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Two Different Narratives of Hijab in Iran: *Burqa* and *Niqab*

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Abstract

Burqa and *niqab* are currently the two most challenging manifestations of face veil in the West. Developed based on an interpretive method, the present research is an attempt to study and analyze semantic implications of face veil among 24 Muslim Iranian women in Baluchestan Province and Qeshm Island in Iran. Semi-structured interviews and field observations were employed. The findings indicated that the connotation of *niqab* for the ethnic-religious minority women in Baluchestan was different from that of *burqa* for the religious minority women living on Qeshm Island. The Baluch women wear *niqab* as a sign of their collective identity and differentiation as well as maximal religious commitment vis-à-vis Shia-Persian majority; whereas *burqa* more than representing religious or ethnic identity, is an expressive language for native women to differentiate their personal identity. *Burqa*, produced in different colors and forms, is rich enough to show the marital status, social class, economic wellbeing and the age of women wearing it in a traditional patriarchal society; whereas all-black *niqab* prevents the identification and differentiation of the users. *Burqa* and *niqab* trade in both regions under study has led to the women-only employment in its manufacturing market, sewing and sales, although applying gold threads on some brands of *burqa* has turned them into capital goods, playing a more decisive role in socio-economic empowerment of women in Qeshm. Given the findings of this study, it may be concluded that various types of face veils in the world of Islam represent certain signs and symbols within ethnic-religious structures that need further deliberation before enactment of any law.

Keywords Face veil · Burqa · Niqab · Muslim women · Islamic culture

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Introduction

Although face covering is currently a factor distinguishing or differentiating Muslim women from women following other religions, it also played a significant role in many other religions, including Orthodox and Catholic Christianity as well as Judaism before the advent of Islam (Chowdhury et al. 2017).

Veiling or *hijab* has a long history and background in majority of Islamic societies. Although based on the Quranic principles, there are many similarities among various Muslim communities regarding the culture of *hijab*. The diverse forms of *hijab* among Muslims has its roots in cultural, ethnic and tribal backgrounds. According to many Muslim scholars, although *hijab* is a religious phenomenon, it is also strongly influenced by geo-culture (Byng 2010). The emergence of various styles of *hijab* in different countries is so diverse that some studies call it “Veil as a fashion phenomenon” or subculture of *hijab* (Slininger 2014); “Abaya”, “Khimar”, and “Al-Amira” in Arabia, “Black Chador”, “Shayla” and “scarf” in Iran; “burqa” and “niqab” in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Muslim India or “Purdah” in Muslim Pakistan; “Kerudung” in South East Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, and “Buibui” in East Africa are some dynamic styles of “Hijab” and the interplay between culture and religion as well (Nistor 2017).

Among different Islamic veils, *burqa* and *niqab* are more challengeable (Chowdhury et al. 2017). However outstandingly different in form and content from a region to another, *burqa* and *niqab*, in all their diversity, share the common definition that either one is a piece of cloth that covers the face leaving only the eyes uncovered. The general form of *niqab* is a face veil which covers women's hair, neck, shoulders and face, and only the two eyes are visible, while *burqa* is a kind of mask which covers just part of the face. After the 2001 September 11 attacks, in Western societies, one would witness a wave of protest against militant Islam hidden behind the *niqab* and *burqa*, arguing that such covers not only obscures facial expressions but also seek to ‘hide’ the users’ real intentions, i.e. imposing Islamic rule and pursuing Islamicization of the West (Ballard et al. 2016). Since Islamic veil has been introduced as an alleged symbol of terrorism and Islamism, governments in some Western countries, under increasing public pressure, have adopted policies banning *burqa* and *niqab* in public space. In the meantime, some organizations and individuals are of the opinion that the users of *niqab* and *burqa* should be able to freely choose them without any compulsion. Hence, they argue that wearing a veil should be viewed as a matter of religious freedom (Al-Hejin 2015).

Discussion about Muslim women's veil is not limited to politicians but is also a subject of hot debates among feminist thinkers. Leila Ahmed has shown that *niqab*, which is traditionally a symbol of patriarchy and oppression of women, has been seen as a re-appropriation by Muslim women to empower themselves (Ahmed 2011). Another group of feminists maintain that *niqab* and *burqa* are symbols of Muslim women's lack of agency and their subordination to Islamic patriarchal norms (Rottmann and Ferree 2008). The advocates of this approach argue that a ban on veil is justified on grounds of gender equality and protection of Muslim women against patriarchal oppression.

There seems to be a lacuna regarding a proper understanding of what Islamic veil signifies. One of the main objectives of this study was to fill this vacuum. Review of related literature and in-depth interviews conducted for this study show that majority of the users of Islamic veil reveal very similar and equally diverse motivations, ranging from religious observance and modesty, avoiding the gaze of male harassment, resisting sexual objectification and taking control of their own bodies, to asserting a Muslim identity, resisting assimilation and exhibiting a symbol of women's high social status (Rottmann and Ferree 2008; Afshar 2008; Wing and Smith 2005; Droogsma 2007; Leet-Otley 2019; Tajudin et al. 2019; Mohammadi and Rastegar 2018).

Badinter claims that *niqab* and *burqa* are the symbols of the oppression of a sex, others state that wearing Islamic veil is an act of submission (Carle 2004; Williams and Vashi 2007). With *burqa*, women are isolated, excluded, silenced and dehumanized (Wagner et al. 2012). Wing and Smith (2005) argue that wearing *burqa* provides a sensation of seeing without being seen, of being equal to men on a mental level rather than being a sexual object (Wing and Smith 2005). To Aziz 2014, wearing *burqa* and *niqab* is the proliferation of the most radical type of Islamic veil (Aziz 2014).

