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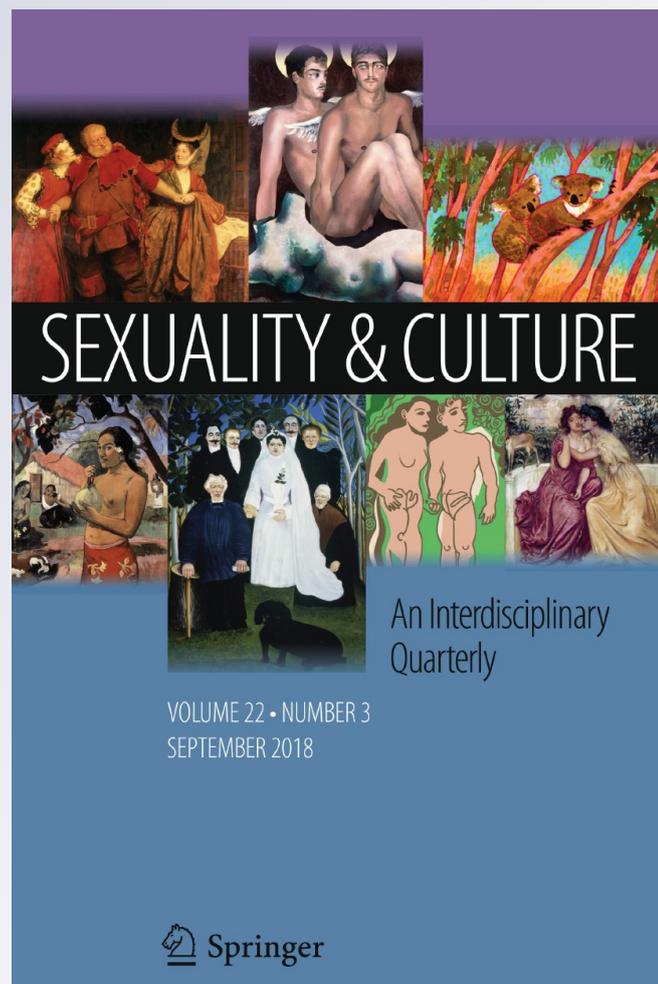
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The Social and Cultural Construction of *Burqa*: The Case of Ghesm Island in Iran

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Abstract The present study attempts to describe the components, characteristics, and implications of *burqa* in Qeshm Island, Iran, through an ethnographic method. The sample of the study is composed of twelve *burqa*-wearing women who were selected by applying a purposive sampling method. The process of data collection took 1 year, and the researchers conducted observations, note-takings, photography, and interviews with the participants on the field. The findings indicated that unlike niqab in the Arab countries, *burqa* is not surrounded by ideology. It is a cultural product which needs to be understood based on six main themes. In this cultural context, *burqa* is considered to be a social construction through which women reconstruct and moderate their social status, distance themselves from imposed roles and stereotypes, distinguish themselves from others with their creativity and innovation in designing *burqas*, and occasionally benefit from *burqas*' financial value. Considering the various implications of *burqa* in the Muslim world and in Iran, it is proposed that the laws pertaining to this region be legislated based on the recognized indication of *burqa* by ethnic and religious groups.

Keywords Islamic veiling · *Burqa* · Gender · Culture · Iran · Qeshm Island

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Introduction

Burqa and *niqab* are two of the most common veils for Muslim women. The term *burqa* has been used interchangeably with the term *niqab* even though they are two different types of Islamic garments. *Niqab* is a kind of black chador that covers women's head and neck, leaving only their eyes exposed (Allen 2014). It is especially worn by some Hanbali Muslim faith traditions in Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. But *burqa* has been worn by women in various Islamic cultures since the ninth or tenth century (Gal-Or 2011). It is a garment that can be made from net textiles with a woven grill over the eyes which is of several types in terms of form, color, sewing, usage, and perspective of consumers, and it is prevalent in Central Asian countries, Iran, and Afghanistan (Mirhosseini 2015). Islamic veils including *burqa* or *niqab* have become one of the most challenging and symbolic subjects in Western imagery against Muslim women. Therefore, Muslim women's veiling practices have come under the gaze of governments all over the world. It has been vehemently contested by some governments, and in contrast some others have passionately defended veil-wearing women.

Since the time that Michel Foucault described the body as a source of power and argued that you can “Hold upon it; invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault 2012), a number of researchers, based on this theoretical framework, have considered body merely as a passive political subject dictated by governments and failed to shed light on its further indications. In the recent year, the politicization of Muslim women's garments has been intensified to a higher extent to the point that *burqa* is defined as a collective religious sign to present an Islamic ideology or project the control over a certain category. These kinds of ideas neutralize women's body and lead to a gender-blind construction.

