

OPINION

From: Prof. Pavel Pavlovich, DSc, Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski.”

Regarding: A Dissertation for obtaining the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in professional field 2.1. Philology, Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia, and Australia, doctoral program: Arab Studies

Title: The Arabic Language and Modern Cultural Identity in the 19th Century: Rifaa al-Tahtawi and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq

Doctoral candidate: Ekaterina Krasimirova Dokleva, Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Procedure Details

By order No RD-38-256/28.05.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski,” I have been appointed as a member of the academic jury for the defense of the aforementioned dissertation, and by protocol No 1/30.05.2024 from the meeting of the academic jury – to present an opinion.

The materials submitted by the candidate comply with the normative requirements in the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for its implementation (PPZRASRB), and the regulations of Sofia University for obtaining the educational and scholarly degree “Doctor.” The abstract accurately and comprehensively reflects the content of the dissertation. The presented publications meet the minimum national requirements for scientific activity: two are published in Bulgarian edited collections, one of which is a Festschrift, and two more are currently in print.

The dissertation text is an original work by Mrs. Dokleva and contains no elements of plagiarism.

Assessment of the Dissertation

The dissertation focuses on the 19th-century “Arab Revival” (*Nahḍa*) and the formation of modern cultural identity in the Arab world, exemplified by two prominent figures of the *Nahḍa* – the Egyptian intellectual Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801–1873) and the Syrian writer and Maronite Christian (later Muslim) Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1805–1887). The overall intention of the work is to compare the activities of these two figures within the context of historical and political processes among the Arab population of Egypt and the late Ottoman Empire, highlighting their contributions to modernizing the Arabic literary language and, through it, building a new type of Arab identity. The dissertation comprises an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, appendices, and a bibliography, totaling 348 pages.

The Introduction states the research objectives, reviews the literature on the dissertation topic, and describes its structure. Mrs. Dokleva also elaborates on her research method, which is based on “the model of the Dutch sociologist and cultural anthropologist Geert Hofstede,” along with lexical and grammatical analysis of the Arabic language in the works of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and al-Shidyāq (pp. 7–8).

The first chapter examines the 19th-century modernization in the Arab world. The Author discusses the linguistic, social, and historical dimensions of the concept of *Nahḍa* (Revival) – a term used to denote the renewal of which al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and al-Shidyāq were part. From Mrs. Dokleva’s in-depth analysis, it is evident that the *Nahḍa* represents a multifaceted process of intellectual, linguistic, cultural, social, and economic changes that unfolded with uneven dynamics across different parts of the Arab world and should not be mechanically likened to the European Renaissance. This process owes its beginning to a combination of external and internal factors of impact and change, through which the European modernization impulse, introduced by Napoleon Bonaparte’s Egyptian campaign

(1798–1801), intersected with the aspirations of Arab societies for renewal while preserving their traditional foundations. The Author examines discussions among Arab learned elites of the 19th century about the relationship between embracing modernity and preserving authenticity (*aṣāla*), often involving the Arabic language as a key element of Arab identity. In accordance with the dissertation topic, the last part of the first chapter is dedicated to the characteristics of the *Nahḍa* in Egypt and Syria. These are predicated not only on the different historical trajectories of the two countries, their confessional diversity, and their exposure to various political and cultural influences from outside but also by the shared interests of the local intellectual elites in modernizing the Arabic language and culture.

In the first part of the second chapter, Mrs. Dokleva classifies the representatives of the *Nahḍa* both chronologically according to their successive generations and typologically according to their preference for religious-traditionalist or secular-modernist views. These fundamental classification criteria are nuanced by the influence of confessional affiliation and the ideologies of nationalism and socialism on the Arab Renaissance figures. Dividing lines are also drawn by their attitudes towards the Arabic language and culture, where modernists advocating the adoption of new literary genres clash with purists who draw inspiration from the idealized classical tradition. In the second part of the second chapter, Mrs. Dokleva introduces us to the biographies and works of al-Shidyāq and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī.

In the third chapter, Mrs. Dokleva focuses on the views of al-Shidyāq and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī on modernizing education and the Arabic language. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's participation in the educational reform in Egypt is traced, highlighting his attempts to simplify grammar textbooks by adopting French propaedeutic models. Equally significant are al-Shidyāq's contributions to facilitating the teaching of Arabic grammar. The works of both thinkers on Arabic lexicography are analyzed in detail. Mrs. Dokleva also examines their contributions to translating terminology from Western languages into Arabic and analyzes the genre and stylistic diversity of their works. Throughout the exposition, Mrs. Dokleva follows the tension between the innovative approaches of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and al-Shidyāq and

traditional teaching methods on the example of the two thinkers' disputes with upholders of tradition.

