Women's Studies International Forum 43 (2014) 38–49

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

'Everything I told you was true': The biographic narrative as a method of critical feminist knowledge production

Karin Willemse

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, P.O. BOX 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 17 March 2014

SYNOPSIS

In this article the author explores the biographic narrative as a process of intersubjective knowledge production in the sense that this process is embodied, situated and partial. The analysis of this process focuses on the biographic narrative of Hajja, a market woman in Darfur, Sudan. Her assertion that what she told to the researcher was 'true' is a starting point for understanding the relevance of this 'truth' for the way Hajja negotiated the Islamist moral discourse on gender at the time of narrating. The context of narration proves of main importance in order to understand the identities Hajja prioritized and silenced as well as the shifts in her narratives of self at different moments in time. To consider biographic narratives as a form of feminist knowledge production, the author suggests to understand biographies as 'texts-in-contexts' whereby feminist scholars also write about the process of understanding, since they are part of the context as well. Reflexivity is thereby a tool for analysis whereby the representation of this process of understanding is as important as the product of this process of knowledge production.

Introduction

> "Shufti, ya ukhti (you see, my sister) everything I told you was true."

Hajja[1] exclaimed this almost in exasperation during a short return visit I paid to her in December 1995. I had come to her home town Kebkabiya, in Darfur, West-Sudan for many reasons: the most important was my wish to get Hajja's reflections and perhaps also her authorization for the way I had represented, contextualized and analyzed her biographic narrative. At the time, I considered this 'feed-back' part of my feminist perspective on 'responsible representation', since it would mean that Hajja had a say in the way I portrayed her.[2] As it turned out, Hajja neither gave her consent nor did she correct my portrayal of her life. As I will argue here, it was Hajja's refusal to reconsider the narrative I had turned into a text that forced me to admit the (im-)possibility of deciding about the 'correct' version of a biographic narrative. It made me realize that I needed to understand her narrative as a 'text-in-context': of a performance at a certain moment in time and in a particular space that together constituted the 'context of narration'.

At the time of meeting Hajja some four years earlier in 1991, she sold onions at the market of Kebkabiya, a small provincial town in North-Darfur. My research was about working women in Kebkabiya, notably market women and female teachers, and took place in two periods of about seven months, from October to May between 1990 and 1992. During the second period of my research in Kebkabiya, Hajja invited me to stay at her compound, which she shared with her two daughters and three grandchildren. In this period, I taped about 22 narratives of working women in several sessions and Hajja's narrative was one of them. In this article, I will look closely at Hajja's biography, not only as a method of research but as a means to understand her self-representations as multiple, fluid and changing, according to the context of narration.

To my question as to what she thought about my representation of her narrative during my return visit in 1995,

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.02.005
0277-5395/

Hajja's answer was short: she had told me the 'true' story of her life. Next, she started re-telling her narrative of the same event in almost exactly the same words as she had used during our first meeting. Hajja's assertion that she told me the true story of her life is central in my exploration of the extent to which the biographic narrative can provide a critical feminist understanding of the position and positioning of Hajja, who 'just' narrated about her life. A biographic narrative, as with any mode of knowledge production, is intersubjective and, in this case, a result of the interaction between Hajja and me. The insight gained in this process is therefore always embodied, situated and partial. In order to understand this knowledge well, the context of narration is of main importance. Before turning to Hajja's words, I will discuss some academic perspectives on the biographic narrative and the notions of agency, identity and memory.

The biographic narrative as a feminist method of research

Feminist scholars have championed biography because it puts the narrating woman centre stage as it allows the narrator to discuss those issues of life that matter most to her without being directed by questions of the researcher. The work '*Nisa. The Words and Life of a !Kung Woman*' (1981) by Marjorie Shostak constituted for me and a generation of feminist anthropologists a landmark as it seemed to represent as closely as possible the experiences and perspectives 'in the words' of Nisa, a !Kung woman living in the Kalahari desert in southern Africa. In the following decade, the biographic narrative received renewed attention, especially among feminist anthropologists.[3] Works were published that problematicised, discussed and experimented with different ways of representing 'women's words', while all tried to escape from generalizations that would cast women as a homogeneous category.

