

Veiling, Visibility, and Visual Controversy: The Shuttlecock Burqa in Global and Pakistani Contemporary Art

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Abstract

This study investigates the Shuttlecock Burqa as a contested visual symbol in Pakistani contemporary art within broader global debates on representation, gender, and cultural identity. Rather than treating the Burqa solely as a religious garment, the research examines it as a historically layered cultural form shaped by social hierarchy, colonial discourse, and modern media narratives. Drawing upon feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, and visual culture studies, the paper situates Pakistani artistic practices alongside Western traditions of controversial imagery, demonstrating that disputes over representation are not culturally unique but structurally comparable.

Through close visual analysis of works by major Pakistani contemporary artists, the study shows how the Burqa operates as a metaphor for visibility, absence, protection, and control. The artworks reveal shifting meanings that challenge both internal patriarchal structures and external Orientalist stereotypes. A survey of Pakistani art students and practitioners further supports this argument, indicating that public perception of the Burqa remains diverse and context-dependent, shaped more by framing and discourse than by the garment itself.

The research concludes that controversy surrounding the Shuttlecock Burqa emerges not from the object but from competing interpretive systems operating across local and global contexts. By transforming the garment into a critical visual language, Pakistani artists expand conversations about identity, agency, and representation in contemporary art.

Keywords

Shuttlecock Burqa; Pakistani Contemporary Art; Veiling and Visibility; Visual Culture; Gender Representation; Postcolonial Theory; Identity and Gaze; Art and Controversy

Introduction: Art, Visibility, and the Politics of Representation

Art has never been a neutral field. Throughout history, it has functioned as a space where societies negotiate power, morality, identity, and belief. What is accepted as beautiful or appropriate in one era may be condemned as offensive or dangerous in another. As E. H. Gombrich argues in *The Story of Art*, the meaning of an artwork is never fixed; it is shaped by cultural expectations and historical circumstances. Controversy emerges when art challenges deeply rooted visual habits and social norms.

The Shuttlecock Burqa occupies a similarly complex position in contemporary Pakistani art. It is not merely a garment but a dense cultural sign loaded with meanings related to gender, modesty, identity, and power. In post-9/11 global discourse, the Burqa has become a highly politicized image, frequently used in media representations of Muslim societies. Pakistani contemporary artists have responded by reclaiming and reinterpreting this symbol through painting, installation, photography, and sculpture. Their works do not simply depict clothing; they interrogate systems of visibility and invisibility that regulate women's bodies and social presence.

This research asks a central question:

Is the Shuttlecock Burqa Inherently Controversial, Or Does Controversy Arise from

Its Artistic Representation and Interpretation?

To answer this, the study situates Pakistani Burqa imagery within a broader art-historical and theoretical framework. Western examples of controversial art demonstrate that social discomfort around representation is not unique to Muslim societies. Instead, it is part of a long global history in which artists repeatedly test the limits of acceptable imagery.

Theoretical Framework: Feminism, Postcolonialism, and Visual Culture

Understanding Burqa imagery requires engagement with major theoretical perspectives that address how images shape social meaning.

The Female Body and the Politics of the Gaze

Laura Mulvey's influential essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* introduces the concept of the male gaze, arguing that visual culture often positions women as objects of observation and desire. In Western art history, the nude female body has frequently been displayed for male spectatorship. The Burqa complicates this dynamic. Instead of exposing the body, it conceals it, yet this concealment intensifies curiosity and speculation.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that identity is constructed through repeated social practices, including dress. Clothing is not merely decorative; it participates in producing social gender roles. The Burqa can therefore be understood as part of a visual performance of modesty shaped by cultural expectations. When artists represent it, they intervene in this performance, revealing its constructed nature.

Orientalism and the Politics of Representation

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism is crucial for understanding how the Burqa circulates in global imagery. Said argues that Western representations of the East often simplify complex cultures into stereotypes. In post-9/11 media, the Burqa became a shorthand symbol for oppression and backwardness. Such representations ignore historical

diversity and reduce women's lived experiences to a single visual sign.

Pakistani artists respond to this external gaze by appropriating the Burqa as a site of critique. Their works resist both Western stereotyping and internal patriarchal control, positioning the garment within a dialogue about identity and power.