At the moment, some governments have agreed on banning *burqa*; countries such as Belgium, France, UK, Germany, Sweden, Australia, and Canada have issued bans on veil being worn in public. There are different analyses revealing the problematic aspects of veil in a secular society. For opponents, the veil (regardless of style) is a symbol of religious fundamentalism, not a true believer's religious practice. The media's attention has been specifically drawn to the wording—“radical religious practice” (Al-Hejin 2015). For instance, semantic categories of religious spectrum in BBCC articles often refer to headscarves, veils, *jilbab*, wearing, and *burqa* in side concepts such as radical, conservative, hardliners, Islamist, strict, and radicalization (Al-Hejin 2015). Some believe that behind *burqa* lies a militant Islam, thing that not only obscures facial expressions but that seeks to ‘hide’ its real intentions—to impose Islamic rule and the pursuit of the Islamification of the West (Ballard et al. 2009). Badinter (1989) claims that veil is “the symbol of the oppression of a sex, this is an act of submission” (Jones 2002). With *burqa*, women are isolated, excluded, silenced and dehumanized (Wagner et al. 2012). Wing and Smith (2005) realized that wearing *burqa* provides a sensation of seeing without being seen, of being equal to men on a mental level rather than sexual objects (Wing and Smith 2005).

These comments, intending to support banning *burqa*, are proposed in a condition that abiding by the fundamentals of human rights and emancipating values of feminism is significant to these countries from political aspects; fundamental freedoms containing “freedom of choice is antecedent to freedom of religion,” “individual’s choice of religion and its practice,” “equality in religious faith” and “respect for minorities rights” have added in complexities to understand (Gal-Or 2011). The proponents of wearing *burqa* perceive this social fact from a different point of view; by referring to the fundamental notions of the post-colonial feminism approach, they tend to respond to this key question raised by Spivak (1988) asking “can the subaltern speak?”. Their concern is that the fact of “banning *burqa*” itself is also based on emancipatory arguments raised by others and Muslim women do not perceive the ban as a contribution to their autonomy. Thus, the framing of a case by outsiders can have different kinds of impacts (Brems et al. 2014). These are gratuitous statements that do not bear any relation to the intentions or experiences of Muslim women concerned. Indeed, empirical research indicates that the women who wear a face veil do not intend to withdraw from society and that—in the absence of a ban—they do indeed interact with others in society (school teachers, shopkeepers, neighbors, friends) in numerous ordinary ways) (Bouteldja 2011).

Proponents of a ban argue that according to the instructions within Islamic texts, there is a range of Islamic opinions and not all Muslims support *burqa* or think that it to be a strict religious requirement because *burqa* is not an integral part of Islam (Idriss 2016). These are generally related to the divergence of opinions on the *burqa*. They contend that the Muslims’ understanding of Islam is flexible; it can be interpreted based on both plural and democratic principles (Mir-Hosseini 2002). When Muslim women believe that *burqa* signifies an important aspect of their personality and identity, it does not have a dehumanizing effect but rather gives effect to human dignity values. This kind of demands by Muslim women has arguably been influenced by increasing Liberal politics. It is a paradoxical intervention which allows governments to ban certain unfamiliar religious manifestations, such as the veil, as intolerant or discriminatory. Thus, not only are *burqa* and the veil misrecognized, but the autonomy of other communities to apply their own traditions is challenged too.

The present study attends the indication of *burqa* in Qeshm Island located in Iran as one of the Islamic states and intends to define it by a part of Sunni women who use *burqa* to cover their faces and live in a country with a Shiite majority population. Qeshm Island is the largest island in Iran and the Persian Gulf. The area of this island is 2.5 times larger than the country of Bahrain and has been known as one the most major trade zones in southern Iran. Since the distant past, this island has been a center for trading and commercial interactions with Arab states of the Persian Gulf, India, Pakistan, and North African states due to its special geographical location and the presence of Lenj boat industry (Bulookbashi 2001). The local population of Qeshm can be distinguished from the island other residents with their commitment to a number of traditions including polygyny, female genital mutilation, and wearing *burqa*. Wearing *burqa* in public is solely customary in two regions of Iran: the Province of Sistan and Baluchestan bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Province of Hormozgan neighboring the Persian Gulf Arab states. Qeshm Island is of

a further position for Iran which is attracting numerous tourists on winter holidays who enter the region temporarily for recreation. Additionally, one of the most significant sources of income for the local population is commercial fishing. The lifestyle of these people has resulted in the women's participation alongside with men in fish markets despite the presence of gender-biased and patriarchic presumptions. Meanwhile, numerous *burqa*-wearing women are earning through being engaged in peddling, fishing, and fish sales.

Wearing *burqa* is a cultural custom in this region, preserved by the local women and in some cases, promoted by them. Although all *burqa*-wearing women appear to be identical at first glance, this cultural product is of varied colors, forms, and types, each conveying a specific indication. Those wearing *burqa* are aware of these types and can distinguish and differentiate varied *burqa*-wearing groups of women pertaining to their region from other regions. Since the recognition and realization of the social action and even interaction with this community is not simple for outsiders, challenging gaps have been raised between the discourses of "insiders" and "outsiders" regarding this issue.

Our purpose is to describe how the various misrecognitions about *burqa* have formed in the countries impacted by this issue and to explain the cultural dynamics and the meaning of *burqa* as a symbol that has been produced under a regular framework. By unraveling the real meaning of *burqa* among the users in one of the Muslim countries, we reveal diverse meanings of *burqa* in this field. The present article focuses specifically on the motivation of people who wear *burqa* in Iran by incorporating the post-colonial feminism framework. The data collected from the cases residing in Qeshm Island have been used to provide an interactions account of how *burqa*-wearing women describe themselves in this context. However, the purpose of our study is not to provide generalizations across large populations of Muslims worldwide. Considering the aforementioned material, the present study attempts to respond to the question that "what does wearing *burqa* signify for the local female residents of Qeshm Island?"