In 1993, *Translated woman. Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* by Ruth Behar and *Writing Women's Worlds. Bedouin Stories* by Lila Abu-Lughod appeared almost at the same time and both received ample attention from feminist scholars. In both works, the emphasis was on women who narrated about the particularities and experiences of their everyday lives. Behar focused on the biographic narrative of one woman, Esperanza, to understand both the life of this extraordinary woman and gender relations in Mexican society, thereby using Esperanza's biography as the format of her book. Lila Abu-Lughod denounced the relevance of the biography as a method and a mode of representation as its format would force local ways of narrating into a western straightjacket that might alter the original narrative beyond recognition. Abu-Lughod also objected to this genre because it was supposed to focus on the individual as isolated, separated, and thus alien from the daily life in which the narrative carries meaning (Abu-Lughod, 1993, pp. 36–49). Other feminists similarly problematicised the biographic narrative as a method, as in the west it reflected a male prerogative, a 'Great Man tradition'. It spoke of individual linear progress and power, of a hero who struggles and survives, which would not relate to the ways in which women experience the world (Okely, 1992, pp.4–5).

The use of biographic narratives in research in non-western contexts is not only problematicised by feminist scholars. For example, the Comaroffs disqualify biographies as a means of understanding non-western notions of selfhood. They consider the 'biographical illusion' to be tied to the Cartesian "I", the image of a self-conscious being, and the rise of bourgeois personhood in the eighteenth century. As such it constituted a western modernist fantasy "about society and selfhood according to which everyone is potentially in control of his or her destiny in a world made by the actions of autonomous 'agents'" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992, pp. 25–27, 238; see also Geschiere, 2001, pp. 31–39).

In short, from within feminist studies and without the method has been criticised for being too western, individualistic, modernist and viricentric and therefore unfit to either understand self-representations by women in non-western societies or to write alternative histories 'from below'. Though I take these critiques and cautions seriously, I feel that precluding non-western women from biographic research constructs them a priori as essentially different from western women in the way that they can relate about their lives. I think that a proper understanding of the ways in which women position themselves via their narratives is a prerequisite for deciding whether women do or do not experience themselves as individuals, just as their belonging to a given collectivity should not be taken for granted. At the same time, terms like 'life-history' and 'autobiography' may indeed raise expectations about the narrative having the format of a story 'from the cradle to the grave' like in western contexts. I therefore suggest that the notion be used of 'biographic narrative' that refers more loosely to narratives reflecting on only parts of a woman's life, both in the past and in the present.

However, even this wider notion of the biographic narrative does not give easy or self-evident access to the multiple ways in which women construct identities and position themselves, as Mohanty warns:

> "Thus, the existence of Third World women's narratives in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. It is *the way* in which they are read, understood, and located institutionally that is of paramount importance. After all, the point is not just "to record" e person's history or struggle, or consciousness, but *how* they are recorded: *the way* we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant."
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> [Mohanty, 1991, 34, emphasis K.W.]

In fact, Mohanty points out that women, whatever their backgrounds, may 'decenter hegemonic histories' by positioning themselves in alternative ways in relation to dominant, hegemonic discourses that possibly confine their room for manoeuvring and the scope for claiming subjectivity. At the same time, the negotiation of such dominant discourses is not always openly or clearly articulated and hence not easily detected. It is therefore not the biographic narrative in itself that is problematic, but how to listen, read and represent these narratives well. However, the intention to be critical in itself does not ensure a critical feminist stance: for that purpose I turned to the notion of 'against the grain'.

The term 'against the grain' was used by feminist scholars of a critical, post-colonial and subaltern signature, in particular by 'feminists of colour' to come to terms with the dominant positioning within the establishment of the academic world (Abu-Lughod, 1993, pp. 1–52; Harrison, 1993, pp. 307–327; hooks, 1981; Meijer, 1996; Mohanty, 1991, pp. 1–48; Moore,