

# **‘Because I am a Girl’: Identity and Positioning in Afghani Women Narratives**

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## **Introduction**

Over an August night in 2021, Taliban unexpectedly took over power in Afghanistan, almost twenty years after the U.S. waged war on extremism on the Afghani soil to eradicate the Taliban terrorist regime. This sad turn of events brought back all the memories of oppression, violence, poverty, and terrorism to the Afghani people who struggled over the turn of the century to wipe out the misery imposed on them by the Taliban regime. This power takeover came as a devastating shock to Afghani women in particular, who hardly overcame their traumatic experiences with this regime which viewed women as second-class citizens in all walks of life.

The present study examines sixteen narratives written by Afghani women over the period 2009 to 2015 as part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence Campaign. The Afghani Women Writing Project (AWWP) joined this campaign by compiling a number of narratives, by Afghani women who share their stories of suffering, oppression and gender-based violence (GBV) whether under the Taliban regime or otherwise. They tell stories of discrimination in education, living, rape, and other aspects of oppression.

The study particularly focuses on how the narrators project and construct their identities via narrating. Ever since the narrative turn, it has become established that narration could be seen as an identity-construction tool. In fact, Bamberg and Georgakopoulou consider “stories [as] privileged forms/structures/ systems for making sense of self by bringing the coordinates of time, space and personhood into a unitary frame [...] for further analytical scrutiny in the form of ‘identity analysis’ (2008, 378). Bamberg also reiterates this, considering how “narrating enables speakers/writers to disassociate the speaking/writing self, and thereby take a reflective position vis-à-vis the self as character in past or fictitious time-space, make those past (or imagined) events relevant for the act of telling” (2011, 7). Similarly, Ayometzi regards personal stories as “a means through which tellers develop differentiated personal identities and a form through which they are led into the construction of a collective identity” (2007, 45).

The present study scrutinizes the narratives in light of Bucholtz and Hall Identity framework. Setting off from the premise that “identity is the social positioning of self and others” (2005, 586), Bucholtz and Hall set five main principles that inform

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identity construction: *emergence principle, positionality principle, indexicality principle, relationality principle, and partialness principle*. It is the indexicality principle, which focuses on how linguistic choices index identity, that would inform the micro-analysis of the narratives, which in turn projects the narrator's and others' identity positioning.

The aforementioned analysis is followed by reading the results in light of Bamberg's (1997, 2004) model of positioning. Bamberg's model is functionality-oriented; it is more concerned with how the micro-linguistic structure of the narratives is in the service of "discursive purposes and the formations of local identities" (1997, 336). Bamberg sees that this model of positioning examines the linguistic mechanism of identity construction, whether of the narrator or other characters, "emerging in time and space as protagonists and antagonists," that is to say, the mechanism by which "they *index* their sense of self" (2012, 249).

When this study was first attempted, Taliban was not in power yet. Hence, it was meant as a tribute to all oppressed women over the past two decades. It never occurred to the researcher that it could also be a tribute to oppressed women in future decades as well.

### **1. The Story of Afghanistan**

A landlocked country, located at the crossroad between South and Central Asia, Afghanistan is an Islamic, multi-ethnic mountainous country, with Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks forming the myriad population. Its world-wide affiliation with terrorism and extremism dates back to 1996 when Taliban, later recognized as a terrorist group, took over power, occupying Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. This came in the aftermath of the Afghan War between the Soviet Union (and Soviet Union supported government) and the tribal Mujahedeen. This war, which lasted from 1979 to 1992, left millions of Afghans fleeing to Pakistan and Iran, as well as hundreds of thousands of deaths and casualties on both sides. Throughout these decades of conflict, dissect, and war, life conditions were inhumane. Things did not get any better when the United States, in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, waged Afghanistan War, or *war on terror*. The Washington Post said the Defense Ministry announced that 800, 000 American soldiers served in Afghanistan since the beginning of the war in 2001. Twenty years later, namely in August 2021, Taliban troops managed to take over power in Afghanistan, backtracking to one of the darkest eras of rule in Afghanistan.

During all these phases of unrest, bloody conflicts, and war on terrorism, women were always the biggest victim. Whether during the Taliban regime, or otherwise, a lot of Afghani women were subjected to all forms of gender-based violence, either attributed to patriarchal cultural norms and traditions sweeping the society and favoring males over females, or due to deviant, uninformed interpretations of Islamic rules by some Mullahs and religious leaders of Mujahedeen or Taliban. These used to oppress women, deprive them of all forms of equality whether in education, work, life choices, or even domestic security. Afghani women suffered from all forms of gender-based violence. According to the *Time*, Afghanistan "is still ranked the worst

place in the world to be a woman.... Eighty-seven percent of Afghan women are illiterate, while seventy to eight percent face forced marriage.... Government statistics from 2014 show that eighty percent of all suicides are committed by women [due to] an endless cycle of domestic violence and poverty” (Bohn 2018). The present study thus focuses on the narratives of violated Afghani women.

