

**Narratives, Women and Gendered Roles**  
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السرد والنساء والادوار الجنسانية

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**المخلص**

يشير ديبرمان (2013:67) الى أن "السرد يوفر موارد قوية بشكل خاص للتموضع الكلامي". من خلال الروايات، يتخذ الناس مواضعهم تجاه أنفسهم في الماضي أو تجاه الآخرين. تجادل دي فينا و يوركابولو (2012:164) بأن نموذج بامبيرغ للتموضع الكلامي السردى قد تم تبنيه في العديد من الدراسات التي تتضمن مقابلات وقصص تحادثية لأنه "يوفر جهازًا تحليليًا لربط خيارات الإخبار المحلية بالهويات الكبيرة". يتكون نموذج بامبيرغ (1997) من ثلاثة مستويات: يتعلق المستوى الأول بكيفية وضع الشخصيات في علاقة مع بعضها البعض في عالم القصة؛ يتعلق المستوى الثاني بالتفاعل الذي يحدث بين الراوي والمحاورين معه؛ في حين يتعلق المستوى الثالث بكيفية تعريف الراوي لنفسه، أو بكلمات بامبيرغ نفسه "كيف يوضع الرواة أنفسهم لأنفسهم؟" (337).  
أطبّق نموذج بامبيرغ على الروايات المستقاة من مقابلات مع النساء المسلمات اللاتي يعشن في المملكة المتحدة. هذه المقابلات هي جزء من البيانات الإثنوغرافية لأبحاث الدكتوراه التي أجريتها والتي تحقق في كيفية دمج النصوص الدينية في حياة النساء المسلمات في مدينة كارديف البريطانية عندما ينشئن هوياتهن كمسلمات في الشتات. غطت الروايات التي رويت في هذه المقابلات مواضيع مثل الأسرة والممارسات الدينية والعلاقات. يوضح نموذج بامبيرغ كيف تقوم المشاركات في المقابلة ببناء عالم القصة، وكيف يدمج المحاور في بناء القصة، وكيف يعرفن أنفسهن كأشخاص مميزين من خلال ربط عالم القصة وعالم رواية القصة مع الروايات الرئيسية. تستند هذه الورقة إلى التحليلات لتوضح كيف تسلط هذه النساء الضوء على دورهن الجنساني كأمهات وأخوات وبنات وزوجات، وتعطي الأولوية لهن بدلاً من تسليط الضوء على أدوارهن كأكاديميات ونساء متخصصات في العلوم "الصعبة".  
**الكلمات المفتاحية:** السرد، التموضع الكلامي، نموذج بامبيرغ (1997)، النساء، الادوار الجنسانية.

**Abstract:**

Deppermann (2013, 67) indicates that "narratives provide particularly powerful resources for positioning". Through narratives people take positions towards their past selves or towards others. De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012: 164) argue that Bamberg's model of (narrative) positioning has been adopted in many studies that involve interviews and conversational stories because "it affords an analytical apparatus for linking local telling choices to larger identities". Bamberg's (1997) model consists of three levels: the first level is concerned with how the characters are positioned in relation to one another in the story world; the second level is concerned with the interaction that takes place between the narrator and his/ her interlocutors, i.e. how he/ she positions him/herself to them; while the third level is concerned with how the narrator defines him/ herself, or in Bamberg's words "how do narrators position themselves to themselves?" (337).

I apply Bamberg's model to narratives derived from interviews with Muslim women who live in the UK. Those interviews are part of the ethnographic data for my PhD research investigating how religious texts are incorporated into the lives of Muslim women in Cardiff as they construct their identities as diasporic Muslims. The narratives told within these interviews covered topics such as family and religious practices and relationships. Bamberg's model shows how the interviewees

construct the story world, how they incorporate the interviewer in the construction of the story, and how they define themselves as unique people by linking the story world and the storytelling setting to global/master narratives. The paper builds on the analyses to demonstrate how these women highlight and give prominence to their gendered roles as mothers, sisters, daughters and wives rather than highlighting their roles as academics and women specialised in ‘hard’ sciences.

