

REVIEW

of the Dissertation on the topic “Arabic language and modern cultural identity in the 19th century: Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaaq” by Ekaterina Krasimirova Dokleva, distance learning PhD student at the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, Sofia University of St. Kliment Ohridski, for obtaining an educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the field of higher education 2. Humanities; professional field 2.1. Philology; scientific speciality “Literature of the peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia (Arabic Social Studies)” under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Galina Evstatieva, PhD

by Prof. Baian Rayhanova, DSc, Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, Sofia University of St. Kliment Ohridski, a member of the Scientific Jury, appointed by the Rector’s decree № RD 38 – 256, dated 28.05.2024

I. DOCTORAL DATA

Ekaterina Dokleva, distance learning PhD student at the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, Sofia University of St. Kliment Ohridski, has been dismissed from the PhD program with the right to defend her dissertation on 29.04.2024 by the decision of the Faculty Council of FCMPH with record No. 70-04-449/16.05.2024 and is participating in the procedure for obtaining the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the scientific speciality “Literature of the peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia (Arabic Social Studies)”.

The PhD student's documents, submitted electronically, meet the requirements of the Law on the Development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as the relevant Regulations of Sofia University of St. Kliment Ohridski. The certificate of fulfillment of the minimum national requirements for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” is attached.

II. DATA ON DISSERTATION, AUTHOR'S ABSTRACT AND PUBLICATIONS

Ekaterina Dokleva's dissertation has a volume of 348 pages and consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, eight appendices and a bibliography including 237 titles in Arabic, Bulgarian, English, Russian and German. Each chapter is divided into several subchapters and is accompanied by summarizing conclusions. The structure and content of the dissertation meet modern academic requirements, and the chosen methodology fully corresponds to the goals set.

The author's abstract is 35 pages long, correctly reflects the main content of the research and emphasizes its contribution. The results of the study are presented in four publications and tested at a scientific conference of non-habilitation teachers and doctoral students, organized by the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology at Sofia University of St. Kliment Ohridski.

According to the author's note, two articles “The Egyptian School of Languages (Madrasat al-Asun) in the Arabic Renaissance” (2022) and “Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq in the Center of the Ottoman Empire” (2022) are included in the scholarly collections and published by the University printing house of St. Kliment Ohridski, and two other articles “In Search of Modern Arab Identity: *Leg over leg ...*” and “Ideological Exchange and Polemics between Western Orientalists and Arab Intellectuals during the Nahda Period (19th – early 20th centuries)” have been accepted for publication and will be published respectively in the collections “Modern Trends in Arabic and Islamic Studies” and “Light of the East – Bulgarian Oriental Studies – Beginning, Development and Prospects.”

III. SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

Ekaterina Dokleva's dissertation “Arabic language and modern cultural identity in the 19th century: Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq” is an original and meaningful work. Its relevance stems from a limited number of scholarly publications examining in detail the activities of two prominent revivalists from

Egypt and Syria, as well as their role in the intellectual and spiritual life of nineteenth-century Arab society.

The 11-page introduction convincingly substantiates the relevance of the dissertation topic and indicates its main parameters. It also includes a brief literary review of the works of Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, as well as the works of a number of Arab, Western European and Bulgarian researchers.

The first chapter “Modernization processes in the Arab world in the 19th century. Arab Renaissance (al-nahda al-arabiyya)” contains 57 pages and introduces the research problem. Ekaterina Dokleva clarifies the terminological meaning of the word *Nahda* in great detail and summarizes a number of research concepts and theses of Rebecca Johnson, Ahmad Barqawi, Muhammad al-Hadi al-Matwi and many other well-known authors. She examines the nature and characteristics of the Arab Renaissance and its main centers, and also highlights several key factors for the emergence of this phenomenon in Egypt and Syria.

In addition, Ekaterina Dokleva traces the intellectual debates related to the phenomenon of Nahda and various manifestations of modernity and authenticity during this period. In her opinion, these discussions are proof of the determining role of external factors for the appearance of the Nahda in Arab society precisely in the 19th century (p. 33). Particular attention is paid to the terms *modernity* and *modernization* used by Derek Hopwood and Ceyhun Arslan.

According to Ekaterina Dokleva, the disputes about modernity and authenticity are organically connected to the other debate concerning the issues of renewal and heritage. She examines the theses of Peter Hill and other Arab and European scholars studying the Arab Nahda and highlights two narratives dominating their works. The first presents the Nahda as a heroic act of intellectuals who succeeded in leading society out of the decadence associated with the Ottoman past (p. 39). The second sees the Nahda as a tragic story due to the influence of European ideas in the Arab world and their cultural infiltration (pp. 40–1).