The present research studied the semantic implications of *burqa* and *niqab* in two regions in Iran, namely, Qeshm Island and the Province of Sistan and Baluchestan. The local population of the two regions under study can be distinguished or differentiated from other residents based on their commitment to a number of traditions, including polygyny, female genital mutilation, and wearing two specific types of Islamic veil, i.e. *burqa* and *niqab*, which are solely customary in Iran.

Qeshm is the largest island of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Persian Gulf. Since long time back, 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 particular geographical location and the existence of local boat (*lenj*) building mills. Wearing *burqa* is a cultural custom for Sunni/Shafi'i and Persian women who live in a country where majority of the population are Shia and Persian in this region. Although all *burqa*-wearing women appear to be identical in the first glance, this cultural product is of varied colors, forms, and types, each conveying a specific meaning. Those wearing *burqa* are aware of these types and can distinguish and differentiate varied *burqa*-wearing groups of women pertaining to their region from those coming from other regions. Since recognition and realization of the social norm and even interaction with this community is not easy for outsiders, a challenging gap has emerged between the discourses of "insiders" and "outsiders" regarding this issue (Mohammadi and Rastegar 2018).

In Sistan and Baluchestan Province, bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan, *niqab* is a common veil among Sunni/Hanafi and the Baluch women, who are recognized as religious and ethnic minorities in Iran. According to the Maliki and Hanafi jurisprudence covering of the face and hands by women is not a religious obligation.¹

¹ For the Hanbali and Shafi'i schools which are more conservative, covering entire body and face are required (Slininger 2014).

However, the followers of these two religions wear black niqab which covers the entire face and body down to the shoulder or feet, leaving just a mesh screen over the eyes.

The main purpose of this study is to describe semantic implications of *burqa* and *niqab* in the two different ethnic and religious contexts. This study is specifically focused on the motivation of people who wear *burqa* and *niqab* in Iran. To this end, the multicultural feminist framework has been used. The necessary data have been collected from the respondents residing in Qeshm and Baluchestan to provide an interactional account of how *burqa* and *niqab*-wearing women express themselves in different contexts. However, the purpose of this study is not to generalize the findings to large populations of Muslims worldwide. Hence, attempts have been made to find an appropriate answer to the following question: How have *burqa* and *niqab* found diverse meanings for the Muslim women in Baluchestan Province and Qeshm Island?

Research Method

This study has focused on the *burqa* and *Niqab*-wearing Muslim women in two regions in Iran, namely, Qeshm Island and Sistan and Baluchestan Province. Interpretive method has been used to understand different semantic implications of *burqa* and *niqab*. 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). The techniques of gathering data were semi-structured interviews and field observation. Since the majority of participants usually opened up with an issue affecting their lives more seriously, a better opportunity was availed to describe, categorize, and compare them with a more accurate prioritization.

The data were analyzed in several steps based on Van Manen's criteria, i.e. characterizing 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.

Participants

A number of twelve *burqa*-wearing women in Qeshm Island and the same number of women who wear *niqab* in Baluchestan region accepted to participate in this study and each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min. In this study purposive sampling method were applied to meet very narrow or specific criteria and find participants who had very specific experiences regarding the *burqa* and *niqab*. To obtain a representative sample, a range of face veiled women who were carrying out the daily affairs of life in public areas including the main streets (4 participants); parks (6 participants), grand bazar (6 participants), and workplaces (8 participants)

were selected. These areas are located in the north, center and south of Qeshm and Baluchestan regions descend economically concerning the socioeconomic status of that area. The purpose of this study and its significance were explained to the participants prior to gaining their trust concerning the confidentiality of interviews; they had a right to leave the interview at any time, and were allowed to observe and discuss moral issues during the interviews in a safe and private environment. Details of the participants are provided in Table 1 separately.

Trustworthiness

To be ensuring of the validity of data the “iterative questioning” approach has been applied; this strategy helped researcher to persuade participants express their ideas honestly and frankly. In terms of enhancing the credibility of findings, each participant in this study has been presented with an abridged essay regarding the emerging categories so as to adjust their individual interview to the standards of these emerging categories; this strategy is called member checking. Third-party assessor was also employed to review the process of coding, conceptualization, and the categories. Frequent sessions between the researcher and experts scholars who were familiar with the subject and the context also provide the possibility for the investigator to recognize the own biases and preferences during the four stages of data analyzing including discovering the concepts, discovering the context, discovering the processes and combining the categories. Subsequently, the analysis and findings were verified by the assessor. Furthermore, researchers in the current study have applied double-checked strategy to compare the unprocessed data with the theoretical scheme and use the “reflective commentary” strategy to appear the “progressive subjectivity” and monitoring the researcher’s own developing constructions, which the writers consider critical in establishing credibility.

Results

Based on the semantic implications and indications pointed out by two groups of the participants who wear *burqa* and *niqab*, three categories have been identified. The objective of this study was to analyze the backgrounds, functions and consequences of wearing *burqa* and *niqab* separately in Qeshm and Baluchestan.

