



The interpretation of face veiled women in Balochistan region: a geo-cultural study

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Accepted: 30 November 2021

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Abstract

Face veil as one of the most challenging manifestations of *hijab* in the cultural geography of Islamic countries operate as a distinguisher. In this study, 12 Baloch Muslim women have participated to explicate semantic implications of the *niqab* in Balochistan region. The method of phenomenology has been applied to analysis the perspectives of participants on *niqab*. The data was coded, categorized and analyzed by using MAXQDA qualitative software. The semi-structured interviews and field observations indicated that Baluch women wear *Niqab* as a symbol of their collective ethnical identity to prove their greatest religious commitment, this all-black cloth, *niqab*, not only is devoid of any user identification and diversity in production but also allows women to travel in a Shia-Persian centered context. Accordingly, *niqab* carries a certain symbol with respect to ethnic-religious structures to operate as a powerful cultural signifier of otherness, decentralization of Shia-Persian majority discourse, and strengthening collective identity to maintain the social cohesion.

Keywords Niqab · Islamic face veil · Muslim women

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1 Introduction

Although there are many similarities regarding the culture of *modesty* based on the Quranic principles, face veil is not a requirement of being Muslim woman into four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence. While, Muslim scholars such as *Salafi* movement assert that women are required to cover their faces in public, in Hanafi and Shia schools wearing face veil is not recommended (Sulaiman and Raifu 2020). There are concrete evidences show that different design of *hijab* among Muslim women which is rooted in cultural, ethnic and tribal aspects (Slagle 2021; Wagner et al. 2012b). Some studies highlight geo-cultural contexts of *hijab*, as much as it is a religious phenomenon (Byng 2010). In this perspective various styles of *hijab* refer to the geographical territory. for instance “*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 of Asia such as Malaysia, Indonesia and “*Buibui*” in East Africa are partly dynamic styles of “*Hijab*” and the interplay between culture and religion also (Nistor 2017). (Eleuteri and Terzitta 2021).

The same variety can be visible in the meaning and interpretation of *hijab*. While Islamic veil has been understood as a symbol of reductivism, extremism, conservatism, backwardness, and civilization deficit (Piela 2021) (Al-Hejin 2015), Islamic scholars have concentrated on veil as a religious observance. They believe that taking *hijab* resonates with avoiding the male gaze and observing (Rumaney and Sriram 2021) modesty, piety, virtue (Zia 2020), spirituality, mysticism, and desexualizing rules (Al-Absi and Theology 2018). Mounting skepticism over Muslim women’s veil is not limited to the feminist thinkers, the politicians. Different social policies implemented by European countries; for example, France imposed an outright ban on the veil in the public and academic spaces, Italy, Belgium, UK, Sweden and some other countries have placed a local ban on face veil, while Germany has passed no sentence on veiled women (Chen et al. 2019).

While the most important motivation of wearing face veil has been considered as an observance the religious value, political sociologists believe in a significant difference between the majority Muslim societies in comparison with non-Muslim majority societies regarding the face veil (González 2011). Wagner (2012) argues that although there is little reference to religion as the reasons for wearing veil in Muslim majority societies, most minority Muslim women define the veil as a way of affirming their cultural identity. They are mostly forced into constructing their cultural identity in ways that exaggerate their group belonging and difference from people outside of their community. An example of such situation can be observed among the Muslim minorities living in the West, where the headscarf is considered primarily a symbol of religious affiliation and cohesion among Muslims. The study on *burqa* in Qeshm island in Iran, where Persians have been called Shia Muslim, confirms that the face veil has been warning by a group of Shafi’i Sunni minority minorities to distinguish their socio-economic class, marital status, religious orientation, neighborhood and living area from outsiders (Mohammadi et al. 2021).

