The Radical Thought in the American Novel

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Abstract:

The major purpose of the article is to shed light on the role played by literature in general and the novel in particular to the struggle for social reform and justice in the American society through the promotion of some radical thoughts that changed the American philosophy of life.

In fact, radicalism though seems more connected to political and economic life than to literature it goes without saying that literature usually reflects the ideas and the convictions of its writer who often hold radical views.

In Uncle Thomas Cabin Stowe exposes abolitionism as a solution to the plight of the American slaves and many critics consider the novel as an attack on the evils of slavery while in The Jungle Sinclair suggests socialism as a cure for the social illnesses of the immigrants of America.

In the light of the two novels we can say that the American novel provided a space to the radical ideology of its writer and therefore contributed to the promotion of social change in the American society

Keywords: radicalism, reform, literature, justice, society

الملخص:

يهدف المقال إلى دراسة الدور الذي يمكن أن يلعبه الأدب في الإصلاح السياسي و الاجتماعي لما قد يحمله من أفكار إصلاحية المقال يسلط الضوء على روايتين أمريكيتين كوح العم توم لهريت بيتشر ستو الناقدة للعنصرية والأدغال لابتون سانكلار المناهضة لرأسمالية لانا كلا الكاتبين كانا يتبنيا فكرا راديكاليا اصطلاحيا

الكلمات المفتاحية: الراديكالية ' الأدب' الإصلاح' العدالة' المجتم

Introduction

The major purpose of this article is to throw light on the contribution of literature in general and the novel in particular to the struggle for social reform and justice in the American society, and to the promotion of some radical thoughts that changed life in the American community Radicalism seems more connected to political and economic life than to literature but we can not deny that literature indeed may reflect the radical thought, but here we need to raise a grave question: has the American novel contributed to the creation and the initiation of radical ideologies in the American society?.

In this article, I shall try to answer the question raised above through suggesting that literature had long been connected to the American cultural values and both directly or indirectly reinforces and even recycle each other .I intend to make these heady ideas a bit more concrete by analyzing radicalism in American literature. Of course, this will be possible through the study of the radical thought as expressed in some literary works. For this purpose, I have selected two works that had caused revolutions in the US society during different periods .the first is Harriet Beecher 's *Uncle Thomas Cabin* whereas; the second is Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Perhaps, before analyzing the literary works, it would be important to present the literary approach adopted for the critical treatment. Probably, the appropriate critical approach for this study will be new historicism

Owing to the intricate and ambivalent relationship between text and context, there has been a long-running debate about the disciplinary boundary between history and fiction. ¹Accordingly, the history of literary theory, in a sense, can be viewed as a series of theoretical battles between textualism and contextualism, swaying like a pendulum, with momentary victories to one side or the other, reflecting the oscillation between the verbal-literary champions of textualism and socio-historical champions of contextualism. The dominant form of textualism American New Criticism, Russian Formalism and French Structuralism going roughly from the 1920s to the 1970s would seem complacent about the triumph of literature over history based on a sovereign indifference to facts. By rejecting the voice of history, which is seen as merely a series of documents recording a fixed series of objective facts, literary studies would seem to have banned the dialogue between literature and history. It is unquestionable that New Historicism is part of the postmodern trend in literary history and culture studies.

Even seasoned observers of academic fashions may feel giddy noticing the rise of something called the "New Historicism," especially as we had just grown accustomed to pronouncements—whether celebratory or derogatory—that there was no getting "beyond formalism." Like any label for a movement in criticism, "New Historicism" serves more as an indicator of associated tendencies than as the proper name for a specific or coherent school Thus in accord with the accounts of Brook Thomas and David Simpson, I will use "new historicism" in a quite general sense rather than restrict it to the movement associated with Stephen Greenblatt .While she wrote at least ten adult novels, Harriet Beecher Stowe is predominantly known for her first, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Begun as a serial for the Washington anti-slavery weekly, the *National Era*, it focused public interest on the issue of slavery, and was deeply controversial.