**Key words:** Narratives, positioning, Bamberg’s (1997) model, women, gendered roles.

## 1. Introduction

The data involved in this article is related to my PhD research which I have recently finished. In my PhD research, I investigate the role of religious texts which are embedded in religious rituals in the construction of diasporic women’s identities. Since most Islamic rituals are characterized by gender segregation, the rituals I had attended as a participant observer were segregated with men seated in a separate place to women. Because I do not have access to the men’s section in the Islamic Centre where I carried out my study, which is located in Cardiff, Wales in the United Kingdom, the focus of this study is on women only.

As the rituals involve the use of a variety of religious texts, separating these texts from their context would be difficult to achieve. Thus, in order to understand how these texts are incorporated into Muslim women’s lives, how their identities are constructed and perhaps maintained in a non-Muslim community and what roles these texts play in these women’s lives, carrying out fieldwork was an appropriate solution. This has led me to spend two months in two successive years in 2014 and 2015 participating, observing and conducting interviews with the women involved in these rituals, which were held in the aforementioned Islamic Centre.

In what follows, I will present the key terms employed in this paper like narratives, positioning and gendered roles. Then I will look at some examples from the data and see how gendered roles are produced by the women of this study.

## 2. Narratives and Positioning

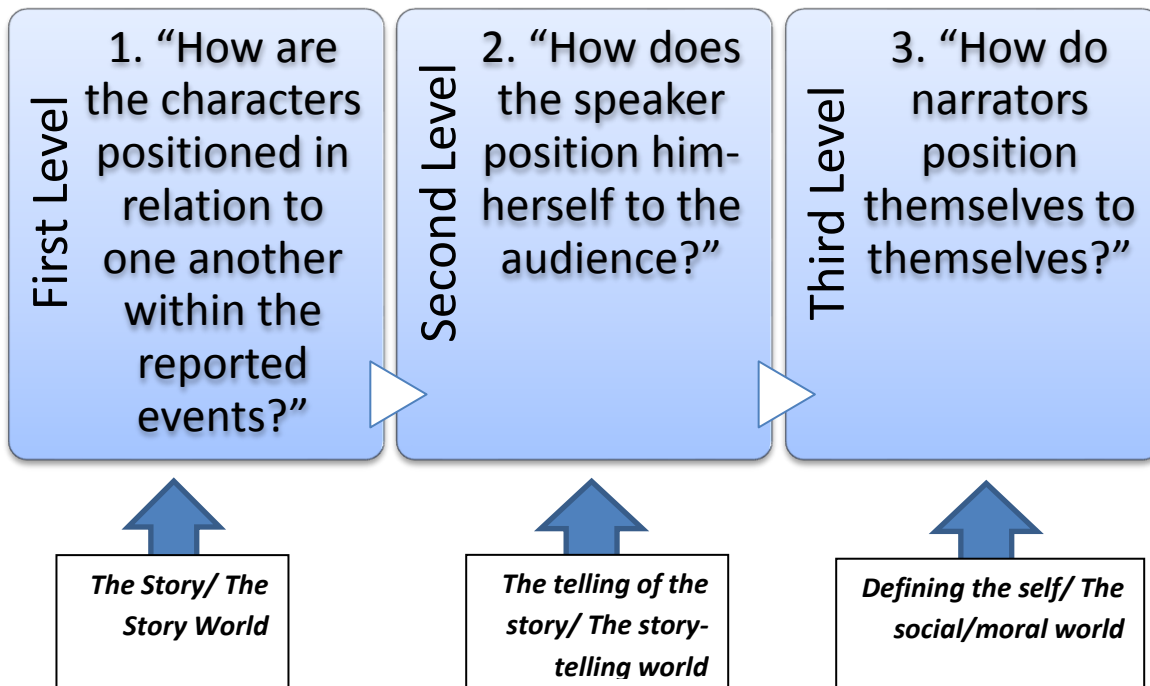
Narratives are considered the ground upon which identities are constructed (De Fina, 2003; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). Narratives are described by Schiffrin (1996: 199) as “a linguistic lens through which to discover peoples’ own (somewhat idealized) views of themselves as situated in a social structure.” Narratives for Bamberg (2004a: 358-9) “always *reveal* the speaker’s identity. [...] By offering a narrative, the speaker lodges a claim for him/herself in terms of who he/she is.” This ties in with what Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 138) claim that “the practice of narration involves the ‘doing’ of identity, and because we can tell different stories we can construct different versions of self.” Thus, narratives as Blommaert and Dong (2010: 52) argue, help people to “produce very complex sociocultural meanings”.