## **2. Theoretical Preliminaries:**

### *2.1. The Concept of Identity*

The term "identity" first gained salience through the work of the psychologist Erikson (1968). Erikson associates identity as a definition of personhood with sameness or continuity of the self across time and space. Whereas it has always been viewed as a static feature of the human being, predetermined by a multitude of factors such as history, culture, age, gender, language, etc., nowadays more studies focus on identity construction, an interactive process that humans undergo. In fact, the term identity is sometimes replaced with 'identification' to highlight the subjective, voluntary aspect of the concept. Zimmerman (1998) was among the first scholars to note that there are three types of identities: the discursive, the situated, and the transportable. Transportable identity is the one imposed by macro-level demographic categories such as gender, ethnicity, or origin. Situated identities are those that are imposed by temporary situations or social activities such as profession or education. Finally, the discursive identity, the most fluid and temporary of the three types, is that one that emerges during interaction. It is this type of identity that falls in the scope of the present study: the discursively-constructed, identity-in-interaction. This line of thought has been taken by Norris, who points out that individual identity is constantly "interactively constructed" (2007, 658) in interaction. The work of Bucholtz and Hall (2005) on identity in interaction follows the same path of identifying identities, as relationally constructed within discourses. Similarly, De Fina and Georgakopoulou define identity as "a property of the individual or as something that emerges through social interaction" (2012, 155), rather than a fixed, predetermined label.

### *2.2. Identity and Narration.*

One of the decisive differences between the study of narratives before and after the narrative turn is the orientation. Inspired by the pioneering work of Labov and Waletzky (1967) on oral narratives of personal experience, many linguists have taken keen interest in spontaneous narratives of people from different backgrounds such as females, adolescents, children, psychologically-disturbed, among others. Following Labov's seminal work, most studies adopted the same structurally-oriented analysis, paying due attention to the textual features of the narrative, as a means by which narrators construe their experience.

With the narrative turn, interest has been shifted to a more functional orientation; with the role storytelling and narratives play in positioning and identity construction. The works of Ochs and Capps (2002), Bamberg (1997, 2004), Langellier and

Peterson (2004), De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2006), Georgakopoulou (2006), Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), Riessman (2008), and Norrick (2009) have set milestones of the salience of narratives in self and other representation and positioning (Sarhan, 2018). Significantly enough, this could also be considered as a turn to shedding light on ‘small stories’, not only the big ones, as means for exploring the self, and “how people as agentive actors position themselves—and in doing so become positioned” in those identity-in-interaction narratives. According to McAdams’ (2001) narrative identity theory, people construct some form of identity by integrating their life experiences into an “internalized and evolving narratives of the self”. Bamberg sums the whole argument of the interrelatedness of identity and narration:

When considering the emergence of identity, the narrating subject must be regarded: (a) as neither locked in stability nor drifting through constant change, but rather as something that is multiple, contradictory, and disturbed over time and place [...]; (b) in terms of membership vis-à-vis others that help trace the narrator’s identity within the context of social relationships, groups, and institutions; and (c) as the active and agentive locus of control [...]. Along these lines, identity is not confined by just one societal discourse but open to change. Identity is able to transform itself and adapt to challenges of growing culture multiplicities. (2012, 245)

### 2.3. *Bucholtz and Hall (2005) Identity Framework*

The concept of identity has gained much attention over the past two decades and has been studied via a myriad of disciplines, including social psychology, anthropology, ethnography, as well as linguistics. Within linguistic studies, a number of theories have been set to examine the interdependent relation between the linguistic choices and identity construction. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) define identity as “a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts interaction rather than as a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories” (585-586). According to their first principle, the *emergence principle*, identity is not a fixed entity; rather it is a *discursive practice that emerges in interaction*. This is in line with the mainstream thought, which sees identity as a ‘fluid’ concept, discursively constructed by the person, and the surrounding sociocultural context as well as the micro-context of the situation.

As per the *positionality principle*, identity is a collection of demographic categories, cultural positions, as well as “temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles” (592). This is particularly where the role of interaction, and narrativity stands out in relation to identity. In interaction, categorization based on gender, ethnicity, age, or otherwise sets the ground for particular identification. This is usually coupled with local cultural norms which confine identities even more.