Materials and Methods

To understand the different meanings of *burqa*, an interpretive method has been applied. According to the interpretive paradigm, meanings are constructed by humans in unique ways, depending on their context and personal frames of reference as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty 1998). In this method, subjective experiences of participants are valued. Therefore, findings emerge from the interactions between the researcher and the participants as the research progresses (Creswell 2013).

Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or fields by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally (Brewer 2000). Considering the proposal by Fontana and Frey (2005), the main data gathering method applied to this study is interview.

Semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their stories in their own words and provide greater breadth to respond the questions and speak about their experiences (Morse and Field 1995).

In order to achieve a better comprehension of the interviews and the participants' world, observations, on-field notes, and investigation of documents have also been employed. The entry requirements of the study included being local, familiar with the formal language, being Sunni, and feeling comfortable talking about the subject. This was the starting point as they were asked to share their story. The data were analyzed in several steps based on Van Manen criteria; characterize the phenomenon by using the main themes. A theme is the experience of focus, meaning, and point; it is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand (Van Manen 2016). As the data were collected, common clusters describing the phenomenon became apparent. It was then possible to synthesize these clusters into themes, while continuing to read and re-read the transcripts. Subsequently, the selective approach was utilized to analyze the data. Phrases that reflected the fundamental meanings were identified and then highlighted in the color that corresponded to the fundamental meanings. These phrases were carefully reflected upon and grouped by their corresponding fundamental meanings. In the final line-by-line approach, transcripts were read line by line to identify themes from the data (Van Manen 2007).

The general orientation of this study is as follows: The describing phrases of veil-wearing women were clustered according to the associated fundamental meanings. These clustered groups were reflected upon and looked at for any redundancy, saturation, and overlap. Finally, each clustered group was reduced to initial themes. After further reflection, the initial themes were synthesized into essential themes by reading and rereading the transcripts and pondering the relationship among the themes in accordance with van Manen's method. Finally, the themes were formulated into an interpretive thematic statement based on the linkages among the essential themes. The final interpretive statement represents the researcher's view from the participants' accounts of their life experiences. Each transcript was read and re-read for accuracy and validated by the participants regarding the meaning units, initial themes and essential themes as well as the interpretive statement. To achieve a permanent agreement between the researcher and the participants on the meaning of *burqa*, differences were discussed and agreements were reached.

Participants

A number of twelve *burqa*-wearing, local women in Qeshm Island participated in the present study. The researchers commuted to this island for an approximate period of 1 year, identifying the sites and setting at which the local residents dwell at and through establishing rapport and face-to-face interactions with these women, observed their behavior, conversed with them, and conducted the data collection for the study.

A purposive sampling technique was utilized in the present study. The researchers of this qualitative study preferred to select individuals who were rich sources of data

and capable of assisting them with developing and reconstructing the notions. The details of the participants are provided in Table 1 separately.

Trustworthiness

Each participant in the present study has been presented with an abridged essay regarding the emerging categories so as to adjust their interview to the standards of these emerging categories. This strategy, referred to as “member checking,” is essential in qualitative study so as to enhance the credibility of findings. The second strategy was assessing the accuracy of the findings; a third-party assessor was employed to review the process of coding, conceptualization, and the categories; subsequently, the analysis and findings were verified by the assessor. The third strategy was the comparative analysis through which the researchers double-checked the raw data and compared in against the theoretical scheme (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Results

In this section, the components and properties are initially presented; subsequently, based on the implications and indications pointed out by each of the participants, six main themes including *burqa* as a language, *burqa* as an identifier, *burqa* as a tradition, *burqa* as a saving, aesthetic context of *burqa*, and religious context of *burqa* are elicited.

Table 1 Details of the participants

Entry	Nickname	Age	Level of education	Marital status	Occupation	Religious orientation
1	Nahal	38	Associate degree	Married (second spouse)	Homemaker	Sunni (Shafi'i)
2	Sayeh	20	High school degree	Single	Homemaker	Sunni (Shafi'i)
3	Aseman	58	Illiterate	Widowed (spouse deceases)	Vendor	Sunni (Shafi'i)
4	Sadaf	21	High school degree	Married	Homemaker	Sunni (Shafi'i)
5	Parvaneh	31	Bachelor's degree	Married	Teacher	Sunni (Shafi'i)
6	Baran	47	Associate degree	Widowed (divorce)	Nurse	Sunni (Shafi'i)
7	Darya	43	Middle school degree	Married	Fish dealer	Sunni (Shafi'i)
8	Negar	19	Illiterate	Married	<i>Burqa</i> dealer	Sunni (Shafi'i)
9	Nila	29	High school degree	Married	Tailor	Sunni (Shafi'i)
10	Negin	49	Middle school degree	Married	<i>Burqa</i> designer	Sunni (Shafi'i)
11	Niloufar	34	High school degree	Single	Salesperson	Sunni (Shafi'i)
12	Neda	26	High school degree	Married	Tailor	Sunni

Components of *Burqa*

The components of *burqa* include strap, golden, silver, etc., fastener, and cloth. On the sides of *burqa*, there are 2 two-layer cotton straps with one of them bigger than the other. Provided that *burqa* user is right-handed, the right strap is arranged to be longer and vice versa. *Burqa* is tied on the back of their head with these straps, and a number of the participants mention that they tie their keys to their residences in their *burqa*'s straps to have them always available (Fig. 1).