Deppermann (2013, 67) indicates that “narratives provide particularly powerful resources for positioning”. Through narratives people take positions towards their past selves or towards others. Archakis and Tzanne (2005: 272) argue that “the construction of identity can be achieved through narration, more specifically through what is related, to whom and in what way”, i.e. through positioning. Positioning has been defined by Davies and Harré (1990: 48) as a “discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines.” Davies and Harré (1990: 48) argue that there are two types of positioning: interactive and reflexive positioning where the former refers to the situation in which one positions another while the latter refers to when one positions oneself. Davies and Harré (1990) and others have worked extensively on the concept of positioning and one of those who has worked on how positioning contributes to identity work in narrative is Michael Bamberg. Bamberg’s (1997) work on narrative analysis is premised on the idea that in conversing people take positions in relation to one another. Bamberg’s work on the development of the theory of narrative positioning involves a move from “a

traditional, structural approach” to “a more performance-based, approach” (Bamberg, 1997: 335), i.e. a move from what is said and its meaning to a move that focuses on how it is performed in conversational interactions. While the speakers’ representation of themselves in the story tells us something about the identity they are taking up, Bamberg argues that we can find further clues in the way in which they perform the story with and to others. Bamberg (1997) argues that the process of positioning happens at three different levels. These three levels are formulated into three questions (Bamberg, 1997:337):

1. “How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the reported events?”
2. “How does the speaker position him- or herself to the audience?”
3. “How do narrators position themselves to themselves?”

So, the first level tackles the story; the second level tackles the telling of the story to an interlocutor while the third level tackles the definition of the self in the telling of specific stories. In other words, we have three worlds: the story world where characters and the relationships that link them together in this story world are presented, the story-telling world where the interaction that takes place between narrators and their audience when they engage in telling stories is presented and the social/ moral world where narrators define themselves in relation to Discourses/ macro discourses/ master narratives. The presence of narratives in the data and the reliance of my participants on them motivated me to investigate them closely and this is the reason behind the adoption of Bamberg’s (1997) narrative positioning model which is represented in the figure below.



Before moving to the data employed in this paper a note concerning ‘master narratives’ needs to be included since it is a core concept in understanding the gendered roles the women of this study orient towards. Bamberg (2005: 287) defines a master narrative as a term that “typically refers to pre-existent socio-cultural forms of interpretation”. In other words, a master narrative is deeply embedded within a culture/ community, used and circulated by the community members. McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2017: 191) emphasise the taken-for-granted aspect of the master narratives by arguing that one of the aspects that gives power to master narratives “is their invisibility as they become taken-for-

granted as ‘Truth’.” This goes in line with what Andrews (2004: 1) views as one of the main functions of master narratives: “they offer people a way of identifying what is assumed to be a normative experience”, and in this way they work as “a blueprint for all stories; they become the vehicle through which we comprehend not only the stories of others, but crucially of ourselves as well”. The ethnographic work and in particular interviews will assist in reaching these master narratives the participants employ or refer to through their discourse with me. Being an Iraqi myself who is interviewing fellow Iraqis will also be of great help in reaching these master narratives because of the shared common knowledge we both possess as citizens of the same country who almost share the same norms of behaving and possess almost the same cultural norms.