1- The Abolitionist Thought in Uncle Tom's Cabin

In writing the book, Stowe drew on her personal experience: she was familiar with slavery, the antislavery movement, and the underground railroad because Kentucky, across the Ohio River from Cincinnatti, Ohio², where Stowe had lived, was a slave state. Following publication of the book, she became a celebrity, speaking against slavery both in America and Europe. She wrote *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) extensively documenting the realities on which the book was based, to refute critics who tried to argue that it was inauthentic; and published a second anti-slavery novel, *Dred* in1856. In 1862, when she visited President Lincoln, legend claims that he greeted her as "the little lady who made this big war". He meant the Civil War .Campaigners for other social changes, such as Caroline Norton, respected and drew upon her work.

Slavery and abolition were not only abstract moral issues for Stowe³. Lane Theological Seminary, on which her entire family depended for a livelihood, never recovered from the student resignations and was hard, put to pay its faculty salaries.

So when Calvin was appointed to a chair at Bowdoin College, it must have been with some sense of relief that Harriet set off, pregnant, three children in tow, to make the long journey by rail and steamboat to Brunswick, Maine. (There is a story that she and her children were so shabbily dressed that a stationmaster along the way refused to let them inside the waiting room.) Harriet's letter describing the work involved in refurbishing the large, old, unlived-in house they had rented reproduces some of the chaotic scenes of her domestic life in Cincinnati. She describes the birth of her son, Charles Edward, as a welcome relief from the frantic effort. But the move to Brunswick began a new era in her life.

By openly declaring her writing desk a pulpit, Stowe may have been trying to reassure herself that in portraying personal relationships among the urban middle classes she was still doing the Lord's work. Yet such anxiety was natural, given her family background, the evangelical impulse that had always motivated her and the moralizing temper of the society she wrote for.

American literature for most of the nineteenth century bore the imprint of an evangelical Protestant culture, Calvinist in its belief in submission to the will of an all-powerful Providence, and reformist in its hope that all human beings would some day be "one with the sympathies of Christ" and would work to make the country's institutions more merciful and just. It was because *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sprang from such mainstream moral and religious beliefs that it was able to galvanize national opinion as dramatically as it did. When Stowe began writing that book, she had no idea that its influence would reach so far. The novel started out as a series of sketches, scheduled to run for about fourteen weeks in an anti-slavery newspaper called the *National Era*.

As Stowe said in a letter to the editor, Gamaliel Bailey, the series was intended "to hold up in the most lifelike and graphic manner possible Slavery. . . . There is no arguing with *pictures*, and everybody is impressed by them, whether they mean to be or not." Everybody *was* impressed. Letters started flooding in, and soon Stowe's original fourteen weeks stretched to ten months. The chapters that poured out were not composed under the same conditions that had produced the sketches. Catharine came to take care of the children so that Harriet would have time to work, and Calvin gave up his office at Bowdoin so that she would have a place to work in. Harriet wrote like a person possessed, or inspired. Later, she would say of the novel "God wrote it."⁴

Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is still irresistible reading, its belief system no longer corresponds to the one that is dominant today. Its racial stereotypes are offensive—Stowe believed that Negroes as a race were emotional, spiritually gifted, loyal, and childlike—and her characterization of Uncle Tom has become a touchstone for modern critiques of racism. But the moral force of her attack on slavery remains, and it is important to understand why the particular form of her attack had such an unparalleled effect in her own day. In writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Stowe took the most sacred beliefs of her culture—the sanctity of the family and redemption through Christian love—and turned them into an attack on the evils of slavery.

The original sub-title of the novel, *The Man Who Was a Thing* presents her case succinctly. By treating slaves as things to be bought and sold, rather than as human beings,

slavery implicitly denies that slaves have souls to save, and therefore it is a sin. As a sin, it destroys not only the soul of the slave-owner, but the social fabric as well, for in separating wife from husband and parent from child, it destroys the institution on which human society rests—the family. In showing how slavery subverts Christianity and attacks the family at the same time, Stowe appealed to the wealth of feeling her age had invested in the sacredness of the home and of family ties. It was a brilliant strategy. After *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared, Northern legislators used its arguments to convince their colleagues of slavery's evils.

