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BACKGROUND TO ARABIC AND YEMENI LITERATURE

An Historical Review

Once upon a time, there was a country named “Arabian Felix” which means (Happy Arabia). It was beautiful, healthy and rich too. But by the dawn of the 20th century, that happy land turned into the poorest, the most backward, and the ugliest country on earth. Once its location was in the heart of the old world made it very important point on many of the commercial routes between Europe and Asia. Once it was famous for its remote kingdoms, its advanced irrigation system and its great Dam.

Yemen or the Republic of Yemen is one of the Arab countries, which altogether form of what is known the “Arab World”. The Republic of Yemen is located in the far corner of southwest of Asia. From the North, it borders Saudi Arabia, from the east, the Empty Quarter and the Gulf States, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea in the south and the Red Sea in the west.

Yemen’s total area is about 550,000 square kilometers with an overall population 20,000,000 according to the latest census survey (2003). Yemen is a Republican country. From the last year (2006), the president is directly elected by people every seven years period. Other parliamentary and local council elections hold every six and two years respectively according to the constitutional amendments in 2001.
Yemen is an agricultural country for its rich and fertile soil. Approximately 75% of the total population works in farming. Fisheries and petrol industries come at the second level after agriculture. In the very remote times, Yemen was well known for its world wide coffee (Mocca Coffee). However, such an important agriculture product became very rare recently for people neglect its production and also due to the severe outside competition. The country’s farming mainly depends upon seasonal rainfall. Rain fall down during summer seasons and lasts five months (June-October). Since Yemen is a fertile country, various kinds of fruit, vegetables and crops are grown such as grapes (almost more than 25 kinds) mangoes, bananas, water melon, oranges, wheat and other valuable products.

Unlike, the rest of the Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia, Yemen’s civilization dates back 3,000 years. Many distinctive ancient kingdoms emerged in different periods of time and in different geographical sites. Their remains represent a living witness for that Yemen’s great past. A last point might be mentioned in this context is that Yemen was among those old nations which were ruled by women. It was the Queen of Shiba who was the ruler of Yemen in ancient times. That is what the Holy Qura’an and the ancient Romans and Greek’s Scripts mentioned.

Political Background

Before the Yemeni Unification in 1990, Yemen was divided up into two independent countries, one was in the south (The People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen), and the other was in the north (Yemen Arab Republic). Before independence in 1967, South Yemen was under the British
Colonization for 128 years (1839-1967). After independence, the new political system adopted socialism as a political and economic system.

On the contrary, the northern part of the country was a former Turkish province till 1918. The Turkish or (Ottoman) occupation lasted over 400 years (1517-1918). The Turkish occupation left the country in a very bad misery. Poverty, famine, diseases, destruction, and backwardness were the main Turkish marks it left behind.

What is important for the researcher here is to shed the light on this part of the country in particular, since the situations were unbearable for human beings to live in and since the situation in the southern part was much more improving due to the British Government achieved some positive improvements, particularly in the fields of education, health care services and administration. In other words, the northern part of the country was really a "Unique World" by itself till the revolution took place in 1962.

Emerging of the Imamates

As it was mentioned beforehand, North Yemen was under the Turkish domination till 1918. But before their withdrawal, they handed it over to a family named (Hameed Al-Deen Family), or the Imamates. In other words, the power transformation was from worse (Turks) to the worst (The Imamate).

Nothing had changed so far. The country's situation went worse. It went many decades back. Power totally gathered in the hands of the Imam and his son. In his introduction to the novel The Hostage, Robert D. Burrowes
gives the following gloomy picture about North Yemen: "Modernity came late to North Yemen. On the Eve of the 1962 revolution, North Yemen was one of the world's last extant examples of a relatively complex, large scale traditional social system." Burrowes continues describing the primitive political system. He says, "A highly tribalized and conservative Islamic Social Society; it was little changed in the 1950s from the Yemen of two or even several centuries earlier."

Regarding the isolation of the country from the outside world, Burrowes writes, "Despite the nearness of Britain's bustling Aden Colony, modern commerce's sea lane between Europe and Asia, North Yemen remained a backwater outside the mainstream of world's events." It was as one diplomat put it, "the Tibet of the Red Sea." Ironically, scholar Robin Bidwell is describing Sana'a, the capital of North Yemen and the Imam in the 1950s saying that Sana'a of 1950s looked like a museum which was not the result of centuries but of deliberate decisions by (Two Imams) to hold the twenty century at bay.

