Srinkhal* (The Chain)

Yusuf Idris's *Arkhas Layali* and Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *Srinkhal* are important works of social realism in modern Arabic and Assamese short story literature. Both stories come from distinct literary and cultural contexts, but both

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writers portray the struggles of ordinary people who face poverty, social oppression and the loss of human dignity.

Poverty and economic hardship constitute a major theme in both stories. In *Arkhas Layâlî*, Yusuf Idris presents the miserable condition of Abdul Karim and his family who struggle to arrange their daily meals. Their poverty is a reflection of the greater economic problems of Egyptian rural society, where unemployment, inequality and the neglect of ordinary individuals lead to continuous suffering. Similarly, in *Srinkhal*, Saikia presents Ambika, a young widow with five children, who struggles to keep her family afloat in the face of poverty and hunger, following the loss of her husband, Nilokanto. She captures four pigeons that were released from a public meeting reflects the extreme economic difficulties she faces. Ambika is thinking of selling the pigeons to buy the things she needs for the house, however her children want to eat them. Thus, both stories demonstrate how poverty deprives individuals of basic necessities and forces them to make difficult decisions for survival.

Social oppression is another important point of similarity between the two stories. Idris, through *Arkhas Layâlî*, exposes the socioeconomic inequality and the harsh situations that keep poor people trapped in helplessness. The suffering of Abdul Karim and his family is a sign of how the unequal social structure deprives economically disadvantaged individuals of the ability to regulate their life. In *Srinkhal*, Saikia explores social oppression through Ambika's position as a widow. Her poverty, societal limitations and vulnerability make her an easy victim for male exploitation. A wealthy friend of her deceased husband, Kalidas, exploits her helplessness. But Ambika fights his advances and strives to save her dignity. Thus, Idris highlights the oppression of poor families, and Saikia gives particular attention to the difficulties and limitations of a widow.

The human dignity also connects the two stories. The struggle of Abdul Karim and his family in *Arkhas Layâlî* shows how poverty affects human self-respect and the basic dignity of life. Despite their miserable circumstances, their suffering reflects their desire to live with dignity. Similarly, Ambika in *Srinkhal* fights for the survival of her children and also for her self-respect and personal freedom. Her refusal to accept Kalidas's approaches is indicative of her desire to maintain her dignity even in her economic vulnerability. The pigeons also become a symbol of her helplessness and the hard choices forced upon her by poverty and social circumstances.

Despite these similarities the two writers have different techniques to depicting social realities. Yusuf Idris deals with the harsh realities of Egyptian society through direct criticism of poverty, economic inequality and social injustice. Bhabendra Nath Saikia in contrast, shows the reality of Assamese society through psychological observation, subtle narration and personal experience of his characters. But both writers have a genuine compassion for the sufferings of the common people and show the societal conditions that responsible for their difficulties.

Dissimilarities between *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest nights) and *Srinkhal* (The Chain)

Arkhas Layâlî by Yusuf Idris and *Srinkhal* by Bhabendra Nath Saikia deal with social realism and human suffering. But they are different in narrative styles, characters, social settings, and treatment of societal problems. The following are the main differences between the two stories:

1. Social Background: *Arkhas Layâlî* portrays the miserable life of poor Egyptian villagers, especially the economic problems of Abdul Karim and his family. In contrast, *Srinkhal* shows the social and domestic difficulties of Ambika, a widow and her five children in Assamese society.

2. Central Problem: The central concern of *Arkhas Layâlî* is extreme poverty and the struggle for basic necessities. In contrast, *Srinkhal* is focused on poverty, social restrictions, loneliness and the problems of a widow in maintaining her family.

3. Nature of Oppression: Oppression in *Arkhas Layâlî* is mostly displayed in economic inequality, class divisions and the negligence of the poor villages by the government. In *Srinkhal* oppression is more associated with societal customs, family duties and restrictions imposed upon women.

4. Representation of Women: Women in *Arkhas Layâlî* are mainly portrayed within the context of family poverty and the struggle for survival. In *Srinkhal*, Ambika occupies the central position and represents the suffering, patience and responsibilities of a widow in a traditional society.

5. Characterisation: Yusuf Idris presents Abdul Karim as a representative of the economically deprived rural villager. Saikia, however, develops Ambika as a character whose personal suffering reflects the wider condition of widowed women and their families.