Yet, via positionality principle, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) open an 'emergency door' for temporary negotiation of these imposed identities, and hence a room for adopting, rejecting or even reversing these identities. In this case, interactants can position themselves, as well as others, as per the local context, rather than the macro-context.

This is further enhanced, as per their framework, by the linguistic choices that index the interactants' self-chosen positions and identities. According to the *indexicality principle*, the focus is on the mechanism of constructing identity via language resources and "the way in which linguistic forms are used to construct identity positions" (594). These resources include social category labels, stance markers, style features as well as "as a repertoire of linguistic forms associated with personas or identities" (597). What makes this principle particularly relevant to the present study is Bucholtz and Hall's emphasis on the integral relation between identity formation and cultural beliefs, values, and ideologies "about the sorts of speakers who (can or should) produce particular sorts of language" (594). Throughout the examined narrative, cultural and societal assumptions, linguistically encoded in presuppositions, dominate the narrative discourse.

The remaining two principles, *the relationality*, and *partialness*, complement the framework's emphasis on how identity positions are relative constructs, that are set against others' identity positions in terms of similarity or difference, adequation and distinction as well as other features. Whereas partialness emphasizes how identity is a partialness-based whole, "an outcome of interactional negotiation and contestation" (606).

#### *2.4. Positioning in Narratives*

Positioning, as a concept, has its roots in multiple interdisciplinary fields. Within social sciences, it originally belongs to the work of Hollway (1984) on subjectivity in heterosexual discourse and how interlocutors can 'take up a position' in relation to other people. According to Hollway, discourses determine available positions.

However, it is the work of Davies and Harré (1990) that marks the onset of envisaging positioning in relation to the construction of identities in narratives or interactional practices. They consider positioning as "the basic mechanism by which a self and identities are acquired in social interaction in terms of practical, emotional, and epistemic commitment to identity-categories and associated discursive practices" (42). Benwell and Stokoe (2006, 43) note that positioning refers to the method by which speakers adopt, resist, impose, and offer subject positions during an interaction. Following the publication of work by Davies and Harré (1990), further work in developing and refining Positioning Theory has been carried out predominantly by Harré & Moghaddam (2003), Harré and van Langenhove (1991, 1999), Moghaddam (1999), Moghaddam, Harré, and Lee (2008), van Langenhove and Harré (1994, 1999), van Langenhove (2016) and numerous other works.

**2.4.1. Bamberg's Positioning Model (1997).** Bamberg's work on the interdependent relation between narratives and positioning has led to various attempts to analyze different forms of storytelling until this model of positioning was

introduced in 1997 and later elaborated in 2004. Bamberg sees that identity construction in narratives is two-fold: involving the “referential world with characters in time and space as well as the function of interactive engagement” (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008, 380). In this light, Bamberg identifies positioning in interaction as a process involving three interdependent levels:

1. “how are the characters positioned in relation to one another in the reported events?” (1997, 336-337). This level emphasizes how the characters are constructed within the story world, for example, “protagonists and antagonists, or as perpetrators and victims” (337). Bamberg notes that this level is dependent on linguistic resources which “mark” characters within the story.
2. “how does the speaker position himself/ herself to the audience?” (1997, 337). This level widens the scope of narration to include the narrators vis-à-vis the audience and how they position themselves in the real world plane.
3. “how do narrators position themselves to themselves?” (1997, 337). Within this level, narrators are no longer concerned with their outward identity, whether the story world one or even the real world identity, but are even more concerned with their inward identity to answer the question ‘Who am I?’ Once more, the linguistic choices either support or refute the identity positioning “claims that the narrator holds to be true and relevant” (377).

The results of the micro-linguistic analysis along the lines of Bucholtz and Hall (2005) framework, would be read in the light of Bamberg’s model. These three levels are realized via the linguistic choices, or the *indexical processes* examined. This is meant to elucidate how Afghani women writers position themselves towards the above-mentioned participants.

### 3. Methodology

The data under investigation are approached both qualitatively and quantitatively. A total of sixteen narratives are analyzed on two levels. First, the narratives are scrutinized in detail, using the toolkit of Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) Identity framework. This involves investigating how different linguistic resources index identity. These linguistic resources include the use of pronouns, mood and modality, presupposition, implicatures as well as metaphor. They also include the social categories and labels. Quantitative findings that reflect lexical, syntactic, as well as pragmatic patterns are reviewed. This level of analysis is meant to link the resulting linguistic patterns to identity positions as instantiated via language. The second level of analysis involves looking at the results in the light of Bamberg’s (1997) model of positioning to show how these women use language to position themselves as story characters, position themselves as narrators vis-à-vis the audience, and finally how they position themselves vis-à-vis themselves.