The Contexts of *Burqa* and *Niqab*

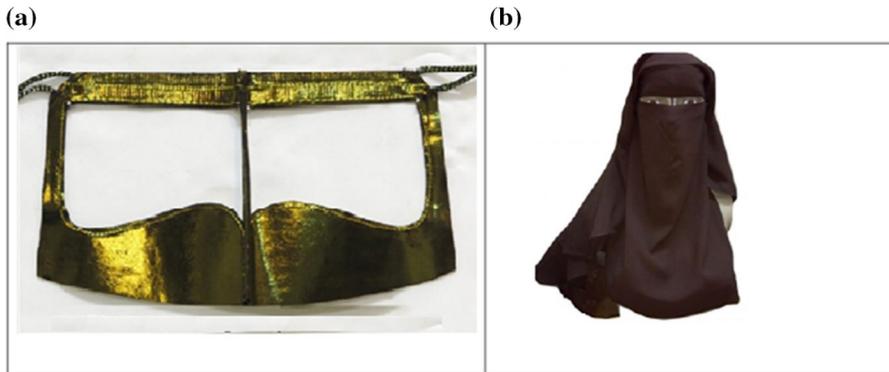
In Iran, *burqa* and *niqab* are only small subcultures of *hijab* and are merely used in two Sunni-populated regions that share common normative contexts. They are used under the influence of families and social traditions. *Burqa* (Fig. 1a) is the most popular Islamic veil in Qeshm Island, while *niqab* (Fig. 1b) is widely used in Baluchestan. Although these two Islamic veils have significant differences, many common normative contexts were found for wearing both, which will be discussed below.

Table 1 Demographic detail of participants

Entry	Name	Type of veil	Wearing veil (years)	Age	Marital status	Ethnicity	Religion	Region
1	Nahal	Burqa	21	38	Married	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
2	Sayeh	Burqa	1	20	Single	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
3	Aseman	Burqa	32	58	Widow	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
4	Sadaf	Burqa	3	21	Married	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
5	Parvaneh	Burqa	7	31	Married	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
6	Baraan	Burqa	9	47	Widow	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
7	Darya	Burqa	12	43	Married	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
8	Negar	Burqa	6	19	Married	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
9	Nila	Burqa	10	29	Married	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
10	Negin	Burqa	15	49	Married	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
11	Niloofer	Burqa	4	34	Single	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
12	Neda	Burqa	2	26	Married	Persian	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Qeshm
13	Mania	Niqab	5	27	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan
14	Malek	Niqab	15	55	Widow	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan
15	Gohar	Niqab	20	45	Widow	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan
16	Faezeh	Niqab	5	20	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan
17	Zomorrod	Niqab	7	28	Single	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan
18	Afsaneh	Niqab	9	27	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan
19	Jamileh	Niqab	11	31	Single	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan
20	Fatemeh	Niqab	4	22	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan
21	Ayeshah	Niqab	3	23	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan
22	Ameneh	Niqab	7	25	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan
23	Maliheh	Niqab	8	20	Single	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan

Table 1 (continued)

Entry	Name	Type of veil	Wearing veil (years)	Age	Marital status	Ethnicity	Religion	Region
24	Pari	Niqab	15	57	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan

**Fig. 1** **a** Burqa in Qeshm Island, **b** Niqab in Baluchestan

The normative requirements of a patriarchal community.

As it was argued, *niqab* and *burqa* are two Islamic face veils that women wear for expression of Muslim identity and manifesting their distinction from the others. Wood (2015) described them as personal objects used to announce the identities and heritage of the users and to personalize their environments (Wood 2015). Although the referents of this requirement in the first place are family traditions and religious persuasion, in the socialization process it becomes a personal habit and the person wears it unconsciously without which she feels lacking something (Tristam 2013). Clarke (2013) has added some other sub-themes such as appropriate gender-relations, social-esteem and self-confidence, which are available for them in the society (Clarke 2013).

Afsaneh, a *niqab*-wearing woman from Baluchestan, one of the respondents, attributes her Islamic veil to the neighborhood and the obligation to use it: “In the beginning, I wore *niqab* because you could see no one without it outdoors, but today, I feel blushed to go out without my *niqab*. Jamileh, another respondent, said: “I can’t let go of it. I even sometime like to wear it in women-only parties.” Some respondents from Qeshm such as Sadaf, Sayeh and Baraan said: “*Burqa* is now part of our body like our eyes. It is a habit and we are addicted to it.”

1. Following family instructions and tradition:

History, particularly in Muslim countries such as Egypt, Iran and Turkey, bears testimony that even during *hijab* ban by governments, women did not remove

their Islamic veil and many families forced women, daughters and wives to keep their *hijab* (Moghadam 2003). The tradition was stricter in the case of the wives of the kings and nobles (Chowdhury et al. 2017). Therefore, many researchers are of the opinion that *niqab* and *burqa* are a tradition; there is no strong connection between them and religion. In some countries, women do not wear it based on a fatwa (religious decree) since the user say they are part of their habit and family honor (Chesler 2010).

Participants attributed part of the normative obligation for wearing burqa and niqab to the patriarchal influence of men in the family to safeguard their family traditions and prestige. Maliheh, 20, from Baluchestan said: “I do not like it that much but I wear it for my father’s prestige.” Zomorrod, another respondent, said: “Our men have entrenched prejudice against their female family members. They feel ashamed when they hear someone speaking about their sister, wife or mother. That is why everyone in my family wears a niqab. Pausing for a moment, Faezeh, the next respondent said: “My brothers will kill me if I avoid wearing niqab. Once my brother’s fiancée was seen without a niqab and he began a brawl and wanted to break his engagement.” She continued: “Another time I wanted to go out without a niqab with my brother. My father beat me (and then she delivered a loud laughter)”. Many participants in Qeshm, pointed to the family instructions to wear burqa. Parvaneh said: “I wear burqa because my husband wants me to. As a woman, I should be committed to family traditions.” According to Negin, another participant, burqa is not a matter of today or yesterday. “The tradition of wearing burqa has passed from generation to generation. My mother still has some burqa veils of her mother.”