Religion and faith play a central role in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A character's relation to Christianity — believer, lapsed believer, nonbeliever — is part of how that character is defined. Eliza, Tom, Mrs. Shelby, Eva, and Ophelia are all described as dedicated Christians, and they are mostly good. George, Augustine St. Clare, and Cassy are basically good in spite of their inability to believe in Christianity (they are presented as having justifiable excuses not to believe). Simon Legree's complete lack of religious faith is connected to his depravity. Christianity is linked in the novel to morality, humaneness, and generosity. The Christian faith of slaves gives them courage and the strength to go on. Tom's and Eva's religious convictions transform them into Christ-like figures, and their deaths, like Christ's, are meant to be redemptive. Although she dies of tuberculosis, Eva appears almost to give her life for the antislavery cause, as slavery pains her so profoundly.

1.2- Christianity in Uncle Tom's Cabin

Writing for a predominantly religious protestant audience, Stowe tried to illustrate and even argue that that the system of slavery and the moral code of Christianity oppose each other .No Christian according to her should be able to tolerate slavery .throughout the novel the more religious a character is the more he or she rejects slavery. Eva the most morally perfect white character in the novel fails to understand why anyone would see the difference between blacks and whites .in contrast ,the morally revolting , nonreligious Legree practices slavery as a policy of a deliberate blasphemy and evil .

Christianity in *Uncle Thomas Cabin* is based on the principle of universal love if all Christians were to put this principle into practice no one would give himself the right to oppress or enslave another .therefore ,we can say that Christianity not only opposes slavery as a social system but it must be used to fight this racist institution .

Tom Locker, the slave hunter seem to have learnt this lesson after his life h as been saved by the slaves he tried to capture and bring back to the master .this man and after being healed by the deeply religious Quakers ,he changed his opinion about slavery .

Moreover Uncle Tom ultimately triumphs over slavery in his adherence to Christ command to "love your enemy ".he refuses to compromise his Christian faith in the face of all the trials he undergoes at Legree plantation. when he is beaten to death by his harsh master and his men Tom dies forgiving them .in this way he becomes a Christian martyr and the best model for both the blacks and the whites who succeeds to a great extent to show them how slavery is incompatible with the Christian faith and teaches them how to fight this system through Christian love.

1.3-Uncle Tom's Cabin as a SocialProtest

Even today, with literature constantly crossing more lines and becoming more shocking, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains one of the most scandalous, controversial, and powerful literary works ever spilled onto a set of blank pages ⁵. Not only does this novel examine the attitudes of white nineteenth-century society toward slavery, but it introduces us to the hearts, minds and souls of several remarkable and unprecedented characters.

In a time when it was quite common for a black woman to see almost all of her children die, Harriet Beecher Stowe created Eliza; a strong and powerful woman fleeing slavery and risking everything to protect her son. In Chapter Seven, we see through Eliza's eyes, just how painful and heart wrenching her personal sacrifices is to her.

Statements like this were not simply crafted to enhance character development; they were created in an attempt to make whites see slaves as mothers, fathers, Christians, and most of all...people. The character of Tom is described as "a man of humanity" certainly not a description commonly linked to black people at that time.

Tom was truly the first black hero in American fiction. However, Stowe based many of her assessments on her own reality. And while it is obvious that she very much advocated the abolition of slavery, she did not completely rise above her own racism. After all, this work was written during a time in which racial equality was incomprehensible to most whites. Therefore Stowe's ingrained prejudices were bound to seep out occasionally, despite her positive convictions. ⁶ But despite, or rather, because of its enormous popularity, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has not come down to us as an American literary classic. Its power to move millions of people has been held against it by a critical tradition that, since the 1940s, has identified formal complexity and difficulty of apprehension with literary merit. The fact that it was written by a woman, in language that made overt appeals to the emotions, carried a political message, and asked its readers to change put it squarely in the category labeled "propaganda." That the most powerful book ever written by an American has been excluded from the American literary canon precisely *because* of its power should make us question the grounds on which some of our present "classics" have been chosen.