It is important that the chronological and territorial frameworks of the Nahda are examined through the prism of the historical events influenced the development of Arab society during the period under consideration. Not only the periodization

made by Muhammad M. Badawi, Umar al-Dasuqi, Shakib Arslan and other scholars is indicated, but also the differences and similarities between their approaches are highlighted.

Based on an in-depth analysis of relevant publications, Ekaterina Dokleva comes to the conclusion that the Arab Nahda starts at the beginning of the 19th century and ends after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the twenties of the 20th century. However, she does not limit herself to the characterization of the Nahda during the indicated time frames and notes the updating of this concept after the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948, perceived by the Arabs as the *Nakba* (catastrophe), and after the revolutions of the so-called *Arab Spring*.

It is quite logical that the peculiarities of the Nahda are revealed based on the study of this phenomenon in Egypt and Syria, which became the intellectual and cultural centers of the Arab world in the 19th century due to a number of political, economic and socio-cultural factors. Ekaterina Dokleva reasonably argues that “the elite, created by Muhammad Ali around himself in the first decades of his reign, was almost entirely Ottoman ...” (p. 55). However, on the same page, she refers to the Ottoman elite composed of the Turko-Circassian elite, although the activities of the Circassians or their names are not mentioned at all, while the Albanians and Armenians mentioned in this part of the thesis do not belong to the Circassian ethnic group.

In the second chapter “Main representatives and currents of the Nahda: Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq and Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi”, which has a volume of 57 pages, Ekaterina Dokleva again returns to the topic of authenticity and modernity. According to her, the representatives of the Arab Nahda are divided in relation to the values proposed by the West (p. 75). In doing so, she refers to the statements of Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri and George Tar[a]bishi, who note the traditionalist and modernist trends in the activities of the Egyptian and Syrian revivalists, as well as the ideas of Muhammad al-Hadi al-Matwi and Louis Awad, who emphasize a third trend defined as secular and associated with rationalism and revolutionary progress.

Moreover, it is pointed out that the problems of the Arabic language, which plays an important role in the process of formation of Arab identity and “turns out

to be a unifying element of identity between Christian Arabs and Muslim Arabs” (p. 82), become the object of lively debates not only in the period of Nahda, but also nowadays. Based on the publications of Nada Tomiche, Abdulrazzak Patel, Adrian Gully and other authors, Ekaterina Dokleva traces discussions of representatives of different revivalist trends and generations about the authenticity and modernity of the Arabic language. She indicates the contribution to these linguistic debates of Nasif and Ibrahim al-Yaziji, Butrus al-Bustani and Yusuf al-Asir, and accompanies her reflections with brief biographical data of these intellectuals, who represent primarily the Syrian school.

In addition, considerable attention is paid to the writings and life path of Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, who was born into a Maronite family in Lebanon, became a Protestant, and then a Muslim, as well as Rifa‘a Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi, who came from a Muslim family, completed his education at the prestigious Al-Azhar Islamic University in Cairo and then studied in Paris. The PhD student comes to the convincing conclusion that despite the essential differences, their diverse cultural and educational activities significantly contribute to the development of translation and periodicals in the Arab world. It is no coincidence that they become one of the most emblematic figures in the 19th century. Considering the very title of the dissertation, as well as the structure of subsequent chapters, it would be more logical to present al-Tahtawi in this part, and then al-Shidyaq, as well as their translated works, respectively, in the appendix.

The third chapter “Views of Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq on the modernization of the Arabic language” with a volume of 65 pages is focused on the practical contribution of these two revivalists to the development of the Arabic educational system. It is noted that before the new educational reforms of the Nahda period, which include the innovations of Muhammad Ali and his grandson Ismail Pasha (ruler of Egypt and Sudan), manuals for teaching Arabic are mainly poetic works or grammatical poems (p. 130). Although they have their specific function and affect linguistic aspects in one way or another, these texts do not predispose to the mastery of grammatical rules.