2. Publicity and promotion of Islamic veil by religious circles and scholars:

Some religious and political circles and platforms in Iran, like mosques, seminaries, Friday prayers, Judiciary, and national TV are among hotspots for publicity and promotion of Islamic *hijab* (normally black *chador* or head to toe gown) but in Sunni-majority regions, the muftis publicize wearing *burqa* and *niqab* (Mohammadi and Rastegar 2018).

Burqa and niqab promote the culture of piety and simply carry the concept of modesty (Abdel-Mageed 2008). According to Hamdan (2010), *hijab* has come to symbolize everything from Islamic Fundamentalism and women’s subordination to freedom of religious practices and women’s empowerment and equality (Hamdan 2010). This has also implied the Quranic command to the Prophet Mohammad’s wives to choose the cover themselves.

All Islamic groups refer to *hijab* (black *chador* with Shia Muslims and *burqa* and *niqab* with Sunni Muslims) as “Islamic jihad of women” (Wadud 2007; Yegenoglu 2006).

Ameneh, Baluch participant, admitted that wearing *niqab* has religious significance and function: “This veil helps me protect men and myself from committing sin. I believe that by following the tradition of the Prophet’s wives, I will have the privilege of being in their company in the Heaven.” Pari also said: “... When

I'm a Muslim, I have to accept its commandments and ordinances; otherwise it is tantamount to committing a sin." Fatemeh, too, said: "I fight for the truth against the falsehood with my niqab. I obey the law of God and have nothing to do with the law of human beings even if all human beings say niqab is illegal or is a sign of intellectual backwardness." participant from Qeshm, too, offered similar religious reasons for wearing burqa. Darya is of the opinion that burqa is a sign of servitude: "I had taken a vow of wearing hijab if my wish was fulfilled. When my wish was fulfilled, I took a vow of keeping my burqa from morning until sunset for the sake of God."

Functions of *Burqa* and *Niqab*

The findings of this study indicate that *burqa* and *niqab* possess some similar, some different and even some contradictory functions. The functions of these two forms of *hijab*, based on interviews with the participants, are discussed below.

About Similar Functions of *Burqa* and *Niqab*

1. Unique Islamic Fashion

There are some evidences indicating that the *burqa* and *niqab* can be considered as an Islamic fashion (Yotka 2016). Since these two cultural elements exclusively belong to the Muslim women, researchers speak of a very complicated manifesto belonging to the locals. They argue that adoption of Islamic fashion by Muslim women is a kind of resistance against the highly profitable Western fashion industry. In fact, Islamic fashion that has provided Muslim women with a kind of diversity in their social life. Miller (2005) calls them bottom-up diffusion of fashion, taking into account the fact that the ideas of high-fashion creators are rooted in the practices coming from popular culture or street-styles of hijab become inspirations for the creations of high-fashion house (Miller 2005). Nistor (2017) maintains that *burqa* and *niqab* are roughly two representations of *hijab* that have been integrated into fashionable life styles (Nistor 2017). According to Clarke (2013), freedom from the pressures of fashion also plays a decisive role for Muslims wearing *niqab* in Canada (Clarke 2013).

A great number of participants such as Nila, Aseman, Gohar, Ayesheh and Afsaneh referred to *burqa* and *niqab* as "a sort of local and differentiating fashionism". Ayesheh said: "With this niqab I will be identified as a Muslim woman wherever I am in this world, with some others lacking something like this." Sadaf said: "Burqa is not something that foreigners could develop its equivalent or a better one. ... It is a handmade product without any date of expiration. This is because it is not a faddish product to become fashionable for a short time and then become outdated one day." Nila, too, said: "I have a special burqa for each occasion; I mean, for mourning and wedding ceremonies, outdoor, praying and parties. This is quite a collection for me!" Referring to "fashion of resistance", Nakhel and Gohar say they do not have to waste their money to keep up-to-date with ever-changing costly fashions when they wear their traditional veil.

Feminine Trade

In spite of the fact that some raw materials for *burqa* and *niqab* are imported, design, sewing and sale of this homemade product are exclusive to women. The prosperity of this home business is acceptable to the patriarchal society which facilitates interaction among women outside their houses (Waninger 2015). In closed societies, where there is no possibility of employment and social role for women or it is restricted—if any—*burqa* trade has grown into one of the most popular social activities for women in Qeshm Island and Sistan and Baluchestan Province. Negar, Nila, Ameneh and Sayeh consider it an income-raising activity that supplies a commodity, while their husbands do not consider it to be necessary. Malek and Aseman said they earn their living by *burqa* trade after the death of their husbands. Malek Naz, 55, said: “My husband had several wives and he could not afford paying sustenance for my children. I had to earn a living for the house and my children; therefore. I began sewing niqab and earning money.”

The diversity in form has led to production of a specific form of *burqa* that is decorated with gold threads and has turned it into a capital good. In comparison with other face covers, the gold-worked *burqa* enjoys an inherent economic value. Due to gold cloth and gold rings worked on *burqa*, it is considered as capital good among women with high value in transactions (Mohammadi and Rastegar 2018). Some participants expressed their views on this special function of *burqa*:

“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 fasteners. In their view, the price of second-hand *burqas* ordered by customers (not the finished *burqas* they buy) has always been on the rise and it has never declined. Sadaf referred to her gold-worked *burqa* as one of her most precious wedding gifts, saying: “*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.”