2-Radicalism in Upton Sinclair's The jungle

As a response to the nineteenth century capitalism and political corruption, reform movements arouse one of them was progressivism. This movement gave American politics and thought its social character .the progressive leaders saw that work was a kind of war against the abuses of urban political bosses and corrupt masters of corporations'.

Their goals were greater democracy, and social justice, more effective regulation of business, and amore available public service. In other words they were convinced that the government had to expand its scope so that it would be able to ensure welfare to its citizens. Almost all notable figures of the period philosophers, men of letters, scholars, and politicians were convinced that the progressive goals had to be achieved.

One of the writers of the period was Upton Sinclair who opted to be one of those who expressed their progressive ideas though literature.

While the works of Upton Sinclair are not widely read today because of their primacy of social change rather than aesthetic pleasure, works like The Jungle are important to understand in relation to the society that produced them. Sinclair was considered a part of the

muckraking era, an era when social critics observed all that was wrong and corrupt in business and politics and responded against it.

The Jungle was written primarily as a harsh indictment of wage slavery, but its vivid depictions of the deplorable lack of sanitation involved in the meatpacking industry in Chicago resulted in public outrage to the point where Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act.

The Jungle is a product of the era when industry was rapidly evolving and millions of immigrants came to America, the perceived land of milk and honey. What they often found instead were a lack of jobs, low paying jobs in deplorable conditions and the realization that the American dream was not equally accessible to all.

2.1- Progressivism and Social Reform

The Socialist Party of America was founded in 1901, and for over a decade after that saw enormous growth, by 1912 they had over 1,200 elected public officials in the country, and during the election of that year had very good election results by their candidate Eugene Debs for President ⁷. The growth of the Socialist movement primarily took place in the vast heartland of the United States, as it was undergoing the strains of industrialization.

The roots of this movement were based on reforms to the social and economic systems that were keeping the immigrants enslaved by the current systems that were in place. The 19th century saw rapid industrial expansion in America. Between 1800 and 1900 the per capita income rose from \$200 to more then \$1200 .However, the distribution of wealth was uneven, 1% of the population owned 54% of the wealth.

It is in the background that socialism kers could flourished. Socialism was a message of hope, when the woree no hope for their lives.

During the early 20th century, working conditions were basically unregulated. The workers were at the mercy of the industrialists and how they felt they should treat their workers. The growing immigrant population assured them that they would always have a large labor pool willing to work for low wages. If a worker complained or was injured, there were many others waiting in line to take the job. In 1886 workers united in Chicago, during the famous Haymarket Riots. Workers went on strike for an 8-hour work day and better working conditions. Workers at the time were required to work twelve to fourteen hour days, six days a week, often in dangerous conditions. There was no government oversight, so employers were free to make up the rules as they went along.

The riots started after two strikers were killed by police, supposedly at the request of factory owners, causing outrage among the working class in the city.

A rally was called for at Haymarket Square to protest the killings, the rally turned violent when the police were called in to disperse the crowds.

During the Haymarket riots eleven people were killed and dozens wounded when police, at the request of factory owners, opened fire on the crowd. In retaliation, the demonstrators tossed a bomb near the police line, killing several officers.

This was the foundation for the socialist movement among the workers in the American Heartland ⁸. This was a rallying cry to those that felt powerless, and disenfranchised.

Over the next several years as workers tried to make gains in the workplace, their attempts fell mostly on deaf ears, as there were more people willing to take the jobs at the low

wages and dangerous conditions then were workers willing to sacrifice for the good of all. It is in these conditions that *The Jungle* is set.

As Sinclair reveals the poverty and hopelessness, of urban life, he sets his argument for socialism. How under a classless society, with the factories regulated, and workers compensated fairly for their toil, life for the immigrants would be better.

The fear of injury and starvation would be eliminated; workers would be united in their common goal to produce for the factory because they benefited directly from their labor as a cooperative.

The immigrants in *The Jungle* came to America in search of a better life, a life they thought capitalism would bring them. As it turned out for many of them, life was harder here, then in their home country.

There at least they had family support, they knew they values and morals they were to live by and they knew the language and culture, capitalism was not the utopia they that it would be. The stories of the immigrant who made good, were too few compared to the numbers of people came looking for that dream.