The fastener placed on the strap and adds to *burqa* beauty. One of the most significant symbolic aspects of *burqa* is hidden in the fastener; the participants mentioned that noble and wealthy women use gold- and silver-studded fasteners. The majority of these women order the fasteners to reputable masters of this trade.

Sadaf, a 21-year-old homemaker, has mentioned that "we are a reputed family from the region of Lark and so my in-laws gave me a *burqa* with gold fastener as the wedding gift. Here, there are skillful *burqa* makers who have engraved the star and moon design themselves." Mentioning the significance of *burqa* with gold fastener which indicates women value, Nahal states "I have two pairs of *burqas* and wear my *burqa* with gold fastener to parties and weddings." Aseman who is a 58-year-old vendor describes the beauty of old *burqa* fasteners and says "my late mother used coins to make the fasteners; a jeweler used to melt the coins and after molding, made the fastener with green and red gemstones to decorate it. They were way more tasteful than today's *burqas* but younger women don't appreciate them." *Burqa* ornaments also symbolize and distinguish the taste and preference of women. Baran could clearly mention this distinguishing feature: "the ring is just for married women; unmarried girls don't wear ornamented *burqas* because they don't want others to find out which family they are from or how their taste is."

As the producers mention, the textile utilized in *burqa* is mainly cotton though fabrics such as Shileh, a type of highly glossy textile similar to satin, fabrics are also

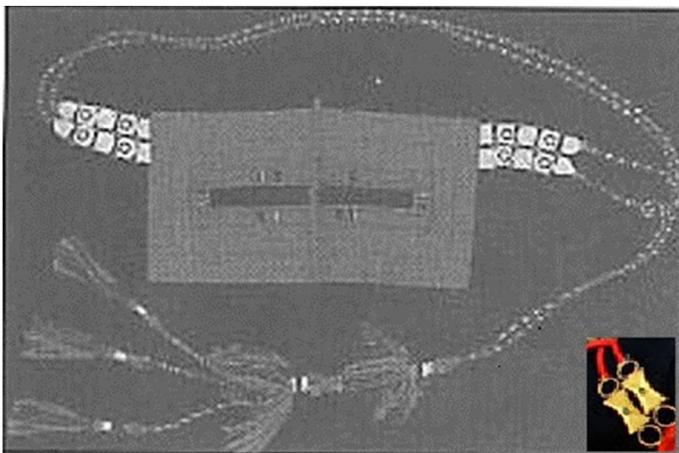


Fig. 1 The fastener of *burqa*

used in Qeshm (Fig. 2). Shileh *burqas* are for special occasions, more expensive, and available in golden, green, and red colors though due to their high shininess, the color cannot be fully differentiated. Sayeh, a 20-year-old single woman mentioned her preference for cotton *burqas* “I’d rather cotton *burqas* because in the island hot climate wearing glossy *burqas* is a hassle.” Other participants mention the comfort of using cotton *burqas* due to climate conditions and refer to it as “everyday” which is suitable for streets, shopping, and work.

The commonest colors of *burqa* are light red, crimson, golden, and black, while colors such as yellow and green have a market as well in some regions of the island. *Burqa* retailers state that “most *burqa* buyers prefer the black color for streets and public areas for quite a while and so we order black *burqas* more.” If a younger girl wears a light-colored *burqa*, her marital status cannot be determined; Nahal says “here, a suitor doesn’t look at your ring finger, they look at the kind of *burqa* you’re wearing, this way they find out if they can come to your door [for proposal].”

The Properties of *Burqa*

The culture of using *burqa* depends on factor such as age, marital status, social origin, financial status, place of residence, setting, and social interactions pertaining to the participants. Thus, colors and designs of *burqas* reflect age and generational distinctions which can result in social pressures and being confronted



Fig. 2 The cotton and Shileh *burqa*

with sarcasms and cynicism on the side of others should the styles and patterns are not observed. In Qeshm Island, girls do not commonly use *burqas* though in the villages around Qeshm, if girls do not marry until they are 15 years old, they wear niqabs. In some villages around Qeshm Island according to the Sunnah, girls wear *burqas* from the age of 9 years.

According to the data gathered from the participants' responses and the researcher's observations, single girls and older women use dark-colored *burqas* believing that these *burqas* attract less attention and bring more grace to them in the society. Aseman mentions the dark color of *burqas* "dark *burqas* means something to the people of this area; it means that we are no longer attractive and full of energy and our youth is gone." The difference in *burqas* of these two groups is the size of the eyeholes; the size of the eyeholes is bigger in case of the girls who are about to get married to reveal their youth and freshness; however, in the case of older women, these eyeholes are designed very small to represent grace and maturity of the user.

