

Narrating the Infrastructure of Stigmatized Characters

Mohamad Abi Samra

1

In front of me now on my writing desk are more than 50 tapes on which I recorded people's life histories, including testimonies of experiences and incidents from their past. Recording the subjects' own voices and their oral language required very long hours of sitting, interviewing and questioning; this happened after meeting them for the first time and developing varying relationships with them as well. Until now, I have neither had the time to listen to these oral histories nor to transcribe them in colloquial language before meticulously rewriting them in the classic Arabic. For more than 30 years of my writing, journalistic and research career, I have relied a great deal of the time on oral recordings of histories, biographies, experiences and statements from people coming from different and various walks of life.

However, in my second novel *The Previous Man* (1995), whose biography of a character was based on 20 recorded hours of interviewing one person and 200 pages transcribed using the person's own colloquial language, I only made use of its basic mood and some of the revelations and incidents featured in it. The reason was that when I started transforming his taped biography into a novel, I had already ceased writing it in the form of a sociological testimony and began treating it as fiction or as a literary work.

2

In nonfiction, the exact copying of recorded oral stories into classic Arabic is considered creative artistic work, which begins by uncovering the threads and focal points of the story, weaving them together and connecting them in order to be structured in a vast narrative dramatic space. This work should remain true to the oral story, and equally true in bringing it out of its time by keeping at a distance from it and observing it from outside. This process resembles turning a written scenario into a movie.

3

In *The Previous Man*, I used the biography of the man whose life I recorded in detail, in a free and personal style, without being faithful to it in any respect. Not one sentence in my novel was uttered by him. But I imagine that the character in the novel is closer to him than he himself, while a total stranger at the same time; as if it exposed him to what he would have never known or chosen. Personally, I, the author of this fictional character, was exactly like the man whose biography I had taped: I was getting to know myself in a way I had never done before and to keep at a distance from [it] myself as if I never knew [it], but was only starting to get to know it while writing. My situation here is just like that of the reader reading a novel. This means that the fate of the character in the story is planned in every phrase by keeping it mysterious and unknown until that moment.

1

The first sentence I wrote in *The Previous Man* almost reveals the dramatic focus of the whole story: "During my last visit to Lebanon I, who have been living in France for the past 17 years, discovered how strongly I still resemble my childhood and teenage friends who lived in the Salim Massaad neighborhood where I and my siblings, and our father before us, were born in one of its cottages. I resemble them in looks, attire and tone of voice. While in Beirut, I looked back at parts of my domestic life in Lyon and imagined that my wife Monique and my three French children were also born in the same cottage."

However, the autobiographer never inspired that phrase, which needed the entire novel to elucidate it, confirm it and act on it; as if the passing of time could not change anything substantive or worth mentioning in that man's life and destiny, beginning from his early childhood. Thus, I can safely say that *The Previous Man* contradicts his own story. In other words, the novel recounts that which never changes in a person's life, let's call it fate, that which might be predestined even though it appears unknown and mysterious. It is as if a single life is not enough to alter anything in this person's life and destiny.

"The previous man" is a person born to an "unfeminine" mother; his birth is an act of fate similar to a scar. That is why he lives his entire life trying, as it were, to get himself born from another mother, one who exudes femininity. The kind of femininity this man is chasing is the type that has made the figure of a modern woman similar to women portrayed in commercials. He is under the illusion that the delicacy of this femininity alone is enough to erase his scar; the disgrace of his birth from a woman whose femininity was absent in the moment of giving birth.

I use recorded memoirs and biographies to write about what time has changed in people, to write the social and cultural time that is changing within one life or within one generation, or between generations. But in a novel I write about what people can never change or replace in their lives, their bodies and their souls throughout their short lives, in spite of their ability to move from one cultural and social world to another, or from one background or one language to another.

Am I saying that I write about what does not change in people? How can a story be a story if it only recounts constancy and stability? I do not know.

In all his historiographical texts, the late great French historian Fernand Braudel only wrote about the quasi-stable structures of human civilizations. He named that kind of historical writing the *longue durée*, long-span history writing, which is to say, recording the history of the near-fixed substructure of civilizations.

Can a novel recount what could be called the "near- fixed infrastructure of human personalities"?

I suppose that [my novels] *Pauline and Her Visions*, *The Previous Man* and *The Dwellers of Pictures* are simply attempts at writing about the destinies of people who sense that neither the passing of time

nor the altering of their lifestyles can ever change their fate. It might also be a story of how the nucleus of a culture, whether inherited or transmitted, can be created within the human personality. It might also be a story of how a person recognizes his personal constitution that controls his destiny.

Mohamad Abi Samra (born 1953) is a novelist and journalist and the director of the reportage page in *Annahar*, a Lebanese daily. His five books include three novels and a book of travel essays.