Negin said: “I have ordered a gold-worked *burqa* for my daughter who will celebrate the onset of her puberty next month. She is not supposed to wear it on streets. It is to encourage her commitment to Islamic veil and a saving for future.” She added: “Our men pay more for these things, so I took the chance to buy a gold-worked *burqa* for her.” In addition to the above, the participants talked about unique functions of *burqa* in Qeshm Island that specifically distinguishes it from the functionality of *niqab* in Baluchestan.

About Distinct Functions of *Burqa* and *Niqab*:

Burqa as a Language:

Although women in both contexts are under the domination of values, traditions and norms of patriarchal system, based on the opinions of the respondents in Qeshm, *burqa* is rich in broad semiotic aspects for description of facts a woman is unable to express openly and easily in a patriarchal society. Among various elements of the Islamic culture, *burqa* is the most powerful, enduring, and dynamic symbolic signifier expressing the local women's sorrow, delight, marital status, poverty, and wealth while being a promotional tool for religious and ethical values of Muslim women. For instance, the respondents stated that widowed women

in this region indicate their intention or objection toward remarriage through their face veil. To this end, women are not forced to use verbal language (Mohammadi and Rastegar 2018).

Baraan, a widow from Qeshm said: “I wear a burqa usually worn by single girls in Qeshm Island. This burqa tells men that I’m single for the time being, so it tempts men to come forth and propose marriage.” Gohar, a Baluch widow, said: “After my husband’s death, I wanted to marry another man, but I never had the courage to express it.” She talked about prejudiced brothers who banned her from socializing in the society, considering her remarriage a shame for themselves. Malek, too, said: “The merit of wearing niqab lies in persuading Muslim woman to silence in the society. Is it possible for others to hear my voice clear enough from behind this niqab?” She had the answer for her question: “not at all”. Mania, a *niqab*-wearing woman from Baluchestan pointed to a religious story, saying: “We follow the path of the Prophet’s daughter. She used to wear niqab and put her finger in her mouth to avoid her voice being heard by namahram or those not immediately related to her.”

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Based on the interviews made, *niqab did not have such a function with the Baluchi women at all. They eventually use niqab as a covering that bans display of such acts as speaking, drinking, eating and laughing in the society. One of the key functions of niqab is said to be “silence for women when in public places”. Jamileh explained it this way: “The dignity of niqab-wearing women lies in the fact that it hides all face-to-face encounters with those not immediately related to you.”*

1. Burqa as an Identifier

Burqa is produced in various colors, styles and forms. The signs on *burqa* including color, type of fabric, style of sewing and embellishments distinguish women in Qeshm from those living in the smaller islands nearby. The locals, both men and women, can easily distinguish the style, neighborhood, clan and tribes of women through the *burqa* they are wearing. They can also distinguish native women from non-natives (Mohammadi and Rastegar 2018). Meanwhile, the all-black *niqab* has minimum diversity in form and lacks any semiotic element to identify the person wearing it (Al-Mahadin 2013). Some studies reveal that it is the length of the *niqab* that in some cases indicates the degree of religious tendency of the one wearing it (Zempi 2016; Piela 2019). The *niqabs* extending to the back heels are specially used by women studying at Quranic or seminary schools. This form of *hijab* was mandatory for all women in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule (Slininger 2014). Zomorod said: “I don’t like wearing long niqabs. They are mainly meant for Wahhabis.”

In Qeshm, however, *burqa* is special *hijab* for native women and based on its form, color and type of fabric they distinguish native women from those living in

nearby areas and small islands around Qeshm. Nahal states “it’s impossible for me to give up *burqa* because it shows the ethnic identity of women in Qeshm.”. Baraan insists on these identity lines saying that “*burqa* is my choice and a deliberate resistance against being identical with stranger women.”

Burqa as an Aesthetic Symbol

With their heads and faces covered, Muslim women are practically unable to show off their beauties through colors, chignon models and short hair styles in public sphere. Therefore, to exhibit themselves in fashion and beauty, they use forms of fashionable accessories that are adapted to various kinds of veil (Bartkowski and Read 2003).

The skills of women in using accessories not only are a sign of innovation and creativity, but also an indication of their style, liking and ability in handicrafts. The commonly used designs for *burqa* in Qeshm are needle works, satin stitch, filigree and the like. Employing handicrafts on *burqa* boosts the value and beauty of women (Mohammadi and Rastegar 2018). Neda said: “Based on my own creativity, I use sequins and kalabatan to make *burqa* more beautiful which was not common in the past at all.” Aseman has asked her daughters to display their art of needle point on *burqa* if they want good suitors. “This is the only way to show the beauty of face and manner to the suitors, (she smiles). They should not appear before the suitors with uncovered head and face”. Parvaneh considers *burqa* designs an art of “applying riding (kohl or surma) to eyes which is the custom of this area; kohl and *burqa* together make the face look nice.”

Such a scope of activity is very limited in case of *niqab* because it is confined to satin stitch and using hair pin as the neck-piece. To that end, Faezeh said: “I have a lot of hair pins and precious stones and I use them on my *burqa*.” Fatemeh uses various types of polished black stones on the lower hem of her *niqab* as amulets. Another group of *niqab*-wearing women do not believe in designing their hijab “because it attracts the attention of men.” Malakeh and Pari believe in the same doctrine: “The philosophy behind using *niqab* is keeping oneself away from the gaze and touch of those not immediately related to you (namahrams). It is an instance of committing sin if we use it as an instrument to beautify ourselves.”