Capitalism, enslaved them, by low wages, dangerous working conditions, the fear of injury, the constant threat of job loose, the "use them up and toss them away" ⁹ attitude, and the reality of never being able to get ahead.

As Josiah Strong put it

"if public opinion is educated concerning a given reform – political, social ,industrial, or oral-and if the popular conscience is sufficiently awake to enforce an enlightened public opinion ,the reform is accomplished straight away .this then is generic reform –the education of public opinion and of the popular conscience 10^{10} .

And he added:

"To understand the reform mentality ,we must consider the vigor with which the progressives attacked not only such social questions as the powers of trusts and bosses ,but also such objects of reform as the liquor traffic and prostitution .the progressive mind ,I have said was preeminently a protestant mind ;and even thigh much of its strength was in the cities ,it inherited the moral traditions of rural evangelical Protestantism." ¹¹

The years 1902 to 1908 marked the era of the greatest reform activity, as writers and journalists strongly protested practices and principles inherited from the eighteenth century republic that were proving inadequate for the twentieth urban state .journalists started to write articles dealing with the illegitimate practices of trusts, adulated food, bad working conditions in factories, lack of hygiene, and abusive rail road practices. Trenchant articles started to appear in daily newspapers and popular magazines as *McClure's* and *Collier's*.

Journalists like Ida M Tarbal who attacked the Standard Oil became known as the Muckrakers.

"Consider who the muckrakers were ,what their institutions were ,and what it was they were doing .their criticism of the American society were ,in their utmost reaches, very searching and radical , but they were themselves moderate men who intended radical remedies".¹²

The period saw the emergence of many literary works which dealt with social problems of the society .Almost all those works provided a general view of the rotten social situation in an attempt to raise the citizen's awareness about the dangers of the capitalist system in fact the writers of those works treated themes that had long been considered as worth not been treated because they would distort the image of America which had often been pictured only through its smiling aspects.

Lincoln Steffen in his famous muckraking book *The shame of the Cities* accuses all the citizens of all the cities of the United States of their contribution to the spread of corruption. He wrote:

"The misgovernment of the American people "he declared 'is misgovernment by the American people ...Are the people honest? Are the people better than Tammany? Isn't our corrupt government, after all, representative? The people are not innocent "¹³

Anyone who has ventured much beyond *The Jungle*, the Lanny Budd novels, and perhaps *The Brass Check*, *Love's Pilgrimage*, or *Boston* can vouch that extensive reading of Upton Sinclair is laborious. Mastering his *oeuvre*—some ninety books, not counting the journalism—would require superhuman perseverance.

But Sinclair remains perennially popular in spite of the fact that (or

perhaps because) his historical significance trumps his literary craftsmanship.

We can thus be grateful that the centennial of the publication of *The Jungle* brings us two new biographies. While both grapple with what motivated Sinclair to keep on trying to change the world, Anthony Arthur's literary biography *Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair* provides more of a sense of the man and the artist, while historian Kevin Mattson concentrates on Sinclair's historical significance in *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century*.

Each title captures how the biographer attempts to redefine Upton Sinclair, whose last biographer was Leon Harris in 1975. Arthur maintains that a distinctive mix of radicalism and perennial innocence captures the best as well as the worst of his subject:

"Sinclair's comparative innocence concerning human psychology accounts for his limitations both as a literary artist and as a . . . husband. Although he would spend most of his career exposing what he thought was wrong with American society, he was constantly being unpleasantly surprised, like Candide, by the human potential for treachery. Yet Sinclair's naïveté afforded him a degree of protection . . . allowing him to hope, against all evidence to the contrary13

That passage foregrounds Arthur's strengths: interest in connecting the public author with the private man, mastery of a broad sweep of literature that proves as useful in contextualizing Sinclair's personality as his writings, and ability to deal with contradictions.