#### 4. Data

The data dealt with in this paper is interviews conducted with either Iraqi PhD students or spouses of PhD students who live in the UK, particularly in Cardiff city. Their stay there is temporary because they need to go back to Iraq after completing their studies, i.e. they are academic sojourners. The table below shows their names, which are pseudonyms, their ages at the time of the interviews, their marital status and their city of origin in Iraq:

	Interviewee	Age	Position	Marital status	Hometown
1.	Suha	29	PhD Student Mechanical Engineering	single	Baghdad
2.	Walaa	42	a pharmacist who is accompanying her husband	married with 4 daughters	Karbala
3.	Maha	44	PhD Student Civil Engineering	single	Babil
4.	Rana	44	PhD Student Civil Engineering	single	Karbala
5.	Sama	44	PhD Student Electrical Engineering	single	Basrah
6.	Asma	34	PhD Student Medical Engineering	married with 1 daughter	Originally from Baghdad but then moved to Karbala
7.	Mithal	45	PhD Student Electrical Engineering	married, childless	Babil
8.	Zahraa	38	PhD student Computer Engineering	married with two children, 1 girl and 1 boy	Najaf
9.	Hana	38	PhD student Computer Engineering	married with two children, 1 girl and 1 boy	Karbala
10	Amira	36	PhD student Computer Science	married with three children, 1 boy and 2 girls	Karbala
11	Maram	44	PhD student Computer Science	single	Basrah

The use of interviews as a method, particularly semi-structured interviews, offered the participants the opportunity to talk about their practices through a narrative mode. The importance of

interviews is highlighted by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) who argue that interviews provide the opportunity “to generate information that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain otherwise- both about events described and about perspectives and discursive strategies.” In a similar vein, Copland, Creese, Rock and Shaw (2015: 29) maintain that “interviews are used to support researchers in gaining an *emic* perspective on research, that is, understanding from the participant’s perspective”. Copland *et al.* (2015:37) also add that “interviews are a valuable research tool which can provide a window onto the lived experiences of research participants and provide interpretation and opinion that might not be available from observation alone”.

The way I recruited my participants was done in this way: first I approached the women whom I knew well and who are regular goers to the Islamic Centre, then some of them volunteered and introduced me to others whom I did not know. In other words, the formers have worked as my ‘gatekeepers’. The interviews as mentioned above were semi-structured, i.e. I have a list of questions which opened up a space for elaboration for the participants. The questions posed concerned the following aspects: the reasons behind their attending the Islamic Centre, whether or not they attended more in Iraq or in the UK, whether or not they bring their children if they have any to the Centre, whether or not they employ the religious information received from the Centre in their daily lives and whether or not they have noticed any negative aspects concerning the religious gatherings in the Centre. These questions allowed the participants in addition to answering them to elaborate further regarding their daily life practices in the diaspora and drawing comparisons between Iraq and the UK in terms of these aspects. The participants have also made comparisons between their personal lives and the religious world which is usually included in religious stories told within the context of sermons.

## 5. Gendered Roles

This section discusses the gendered roles the participants have referred to and emphasized in their interviews with me. Before discussing these roles it is significant to highlight the differences between men and women when they tell narratives. Barbra Johnstone (1990: 66-68) who has investigated storytelling in Ft. Wayne, Indiana has come up with the following difference between men and women when telling stories. Johnstone (1990) has found that men and women have different plots. According to Johnstone (1990) women’s stories are related to social relations in which they downplay the personal roles of the main characters, in addition to this there is an emphasis on community and mutual dependence. Women tell stories in such a way that would not attract attention to them as story tellers, and if in any way attention is drawn to them, they tend to portray themselves as foolish or embarrassed. Men’s stories, on the other hand, are related to themselves, like their skills and abilities. They tell stories in such a way that draws attention to them as story tellers.

As indicated above, this paper is concerned with women only, so comparing the ways men and women tell stories is infeasible in this paper. However, the way women tell their narratives in their interviews in this paper is very much similar to what Johnstone has highlighted. Below some extracts which are derived from interviews with Iraqi Muslim women who live in Cardiff are provided. These extracts represent the way these women present themselves in rather gendered roles.