Another group of *niqab*-wearing women consider anti-beautification policy of *niqab* as a key factor to spiritually purify the society and internalize strategies that could decrease the potential for increased public attention and harassment. In this sense, they do not approve of decorated *burqa* because “it tempts women and attracts male gaze.”

Participants from Baluchestan listed specific functions for *niqab* that would not be properly realized in case of wearing *burqa*. They rely on the total anonymity advantage of the user of *niqab* in public sphere and its capability to uniform women in public sphere. According to some researchers, it is the main factor behind legal ban on face veil in the many countries like Austria (2017), Denmark

and Norway (2018), France (2010) as well as Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, ... (Piela 2019). Participants of this study expressed their opinions on specific functions of *niqab* and anonymity of the users which we will discuss hereunder as two sub-themes.

About Specific Functions of *Niqab*

1. *Niqab* Keeps Women Anonymous

While in view of the insiders, anonymity of users of *niqab* is regarded as a virtue and a factor for empowerment of women in handling their social relations (Mahmood 2011), outsiders define it as a means of generating social terror, publicizing a specific ideology and reducing effectuality of social interaction (Zempi 2016; Bilge 2010).

Tarlo's findings are about areas of London frequented or avoided by Muslim women who assessed whether they felt sartorially conspicuous in a given neighborhood (Tarlo 2007). Such level of cleavage in the understanding of meaning or interpretation of a social phenomenon led to demonstrations and resistance by the *hijab*-wearing women in response to the government bans on Islamic veils, particularly in liberal-democrat states. On that account, in this study the participants were asked to express their opinion on the anonymity of the users by wearing *niqab*. Afsaneh said: "I feel as if no one identifies me. This gives me a sense of grandeur and relief because no one talks behind my back or even judges me. I know there are people sometimes abusing tradition of the Prophet (pbuh), like the beggars you see here and there."

Confirming this, Jamileh said: "Many beggars wear *niqab* to remain anonymous. They do not have a heartfelt belief in *niqab* and wear it to safeguard their dignity because the town is small and there is the possibility of being identified ..." Zomorrod gave a hint on who the beggars are: "Illegal Afghan, Pakistani and Indian migrants in our province wear *niqab* to avoid detention by the police since they do not have legal passports." Ameneh, too, said: "It's not a word of mouth; I have seen with my own two eyes that *niqab*-wearing women by the streets late at night get in cars with strangers." Fatemeh said: "None of those sex workers are Baluch. They come from squatter settlements in the suburbs." Confirming her, Faezeh continued: "A *niqab*-wearing woman catting around late at night on streets is a sex worker not a believer. They remove their *niqab* for their customers immediately after getting into the car."

Unlike *niqab*, a certain form of *burqa* that is customary in Qeshm lacks such functionality because it does not cover the entire face. Therefore, *burqa*-wearing women are in constant fear of being identified by others. Sayeh explained more: "Wearing *burqa* during illegal fishing saves me from the malice of police but people in my neighborhood identify me even with a *burqa* on my face. It is difficult for aliens to identify us."

2. Niqab Keeps Women Uniform

Keeping women uniform is another specific function of *niqab*. Based on an insider perspective, wearing *niqab*, in line with uniformization of Muslim women, is one of the most important ideals of Islam through which the manifestation of wealth against poverty in Islamic society is eliminated, the culture of piety is promoted, and living a simple life is valued among Muslims (Moghadam 2002). Muslim women prefer to be seen in uniform in the public areas to manifest their belongingness to this culture and to follow the ordinance of Islam (Mahmood 2011). To that end, a group of feminists rely on post-colonial approaches to defend Muslim women's freedom to choose their clothing in a multicultural society. They are of the opinion that freedom to choose clothing should be granted when activists consider it the performance of religious ordinances regarding worship, sign of servitude to God and an ethical act (Mahmood 2011; Zempi 2019).

Afsaneh stated: "When I wear niqab, it is hard to realize whether I'm rich or poor. This marks the difference between a Muslim society, in which women are in uniform, and non-Muslim society." Mania and Ayesheh believe that *niqab* is an obstacle to "street exhibition" by women because it displays all women in uniform and no one is seen superior to the other." Many respondents recited verses of the Holy Quran in support of Islamic veil: "Tell the believing men to cast down their gaze..." (21:30) and "tell the believing women....wear their head-coverings over their bosoms..." (21:31). Relying on these verses they claim that God has asked the Prophet's wives to wear same clothes to let everyone know that it is a sin to harass them. Researchers claim that one major motivation for Muslim *niqab*-wearing Muslim women is observing social equality and justice for all citizens that distinguishes an Islamic society from a capitalist society (Conway 2012).

Consequences of *Burqa* and *Niqab*

One of the highly debated consequences of wearing *niqab* and *burqa* concerns health and hygiene. Face veil has been defined both as a menace and a protector. Some studies have argued protective consequences of face veil, claiming that it protects the skin against sunrays in the Middle East (Chowdhury et al. 2017). On the contrary, some other studies have mentioned hardships of breathing with a *niqab* on the face (Clarke 2013). Sayeh's explanation on health benefits of *niqab* was as follows: "If there were no *burqas*, all the women on this island would have sunburns on their faces." Jamileh's viewpoint was rather strange: "... Beggars use niqab to avoid sunburn since they are in the sun most of the time." Maliheh pointed to asthma patients, saying it is really difficult for them to breathe from behind the *niqab*. Ameen and Zomorrod, though, have a different opinion: "*Niqab* is like a mask that prevents our head, mouth and face against dust (pointing to common 120-day winds in Sistan).