It is for this reason that the textbooks and teaching manuals created by Rifa‘a Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq can be considered innovative at the time. According to Ekaterina Dokleva, they succeed in realizing their ideas related to the modernization of the Arabic language, but “in practice, the grammars of both revivalists are the first steps of change, and they are not big.” (p. 142) In order to highlight their lexicographic achievements, she returns to the medieval philological heritage and examines the dictionaries of al-Farahidi, al-Jawhari and Ibn Abbad. Based on a thorough analysis of the works of al-Tahtawi and al-Shidyaq on Arabic lexicology and lexicography, the short but effective conclusion is that they “support together the line of modernism and renewal and the line of traditional and authentic.” (p. 160)

In addition, the research focuses on the translation techniques of al-Tahtawi and al-Shidyaq, implemented in a number of their publications. It is preceded by a brief overview of the translation movement in the Arab world, which began in the 8th-10th centuries. The contribution of these two revivalists in expanding the lexical richness of the Arabic language through calques and Arabization of individual words is emphasized. In this regard, it is concluded that despite their efforts, al-Tahtawi and al-Shidyaq are unable “to prevent the introduction of a large number of foreign words, which ultimately also contribute to the renewal and enrichment of the Arabic language.” (p. 176)

The genre and stylistic diversity of the works of al-Tahtawi and al-Shidyaq is also examined in detail, and it is indicated that the Egyptian “insists on a strong connection with heritage and introduces new things more skillfully and acceptably,” while the Syrian “makes bolder innovations that ... bring him controversial fame” (p. 191). Moreover, this subchapter states that “by the beginning of the 19th century, the maqama was no longer as popular among the Arab public” (p. 177). Although, for example, Sabry Hafez, whose book is cited on the same page of the dissertation in relation to the maqama genre, notes its revival in this period. In his opinion, “the nineteenth century alone witnessed the writing and publication of more maqāmāt than in the preceding 800 years” (*The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse. A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature*, 1993, p. 109).

Accordingly, these maqamat have their considerable audience during the mentioned period. In addition, the PhD student claims that “if al-Tahtawi has only one work of fiction among his translations, then al-Shidyaq writes his fiction – also a single one: *Leg over leg...*” (p. 179). Such a claim is dubious since the present study also covers other works of the Syrian revivalist, including his travelogues.

The fourth chapter, “Views of Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq on cultural identity and its modern dimensions,” consisting of 90 pages, is not only the longest, but also the most significant. The theoretical frameworks of issues related to identity and culture are indicated, and two approaches to identity are noted: essentialism, which considers it as an objective historical given, and constructionism, which presents it as a changeable and flexible construction. According to Ekaterina Dokleva, authenticity is perceived by Arab revivalists as a moral obligation because they are convinced that there is an unchanging Arab identity or “core of values” that does not change (p. 196). In doing so, she turns to the theoretical statements of Erik Erikson, Jean-Paul Codol, Pierre Tap, as well as to the concept of Halim Barakat, who defines Arab identity as the sharing of basic elements, which include culture, past, historical experience, etc.

The theory of Geert Hofstede, who believes that culture represents a collective programming of consciousness and is not inherited, but acquired, is examined in detail. In accordance with his model, Ekaterina Dokleva traces the views of al-Tahtawi and al-Shidyaq concerning the modern Arab cultural identity and seeks to identify its “visible” elements mentioned by this Dutch scholar. They are associated with symbols, heroes and rituals and are reflected in one way or another in the texts of these two Arab intellectuals.

In addition, based on the analysis of the writings of al-Tahtawi and al-Shidyaq, she clarifies the nature of the values that characterize modern Arab cultural identity, and reveals four directions, indicated by Geert Hofstede and associated with the attitude to power and the state, to society and religion, as well as with the attitude towards the woman and the *Other*.

The dissertation reveals Ekaterina Dokleva’s deep theoretical knowledge and her ability to systematize, analyze and summarize the research material, but

sometimes she prefers to rely on the opinions of authoritative names in the relevant field and fails to clearly express her personal position on one issue or another. There are some minor flaws in her research, related to technical errors (for example, na[h]data, from the mountain [in] Lebanon, etc.) or deviations from modern literary language (for example, *priaporets*, *tui*, *vriz*, etc.). It is advisable to avoid using only the personal names of the authors (for example, Rifa'a or Ahmad Faris) in academic writing, as well as indicating only surnames in the footnote (for example, Badawi, because the text of the dissertation mentions two authors who share the same last name: Muhammad M. Badawi and Ahmad A. Badawi). As for the textual appendices, which include the representative excerpts from the works of al-Tahtawi and al-Shidyaq, Ekaterina Dokleva demonstrates excellent translation skills and the drive to achieve an adequate translation.

IV. CONCLUSION

I evaluate the dissertation “Arabic language and modern cultural identity in the 19th century: Rifa'a al-Tahtawi and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq” very positively and recommend the Honorable Specialized Scientific Jury to award Ekaterina Krasimirova Dokleva the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the field of higher education 2. Humanities; professional field 2.1. Philology; scientific speciality “Literature of the peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia (Arabic Social Studies).”

July 25, 2024

Prof. Baian Rayhanova, DSc.