Given the geo-political importance of Balochistan region which is contained ethnic and religious minorities and the dominance of patriarchal power over Baluch women’s bodies, some scholars explicate that the *niqab* interplays as a specific symbolic language in this context. The current study is conducted with the purpose of analyzing the semantic implications of *niqab* in Balochistan region which located in southeastern of Iran and has a Baloch-Sunni minority that is a small population compared to the majority Persian-Shia community. Although Baloch women religiously belong to the Hanafi Sunni school and

wearing face veil under the jurisprudence of Hanafi school is not common (Hsu 1994), they have been adopting niqab to cover their face in the public. Accordingly, the main question of current study is whether wearing niqab is perceived as an individualistic cause or it deals with their collectivistic culture of Baloch women.

2 Research method

This study was carried out on the Muslim *Niqab*-wearing women in Sistan and Baluchestan Province. Balochistan is a region in Southwestern Asia. It comprises the Pakistani province of Balochistan, the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan, and the southern areas of Afghanistan. In this study participants have been selected from Iranian part. To understand the semantic implications of *niqab*, an ethnography method with respect to phenomenological approach has been applied. According to this paradigm, meanings are constructed by individuals (Grix 2004); it is subjective and differs from person to person (Guba and Lincoln 1994). The techniques of gathering data were semi-structured interviews and field observation. Since majority of the participants usually opened up with an issue affecting their lives more deeply, the opportunity to describe, categorize, and compare participants with a more accurate prioritization was provided.

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.

2.1 Participants

A number of twelve *niqab* -wearing women accepted to participate in this study. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min. In this study purposive sampling method were adopted to consider very narrow concepts and find participants who had very specific experiences. 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 (2 participants); parks (3 participants), grand bazar (4 participants), and workplaces (3 participants). These areas are located in the north, center and south of Balochestan region 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.

2.2 Trustworthiness

Strategies including member check which known as a technique of emerging categories through evaluation the feedback or respondent validation; peer review (third-party assessor) refers to the accuracy of the coding process, conceptualization, and the categories; and comparative analysis through double-checked the raw data and compared in against the theatrical scheme (Angen 2000) have applied in the present study.

Table 1 Details of respondents

Entry	Level of education	wearing veil (Years)	Age	Marital status	Ethnicity	Religion	Region	Occupation
1	Bachelor's degree	5	27	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Employee
2	Illiterate	15	55	Widow	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Neqab producer
3	Illiterate	20	45	Widow	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Neqab producer
4	High school degree	5	20	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Student
5	Bachelor's degree	7	28	Single	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Employee
6	Bachelor's degree	9	27	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Journalist
7	Master's degree	11	31	Single	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Researcher
8	Diploma	4	22	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Housekeeper
9	Diploma	3	23	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Housekeeper
10	Bachelor's degree	7	25	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Housekeeper
11	Associate	8	20	Single	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Housekeeper
12	Theological education	15	57	Married	Baluch	Sunni (Hanafi)	Baluchestan	Teacher



Fig. 1 The most common styles of Neqab in Balochistan

3 Results

In this section the most common styles of *Niqab* in Balochistan have been depicted. (Fig. 1).

Although *niqab* and any other face veils are considered as a subculture of hijab In Iran, Iranian Baluch women are widely using the black- two parts of it which distinguishes them from Afghan and Pakistani Baloch women. In this section, five main themes have been discovered to highlight collectivistic culture and only two main themes support individualistic cause of wearing *niqab*:

3.1 Collectivistic culture of wearing *niqab*

3.1.1 The normative requirements of patriarchal community

As it was argued, *niqab* is an Islamic face veils that women wear for expression of Muslim identity and manifesting their distinction from the others. It has been described as personal objects used to announce Baloch identities and heritage to personalize their environments (Wood 2015). Although it is at the beginning a family tradition or religious obligation, in socialization process it becomes a habit and followers feel lacking without it (Tristam 2013). There are some other sub-themes such as appropriate gender-relations, social-esteem and self-confidence which are available for veiled women by society (Clarke 2013).