In the fourth chapter, the Author examines al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's and al-Shidyāq's views on identity. Since "identity" is a modern concept, the Author explains what she means by the use of this term and how it relates to the ideas of the two modernizers of the Arabic language and culture. For her analysis, Mrs. Dokleva draws on Hofstede's four-component typology of cultural identity comprising symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. As symbols, the Author classes the Arabic language, the golden age of Arab-Muslim culture, clothing, and appearance. Heroes are the scholars and poets. Rituals such as travel, blood vengeance, the exchange of gifts, etc., are described in Arab literary works from pre-Islamic antiquity. Values are associated with deep societal structures and attitudes towards them: power, state, religion, gender relations, and views of the other. In each of these aspects, the two thinkers are shown to call for a change in traditional models while preserving their essence and aligning them with modernity.

Mrs. Dokleva's work is clearly structured, with each chapter addressing a specific aspect of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's and al-Shidyāq's lives and activities, thereby laying the foundation for deepening the analysis in the next. The first section of the second chapter, in which the Author categorizes the representatives of the *Nahḍa*, rather belongs to the first chapter, which is dedicated to the general issues of the Arab Renaissance.

The Author is well-versed in the scientific literature on the topic and skillfully integrates the observations derived from it into her analysis.

The summary of contributions corresponds to Mrs. Dokleva's achievements in the proposed work.

The translations of the titles of al-Shidyāq's and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's works are commendable but not always accurate. The Author is guided by contemporary meanings of words, while al-Shidyāq and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, drawing on their linguistic erudition, often use these words in their classical sense. Thus, *Ghunyat al-Ṭālib* (pp. 107, 142) does not mean "the wealth of the student," but "the sufficiency for the seeker." The Arabic verb *ghaniya*

means “to be sufficient,” from which the secondary meaning of “wealth” as a state of sufficiency and independence from material circumstances of life developed. By titling his work *Ghunyat al-Ṭālib*, al-Shidyāq informs the reader seeking knowledge in Arabic grammar that it is sufficient for achieving his goals. *ʿAjm al-ʿarab wa-l-aʿjām* (p. 108) is “assessment” or “knowing” of Arabs and non-Arabs, not “testing” as Mrs. Dokleva translates. The meaning is derived from the expression *ʿajamat-hu l-ʿayn ʿajman* – literally “the eye peers evaluatively at something.” The translation of *al-Laṭīf fī kulli maʿnā ṭarīf* as “Collection of curious proposals” (p. 139) is also inaccurate. The word “proposals” does not appear in the Arabic text, while *ṭarīf* can be translated as “interesting” only by way of approximation, ignoring the fact that in Arabic there is no exact equivalent of the adjective “interesting.” The title *al-Laṭīf fī kulli maʿnā ṭarīf* refers to a comprehensive collection of curious examples illustrating grammatical rules. In a possible future publication, Mrs. Dokleva should carefully review the translations of the titles and either correct or remove them.

Occasionally, the Author uses non-standard terminology. On p. 28, she contrasts “visible spheres of life” as part of the *Nahḍa* with its “metaphysical dimensions.” Metaphysics is a science of what lies beyond physically and intellectually perceivable nature and, as such, represents a significant part of theology. The relative adjective “metaphysical” cannot be used with reference to profound processes underlying the development of social identity. The Author does not define her understanding of “metaphysical” and does not distinguish between its theological, philosophical, and profane meanings, which creates a terminological inconsistency. On p. 33 the “psychological” influence of the Western civilization should be described as “spiritual.”

Despite these critical remarks, Mrs. Dokleva’s dissertation, *The Arabic Language and Modern Cultural Identity in the 19th Century: Rifaa al-Tahtawi and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq*, is a significant scholarly study bearing witness to the Author’s comprehensive erudition and conscientious engagement of the subject. The research and conclusions are satisfactorily argued. The doctoral candidate convincingly defends the thesis that Rifāʿa al-Taḥṭāwī and Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq played a defining role in shaping modern Arabic

language and Arab cultural identity, particularly through their participation in educational reforms and language modernization.

Conclusion

The dissertation presented by Mrs. Dokleva methodically studies the Arab Revival, providing the reader with the key to tracing the intellectual and political trends in Arab societies during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The works of al-Shidyāq and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī are analyzed through Hofstede's theoretical paradigm, which represents a notable contribution to their study.

Given the aforementioned qualities of the dissertation, I give a positive evaluation and recommend that the academic jury award Ekaterina Dokleva the educational and scholarly degree of "Doctor" in the professional field 2.1. Philology, Literature of the peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia, and Australia, doctoral program: Arab Studies.

Professor DSc. Pavel Pavlovitch

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