PART TWO

SETTLING

BIOGRAPHIC NARRATIVES AS TEXTS-IN-CONTEXT

[Thesaurus]
Settling: Establish or become Established, Resident in a place, occupation, way of life
Make or Cause Somebody or Something to Become:
  Clear, calm, stable, or comfortable in a particular position
Put in Order: Or into a desired arrangement
Stop Floating: Move downward, and spread over something

In Part Two, the biographic narratives of two working women, Hajja, a market woman, and Umm Khalthoum, a female teacher, take centre stage. In the next chapter entitled Intermezzo: Crossing the Road I will introduce both narrators by relating how we met each other, and how we chose each other to engage in a project focused on understanding our lives. My use here of the notion of choice does not suggest, however, that we were equal in opting for participating, as the project was initiated by me as a researcher and is analysed and represented here by me as an author. It does suggest that, notwithstanding this power difference, Hajja and Umm Khalthoum did claim agency when narrating about their lives, not only in relation to the dominant discourse, but also within my project, by making it—partly—a project of their own.

Sa’adiya is included in this process since she acted as interpreter and sometime interlocutor during my second stay in Kebkabiya, when Yasmin had other duties to attend to. It was during this second period that Sa’adiya and I recorded the biographic narratives of and with Hajja and Umm Khalthoum. Before turning to their narratives, I want to reflect on some of the merits and problems of the biographic narrative as a method of research, means of analysis and mode of representation.

Although I had intended to ‘make use’ of the biographic narrative as a method, its centrality as the main method in my research was unintended and unforeseen: it was the result of a sudden change in local political circumstances. The biographic narrative offered one of the few spaces in which I could explore the views of working women
on the events of that time and on their positioning in the new Islamist
government’s moral discourse. For all of us involved in the project the
past proved to be a relatively safe way to reflect on the present.

At that time, in the early 1990s, the biographic narrative was receiv-
ing renewed attention, especially by feminist anthropologists. From its
onset feminist anthropology had taken the relation between ‘self’ and
the ‘other’ into account, often based on the categorization as women
being cast as the ‘other’ in many instances in their own societies. Femi-
nist anthropologists thereby questioned the dichotomy between the per-
sonal and the academic, the personal and the political, the personal
and the theoretical. The message that the anthropologist not only
reflects on power-relations, but is engaged in these as well, both in the
locations where she performs ‘research’ as well as back home, was not
lost on me. In my research it was not only my relationship with women
that became a matter of research but their representation as well.

The problematising of the writing of ethnographies was echoed in
the post-modern critiques of ethnographic writing, which earned this
literary turn in anthropology the title ‘the ethnography-as-texts’ school
which became known by the simultaneous publication of two works:
Writing culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography (1986) edited by James
Clifford and George Marcus, and Anthropology as cultural critique. An exper-
imental moment in the human sciences, by George Marcus and Michael
Fischer (1986). This (white) male dominated ‘school’ of anthropology
championed experimental writing of the power-laden ethnographic
‘encounters’ as their prerogative. This claim has been severely criticized
by feminist anthropologists for ‘glossing over the contributions made by
feminist anthropologists on issues of representation, reflexivity, the poli-
tics of dominant positions and constructed notions of otherness, as well
as ignoring women’s experimental writing’. Apart from being criticized

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1 One of the oldest anthropological biographic narratives that was used as method
of research, analysis and representation is Paul Radin’s ‘Autobiography of a Winnebago
Indian (1963)’ narrated by Sam Blowsnake which Radin translated and annotated.


3 This was also due to the happy circumstances that I had been able to take classes
from Joke Schrijvers, one of the first feminist anthropologists who discussed power
relations and engaged in self-reflexive writing. See for example Schrijvers (1985, 1991,

4 Callaway (1992: 44). Renowned examples are Laura Bohannan’s Return to laught-
ter (1954) Never in anger (1970) by Jean Briggs, of which the first was written under a
pseudonym and is sometimes derogatory referred to as ‘confession literature’, while