Some studies argue that *burqa* and *niqab* restrict social dialogues and occupational relations, while some other studies have revered *burqa* and *niqab* as face coverings for boosting social dignity and freedom of women in the society (Mahmood

2011; Ahmed 2011). On the social consequences of wearing *burqa* and *niqab* the respondents of this study gave diverse responses. Aseman said: “Our men do not allow us to work outside the house. It was after the death of my husband that I had to get a job, but not any job because of my burqa.” Another respondent complained about wearing *burqa* during her hospitalization at a hospital: “In the hospital, I was given wrong medicines prescribed for another patient. Since it was a public sphere, my husband did not let me remove my niqab; so, I had to take wrong medication for a week.” Another woman respondent said: “Niqab is good for married women who are financially supported by their husbands. For instance, I was a salesperson for some time and then secretary of a midwife. Since customers and visitors could not hear my voice well, my employees thought I lack discipline or a sense of responsibility. (Pausing for a moment) ... I don't know... I was fired from both.” Unlike other participants, Pari, 57, talked about respect and honor she had received by wearing niqab: “In a trip to Tehran I was told by airport security officials that I could not check in while wearing niqab. They asked me to remove my niqab, but I resisted and we had a security debate until an officer from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) said because of my grandeur in niqab he had nothing to say... I said that the grandeur belonged to my niqab not to me!” According to Faezeh, niqab is a means of freedom of action for women in Baluchestan region: “Without niqab I would not be allowed to take a cab to go to the university and I had to stay at home.”

Discussion and Conclusion

A comparison of semantic implications of two sub-cultures of *hijab* (*burqa* in Qeshm Island and *niqab* in Baluchestan region) has to consider that women in Baluchestan belong to a religious minority (Sunni/Hanafi) and also to an ethnic minority, whereas women in Qeshm Island belong only to a religious minority (Sunni/Shafi'i) and their ethnicity (Persian) is on a par with the majority of Iranians. Discussion on “ethnicity” and “religion” in this analysis concludes that *niqab* as an ordinary form of *hijab* in Baluchestan is a signifier for distinguishing collective identity—and not personal identity. This black uniform covering the women's face does not offer an accurate representation of individual identity and it is only used to distinguish Sunni minority women in Baluchestan from their Shia peers forming the majority of the Iranian population.

In line with confirmation of the findings, results of Wagner et al. (2012) testify inclination of the minorities for safeguarding their distinction in appearance in comparison with other majority groups for earning esteem through construction of identity and cultural maintenance (Wagner et al. 2012). Such perseverance by burqa-wearing women—a religious minority only—against pressures by majority groups was observed at a time there has come an opportunity for representation of personal identity in terms of marital status, age, economic class, social rank (city-village) to a great deal.

Another referent of identity anonymity of *niqab*-wearing women in comparison with *burqa*-wearing women is lack of exposure of face and lack of distinction in their covering (hijab). Not only this eliminates the entire aesthetic manifestations

of face, but also leads to repression of diverse tastes in this group of women. Ignoring the difference of taste among women will finally lead to uniformization of the subjects. These results show that the more restricted the boundaries of recognition of minorities, the more individual identities will be influenced by structural identity and the intensity of minorities' inclination for personal anonymity and unification with the group will increase. To that end, Axel Honneth and Markle (2004) maintains that the fundamental transition from "individual" to "person" and ultimately formation of "subject" based on the actors' concrete needs is related to recognition in social relations. He argues that intersubjective relations of emotional and legal recognition inside solidarity for recognition of accomplishments promote and maintain the development of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem in individuals (Honneth and Markle 2004).

Given the findings of the present research, *niqab* for Sunni women in Baluchestan is a sort of uniformization for ignoring individual differences among minority (religious and ethnic)—vis-à-vis Shia majority women in Iran women—who seek consolidation of "insider" group against "others". These results have been confirmed in reports by Wagner et al. (2012). Participants also stated that wearing *niqab* is an axiological symbol that shows the maximum adherence of this minority group to Quranic commandments and Islamic rules particularly in comparison with the majority Shia group, proving to be better believers in terms of preventing the males from the sin of "male gaze". Wearing *niqab* also is a sign of adherence to Quranic instructions for the unity of Muslim women in the world of Islam (Sayyid and Vakil 2010). Nistor (2017) states that *niqab* is a movement to publicize Islamic fashion that is exclusive to Islamic *ummah* today which is also a resistance for differentiation and against marginalization of Muslim women in the West. The findings of this paper is supported by the findings of a research by Wagner et al. (2012) that shows the semantic implication of veiling for Muslim majority women is more related to convenience, fashion, and modesty with little reference to religion; while it has been defined religiously for Muslim minority women in Iran.