6. Social Environment: *Arkhas Layâlî* portrays the difficulties of rural living in Egypt, where poverty affects food, shelter and day-to-day survival. *Srinkhal*, in contrast, depicts Assamese society where economic hardship is linked with social expectations, family bonds and traditional restrictions.

7. Narrative Approach: Idris adopts a simple and realistic narrative to portray the harsh economic conditions of the poor. Saikia uses a comparatively restrained and psychological approach to reveal the emotional conflicts and social difficulties experienced by his characters.

8. Treatment of Human Dignity: In *Arkhas Layâlî*, human dignity is threatened by hunger, poverty and humiliating situations of economic dependence. In *Srinkhal*, human dignity is challenged by social discrimination, gender-based restrictions and the limited freedom available to Ambika.

9. Overall Social Message: Through *Arkhas Layâlî*, Idris criticises economic inequality and the failure of society and authorities to protect the poor. Saikia through *Srinkhal* depicts the hardships of widowhood, social restrictions, and the battle of women to preserve their dignity and independence.

FINDINGS

The major findings of a comparative analysis of Yusuf Idris's *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest Nights) and Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *Srinkhal* (The Chain) are as follows:

1. Poverty as a Common Social Reality: The analysis reveals that poverty and economic struggle are prevalent themes in both stories. Through Abdul Karim and Ambika, the writers show the effect of financial insecurity, hunger and family duties on the daily lives of ordinary people.

2. Different experiences of social oppression: The study shows that social oppression is experienced differently in the

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two stories. In *Arkhas Layâlî*, it is reflected mostly in economic inequality, illiteracy, social neglect, and the helplessness of poor villagers. In *Srinkhal*, it is especially connected with widowhood, gender inequality, societal limitations and the vulnerability of women.

3. Human Dignity and Self-Respect: Both stories emphasise the significance of human dignity in the face of hardship. Abdul Karim's experience shows how poverty and humiliation affect a person's sense of self-respect, while Ambika's refusal of Kalidas shows her courage to maintain her dignity and independence in the face of hardship.

4. The Effect of Poverty on Family Relations: The research shows the effect of economic hardships on family life and personal relationships in both stories. Abdul Karim struggles to fulfil the needs of his large family, whereas Ambika faces the responsibility of raising five children alone without her husband.

5. Symbolic Significance: The study also identifies symbolism in both stories. The frequent references to hunger and the growing number of children in *Arkhas Layâlî* reflect the continuous burden of poverty. In *Srinkhal*, the four pigeons symbolise Ambika's economic weakness, hard decisions and fight for survival and independence.

6. Common Humanistic Concern: Both the writers, belonging to different linguistic, cultural and literary tradition show great sympathy to the economically and socially underprivileged people. Their stories show that poverty and injustice are not just personal issues but are directly linked to broader socioeconomic realities.

7. Contribution to Social Realism: Lastly, the study shows the significance of short stories as a literary genre to expose social inequities, depict human suffering, and bring the necessity of social justice and human dignity to the attention of people in both *Arkhas Layâlî* and *Srinkhal*.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of Yusuf Idris's *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest Nights) and Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *Srinkhal* (The Chain) exposes the shared societal concerns of two writers from different literary and cultural backgrounds. Both stories show the harsh realities of poverty, social oppression, and the struggle for human dignity. Idris, through Abdul Karim, portrays economic hardship, hunger, illiteracy and helplessness of poor villagers. Similarly, through Ambika, Saikia portrays the sufferings of widowhood, poverty, gender discrimination, and social restrictions. Both characters are trying to save their families and their self-respect under terrible conditions. Idris focuses mostly on economic injustice and rural neglect, whereas Saikia highlights the social and personal issues encountered by women. The pigeons in *Srinkhal* symbolise Ambika's struggle for survival and independence, whereas the repeated references to hunger in *Arkhas Layâlî* emphasise the continuing burden of poverty. Both writers, with their diverse narrative styles, demonstrate genuine sympathy for the suffering of ordinary people. Their stories expose the social conditions that lead to injustice, humiliation and human suffering. The study also reveals how poverty affects family relationships and individual freedom. Both authors employ realistic characters and situations to highlight the challenges of their society. Their works bring out the value of self-respect, compassion and societal equality. Thus, *Arkhas Layâlî* and *Srinkhal* are important examples of social realism in Arabic and Assamese short-story literature. They highlight the shared human struggles that exist beyond geographical, linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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