Burqa contrasts the marital status of married women from widows. In Qeshm Island, women wear *burqas* following marriage, today if a girl would rather not wear *burqa*, she needs to reach an agreement with her in-laws or husband prior to marriage. Similar to any rite of passage which accompanies a sign or change in any given individual, here this passage is reflected through changes in the type of *burqa*. Thus, marriage—as one of the most significant life events—coincides with a color change in *burqa*.

Parvaneh elaborates on her experience of reaching this agreement "my family never forced me to wear a *burqa*, this issue was discussed at the proposal night; my husband agreed at first that I wouldn't have to wear a *burqa* but then broke his promise. Now I wear a *burqa* except when I'm at school because the regulations don't allow it." Sadaf mentions men's sensitivity "our men see *burqa* as a sign of prejudice for their wives, a man rarely allows his wife to reveal her face if he knows she is beautiful." Regarding the widows, based on the customs, black *burqas* are worn for a period of 40 days; afterward, wearing a *burqa* depends on the woman's choice; if she desires a second marriage, they do not wear a *burqa* similar to minor girls; however, if she does not intend to remarry, she wears a dark *burqa* with small eyeholes. Aseman, who belongs to older generations and is illiterate, mentions her personal experience "after my husband passed away, I didn't give up the black *burqa* though I was rather young to respect his memory and keep other men away." Another sign, distinguishing widows, is simple cuffs; flamboyant and colorful cuffs exclusively belong to married women. *Burqa* makers mentioned interesting anecdotes regarding this issue; according to old traditions, if a woman making *burqas* becomes a widow, she should not sew them for newlyweds. This bad omen is contagious and brings bad luck. One *burqa* maker says "after the death of my husband, my business declined for 2 years, I had to sell my *burqas* through dealers to stores because no costumers went to me—not youngers not elders—I understand the youngers' fear of misery, what were the elders afraid of?"

Burqa distinguishes wealthy women from the deprived; using Shileh and silk fabrics with gold and silver materials for the fastener is among the most significant features of *burqas* for the wealthy.

The Context of *Burqa*

The findings obtained from interviews and the researcher's observations indicated that *burqa* is a communicative tool through which women interact with their society; it also represents the identity of these women and their local traditions. The findings of this study indicate that *burqa* is considered as a saving by the local women which is simultaneously of religious and aesthetic indications.

Burqa as a Language

Among various elements of the Islamic culture, *burqa* is the most powerful, enduring, and dynamic symbolic signifiers in Qeshm expressing the local women's sorrow, delight, marital status, poverty, and wealth while being a promotional tool for religious and racial values of Muslim women. For instance, the participants stated that widowed women in this region indicate their intention or objection toward remarriage. To this end, women are not forced to use verbal language. Baran, who has the experience of divorce, mentions the implication of *burqa* as "when my husband divorced me, I wore my *burqa* first because I didn't want to remarry, now it's been a year that I have taken off *burqa*; I want to get married." The participants as well as *burqa* retailers and makers urged that in that region *niqab* was further than *burqa* a garment to express the religious orientation of the local women. *Niqab*-wearing women are often engaged with ideological promoting of Islam in mosques and religious gatherings, while *burqa*-wearing women mostly intend to socialize or engage in financial activities.

Burqa as an Identifier

In immigration-friendly regions, the line between the local identity and non-local identity is on the verge of destruction and annihilation. As the largest Iranian island and a free-trade zone, Qeshm Island has confronted a flood of immigrants from other Iranian cities in the last two decades. When the line between local and non-local is threatened, cultural elements, especially type of outfits, act as an identity-making facilitator and perform as an identity distinguisher. Essentially, in the eyes of the participants, the implication of *burqa* is resuming their ancestors' traditional outfits. On this issue, Nahal states "it's impossible for me to give up *burqa*, *burqa* shows the racial identity of us Qeshmis," and Baran insists on these identity lines "*burqa* is my choice and a deliberate resistance from not being identical to stranger women."

Burqa as a Tradition

Some participants mentioned the patriarchal system and the traditional customs. For instance, Paraneh says "I wear *burqa* because my in-laws force me to and my husband wants me to. As a woman, I should be committed to family traditions.

Burqa must stay with me.” In some cases, women use *burqa* to remain anonymous. On this issue, Aseman says “I’m a peddler; every day, I go to the sea with tens of men and bring goods from Dubai {illegally} and sell them in the Island, when I work on sea with my *burqa* on, I can’t be identified; the coast guard doesn’t bother local women, they don’t search us...what else can we do? This is all women do here.” Sayeh states the notion of identification in a different way “I have to leave home several times a day. When I’m wearing *burqa*, they don’t know that I have left home several times and don’t talk behind my back.”

Since many women interact with non-mahrams (non-intimates) in work environment or business fields, they use *burqa* to feel more comfortable and act more freely. A further reason is that the majority of these women trade smuggled goods and this way they cannot be identified by the police. In most cases, the participants mentioned habit and said that *burqa* was a part of their wholeness. For instance, Negin says “like our eyes, *burqa* is not separated from us and is carried with us.”