Unfortunately, The Imam deliberately wanted the country to be poor, isolated and backward for one illogical reason; to protect the society from outside influences. Once he said that he would rather eat straw than risk foreign ties that could cost Yemen its independence. What he really means by "Foreign ties", is foreign ideas. He knows that when the country is open to the rest of the world, new ideas would come into it either. Therefore, the primitive regime closed the country in the face of the world, thinking, wrongly, that if he had opened it, new ideas would have spread out among the
society and would destroy its pure religious and permanent values. Religion
dominated the whole life of the Yemen society. For the regime, modern
education is not accepted since its western oriented values. It would be
interesting to finish this discussion with what Hugh Scott writes about Imam
Yahya when he met him in 1930. He describes Yahya's total control on
administration by saying:

"He is an as absolute a monarch
As any left in the world. No ruler ....
can in greater measure attend personally.....
to every detail of his administration as
we had opportunity to see with our own
eyes .......If anyone on earth can say
I am the state, it is the Imam of Yemen".7

1962 Revolution

A revolution finally had broken down and overthrown the tyrannical
"patrimonial traditional political system" according to the sociologist Max
Weber's category.8 As soon as the revolution had broken down, immediately
followed by fundamental reformations covered all the activities connected
more or less with the society's basic needs and demands. The first promising
issue the new regime had to fulfill was announcing Yemen as a free and open
country. Education, health services and transportation were very demanding
and initial issues for the new regime. New schools were built. Hundreds of
students were admitted in schools. Along with schools, tens of hospitals were established either by the government or by foreign aids.

The 1990 Unification

Needless to say that the Yemeni Unification in 1990 represented a positive landmark in the life of the Yemeni people. Citizens felt proud of their unification in which two previous distinctive political systems mixed up together to form one. Unification brought radical and fundamental changes with it, particularly, in the issues of freedom and democracy which were absent in the political life of society in the both former systems.

The Beginning of the Arabic Novel

It could be said that literature in its wide context, is a set of human beings recorded experiences and experiments which have been accumulated within a long time of the society’s history. Literature is the real and natural storage of the human’s culture which includes all the material and non-material issues, such as ideas, feelings, customs, behaviour, tradition, dress, food and language. Literature is a fundamental reflection in which it indicates the nation’s strengths and weaknesses at the same time. And to do so, literature has its own special methods to achieve the society’s satisfaction and stability. Literature, through its different genres, such as novels, stories, journals, poetry and drama are the methods literature uses to guide, observe and achieve those desirable goals and values. If for example, such social goals and values are not met other methods are used too, such as criticism, irony or humor.
Modern Arabic Literature was born during the 19th century after several travails, setbacks and pains which basically delayed its birth date and slowed down its early presentation. One of these main obstacles was the foreign occupation to the Arab World. At that time, probably all the Arab countries were under a very autocratic, traditional, dictatorial and totalitarian political system; the Turkish occupation. Turkish regime was the worst colonists in the globe. Corruption, destruction, ignorance and famine were the regime’s most notable signs in the area. The regime stopped media, prohibited publications and killed the nation’s hope for freedom and justice.

However, and in spite of this unbearable situation the Arabs suffered from under the Turkish regime, the Arabic Literature revived and traced its way to freedom. Roger Allen, the author of A Period of Time and Modern Arabic Literature. In his The Arabic Novel: A Historical Background, writes:

"Contemporary Arabic Literature is the result of a long but often accelerated process which has its basis in al-nahdah, the movement of culture revived or renaissance, which began during the 19th century."

Arabic Literature is classified, according to Allen, under two categories "Classical and Modern". In this respect he writes,

"More specifically, the encounter with the west, its science, and culture, on one hand, and on the other, the rediscovery and stimulation of great classical heritage of Arabic-Islamic culture."

Allen points out to two things happened in the Arab world after it had opened itself to the western civilization; first, the translation of the literary
works of European fiction into Arabic and second their adaptation and imitation culminating in the appearance of indigenous tradition of modern fiction in Arabic. For the classical tradition of Arabic narratives they included anecdotes, vignettes, moral tales, stories of miraculous escape. The world’s greatest collection of narratives, A Thousand and One Nights, is to be under that classification.