A group of participants in this study are Balochi *niqab* females who point out the role of social pressures in using face veil in the public environment of wwhich has become part of their identity “*In the beginning, I wore niqab because you could see no one with it outdoors but today, I feel blushed to go out without my niqab*”. Another participant, said: “*I can’t let go of it. I even like to wear it in hen parties.*” Some other participants said: “*Niqab is now part of our body like our eyes. It is a habit and we are accustomed to it.*”

Participants attributed part of the obligation for wearing *niqab* to the patriarchal influence of men in the family to safeguard their traditions and prestige. One participant said: “*I do not like it that much but I wear it for my father’s prestige.*” another participant, said: “*Our men have entrenched prejudice against their women. They feel ashamed when they hear someone speaking about their sister, wife or mother not wearing Islamic veil. That is why everyone in my family wears a niqab*”. One of the participants [Pausing for a moment] said: “*My brothers will kill me if I avoid wearing niqab. Once my brother’s fiancé 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 [loud laughter]*”. Many participants, pointed to the family instructions to wear *niqab*. One of them said: “*I wear niqab because my husband wants me to. As a woman, I should be committed to family traditions*”. According to the point of one participant, *niqab* is not a matter of today or yesterday. “*The tradition of wearing niqab has passed from generation to generation. My mother still has some niqab veils of her mother*”.

Some studies have found *niqab* as a factor restricting in social dialogs and occupational relations (Mahmood 2011), while some other studies have revered *niqab* as face coverings for boosting social dignity and freedom of women in an Islamic society (Ahmed 2011). To clarify such contentious situation diversified social consequences of wearing *niqab* has been illustrated; one of the participants 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 for my niqab.*” Another respondent complained wearing *niqab* during her hospitalization at a hospital: “*In the hospital, I was given wrong medicines intended 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 participant said: “*Niqab is good for housewife. Not for me, 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 why. I was fired from both.*”

3.1.2 Publicity and promotion of Islamic veil by religious circles and scholars

In Iran, some religious and political circles and podiums like mosques, theological schools, Friday prayers, Judiciary, and national TV are among hotspots for publicity and promotion of Islamic *hijab* (normally black *chador*) but in Sunni-majority regions, the muftis publicize wearing face veil (Mohammadi and Rastegar 2018).

niqab is proliferated the culture of piety and simply carry the concept of modesty (Abdel-Mageed 2008). According to Hamdan (2010), it has come to symbolize everything from Islamic Fundamentalism and women’s subordination to freedom of religious expiration 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 these religious groups refer to *hijab* with Shia Muslims and *niqab* with Sunni Muslims as “Islamic jihad of women” (Wadud 2007) (Yegenoglu 2006).

One of the participants, admitted religious significance of wearing *niqab* where she said: “*This veil helps me keep men and myself away from committing sin. It is my belief that by resorting to the tradition of the Prophet’s wives, I will be resurrected with them in the Heaven*” Also one of the Baluch participants said: “*... When I’m a {real with different intonation} Muslim, I have to accept its ordinances otherwise I will be tempted to commit a sin.*” One of the participants said: “*I fight for the right against the wrong with my niqab. I*

obey the law of God and have nothing to do with the law of humans even if all humans say niqab is illegal or a sign of intellectual backwardness". Another participant believes that *niqab* is a sign of servitude: *"I had a vow. When I got what my heart had desired, I vowed to keep my niqab until sunset for the sake of God."*