***Burqa* as a Saving**

To the women, *burqa* is considered as a commodity with its financial context being essential to these local women. Sadaf refers to her *burqa* with gold as one of her most precious wedding gifts “*burqa* is like cash that a woman keeps at home; the most expensive gift that my husband gave me was this very *burqa* with several mithqals [1 mithqal = 4.25 g] of 22cs gold.” On this issue, Nahal mentions men’s support “men spend on *burqas* with heart and soul; so I chose the most expensive one.” To Baran, *burqa* is a saving for monetary adversities “after the decease of my husband, my wedding *burqa* was the last thing I sold when I was sort of money.” *Burqa* makers mentioned the business of custom-made *burqas* in the shortest time. They told the researcher “the more expensive *burqas* women order for their weddings, the more savings they will have.” Second-hand *burqa* retailers mentioned the value of the gold and the engravings on the fastener. In their view, the price of second-hand *burqas* ordered by customers {not the finished *burqas* they buy} has always been raising and it has never been seen to fall.

The Religious Context of *Burqa*

While saying prayers, worshiping in mosques, and having meals, women remove *burqa* due to religious causes. On *burqa* while eating Parvaneh says “food is respectable because nobody wants to insult blessings, while eating men and women sit separately so that women can take off their *burqas*.” On special days such as the Month of Ramadan more devoted women do not remove their *burqas* from the Morning Prayer until sunrise. Darya mentions votive prayers and *burqa* “I had a vow. When I got what my heart had wanted, I vowed to keep my *burqa* on for 7 Ramadans from sunrise to sunset for the sake of God.” A number of the participants mentioned the redemption of women through wearing *burqa*. Since matters of divinity never change but renew constantly, the participants urged that women who keep their *burqas* on in bed, though low in number, are superior. Baran says “women

engaged in Jihad twice alongside with men; when the Portuguese and British colonizers conquered the South of Iran. *Burqa* stopped the foreigners from intruding the local women. Another time was when the unveiling was enforced and they removed *burqas* by force, every *burqa* thrown into the water was replaced by another *burqa*.” The majority of participants attributed their *burqa* use to concealing their beauty from the eyes of strangers, which is emphasized in Quran for Muslim women and the followers of the prophet. On this issue, Sayeh, Sadaf, and Baran say “I just cover my beauty from non-mahrams (non-intimates) as our religion deserves to be.” Nahal refers to an anecdote from the prophet era to demonstrate the value of *burqa* “it is in the anecdotes that the prophet’s daughter covered her mouth or put her finger in her mouth while talking to non-mahrams in order for her voice not be recognized... *burqa* stops the voice of a women from tempting and stimulating men.” Aseman says “I wear *burqa* to promote Quran and preserve the Islamic community.”

The Aesthetic Context of *Burqa*

The general form of *burqa* is 4-dimensional with two oval-shaped, symmetrical surfaces in its middle pertaining to design and illustration. The elders prefer nature-inspired designs; but nowadays, unorganized and abstract designs are the fashion. Neda says “based on my own creativity, I use sequins and kalabatan to make *burqa* more beautiful which was not common in the past at all” (Fig. 3). Negar and Niloo-far agree that “sales competitions mostly depend on the embroidery on *burqa*.” To respond to the question that “which region has the most beautiful *burqa*,” the participants presented regionalist responses; every participant showed respect to *burqa* of her region and introduced it as a more beautiful *burqa* than other regions’.

Another aesthetic context of *burqa* which was mentioned by all the participants is that wearing *burqa* protects skin from the sun; for instance, Sayeh says “if there



Fig. 3 Sequins and kalabatan *burqa*

weren't a *burqa*, all the island women would have sunburnt faces." Sadaf sees *burqa* as a cover to hide her make-up from her husband's religious sensitivity "my husband is against using all kinds of make-up. But when there is a *burqa*, he doesn't care if I use lipstick, sunscreen, and blush or not. We women always love beauty and this doesn't match our men's prejudices." Parvaneh considers *burqa* designs as art "applying riding (*kohl* or *surma*) to eyes is the custom of this area; *kohl* and *burqa* together make the face look nice. If I get a chance, I will put designing henna on my hand too...*burqa* is also like a temporary painting on face...modern women tattoo, these are all for looking pretty." Aseman attends to the aesthetic implication of *burqa* from a further view "*burqa* covers the defects of women's faces; if you're old, people don't see you wrinkled face every day and think that there is a beautiful face hidden under *burqa*." Nahal mentions concealing facial defects under *burqa* "*burqa* is a good custom for me, the scars of my deep acnes on my cheeks are under *burqa* and these ugly sites are not seen."

The participants also mentioned matching *burqa* with their scarves; a number of them preferred *burqa* with a white scarf and others with a colorful scarf. Yet, older *burqa* makers and elder participants stated that red *burqas* with black scarves is the most deep-rooted form in the area of Qeshm.

Discussion

From an etic perspective, studying *burqa* might result in scattered, varied, and contradictory interpretations regarding the type of body covering and veil in Muslim regions, hence, perceiving the indication of *burqa* as a text needs to be achieved based on the cultural context and without the interference of ideological prejudices and from an emic perspective.