### Extract 1

Walaa	for example if a child of yours gets ill
	you stay awake all night (.)
	me for instance if a child has fever at my home
	even if it’s my nephew
	I can’t sleep (.)
	can’t sleep (.)
	just got a fever not lost
	and I don’t know
	where he has gone in the darkness (.)

Walaa in the extract above tells a hypothetical situation through which she is addressing the interviewer. Walaa is invoking shared aspects between the interviewer and herself, i.e. she is referring to their shared sex and that they are both females. She is also relating to the interviewer by invoking gendered roles like the role of mothers who would be keen on the wellbeing of their children. In addition to the affiliation work, the reference to this gendered role helps in positioning Walaa to the interviewer as a caring and tender mother who would be worried not only about her own children but also about others' children like her nephew.

### Extract 2

Asma	<p>uh in Cambridge of course uh I suffered in general from the [lack of] the number of Muslims (.) and from the way they dealt with Muslims (.) <u>even my daughter</u> suffered a lot...I suffered greatly <u>and especially my daughter</u> I noticed that when <u>she</u> entered the kindergarten they <u>didn't welcome her</u> (.) they didn't <u>say good morning to her</u> the way they'd say it to other children (.) uh they <u>didn't flatter her</u> even when my husband and I would enter they wouldn't welcome us the way they did to others... when <u>my daughter</u> joined the <b>foundation class</b> in <b>X School</b> the one near the <b>Y Building</b> they <u>welcomed her</u> <u>she hated her teacher</u> in Cambridge and whenever I feel that <u>she</u> is tired or doesn't want to go to the <b>foundation class</b> I tell her "do you want me to take you back to your teacher in Cambridge?" <u>she</u> says "no, no I'll go to the <b>foundation class</b>"... when I was in Cambridge my classes end at 3:30 pm or sometimes later than this I tried to <u>finish as quickly as I could</u> and if I had <u>to skip a lecture</u> so that I could <u>go back to my daughter</u> in order to feel relieved... here she stays in the <b>foundation class</b> until 6:00 pm I go to her at 5:55 or 5:50 because I feel relieved and safe, I know their nature</p>
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In the above extract, Asma talks about the differences in living in two British cities, Cambridge and Cardiff. When she was in Cambridge she suffered a lot, in spite of this suffering she does not talk about it from her perspective, rather she talks about it from her daughter's perspective. The extract is full of reference to Asma's daughter and little attention is paid to Asma and her husband; the whole narrative revolves around the daughter. The daughter was not welcomed by the teaching staff in her kindergarten in Cambridge; they were not friendly towards her. This has entailed Asma to skip her language courses in Cambridge in order just to be close to her daughter. The situation changed for the daughter when they moved to Cardiff. She liked her class and her teacher and this has resulted in Asma feeling more relaxed and probably more focused on her lessons/ study.

Through this extract, Asma shows her dedication as a mother who puts her daughter's interest first. When Asma's daughter did not feel comfortable in Cambridge this has been reflected upon Asma. The same happened when they moved to Cardiff and Asma's daughter liked her school. Asma has gone to the UK as a PhD student who would study for a degree in Medical Engineering, because of the uncomfortable situation Asma's daughter has faced in Cambridge, Asma abandoned the role of a student and took on the role of a mother, a mother who is dedicated and concerned about her daughter's needs. In other words, Asma highlights her gendered role as a mother over her role as a student.

### Extract 3

Asma	now sometimes my daughter-
	girls start to get attached to their fathers
	when they are three four or five years
	she misses her father a lot although I take care of her more than he does
Inter.	yes
Asma	I notice that when we go back home
	she starts asking
	mum when dad is coming
	mum why dad is late
	mum call him
	let him leave the university

Another extract which is also derived from Asma's interview in which she states that she takes care of her daughter more than her husband (who is also a PhD student at Cardiff University) does but that does not affect her daughter's attachment to him. From a level 3 perspective, Asma is again defining herself as a caring mother; someone who puts her children first and understands their needs.