### 4. Analysis: Identity Construction

This section is dedicated to analyzing the selected narratives qualitatively and quantitatively by identifying the mechanism of identity construction via the use of different linguistic forms, or what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) call indexical processes.

This draws on the *indexicality* principle. Various examples of these linguistic forms are cited. This is followed by a quantitative review of the most recurring linguistic patterns. One final note is that the researcher has been keen on using the proper names of the narrators, whenever provided, instead of using the term 'narrator' or 'storyteller'. This is meant to emphasize their subjectivity and identity.

#### *4.1. Indexical Processes*

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) provide an outline of the major indexical processes; they particularly name social categories and labels, presuppositions and implicatures, as well as *unidentified* (my emphasis) linguistic structures. These linguistic resources contribute to the construction of identity positions. Besides the indicated indexical processes, the analysis also covers how the use of pronouns, mood and modality, and metaphor index identity positions.

**4.1.1. Social Categories.** Social categories refer to "overt referential identity categories in discourse" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 594). Being typical culturally entrenched phenomena, these categories are overt indexes of identity and positioning, especially when juxtaposed with other indexical labels. They even acquire more power by being circulated within ongoing discourse; hence, they get reproduced as identity-markers. Within the narratives, the most striking social category label that occurs quite frequently is 'girl' and 'woman'. As per the different narratives, these two lexical items carry quite a derogatory force in the mainstream Afghani societal discourse. Looking through the different narratives, it is clear that the word 'girl' or 'woman' within the Afghani culture is equivalent to oppressed, violated, hated, and victimized. 'Because I am a girl' is a very frequent syntactic pattern, that presupposes being harassed, victimized and definitely oppressed. In "A Pretty Toy in my Family's Hand", this is clearly stated in 'You should not study, because you are a girl'. Similarly, in the "Cradle of Violence", Pari mentions how 'the girl has no voice to defend herself', whereas in "How Culture Leads to Gender Violence", Asma explains how 'If a woman laughs loudly she will be insulted.' In "Life in a Talib-held Province", the anonymous author uses 'but I am a girl and cannot go out,' which shows again how this label 'girl' or 'woman' identifies the speaker as helpless. These and other examples instantiate how 'girl' and 'woman' are not used in a neutral light, but rather as an ideologically loaded one.

Another recurrent social category label used is *mullah*. Originally a term that denotes a Muslim teacher or leader, *mullah* in Afghanistan refers to a province religious governor, mostly abusing power in the name of religious rituals. In "Misunderstanding Rape", Marzia (2014) clearly condemns the injustice of mullahs: 'Mullahs must be taught about women's rights and international human rights, so they will stop misinterpreting the rights Islam has given to women.' Other labels, that index certain identity positions, belong to ethnic categorization such as "Hazara" in "Kill Silence", where Shogofa (2009) 'was too afraid to even tell people I am Hazara.' The Hazara community is Afghanistan's third largest ethnic group, who "have faced long-term discrimination and persecution in predominantly Sunni

Afghanistan and Pakistan” (*BBC News* 2021). This again implicates the oppression and injustice done to them if their identity is disclosed. In the same vein, the narrator in “Running for Parliament, Afghan Style” is identified as Kuchi, a member of the Afghani nomad tribes, known for their extreme poverty. Indeed, cultural practices and social groupings anchor identity in interaction.

**4.1.2. Presupposition and Implicature.** Presupposition is the second type of indexical processes featuring within the narratives. Benwell and Stokoe (2006, 114) note that presupposition “refers to the presumed knowledge a recipient needs to make full sense of a text.” Presumed knowledge covers the immediate co-textual context or generalized world knowledge. In the case of the narratives, it also refers to a wider socio-cultural knowledge for full understanding of the text. Without prior knowledge of the religious, ethnic, and cultural makeup of the Afghani society, making sense of utterances would not be possible. The major type of presuppositions featuring in the narratives is structural presupposition, where the syntactic structure of the sentence defines the presupposition. For example, in “Many Sides to Gender Violence in Afghanistan”, Shogofa Az complains about suffering ‘from harassment on the streets *because I am a girl*’. Here, the causal relationship between harassment and being a girl presupposes the normality of this act of violence, so long as the victim is a girl. The same applies to Fariba’s example in “Change for Mariam”: ‘She faced many problems because her brothers and father did not want her to go to school—*because she was a girl*’.