The recent challengeable laws around banning the wearing veil show western political leaders often view historically established communities and cultures as homogeneous units rather than recognizing them as multifaceted, dynamic and flexible constructs (Wallach Scott 2007; Yasmeen 2013). When *burqa* is interpreted from an outside view, it appears to be merely religious attire in the life world of Muslim women; nevertheless, it is not the only interpretation by the uses and retailers of *burqa*; the participants revealed the multiple worlds of *burqa* in the form of stories, anecdotes, and symbols. The true interpretational description through discourse communities is an effort to revive the oriental sociology as Said deemed proper. He believes that the west is in the limited consciousness of the life experiences of East (Said 1995). Hence, the orient was regarded as a land of regressive and silent women not merely due to their intellectual ranking, but also regarding faith and culture which is considered as an exotic and absurd phenomenon (Afshar 2008).

Investigating the Islamic veil by Muslim researchers is of varied dimensions depending on the political, historical, and cultural structures of the Muslim world; The literatures on gender in Muslim societies have highlighted by Leila Ahmed in "*Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*" and Fatima Mernissi in "*The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist's Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*" in these studies have emphasized on the misrecognition and

negative impact of the colonial and nationalist periods on women's lives. Deniz Kandiyoti also highlighted the ways in which Muslim women resisted patriarchal structures and set up their agency against such structures (Kanjwal 2010). Afsaneh Najm Abadi, Valentine Moghadam and Mir-Hosseini implied to enforce veiling in some Islamic countries. In addition, there is an idea about the certain forms of epistemic, physical, and structural violence behind *burqa* against women in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Sudan, and the same fundamentalism regimes. (Mir-Hosseini 2002, Kanjwal 2010).

The present study is an authentic research conducted by focusing on the lived experiences of *burqa*-wearing women residing in Qeshm. Therefore, the results obtained from the present study vary with the existing literature and in a number of dimensions appeared to be contradictory. Although *burqa* is imposed on women by the oppressive beliefs of patriarchal systems, it has evolved into a dynamic, perpetual mouthpiece of women in traditional societies (Mazurski 2015). The findings of the present study revealed that *burqa* in Iran is a part of women's everyday lives with multifunctional applications more than an object merely based on moral theologies taught by religious traditions. With this interpretation, *burqa*, as a social signifier in the traditional society of Qeshm, is capable of categorizing the women based on their age group. By selecting a *burqa* with color and design proportionate to the customary traditions and observers' expectations, it is determined that the woman under *burqa* deserves what extent of respect and social consideration. *Burqa* also represents their marital status. In a traditional society where women are deprived from the opportunity of interacting with non-mahram men regarding their marital status and such interactions deemed to be unforgivable sins, symbolic use of *burqa* can determine their intent and purpose of the residents of a region. Windowed women and single girls are two of the groups benefiting from this tradition; widowed women who do not intend to remarry, send this message to others by wearing black *burqas* with small eyeholes to express their demand for respect and social considerations in social interactions, while removing *burqa* conveys their willingness for remarriage. Single girls can express their taste through wearing modern *burqas* and increase their opportunities in seeking marriage.

Identity implications is one of the techniques of finding a meaning to life among the women through wearing *burqa*. In immigration-friendly regions, the line between the local identity and non-local identity is on the verge of destruction and annihilation. Qeshm Island as the largest Iranian island and a free-trade zone has confronted a flood of immigrant in the last two decades. When the line between local and non-local is threatened, cultural elements, especially the types of outfits, act as an identity-making facilitator and perform as an identity distinguisher. *Burqa* is the line between self and others and creates a distinct identity.

Not only is *burqa* a choice based on the women's ethical identity, but it also determines the financial status and social origins of these women. In fact, the dominance of Islamic values emphasizing simple lifestyle, equality, and sisterhood connections between Muslim women has prevented the emergence of these disparities in the public sphere. Nevertheless, in private contexts and in the network of relatives, these disparities surface in the form and financial value of *burqa*. In practice, this logic indicates a relative autonomy of meaning-producing community. In other words, a

cultural product with eminent religious representation on a global scope which is consecrating for women can simultaneously be intensified for the users regarding its financial value.

Read and Bartkowski (2000) claim that Muslim women demonstrate that they are capable of constructing modes of religious being that further their own desired interests. This means that simultaneous to the formation of this attitude that religious traditions distance women from social-economic progress, they pursue their goals by critiquing the relationship between text and meaning (Bartkowski and Read 2003). By maintaining the aesthetic and financial contexts of *burqa*, the participants in the present study expressed that any text is complex, unstable, impossible, and irreducible, at least in special cases. Religious traditions, though “global” in their ideological identifications, are lived in the local thoughts (Knott 2015). For instance, wearing a veil in Egypt helps a woman “harmonize with,” while in the USA make them “distinct” from society (Read and Bartkowski 2000). According to Derrida, this kind of assumption about *burqa* by users refers to the concept of “Deconstruction” (Derrida 1992). It is a process of exploring the categories and concepts that tradition has imposed on a word, and the history behind it, because deconstruction examines the internal logic of any given text or discourse, it has helped to analyze the contradictions inherent between different schools of thought and as such it has solved radical analysis and particularly ideological critiques.