3.1.3 Unique Islamic fashion

The fashion industry, where women are one of the most important customers, recognizes the tastes of Western middle-class women, while the *niqab* has been regarded as a main symbol of Islamic fashion phenomenon (Yotka 2016). In fact, *niqab* as a part of the Islamic dress code has been developed over successive historical periods within certain geographical frameworks beside social, religious, aesthetic, economic and political levels according to the reflection standards on the spirit of the society over the years (Hassan 2020). Since it is a cultural element exclusively belong to the Muslim women with a taste for luxury fashion, researchers have written about a very complicated manifesto with the locals. They regard resorting to Islamic fashion as a platform to help women fight the highly profitable Western fashion industry. This has diversified social life of Muslim women. Miller (2005) believes in bottom-up diffusion of fashion, when 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) implies juxtapose, *grosso modo*, as two representations of *hijab* and integrating it 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 referred to *niqab* as "a sort of local and distinctive fashion fever". One of the participants was pleased to say: *"With this niqab I will be identified as a Muslim woman wherever in the world I am, with no one having something like this."* Another one said: *"Niqab is not something foreigners could make its likeness or a better one. ... It is a handmade product without any date of extinction. This is because it is not a product of fashion to come and go one day."* One of the participants, too, said: *"I have a special niqab 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", some respondents 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. It is worth mentioning that *niqab* is a hot commodity in Balochistan region, many women are engaged in the production and sewing of it, and some of these women earn money from this profession, therefore Participants shared the sense of empowerment when they are able to persuade Baloch women to wear the domestic *niqabs* as part of traditional and local clothing and to avoid buying foreign products.

3.1.4 *Niqab* keeps women anonymous

Whereas in view of the insiders, anonymity of *niqab* user is regarded as a virtue and a factor for empowerment of women in handling their social relations, most Muslim women are not allowed to work outside without taking *hijab* (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, this study asked its respondents to express their opinion on the anonymity of the users by wearing *niqab*. One of the participants 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 code, another one said: *“Many beggars wear niqab to remain anonymous. They do not have a cordial belief in niqab and wear it to safeguard their dignity because the town is small and there is a possibility of being recognized ...”* One of the other participants gave a hint on who the beggars are: *“Illegal Afghan, Pakistani and Indian migrants in our province wear niqab for fear of arrest by police since they do not have legal passports.”* One of the participants, 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.”* The other one 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 immediately after getting in car with their customers.”*

3.1.5 *Niqab* keeps women uniform

Under Quranic principles, what distinguishes Muslims from each other should be their faith and piety, not their clothes and appearance. As a result, uniformity of Muslim women means wearing simple, similar, equal and normal modest dress to being define as a one community. Muslim women have strongly recommended adopting *niqab* to seem as same as their sisters in the public, neither more beautiful nor wealthier. (Sadatmoosavi and Shokouhi 2011) 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). The Muslim women prefer to be seen in uniform in the public arias to manifest their belongingness to this culture and to follow the ordinance of Islam (Mahmood 2011). To that end, a group of feminist resort to post-colonial perspectives 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 at a time activists consider it acting upon religious ordinances for worshipping, manifesting servitude and performing an ethical act (Mahmood 2011; Zempi 2019).

One of the participants remarked that *“When I wear niqab it is hard to distinguish whether I’m rich or poor. This marks the difference between a Muslim society, in which women are in uniform, and non-Muslim society.”* Some of the participants believe that *niqab* is an obstacle to publicizing and promoting “street frippery” by women because it displays all women in uniform and no one is seen superior than the other.” Many respondents recited a verse from the Holy Quran in support of Islamic veil, where Surah An-Nur, verses 30 and 31 says: *“Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts,”* and *“and to wrap [a portion of] their head-covers over their chests ...”* Resorting to 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 women is observing social equity and justice for all citizens that distinguishes an Islamic society from a capitalist society (Conway 2012).

3.2 Individualistic cause of wearing *niqab*

3.2.1 The health consequences of *Niqab*

Few participators mentioned the health and hygiene consequences of wearing *niqab*. Face veil has been defined both as destructive and protector. Some studies have argued protective consequences of face veil, claiming that it protects the skin against sunrays in the Middle East. On the contrary, some other studies have complained about hardships of breathing with a *niqab* on the face (Clarke 2013). One of the participants implies that: *“If there were no niqabs, all the women on this region would have sunburns on their faces”*. Another participant’s viewpoint was rather strange: *“... Beggars use niqab to avoid sunburn since they are in the sun most of the time”*. One of the participants pointed to asthma patients, saying it is really difficult for them to breathe under the *niqab*. Some of the other participations, though, have a different opinion: *“Niqab is like a mask that prevents our head, mouth and face against dust [pointing to 120-day winds in Sistan]”*.