Mattson, situating the muckraker in what Henry Luce called "the American century," proposes a less divided and less sanguine soul: "Sinclair lived in the shadow of the towering majesty of the American century, and he lived to publicize what he found in its darker corners," those corners representing "the other American century" of Mattson's title. For him, Sinclair was above all else a public intellectual—indeed a "hero" from a bygone era "when intellectuals still mattered." Sinclair would delight in this assessment, which could provide a more ambitious framework than Arthur's, although Mattson does little with the idea beyond the first chapter.¹⁴ *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century* provides more of a listing of events and summaries of books than a consistent viewpoint on them. Indeed, the last chapter suggests a shift into a new framework, "a story of increasing political maturity, moving from idealism toward realism."

The meat industry as depicted in *The Jungle* sold meat products that were rotten and commonly contaminated with filth; readers demanded protection from these unscrupulous practices. In the novel, government inspectors monitor the Packingtown plants, but are easily distracted and do nothing to impede the inclusion of rancid, diseased, or inedible meats in production.

Chicagoans believed the presence of inspectors meant the meat supply was safe, and did not understand that meats declared unfit for export were not destroyed but simply sold within Illinois. ¹⁴Sinclair suggested that the inspectors were often involved in graft. Jurgis, the novel's protagonist, learns that the meatpackers pay inspectors at least two thousand dollars. The book uses vivid descriptions and makes the atmosphere seem really quite nauseating.

The people who read *The Jungle* were so appalled by the disgusting filth, and the actual ingredients of the processed meat. The book provided the final drive for way for the U.S. Pure Food and Drug Act and truth in labeling all passed by President Theodore Roosevelt.

Conclusion

The reader of both *uncle Thomas Cabin* and the *Jungle* would certainly reveal that both Harriet Beecher Stowe and Upton Sinclair tended to expose very complicated American social problems and throughout the novels they tried to argue for their radical ideas *.Uncle Thomas Cabin* exposed abolitionism as a solution to the plight of the American slaves while *The jungle* suggests socialism as a cure for the social illnesses of the immigrants of America. In the light of the two novels, we can say that the American novel provided a space to the radical ideology of its writer and therefore contributed to the promotion of social change in the American society.

Endnotes

- In "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," Montrose defends New Historicism as a practice that recognizes the "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history"(23). He explains that "[b]y the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question—traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement. Secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual me-diations when they are construed as the 'documents' upon which historians ground their own text, called 'histories'" (20).
- ²- During the 1830s, Stowe became an abolitionist. Slavery had been I prohibited north of the Ohio River since the passage of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Cincinnati was immediately north of the state of Kentucky where slavery was legal. Thousands of runaway slaves passed through Cincinnati as they traveled to freedom along the Underground Railroad. Stowe became friends with several Ohio abolitionists. Among them was John Rankin, whose home in Ripley, Ohio served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. The stories that she heard from runaway slaves and

¹- Paul Hamilton, in the very beginning of *Historicism* (1996), points out that "[f]rom ancient times, philosophers have been eager to separate history from fiction. Like many others, this disciplinary boundary proved fragile from the start" (7).

Underground Railroad conductors while she lived in Cincinnati formed thebasis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

- ³- Stowe was charged with exaggerating the evils of slavery, but her stay in Cincinnati, Ohio, where her father (the formidable Lyman Beecher, head of the Lane Theological Seminary) gave her a close look at the miseries of the slave communities across the Ohio River. People in her circle of friends were continually harboring slaves who escaped across the river from Kentucky on the way, they hoped, to Canada.
- 4-Baym, Nina. Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870. New York: Cornell UP, 1978⁴

⁵-.ibid

- ⁶- Brown, Gillian. "Politics in Uncle Tom's Cabin." American Quarterly 36 (Fall 1984): 503-523.
- ⁷- Dickstein, Morris . "On Sinclair" The Chronicle Review May 2002, Volume 48, Issue 32, Page B12 .
- ⁸- Conlin, Joseph Robert. (1969) Big Bill Haywood and the Radical Union Movement. Syracuse, N.Y. Syracuse University Press 31 March 2006.
- ⁹- Conlin Op.cit.
- ¹⁰- Ibid.
- ¹¹- Ibid.
- ¹²- Ibid.
- ¹³- Ibid.
- ¹³- Ibid., *The Jungle*, 76-77.
- ¹⁴- Ibid.
- ¹⁵- Ibid.