And to stress on the same point raised by Allen mentioned earlier, Paul Starkey in his book Modern Arabic Literature states that the brief French occupation of Egypt that followed Napoleon’s invasion saw developments that were radically to alter the cultural and educational development of the country.

What Starkey means here is that though the French occupation was a military adventure but the invasion was also in part an intellectual adventure too. Accordingly, the outcomes of the invasion were:

"... teams of scholars and scientists accompanied the French military, the comprehensive survey of the country was undertaken. The French also founded a scientific institute in Cairo and set up a series of provincial councils, thus introducing the Egyptians to western representative Institutions for the first time... most significantly... They also introduced a printing press ...." 

And in order to discuss the Arabic Novel, our discussion will limit itself on two Arabic leading countries namely Lebanon and Egypt for their further great contribution to the Arabic Literature Development and due to the following reasons:
• Their prior contacts with western culture.
• Their full awareness of what was happening in the region and the world as a whole.

Lebanon: Priority will be given to Lebanon for its major role in contributing in the Arabic Literature Movement.

As a part of Syria at that time, Lebanon played a vital role in reviving the Arabic Literature through a number of great Lebanese Scholars.

In an area in Lebanon called Mountain Lebanon, there lived a Christian Community, basically from Maronite and Orthodox Sects whose ancestors came to the region as evangelists. These communities had been in contact with west, especially Rome and France. Among these groups of people the 'first glimmering' of al-nahdah, may be traced. Some of these famous families were Bustanis, Yazijis and Naggashes who made a great contribution to the process of Arabic Literature and language. Briefly we will talk about three great writers who really founded the cornerstone of the Arabic Literature.

1. Butrus al Bustani (1819-83)

He helped in translation the Bible into Arabic and wrote the larger part of encyclopedia, Dairat-al-mariż, on which he was working at the time of his death.

2. Nasif al-Yaziji (1800-1871)

He is credited as being the pioneer in the reinvestigation of the great
works of Arabic Literature from the Past. He read the Maqamāt of the eleventh-century prose writer al-Hariri in the French edition of Sylvestre de Sacy and was thus inspired to write a set of his own entitled "Majma al bahrayn."^17

3. Fransis Marrash (1836-73)

Born in Aleppo in 1836, Marrash also traveled to Paris, but ill health forced him to return to Syria where he died at an early age. He published a work entitled Ghabat al Haqq (The Forest of Truth), an idealized and philosophical work about freedom.^18

Egypt and its contribution to the Arabic Novel

Before we start our brief journey to explore Egypt's contributors and contribution to the Arabic Literature, let us start with what Paul Starkey says in this regard.

"From the point of view of literary development, however, the most crucial role was, undoubtedly that played by translation ... Egyptian students returning from abroad had been required to translate the text books they had studied, including French novels."^19

In the event, Allen writes,

"...it needs mentioning again that Egypt was chosen to provide a model for the earliest phases in the development of a novelistic tradition in the Arabic speaking world because historical, geographical, and cultural factors combined to make it the Arabic speaking society most conducive to the advancement of the novel genre."^20
As Allen points out, Egypt is considered the heart of the Arab World, first for its populous country and secondly for its direct and present influence on the region’s current crucial issues such as politics, economy and culture. There is a strong attachment links Egypt and the rest of the Arab World.

As Lebanon, Egypt’s contacts with western countries started very earlier. The French leader Napoleon Bonapart invaded Egypt in 1798, followed by sending Egyptian officers to train in France during Mohammad Ali’s regime. In 1820, a group of Egyptian students were sent to Europe, Italy and France in particular by the same governor. A famous religious scholar, Rifat Rafi Tahtawi (1801 -73) was chosen to accompany the first early mission to France as Imam. After 5 years of stay, Tahtawi wrote a book describing life in France including accounts of dress, food, government, laws etc. When he came back to Egypt in 1836, he was placed in charge of a new built school “al-alsun” (tongues) in Cairo, so he and his pupils started translating a lot of European Literary works into Arabic such as voltaire, Montosquieu and Fenlon. The book that has been written by Tahtawi after he has returned to Egypt, according to Starkey,

“provides a fascinating accounts of his impressions of France and reveals a surprisingly sympathetic attitude towards Western culture, comparing Western education in particular, favourably with that of al-Azhar and other Egyptian institutions, with their emphasis on traditional learning.”