Similarly, in *Kill Silence*, it is presupposed that being a girl is a legitimate reason for oppression: ‘Most girls are humiliated and kept silent *because they are girls*’. Counter-factual presupposition also features in Marzia’s words in “No Honor in Honor Killing”: ‘yet if a woman dares to have a love marriage’, which presupposes the impossibility of this marriage. Or, as Asma puts it in “How Culture Leads to Gender Violence”: ‘If she complains, she will face insults and warnings, be hit,’ which presumes that the ability to complain is not true. Implicature, another indexical process, does not feature prominently in the narratives. This can be attributed to the fact that the AWWP is primarily meant to give voice to silenced women, who finally manage to be outspoken and direct.

**4.1.3. Linguistic Structures.** Within this category of indexical processes, micro-linguistic units encode identity positions. The study focuses particularly on the use of pronouns, mood and modality as well as metaphors to show how they are indexically tied to identity categorization.

**4.1.3.1. Pronouns.** Bassiouney (2014) notes that “pronouns are employed to create and sustain different stances and positions. They are one of the most essential markers of identity negotiation and construction” (71). Pronouns can be used deictically, so the meaning of a particular pronoun is dependent on the context in which the pronoun is used. This interpretation of pronouns hinges on the intersection of their linguistic function and the speakers’ social, cultural, and personal contexts (Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990). Furthermore, pronouns, such as ‘I’, ‘we’, and ‘you’, connect an utterance to the immediate context of the speaker and addressee (Harré 1991). Indeed, the use of pronouns in the narratives is quite significant, especially



the use of the pronouns, 'I' and 'we'. Typical of personal narratives, 'I' features prominently as the most frequently used pronoun. With its role as a marker of agency and identity position, 'I' is employed 301 times in the present data in varying frequencies, ranging from one occurrence in "My Society Looks Like Jail to Me" and in "Change for Mariam", to a frequency of 43 times in "I am for Sale, Who Will Buy Me?", and 81 times in "Running for Parliament". This linguistic resource emphasizes the narrators' sense of identity and agency.

On the other hand, 'we' also features abundantly in the narratives. 'We' has three referential functions: first, referring to Afghani women as in Beheshta's words in "My Society Looks Like Jail to Me": 'Day-by-day we get discouraged because we lose our liberty'; or in Marzia's "No Honor in Honor Killing": 'We are not honor and property and we must not carry all the burdens'; or in Shekiba's "It's Frightening to Live in a Patriarchal Society": 'We should not tolerate it'. This referential use of 'we' is a typical act of identification and othering, where Afghani women are identified as one social category, facing the other non-supportive Afghani society. The other much less frequent reference for 'we' is the Afghani people at large as in "Cradle of Violence": 'When we beat a woman we kill her soul', or in "Running for Parliament": 'You are as amazing as we thought'. The following table shows the frequency of using 'we' to refer to Afghani women versus 'we' to refer to Afghans in general.

Narrative	'we' Afghani women	'we' Afghans
Educating Afghan Women Who Dream Big Dreams		2
Kill Silence	6	
Running for Parliament, Afghan-Style		3
Cradle of Violence	29	
How Cultures lead to Gender Violence		
My Society Looks Like Jail to me	9	
Change for Mariam, Change for Women	1	
No Honor in Honor Killing	10	
It's a Frightening Life in a Violent Patriarchal Society	4	
Total	59	5

**Table 1. Referential use of we in narratives**

As explicit in the table, the use of 'we' to refer to women emphasizes the sense of collective identity in the face of the society in general, and the male society in particular.

As for the second person pronoun 'you', it is used in minimum frequencies across the narratives where it either references men as in "No Honor in Honor Killing": 'If there were no women, you would not exist. Do not think that we are dependent upon you; you are dependent upon us.'; or it references family members as in "Cradle of Violence": 'My dear father, my dear brother, you think that if I have my choice, I

will make a mistake'; or finally humans in general as in "Life in a Talib-Held Province": 'You say you want to help me but I am living in a situation where you cannot help me. All of my province is full of Talibs'. This deictic use of 'you' features 34 times with three different referential functions. Pronouns, as linguistic forms, index identity positions via identifying Afghani women as one social category vis-à-vis the whole community.