3.2.2 Sense of self-confidence and positive body image

One of the most noticeable concepts of the hijab for third-wave feminist theory deals with a deep doubt about a global political image of the body of the veiled Muslim woman. As a result, the experience and narration of Muslim women in their own language was considered (Snyder-Hall 2010). Afterward, the feeling of empowerment and the sense of self-confidence was heard in relation to the voluntary practice of hijab in Muslim countries (Al Wazni 2015). One of the participants who has 57, talked about respect and honor she had received by wearing *niqab*: *“In a trip to Tehran they did not allow me to check in at the airport security gate. They asked me to remove my niqab, but I resisted and we had a security debate until one of the IRGC personnel said he had nothing to say observing my grandeur in niqab. I said that grandeur belongs to my niqab not to me!”* According to the one of the participants, *niqab* is a means of freedom of action for women in Balochistan region: *“Without niqab I would not be allowed to take a cab to go to the university and I had to stay at home.”* Another participant shared her feeling regarding the positive sense of her body image. She said *“I am not afraid of judging by others that I am beautiful or not. I know many girls who waste their time to make up and seem better. Those who are always struggling with their body”*.

4 Discussion

Given that every action is meaningful in the context of a specific socio-political context, in this article the semantic implication of wearing the *niqab* by Baluch women is analyzed according to the political approaches of the Islamic Republic of Iran, ethnic and religious structure of Baluchistan region. In this study, the *niqab* as a subculture of the hijab in the Balochistan region is not merely a female religious symbol but a resistance by an ethnic group to strengthen collective culture against ignoring the identity of

ethnic-religious minorities. According to the current research results there are five main themes in which adopting the *niqab* is associated with keeping collectivistic culture: (1) the normative requirements of patriarchal community, (2) publicity and promotion of Islamic veil by religious circles and scholars, (3) unique Islamic fashion, (4) *Niqab* keeps women anonymous, (5) *Niqab* keeps women uniform. Discussion on “ethnicity” and “religion” in this analysis conclude that *niqab* as sub-culture of *hijab* in Iran emphasize the needs and goals of the group as a whole over the desires of individuals. This black uniform covering on the face of women is only used to distinguish Baloch-Sunni minority women from Persian-Shia majority in the public environments of Iran. This study also finds two main themes which approve individualistic reasons for wearing *niqab* including (1) the health consequences of *Niqab*, and (2) sense of self-confidence and positive body image. In fact, analyzing the individual aspects of wearing *hijab* in Muslim countries where *hijab* is optional has yielded important results. In Iran, as the only country where the government systematically monitors the style and manner of *hijab*, the semantic implications of *hijab* subcultures reveal more realities of society, culture of resistance and identity of divergent groups (Dehghan 2015).

Since *niqab*-wearing women mostly belong to traditional families and social solidarity, a large group of Baloch women only find a chance for public appearance with face veil. This is why many post-colonial school theoreticians such as Meyda Yegenoglu (2006) argue that signs and symbols must be studied and judged particularly within each specific social context. According to Lewis and Mills (2003) face veil is a specific religious symbol to codify women in hierarchy patriarchal societies. Najmabadi (2005) argues that Muslim women are part of restrictive religious rituals and ceremonies, in real sense, which are encouraged to be visible in the society not as an in depended individual but also as a political subject (Najmabadi 2005).

Given the results of this research, *niqab* has been also considered as an identity-building instrument which is used by a minority group with religious and ethnic tendencies in comparison with a majority group in the Iranian society. 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 gaining social esteem through construction of identity and cultural maintenance (Wagner et al. 2012a). The Balochs are one of the main targets of suppression, assimilation, and surveillance strategies by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The regime sought to maintain its control over this ethnic-religious minority by promoting some symbols of political Islam. Face veiled Baloch women have applied a different strategy to raise their own identity and publicize their discourse. In fact, it can be considered a daily struggle to preserve a collective identity from a minority group (Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2021).