In addition to al-Tahtawi’s contribution to the Arabic Literature, his efforts to the emergence of an Egyptian press tradition were great too. He was placed as editor of the Egyptian newspaper al-waqa–al misriyyah, founded
by Mohammad Ali in 1823. Such a newspaper laid the foundation of the Egyptian Journalism.23

Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914)

Jurji Zaydan played a major part in the Arabic Literary renaissance. As a Lebanese immigrated to Egypt, Zaydan established al-Hilal magazine in Cairo in 1892 which is being published.24 Furthermore, Zaydan was attracting his readership with stories based originally on the Arab and Islamic history. He wrote series of historical novels, following the same mode of Walter Scott’s writing. His very notable novels were Shajarat Durr (1984) in which he explores the reign of the famous queen of Egypt. Istibdad at Mamalik (Mamluk Tyranny 1893) may serve as an illustration of the narrative principles used. Set in the time of Ali Bey al kabir and his struggle with his son-in-law, Muhammad Abu Dhahab (1769-73), the novel swings back and forth between Egypt and Syria (which the Egyptian army has invaded).25

Mohammad Housyn Haykal (Zaynab 1913)

Haykal’s Zaynab has been almost universally acknowledged as one such work, and though less agreement might perhaps be found among the critics for a corresponding work from the early 1930s, there can be little doubt that a major advance in Egyptian and Arabic novelistic technique occurred during that period.26

Tawfiq al-Hakim

Although Tawfiq al-Hakim’s reputation comes through his plays than to his novels, his novels, beginning with Awdat al-Ruh which, in fact holds a
position of an almost equivalent importance for the development of modern Arabic Literature generally. Awdat al-Ruh was closely modeled on the author's experiences in Cairo during the First World War and as such, continues an autobiographical trend prominent during the early development of modern Arabic fiction. Hakim's Awdat al-Ruh was followed by three further novels, in all of which the autobiographical element plays a significant part. The three novels are Yawmiyat Naib fi al-Aryaf (1937), Usfir min at sharq (1938) al-Ribat at Mugaddas (1945).

**Abbas Mahmoud Al-aqqad Sarah (1933)**

A self-taught person, involved in the application of psychological analysis literature. He suggests that Sarah is either a novel of psychological analysis or an analysis in a narrative form. The Subject of this analysis is the breakdown of a love affair between Hammam and Sarah.

**Taha Husayn's al Ayyam (1920)**

Al-Ayyam is Taha Husayn's autobiography, which according to critics “made a major contribution to the development of prose literature ...... and has become one of the most beloved of all works in modern Arabic literature.”

**Najib Mahfuz**

Najib Mahfuz, the most Egyptian novelist and the world's prize winner (1988), was born in one of the most populous and busiest quarters of Cairo city, Gamaliyya in 1911. He was graduated from Cairo University in 1934 in philosophy. In addition to his native Arabic language, he mastered both
English and French. Mahfuz produced more than 25 novels and several collections of short stories. The first novel, Abath al-Aqudar (Fates of Mockery) in 1939, in which Mahfuz depicts the ancient Egyptian history. The Trilogy, which consisted of more than 1500 pages, created Mahfuz's international reputation. In this great work, he depicts the lives of the Egyptians in various quarters of the city of Cairo. His next famous fiction work Awlad Haratna (1981) and (Sons of Gelbawi) marked the significant change in topic. According to Allen, Mahfuz's novels moved the genre in Arabic to a completely new pattern.

The Members of the Mahjar (émigré) School in the U.S.A.

It has been mentioned earlier how some Lebanese scholars played an essential role in the field of Arabic Literature Movement, either those who were in Lebanon, Syria or those who escaped the civil war which broke down in Damascus in 1850, and lived in Egypt, like Butrus al-Bustani, Jurji Zaydan, or those who emigrated to North America.