4.1.3.2. *Mood and Modality*. Grammatical mood refers to the clause structure whether indicative (declarative (affirmative or negative) and interrogative, imperative, or subjunctive). Each mood type corresponds to a speech function. On the other hand, modality refers to the degree of commitment of the speaker to the utterance on a scale of certainty and usuality. Both linguistic resources, mood and modality, clearly instantiate indexical processes of identity positioning. Across the different narratives, the narrators employ the declarative mood with much higher frequency than all other mood types. In fact, in many cases, declaratives function as stance-making statements not just giving information. Examples include 'Every Afghan girl has experienced some kind of gender-based violence' in "Change for Mariam"; 'Afghanistan is a country where you can really find the meaning of gender violence' in "Many Sides to Gender Violence"; 'In my country, men can cut the noses and ears off their wives and go without punishment' in "It's a Frightening Life in a Violent Patriarchal Society"; and 'But there are thousands of similar stories in Afghanistan where many women are dying quietly and slowly' in "No Honor in Honor Killing". These are only five examples out of many other declarative sentences with the highest degree of modality as declarative, which rather functions as statements of facts. Interrogatives are used, in minimal frequencies, to question some of the deep-rooted ideologies such as 'Can you imagine, this wrong understanding of Islam among our uneducated people?' in "Running for Parliament", or 'can we change the situation? Will it ever end? [...] If violence ends, will there still be a country called Afghanistan?' in "Cradle of Violence", or 'Who Interprets Islam?' in "How Culture Leads to Gender Violence", or 'Have you ever thought about what it is like to live in a patriarchal society?' in "It's a Frightening Life in a Violent Patriarchal Society". Other interrogatives occur within reported speech in the narratives.

On the other hand, the use of modality indexes power relations within the Afghani community. 'Can' as a modal operator denoting probability/possibility features in utterances that refer to violence against women. Examples can be found in 'In my country, men can cut the noses and ears off their wives and go without punishment' in "It's a Frightening Life in a Violent Patriarchal Society"; or in 'A forced marriage is one of the cruelest and unfair acts that can be imposed on a girl' in "The Short Life of Khadija Who Was Forced to Marry". The modal operator 'can' denoting ability, or rather the lack of ability, is used with very high frequency in clauses referring to women. This occurs, for instance, in 'I can't travel to all the provinces due to security problems, and even where I am allowed to go, I cannot drive myself as a woman in Afghanistan' in "Running for Parliament"; or 'but in Afghan society women cannot laugh in front of men, not even at a family gathering [...]'. In many families, girls

cannot attend school due to security problems caused by men who oppose educated women' in "How Culture Leads to Gender Violence", or in "No Honor in Honor Killing" through which '[w]omen cannot even decide what to wear, where to go, or what to eat.'

Modality also features in the use of the 'must' and 'should' as high modality obligation markers. Using them in abundance by narrators indexes the strong stance of Afghani women and their determination to change the status quo. Examples of these modal auxiliaries include what follows: 'We must protect ourselves and learn to say 'No'.... Women should educate themselves to become teachers who teach rights and laws to Afghans to remove the roots of violence from our culture. Women must educate themselves so that we become leaders and politicians and tell those who use violence against women that violence is' in "Cradle of Violence"; 'But education must remain a priority' in "Misunderstanding Rape"; 'Honor killing must stop; people who kill women must be punished [...]. Tribal laws, honor killing, stoning, and hurting women physically and mentally must be stopped' in "No Honor in Honor Killing" or 'We should not tolerate it' in "It's a Frightening Life in a Violent Patriarchal Society". The following table summarizes the most frequent modal auxiliaries and their meanings in the narratives.

Narrative	can possibility	can ability	could possibility	must obligation	should obligation
Educating Afghan Women Who Dream Big Dreams	0	2	0	0	0
Kill Silence	0	1	0	0	1
Running for Parliament, Afghan-Style	0	1	0	1	0
Cradle of Violence	0	4	1	8	2
How Cultures lead to Gender Violence	2	1	0	1	2
My Society Looks Like Jail to me	9				
Change for Mariam, Change for Women	0	0	0	1	0
No Honor in Honor Killing	2	1	1	7	0
It's a Frightening Life in a Violent Patriarchal Society	0	1	0	4	3
Misunderstanding Rape	2	3	0	0	2
My Society Looks Like Jail to Me	0	2	0	1	0

Many Sides to Gender Violence in Afghanistan	1	2	1	0	2
A Pretty Toy in my Family's Hands	0	1	0	0	2
I am for Sale, Who Will Buy Me?	0	3	2	1	0
Life in a Talib-held Province	0	1	0	0	0
The Short Life of Khadija Who Was Forced to Marry	0	2	0	1	0
Total	7	25	5	25	14