As stated earlier, *niqab*-wearing women respondents of this research belong both to Sunni/Hanafi ethnic-religious minority. Despite the fact that Hanafi school of thought is one of the most liberal Sunni schools in issuing religious decrees or instructions for women,² based on the findings of this research, followers of this school of jurisprudence in Baluchestan enjoy minimum freedom of action in terms of *hijab* for women compared to their Shafi'i peers in Qeshm Island. In other words, whereas Hanafi School is the most liberal among four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, its women followers in Baluchestan enjoy lesser possibility for individual differentiation through clothing and the type of *hijab* compared to Shafi'i women living in Qeshm Island. This social fact can be explained in three different ways:

1. In Baluchestan, gender inequality is overshadowed by ethnic and religious inequality. Hence, women are practically unable to show their resistance against

² Hanafi juristic school of thought considers the *niqab* as *mustahab* (recommended). Among Maliki and Shafi'i schools it is mandatory while Hanbali school considers it *fard* (obligatory) (Denny 2016).

- ethnic and religious patriarchal order, meaning that men have reserved for themselves the right to choose clothing styles for their women.
2. Domination of ethnic culture over religious teachings in a bid to isolate Baluch women from the public and change them into a structural subject under the domination of ethnic system.
 3. Seemingly, under the impact of necessities and demand for identification of the Sunni Baluch minority resistance against the Shia-Persian majority, the *ulema* or religious scholars in Baluchestan have used capacities and flexibilities existing in fatwa (a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized religious authority) to push wearing *niqab* as ultimate and mandatory *hijab* for women, in particular for those studying at theological schools. In contrast, Hanafi School is more liberal and flexible with regard to in Islamic veil for women. Therefore, *niqab* in Baluchestan is chiefly used to highlight the collective identity of Baluch women, whereas the followers of Shafi'i school in Qeshm Island use *burqa* because of its capacity for personal identification.

Given the opinions of the respondents and based on an analysis of socio-cultural context in Baluchestan, where women wear *niqab*, this style of face veil, to a great extent, has turned into religious clothing for identification of native women under the influence of ethnic patriarchy. Since in Arab world, too, the followers of Hanbali school of jurisprudence in particular, use *niqab* for codification of Muslim women in special regions (Piela 2019), *niqab*-wearing women, too, consider this veil as a means of unification of the Sunni Muslim women which has turned into an official and universal garment (Herriot 2008). In contrast, *Burqa* is a covering that provides for cultural representation of the users. Considering creativity of the *user*, *burqa* also allows the users to pursue clothing fashion and diversity by paying attention to the artistic aspects of the product. Therefore, *burqa* is not merely a religious commodity; rather, it possesses cultural and aesthetic aspects as well in this region (Mohammadi and Rastegar 2018). Mahmood (2011) has paid attention to the empowering capacity of Islamic covering, considering it as a factor for identification and boosting participation of Muslim women in their society. Based on the results of this study, *burqa*, as the popular face veil in Qeshm Island, is a source of income and saving for women and hence it is a source of economic empowerment of women. Moreover, it is a profitable, creative and dynamic trade thanks to its artistic and aesthetic values. These characteristics make it appropriate for demonstration in Islamic fashion world.

Another result of this study is that the consequences of using *burqa* and *niqab* are paradoxical, i.e. in some cases they are reported to be progressive and in other cases restrictive. Since *burqa* and *niqab*-wearing women mostly belong to traditional families, they find a chance for presence in the social sphere only by wearing face veil. This is why many post-colonial school theoreticians such as Yegenoglu (2006) in her book entitled "*Inscribing the Other Body*" argue that signs and symbols must be studied and judged particularly within each specific social context. Lewis and Mills (2003), too, argues that face veil, mostly worn by Muslim women in the Arab world, contains very complicated meanings that determine social and economic life of women in these societies (Lewis and Mills 2003). Given the results of this research,

involvement of women in Qeshm and Baluchestan in *burqa* and *niqab* trade facilitates socialization and provides economic benefits for a group of women without literacy skills and employment permit in a patriarchal society. In Qeshm, *burqa* has grown into such a valuable commodity. Producing *burqa* with gold threads and gold rings has turned it into a capital good for those women who inherit almost nothing by affinity or blood relation in some tribes (inheritance by blood relation for women is half of that of men and by affinity one-fourth of men). Therefore, *burqa* traders, who are the native women themselves, have made use of this opportunity to give a hike to *burqa* prices as a sign of honor for men and chastity of women in the region. Thus, they use them as a capital when need be.

Polygamy and concerns over life after death of their husbands were two other motives of native women to order costly gold-worked *burqas*.

According to some researchers, using face veil by women in patriarchal societies has tempted them to create and promote signs and symbols that are meaningful only in that context. Although face veil is apparently deterrent and restrictive at the first glance, in reality it assures their survival and empowerment. Najmabadi (2005) argues that traditional practices allegedly performed as restrictive rituals and ceremonies, in real sense, encourage native and traditional women to be visible in their society and expand their social networks, i.e. boundaries of friendship with men and women (Najmabadi 2005).

Given the results of this research as well as reports presented in previous studies, it seems that face veil, including *burqa* and *niqab*, among different groups of Muslim women may be considered as an identification instrument which is used by a minority group with religious and ethnic tendencies vis-à-vis the majority group in the Iranian society. Since signs of face veil vary in each social fabric depending on ethnic and religious structures, enactment of any law or adopting any decision on face veil requires revisiting the meanings that *burqa* or *niqab* carry for the users. Codification of face veil for Muslim women from Western viewpoint leads to enactment of laws and adoption of policies that are in sharp contrast with principles of secular feminist liberation movement. Outsiders' analyses display deep alienation with the diverse ethnic-cultural signs of this veil and pay attention only to its religious and propaganda aspects, whereas according to the findings of this study, the empowering functions of the veil for this group of Muslim women are undeniable.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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