Since the participants mentioned the intrinsic value of *burqas*, it is apparent that the financial value of a *burqa* for the users is significant regarding the amount of gold, silver, and precious coins and gems applied in the fastener of a *burqa*. Considering this, *burqa* is not merely a religious or cultural product for redemption in the world of spirits; it is also similar to savings in case of monetary adversity and a family commodity for the daughters of that family which is passed to other family members. This finding indicates an extent of materialistic rationality and exchange attitude. The occurrence of a ritual to purchase a *burqa* with gold fasteners or ordering a valuable *burqa*, especially at proposal or the birth of a first child, fortifies this hypothesis that a component of *burqa* indication is a tangible exchange between two families or two individuals. Moreover, *burqa* can be defined as a product for which the community of women plan for and consult on, determine authority and base based on it, and legitimize and organize a portion of their demands. A number of these demands include applying cosmetic products such as lipstick, cream powder, sunscreen cream, and blush in the public sphere which is a vice and against the sharia in the view of the patriarchal society.

Feminist studies of Islam contribute to an improvement of work on women's engagement of conservative religions that has uncovered an array of surprising and creative ways women benefit from their participation in men-dominated religious traditions (Prickett 2015) also (Avishai 2008; Bartkowski and Read 2003; Mahmood 2011; Read and Bartkowski 2000). An Islamic symbol may demonstrate a “capacity for action” not captured in conventional framings of Islam and gender (Mahmood 2011).

A part of *burqa*'s indication originates from the interactions between signifiers and other signifiers which come into being in relation to other indications and ideas and simultaneously occupy a varied scope which, in practice, is revealed

as a mutual relation when the relation is discussed. In describing the indication of *burqa* and insisting on this practical application in Qeshm Island, the participants introduced it as a tool for sustaining the social distance between the local population and the immigrants. The majority of the local residents of this area are Sunni and the followers of the Shafi'i School, while the minority immigrants follow the official religion of the country, Shia Islam. Moreover, most governmental positions and profitable trading professions are occupied by the immigrants, while the declining businesses of fishing, fish sales, and paddling are the only source of income for the locals. The emphasis on distinguishing the local women through *burqa* is meaningful in this context. The local residents have not confined themselves to *burqa*, but by wearing colorful, floral, and thin chadors, they try to distinguish themselves from the immigrants who commonly wear plain black chadors or manteaux with trousers. Robert Wuthnow believe that meaning analysis in the framework of articulation between the ideology and social environment is regarded as a scientific method (Wuthnow 2009). A study conducted on this issue indicates that the interpretations of the notion of veil are thoroughly different in societies with a majority of Muslim population such as Indonesia and societies with a minority of Muslim population as in India. A lower number of women refer their veil-wearing to their religious obedience, while a majority of them declare that the veil is discreet, fashionable, and convenient. Muslim women who are the minority in their society respond their veil-wearing to varied causes: from the arguments indicating their being inspired by their religion to veil's being convenient and to oppose being stereotyped or discriminated against (Wagner et al. 2012).

Based on a general conclusion, it can be declared that *burqa* in Iran is liberated from the dominance of religion to some extent, since religion emphasizes unifying and standardizing the cultural behaviors and attempts to assign its followers to its desired lifestyle. However, in Qeshm Island, *burqa* is of diversity in form and shape and of variety in implications, interpretations, and implications. Thus, on this cultural ground, there exists a subjectivity of women and these women signify and press forward *burqa* in their desired fashion. While women's rights movements in postmodern context have highlighted the historical and cultural different specificities of gendered inequalities and intended to compensate for past weaknesses and insufficiencies (Mohammadi 2017), religious texts and religious dress need to be situated and understood within their contemporary, and diverse, socio-political contexts.

Analyzing the implication of *burqa* from within, observing the value and norm system of Islamist sub-cultures, and attending the practical necessities of *burqa* in varied Muslim communities in legislating laws to permit or ban *burqa* are of significance. Since the contradictory and various current policies of the west regarding *burqa* lack such cognition, a number of countries such as Belgium and France have thoroughly rejected it and announced it as human rights violation and countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany, etc., have posed more moderate and yet confining policies on the issue of *burqa*. Considering the results of the present study, it can be proposed that the researchers in the Muslim world conduct interpretative and ethnographic studies to analyze the implication of *burqa* for various groups of Muslim women so as to reveal the ignored aspects of this lived reality.

Research Limitations

The present study has not included the views of men as the most influential authority to permit wearing or removing *burqa*. In this study, the indication of *burqa* is studied among the Shafi'i minority in the south of Iran; considering the diversity of ethnic groups and various religious tendencies including Shiite and Sunni, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other ethnicities and groups. It is worth mentioning that *burqa* in Iran is regarded as a sub-culture, while in the Arab world is a dominant culture. A further limitation of this study is a lack of authentic studies on the subject; the majority of studies have been conducted on the veil which is a more general phenomenon than *burqa*. Hence, in the literature of this study few previous studies discussing the implication of *burqa* from a point of view of *burqa*-wearing women have been referred to.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Human and Animal Rights For this type of study, formal consent is not required.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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