**Table 2. Modal auxiliaries and their meanings**

Examining the narratives in detail, two patterns of modal auxiliaries' use can be identified. First, the use of modal auxiliaries with high modality (must, should) by the narrators themselves, whether telling their own stories or commenting on the status quo. The second pattern of modal auxiliaries' use pertains to the characters in the embedded stories. These are modals of possibility or ability (can/ could) to reflect how those story characters are victimized. Looking at the frequencies of modal auxiliaries, it can be easily identified how the use of modals with high degree of modality are used with highest frequency which indexes how the narrators, and the characters within the narratives are keen on emphasizing their power and strong stance towards all forms of GBV. Indeed, mood and modality both index identity positions, where the use of declarative clauses, and high modality obligation moderators linguistically encode a strong stance towards gender violence, and keen determination on ending it.

*4.1.3.3. Metaphor.* One dominant metaphor that features in a number of the narratives is the conceptual metaphor WOMAN is COMMODITY. The narrative *I am for Sale* has this metaphor running throughout the whole text. The same metaphor occurs in the following texts: in "A Pretty Toy in my Family's Hands": 'but then I understand they were at my home to buy me... The family that was proposing the marriage was discussing my cost with my father'; in "Many Sides to Gender Violence": 'This really proves that girls are nothing but a doll or piece of equipment that the father can sell to an interested buyer'; in "It's a Frightening Life in a Violent Patriarchal Society": 'In some other countries women are sold as slaves, sometimes traded between men for a pack of cigarettes'; and in "The Short Life of Khadija" 'that Khadija's family agreed to marry her was that the man offered a large dowry [...] because he had bought her for a lot of money from her parents.'

#### *4.2. Discourse Structure*

**4.2.1. Narrative within the narrative.** This linguistic resource is not explicitly mentioned as one of the indexical processes proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) in their framework. However, this has been identified as a discourse pattern in five

of the investigated narratives (as well as others that are not part of the data). Typically, either a literary device, embedded stories, or the Russian doll model, is used within the narratives either to support the narrator's stances, to add vividness to the description, or to give further examples.

For instance, in "The Mirror", Shogofa (2011) makes use of the wedding ceremony narrative as an embedded story of her mum's friend who has never been out of her home: 'She told a story of taking a friend of hers to the doctor once when the friend was sick. The thing is, that friend had never been out of the home before.' Similarly, in "Misunderstanding Rape", Marzia (2014) mentions the story of her first uncle's wife to prove that the Kunduz ten-year-old raped girl was not one of a kind. Shekiba, in "It's a Frightening Life", supports her stance with her own experience as a computer teacher: 'my classes would finish in the evening. I was often frightened that I would be kidnapped or raped while walking home at night', and a more tragic fate faced N. who ran away with her lover and Marzia tells how, after bringing her back home, 'N was beaten and locked in her room for several days until one night her mother took her a glass of milk. The girl died that night from the poison'.

All these embedded stories, as well as others, help narrators back up their stances and further support their arguments. From an identity positioning perspective, they are positioned as either evaluators or commentators in the story world and the real world.

## **5. Discussion**

Among the different approaches to studying identity-in-interaction, or narrative identities, Harré and van Langenhove (1999), Langellier and Peterson (2004), Bucholtz and Hall (2005), De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012), as well as Bamberg's models (1997, 2004) have in common one major feature. These models do not consider narratives as a representation of identities but rather as an identity-constructing tool. In other words, they emphasize how identities are 'practiced and tested out' during narratives as a form of discursive practice. For them, positioning of oneself in interaction is something that is negotiated, tried out or modified during interactions; hence, construction of self and identity is 'necessarily dialogical and relational'. This is indeed a characterizing feature of Bamberg's model of positioning. As noted by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, this identities-in-interaction approach emphasizes "how people actually use stories in everyday, mundane situations in order to create (and perpetuate) a sense of who they are. Narratives are thus [...] constructive means of positions" (2008, 379).

Looking at the different indexical processes employed in the narratives via the lens of Bamberg's model of positioning, the researcher examines them in light of the three-level positioning strategies: a) how narrators are positioned in relation to other story characters in the story world, b) how are they positioned vis-à-vis the audience of the narratives, and c) how they are positioned vis-a-vis themselves. As elaborated earlier, there are usually two narrative planes: the original narrative plane where the

narrator discusses one or another of the forms of gender-based violence, and a second plane which involves a narrative within the original narrative (embedded story).