Jubran Khalil Jubran

Jubran Khalil Jubran, the poet, philosopher, the painter and the novelist who was forced to leave his beloved country, Lebanon heading to the New World. With him, he took all his people's sufferings, concerns and miseries. And from a further far away, in his new world, he started communicating with his citizens through his poems, fictions and novels. In these literary norms, Jubran reminded his people about their oppressions and oppressors. He told them about injustice and unfairness they are exposed to by the Turks.
He insisted on their revolt against their present social environment representing by their backward traditions which pull them hundreds years back. He wrote a great deal of novels and poems in which he strongly and severely criticized his society for holding up primitive traditions, clergymen for their hypocritical attitudes, and finally the Turkish occupation for its backwardness, tyranny and oppression. Jubran’s works of fiction belong to the earlier part of his career and show a lively concern with some of the pressing social issues of his time.

Al-Ajniha al-mutakassirah (Broken Wings) (1957)

Al- Arwah al-mutamarridah (Rebellious Spirits) (1908)

Most of his works discuss women rights, forced marriage and the tyranny of clergy.

From our earlier discussion, we have seen how two important factors had played, to a great extent, in reviving the Arabic novel’s tradition. One of these factors was the direct contact with Western which started with the French invasion to Egypt in 1798. Two positive consequences can be traced here. One, when Mohammad Ali, governor of Egypt ordered to send a group of Egyptian officers to train in France. That was followed by a mission of students to France too by the same governor. The second factor was when some intellectuals from Lebanese commenced to establish a literary movement known as the Arabic Literature Movement, al-nahdah or renaissance, and we have seen how these literary scholars made their great contributions to reach Egypt and then USA where al-mahjar new Literary School has been established.
The Beginning of the Yemeni Novel

No doubt that literature is the real mirror of a society since it reflects the real life of that society. Literature shows the real picture through: morning newspapers, weekly and monthly magazines, theatre performances, novels and so on so forth. Hence, we can truly say that the more literature is present, the more society is advancing forward. At the meantime, the more that literature reaches the ordinary people through its different genres, the more people are aware of their day-to-day problems so they would be able to solve them or at least, avoid them.

Actually, there is an interchangeable interaction between literature and education. That is to say, both of literature and education support each other in such a matter. Or, it can be put in this way, the more education reaches the majority of ordinary people, literature follows the education steps steady and firmly till it reaches its desired goal. In this case only, we can say that such a given society is educated, literate and enlightened. In other simple words, when we see the layman rushing to the new papers stand to buy the morning newspaper, sitting down reading it, here we become confident because that ordinary man started thinking of what is going on around him. Now, on the light of what has been discussed earlier, let us ask the following question: What about a society was deliberately deprived from its natural rights?

The Yemeni society, unfortunately, had witnessed inhuman experiences. The Yemeni citizens had been deprived from education, which is the corner stone of building intellectual awareness, free, and advanced society. The foreign occupation in the south and the tyrant rulers in the north
together agreed to besiege the society and forced it to think only about its basic daily life needs. So, Yemeni people had not been given the chance to read a short story or write a fiction, simply because foreign and local governors did not provide them with the very basic tool, education. This is only one reason why the Yemeni literary movement in general and the novel tradition in particular stayed behind.

Al-maqalih, a Yemeni critic and poet, made this point much clear on his review the Yemeni short story and the novel. “For Yemen was, over the first half of this century, sunk in a profound sleep by virtue of it total underdevelopment, and because of occupation in the south and tyranny in the north…”

But after the revolution, Yemen opened itself to the world. Subsequently, hundred of student missions headed abroad to study. Some of them went to the former Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries and some to Arab countries, Egypt in particular. When they came back home, they brought back new ideas in different human knowledge including political ideologies. Al-maqalih stated such a point as follows:

“It is not strange, therefore, that Yemeni writers, within the various literary genres, should have emerged from amongst Yemenis studying abroad....”

Regarding the Yemen’s literary status, the situation is completely different from that in the Arab countries, (Lebanon and Egypt in this respect) due to very special circumstances. Out of these the Turkish dominion which lasted 400 years resulted into a complete isolation. Furthermore, when the
country was handed over to sovereignty, circumstances got worse. Hence, this Royal Family, the Imamate, kept such bad situations going on. At the time, many knowledgeable people tried to revolt against the Imam in order to better changes, but unfortunately, some were killed, some imprisoned and few escaped the northern part to the south, Aden which was under the British occupation. Those who escaped to Aden formed a political resistance movement. At the time, situations in the north were worsening more and more in all different backgrounds, politically, socially, economically and literary too. These miserable circumstances forced many Yemenis to leave their homeland heading to different global corners.