Another implication of identity anonymity of *niqab*-wearing is lack of exposure of face and lack of distinction in their coverings. This has not only eliminated the entire aesthetic show of face, but also led to repression of diversified tastes in this group of women. Ignoring differences in tastes of 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 subject to collective culture and the intensification of inclination of minorities for personal anonymity and unification with groups. To that end, Honneth and Markle (2004) considers the fundamental transition from “individual” to “person” and ultimately formation of “subject” based on the actors’ demands to identification in social relations (Fig. 2).

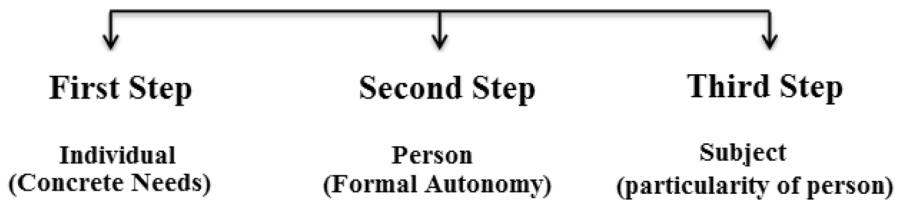


Fig. 2 The stages of forming a social actor

He argues that intersubjective relations of emotional and legal recognition inside solidarity for recognition of accomplishments promote and maintain the development of self-confidence, legal-respect and social-esteem in individuals (Honneth and Markle 2004).

Given the findings of this research, *niqab* for Sunni women in Balochistan is a sort of uniformization for ignoring individual differences among minority (religious and ethnic) women who seek—vis-à-vis Shia majority women in Iran—consolidation of “insider” group against “others”. These results have been confirmed in reports by Rainsford and Wagner (2012) Mohammadi (2021). Participants also asserted that wearing *niqab* is a value-based symbol that shows this minority group attaches maximum significance to Quranic recommendations and Islamic ordinances in comparison with the majority Shia group, proving to be better believers in terms of avoiding the sin of “male gaze”. This is where results of a research by Muslim researchers who mentioned that wearing *niqab* is a sign of resorting to Quranic instructions for unity of Muslim women in the world of Islam (Sayyid and Vakil 2010). Nistor (2017) also identifies *niqab* as a movement to publicize Islamic fashion that is exclusive to Islamic *umma* today which helps resistance against distinction and marginalization of Muslim women in the West.

The findings of this study also prove that wearing veiling in the level of individualistic reasons are more related to convenience, fashion, and hygiene with little reference to religion and ethnicity. Only two of the 12 participants identified the individual aspects of adopting *niqab*. Participants believed in full-face cover protect them against intense sunlight and judging others, so the *niqab* gives them self-confidence and the sense of positive body image. Although individual causes of adopting veil has been rarely raised in current research, some scholars have considered that veiled Muslim women feel more positive body image in comparison to unveil Muslim in the US (Al Wazni 2015).

5 Conclusion

The most significant findings from this study is that wearing *niqab* highlights the collectivistic culture of Baloch women who are considered as a Sunni/Hanafi minority in Iran. Despite the fact that Hanafi school of thought is one of the most liberal Sunni schools in adopting religious directives for women,¹ based on this study, followers of this school of jurisprudence in Balochistan enjoy minimum freedom of action in terms of *hijab* for women. It means that the gender inequality is overshadowed by ethnic and religious inequality in Balochistan, so women are practically unable to manifest their resistance against

¹ 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 system. Moreover, domination of ethnic culture over religious teachings is visible in this case to take Baloch women out of public access and their transition into a subject under ethnic system.

With respect to the opinions of the participants and based on an analysis of geo-cultural context in Balochistan, where women wear *niqab*, this face veil has turned into a religious cloth for identification of Baloch women under an ethnic patriarchal influence.

It is suggested that when the issue of face veil and the sub-cultures of *hijab* are analyzed as a religious construction, it is always important to pay attention to the deconstructing perspectives. When it comes to the *niqab* in Balochistan, it was strongly recommended by the patriarchal system to highlight the geographical borders of the Baluch ethnic group in Iran.

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