CHAPTER 8

BOUNDARIES CON/TEXT-ANALYSED:
GENDER IDENTITIES AND RESISTANCE

On the evening before my departure from Kebkabiya in January 1996, Nura had organised a coffee-party at our compound as a farewell. As the evening wore on, the few men who had come to bid their farewell took their leave. Most women stayed until deep into the night. Umm Khalthoum and Sa’adiya were among the last who left. As I needed to tend to the remaining guests, Hajja told me she would accompany Sa’adiya and Umm Khalthoum some of the way, as is the custom. As I saw their silhouettes disappear in the moonless night, I could still hear some of their conversation. Umm Khalthoum asked Hajja if she could spare her some of her milk the following day. I could not hear the answer but I am sure Hajja promised to do so. Then I heard Hajja ask Sa’adiya if she might send some goods to her sister in Al-Fasher with Jacub’s lorry. Sa’adiya replied that that would be fine, if Hajja allowed Sa’adiya to store some of the sacks of oranges at her compound which Sa’adiya intended to buy from the people coming from Jebel Marra on Saturday. Jacub, her husband could pick up all the goods on the next market day. I knew that Umm Khalthoum promised both Hajja and Sa’adiya to make them some dilka, the local scrub made of sorghum flour and local spices and oils, for which she is renowned.

At first, I considered these arrangements between Hajja, Umm Khalthoum and Sa’adiya as extraordinary. When I first arrived these women, who belonged to different classes, did not have the same relationship as they had when I left. I presumed that I had been a kind of intermediary to facilitate these contacts and I felt a little proud in having been instrumental in stretching the boundaries of the dominant discourse of the government elite. This discourse constructed the differences between these women in order for them to be seen as members of their proper classes.

Now, after having tried to understand the narratives of these women in their context, by reading and writing their texts against the grain, I am no longer so sure about my ‘accomplishment’. After all, the contacts between the three women were not mine to set up, but in the end
depended on the decisions and initiatives of the women themselves. I am more concerned with the implications of me considering the relation between Umm Khalthoum, Sa’adiya and Hajja as an anomaly. If I would go along with that view, I would conceptualise as fixed and stable the boundaries between educated elite women and market women. This would mean that I would go along with a difference between both classes as constructed by the government elite and legitimised by the dominant discourse. Yet, the analyses of the biographic narratives of Hajja, Umm Khalthoum and of the other market women and female teachers showed that constructions of subject-positions are closely related to the ‘settings’ in which they carry meaning, and that they are thus flexible and dynamic. In my analyses I have tried to move away from the rigid and circumscribed way the dominant moral discourse of the newly established Islamist Sudanese government allotted subject-positions to women, especially working women (Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2). By reading their biographic narratives against the grain, I wanted to discover the ways in which working women from different class backgrounds reflected on the discourse and further how they manoeuvred to position themselves in relation to that same discourse. The analyses of the narratives of Hajja and Umm Khalthoum (Chapters 3, 4, 5) and to some extent those of the other market women and female teachers (Chapter 6, 7) showed that all of the women were involved in a continuous process of construction and re-construction of their identities while reflecting on and positioning themselves within the dominant discourse. The subject positions offered by the Islamist dominant discourse were for all of these women the point of reference or of departure in these dynamic processes of self-reflections and representation.

In my analyses of these self-re/presentations, I have consistently referred to these constructions of self as ‘subject-positions’. In my view, this term was most appropriate in these particular cases as it referred to the ways in which dominant and sub-dominant discourses offered possible positions for subjects to take on. Different discourses offer different subject positions and women as subjects may choose to take up these positions, or not. This does not mean that women are completely free in acting out certain subject positions rather than others. Dominant discourses allot subjects certain restricted, often stereotypical identities. However, the notion of subject position provides the possibility to refer to an active involvement of individuals who negotiate their positioning within those discourses. My usage of ‘subject positions’ therefore pre-