As for the beginning of the Yemeni novel tradition, it is probably difficult for any research scholar to find out when exactly the beginning of the Yemen novel writing started, though some literary scholars claim that the rise of the Yemen novel was before the Second World War due to the publication facilities which were available at the time and the mass-media sponsored by Britain in the southern part such as daily newspapers, weekly magazines and periodicals such as Al-Hekmah which was established by an educated group from the north opposed the imam’s regime. Others deny such an allegation, claiming that what was really publishing were short stories and some revolutionary poems. However, there is an inclination that the first Yemeni fiction appeared in 1939 in Aden, entitled “Saeed”, written by Mohammad Ali Loqman. According to Noman, the novel’s theme focused on education, liberation and foreign occupation. Two other novels published in Sana’a, entitled Ana Saeed, and The Two Thief Brothers, both written by Ahmad Al-Baraq, in 1938-1941.
However, some literary scholars agreed that *Ana Saeed* is as a novel while others denied this claim indicating that at the time this kind of literary genre was not known not only in Yemen but in the whole Arab world, except Egypt and Lebanon. Again, those who are pro *Ana Saeed* as a novel stated that Loqman, the author of the novel, graduated from Cambridge University and studied the English novel with great interest. Therefore, “he was richly influenced by its techniques and tried to produce something similar to it.”

Al-Jumly and Rollins stated the following fixing dates to refer to the emerging of the Yemeni novel.


Now, since the general circumstances in Yemen were as gloomy as it was described earlier was the situation really depicted in these novels?

Truly, the Yemeni novel was born from the womb of the peoples' miseries and started recording the big incidents the society was overwhelmed with. So, the new born novel came out as a response to the people's
oppression, injustice and expatriation “all of these 1970s novels focused on the expatriation of Yemeni men search of a better life for themselves and their families. For The Old Port, by Mahmoud Sageeri and The Hostage, by Zaid Mutee Damaj came out in the early 1980s, “dealing with the Imam’s policy of ensuring loyalty among powerful Yemenis by holding their children in prison.”37

With respect to the position of the Yemeni Novel occupied in the Yemeni literature, Al-maqalih, described the Yemeni novel as “a new born attempt and stumbling effort…. Our writers unable to express (themselves well) through the novel....” He went on by saying that the Yemeni novel’s lack of what Al-maqalih called “Contemplation and observation.”38

Unlike the novel tradition, short story proved its presentation since the thirties or forties of the past centaury. Al-hamdani, a literary Yemeni figure and in his review on the short story said that the short Yemeni story “was born in the Yemeni press in Aden”. Therefore the short story writing probably was the daily breakfast of the morning newspapers has been served to their readers. Regarding the now situation, both Yemeni Novel and the short story, Al-hamdani in Translated Yemeni Short Stories makes the following comparison:

“... This is because the scope of the short story itself helps in its writing and publishing and it requires a very limited amount of time...”39

For the novel he says:
“......The novel today remains the forte of a few writers who are not really specialized in the genre and it could be assumed that the age of the novel has not commenced in the present Yemeni Literature.”

It is noticeable here that Al-hamdani’s viewpoint almost goes hand in hand with what Al-maqalih said previously in this regard. Al-hamdani points out to the real obstacles encountering the development of the Yemeni novel as follows:

“Besides the requirements of writing a novel are very difficult and complicated and entails a minute and deep knowledge of technical structure and built of a good novel; and it also requires a long period of time...”
NOTES


2. Ibid., p.2.

3. Ibid., p.2-4.

4. Ibid., p.2.

5. Ibid., p.3.

6. Ibid., p.4.

7. Ibid., p.6.

8. Ibid., p.4.


10. Ibid., p.10.

11. Ibid., p.10.

12. Ibid., p.11.


17. Ibid., p.13-14.


25. Ibid., p.25.
27. Ibid., p.116-17.
31. Ibid., p.111.
33. Ibid., p.15.
35. Ibid., p.10.
37. Ibid., p.40.
38. Ibid., p.40.

40. Ibid., p.7.

41. Ibid., p.7-9.