### Extract 4

Amira	<u>I noticed</u> that during these three years he (her son) was very good in memorization, he could memorize things (.) he used to imitate things from TV... <u>I told his grandmother</u> that Ahmed (her son) was reciting a poem, she was really surprised, so he would sit, read and memorize, <u>his father</u> is the one who <u>encourages him the most</u> since you know... he likes this, <u>his father chooses the poems</u> that are suitable for him... sometimes I encourage him by writing down the words of the poem he listens to because he asks me to do so because it might be difficult for him since he started listening to poems on the mobile phone... he noticed that the words were difficult for him but when written on a piece of paper they'd be easier, <u>his father chooses the poems</u> and he memorizes them, and <u>I write down the words</u> of the chosen poem... he says I want this poem, he <u>keeps looking for it with his father</u> on the web until they find it, then they look for the text because he can't recite it without the written text... he keeps on listening to it until he memorizes it and <u>then I write the words down</u> and give them to him
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The extract above is a bit lengthy one that is why I have omitted some parts of it and included the ones that are more significant. Amira in the extract above talks about her son who likes to memorize and recite religious poems. In spite of the fact that Amira is the one who first notices her son's skill in memorization and she is the one who tells his grandmother about this skill, Amira takes a background position in this narrative. She highlights and promotes her husband's position and represents him in a way that draws attention to him and to his actions. Amira's husband is the one who encourages their son, chooses the poems for him, and looks for the poems on the internet. Amira in the narrative above occupies a secondary position; she is just someone who writes down the words of the poems. Amira by narrating the story of her son in this way and by giving prominence to her husband is complying with the cultural norms which are so widespread in Iraq that a woman has to put her husband first and praise him for almost everything he does even if it was not so significant.

### Extract 5

Inter.	I don't know whether he [her son] has brothers or sisters
Amira	two sisters
Inter.	do they interact with him
Amira	yeah yes
Inter.	do they like to imitate him
Amira	yeah yeah but it's not imitation you know that a poem needs audience (laughs)
Inter.	yeah
Amira	so he recites and they repeat after him (laughing)
Inter.	ok that's good
Amira	yes for example when he memorizes it [a poem] he needs to perform it as if he were in a real gathering
Inter.	yeah
Amira	so we as //women//
Inter.	//as audience//
Amira	an audience that repeats the onset of the poem after him (.) so he recites and we repeat after him (laughing) this way
Inter.	God bless him
Amira	God bless you too

This extract is also derived from Amira's interview. Amira is asked whether her son has any brothers or sisters and she replies by indicating that he has two sisters. The interviewer is asking whether or not his sisters feel tempted to imitate him in his recitation of poems. Amira negates this desire or willingness of imitation from her daughters and she puts them in the position of audience. This is again shows Amira's alignment with the master narrative of inequality between men and women especially in our Eastern communities. Women from Amira's point of view cannot be reciters but they can be audience.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper builds on Bamberg's (1997) narrative positioning model, particularly the third level of it. This third level is concerned with how narrators define themselves to themselves by relating to higher ideologies or master narratives. The participants of this study are highly qualified and well educated women but in their interviews, they rarely talk about this aspect of their life; in contrast, family and their family gendered roles like mother, daughter, sister and wife appear repeatedly in their narratives. By doing so these women show high affiliation with the widespread master narratives that are circulated and consumed by the Iraqi people. They prefer to highlight their husbands' roles over their roles and they tend to portray themselves as dedicated mothers which both are highly praised and encouraged within Iraqi culture and communities. The motivation behind this orientation might go back to their upbringing. From personal experience, young girls are brought up with the mentality that they always come second to boys and that boys are always better in doing things than girls. Studying abroad has for sure opened up new horizons for the women of this study but their narratives reflect their rooted adherence to some of the ideologies they were raised up with and which might be hard to forget or to overcome.



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