In the original narrative, the use of the first-person pronoun - I - with highest frequency positions the narrator as the agent who is in control (Positioning Level 3). It should be noted, however, that the descriptions of the agentive characters are different. In some of the narratives, the narrator 'I' is positioned versus her family as in "I am for Sale", "A Pretty Toy in my Family's Hand", "My Society Looks Like Jail to Me", and "It's a Frightening Life". In other narratives, narrators are positioned as 'we' Afghani women versus men as in "Kill Silence", "Cradle of Violence", "No Honor in Honor Killing", etc. The positioning of self as an agent in control is enhanced via the use of high modality modal auxiliaries such as 'must' and 'should', where the narrators seek to position themselves to their readers as experts on how education and law enforcement are the solution to GBV (Positioning Level 2). Moreover, the high frequency of declarative clauses, representing also highest modality degree, is another positioning tool of the narrator as in control (Positioning Level 3). Within the same original narrative plane, the use of the indexical pronoun 'we' positions narrators as not only in power, but in typical women alignment position against the oppression of men, and society both in the story world and the real world (Positioning Level 1 and 3); or as Bamberg puts it "in harmony with the peer-group values" (1997, 339). It cannot be overlooked that narrators are positioned as victims of some sort of GBV, yet this positioning is discursively reversed by the narrators who look forward to changing the status quo for themselves and for other women.

On the second narrative plane, the embedded story, the discursive act of reporting these stories exemplifies different forms of GBV. On this plane, narrators use a number of linguistic structures, primarily modifiers, to position themselves, first, as connoisseurs of deeply-rooted cultural problems (Level 2 positioning). For example, in "How Culture Leads to Gender Violence", Asma describes men controlling women's destiny as 'torture for a woman', Beheshta in "My Society Looks Like Jail to Me" describes those who harass women physically and emotionally as 'shameless people', whereas Sveto, in "The Short Life of Khadija", condemns how 'forced marriage is one of the most cruel and unfair acts that can be imposed on a girl'.

Secondly, narrators of embedded stories are also positioned as sympathizing with all the different victims of GBV in the embedded stories (Level 1 positioning) as in "Many Sides to Gender Violence": 'You need to be like a bird that has its own wings, not be scared and dependent on the branch [...]. Your wings are your education that makes you independent and not obligated to others'. Finally, by reporting embedded stories, narrators position themselves as supporters of rights for gender equality and humanity (Level 3 positioning) as in "No Honor in Honor Crimes": 'To the women of my country: nothing can stop us when we become united'.

It can be concluded that narrators, via the act of narration, view themselves as self-reliant and capable persons. They position themselves mostly as agents, as evaluators of other story characters' life events, and as experts vis-à-vis their audience or readers. The identity claim (Positioning Level 3) is understood as

'situationally instantiated' by the use of different linguistic constructions. This is contrasted by how the women in the embedded stories are positioned as victims of different forms of GBV.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, sixteen written narratives by Afghani women were analysed. These narratives were part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence Campaign, joined by the website Afghani Women Writing Project (AWWP). All narratives told stories of some sort of gender-based violence (GBV) suffered either by the narrators themselves, or by one of the women characters embedded in the narratives. The study sets off from the premises that narratives are identity-construction tools, and that identity positions are discursively emergent in interaction. The analysis was informed by two main analytical frameworks: Bucholtz and Hall (2005) Identity Framework, and Bamberg (1997, 2004) model of positioning. Drawing on Bucholtz and Hall indexicality principle, the narratives were scrutinized to identify which linguistic resources index identity positions of the narrators, the characters in the narratives, and the members of the Afghani society at large. The findings of the analysis showed that these indexical processes included the use of social categorization labels, the most salient of which was 'girl' or 'women' which is a gender-based categorization, presupposing the normalization of all forms of violence or injustice. Other indexical processes included the use of pronouns, to index sameness and otherness, the significant use of the declarative mood and high modality auxiliaries to emphasize agency and stance.

Examining the data of the study in the light of Bamberg's views, it is quite evident how the narrators' identities emerge and vary in different formats as per the direct context (the narrative itself), the co-textual context (the events that surround the narrative), and the wider socio-cultural context of the Afghani narrated world. As narrators, Afghani women were positioned as mainly self-reliant, willful agents, in a typical women alignment positioning with other women characters; they were also positioned as experts vis-à-vis their readers in control of their narratives. As narrated, or as the characters in the embedded stories, Afghani women are positioned as victims of all sorts of GBV, whether domestic via their family members, societal via cultural norms, or regional via the cruelty and brutality of the Taliban regime. This navigation between the two extremes instantiates how the sense of self in narration is practiced and tested out, hence forming the core of identity and positioning construction.

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