Controversy as an Aesthetic Category

Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* demonstrates that controversy arises when artworks disrupt established visual codes. From Renaissance nudes to modern installations, artists who challenge expectations often provoke public resistance. Controversy is therefore not an accident but an integral part of artistic innovation.

The Shuttlecock Burqa functions similarly. When artists transform a familiar cultural object into a critical symbol, they destabilize viewers' assumptions. The discomfort that follows is evidence of art's capacity to expose hidden tensions.

Western Art and the History of Controversial Representation

To understand why Burqa imagery provokes debate, it is useful to examine Western artworks that generated similar reactions around the representation of the body.

Diego Velázquez — *Rokeby Venus* (c. 1647)

Velázquez's reclining Venus is one of the rare female nudes in seventeenth-century Spanish painting. In a deeply Catholic society, the work challenged moral restrictions on depicting nudity. Although framed as mythology, its sensual realism unsettled viewers. The later attack by suffragette Mary Richardson in 1914 transformed the painting into a political symbol. Richardson claimed she targeted the work to protest the objectification of women, demonstrating how images of the female body can become sites of ideological struggle.

This episode parallels contemporary debates about the Burqa. Both involve disputes over how women's bodies should appear in public imagery and who has the authority to control that representation.

Édouard Manet — *Olympia* (1863)

Manet's *Olympia* shocked Parisian audiences by presenting a nude woman who confronts the viewer with direct gaze. Unlike idealized classical nudes, *Olympia* is unmistakably modern and self-aware. T. J. Clark argues that the painting exposed bourgeois hypocrisy about sexuality and class. The scandal surrounding the work illustrates how art can reveal contradictions between public morality and private behavior.

Rashid Rana's Burqa works operate in a comparable way. By juxtaposing modest outer forms with hidden erotic imagery, he exposes tensions between surface respectability and concealed desire.

Pablo Picasso — Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) (1907)

Picasso fragmented the female body into aggressive angular forms influenced by African masks. The painting's distortion of anatomy and overt sexuality disturbed early viewers. Feminist critics interpret the work as expressing anxiety about female power. Its reception shows that controversy often accompanies radical shifts in visual language.

Similarly, Pakistani artists use the Burqa to fracture expectations about identity and gender. Instead of distorting the body through exposure, they interrogate concealment as a visual strategy.

Michelangelo — The Last Judgment (1536–1541)

The Catholic Church objected to Michelangelo's extensive nudity in a sacred space, leading to later censorship. This conflict between artistic freedom and institutional authority echoes contemporary Pakistani debates about acceptable representation. In both contexts, power structures attempt to regulate how bodies may be depicted.

Linking Western Controversy to Pakistani Context

These Western precedents demonstrate that disputes over representation are universal rather than culture-specific. The difference lies in the visual strategy. Western controversies often centered on excessive exposure of the body, whereas Pakistani Burqa art interrogates enforced concealment. Both, however, involve struggles over who controls visual narratives about gender.

By situating Pakistani contemporary art within this global history, it becomes clear that Burqa imagery participates in a broader conversation about visibility, power, and identity. Artists are not merely depicting a garment; they are engaging a centuries-long tradition of questioning how societies regulate the female body.

Historical Evolution of Parda: Culture, Power, and Visual Symbolism

To understand why the Shuttlecock Burqa became such a powerful motif in Pakistani contemporary art, it is necessary to move beyond surface-level assumptions and examine the historical evolution of veiling practices. The Burqa is not simply a religious garment; it is the product of layered historical processes involving class hierarchy, political power, gender regulation, and cultural identity. When contemporary artists depict the Burqa, they are engaging with this long and complex history.

Culture is inherently comparative. Every society defines itself by distinguishing its practices from those of others. Clothing, in particular, functions as a visible marker of belonging. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes culture as a "system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms," and dress is one of the most immediate symbolic forms through which societies communicate values. The Shuttlecock Burqa operates within this symbolic system as a sign that carries multiple meanings simultaneously: modesty, protection, identity, and control.

Pre-Islamic Origins of Veiling

Contrary to common assumptions, veiling did not originate with Islam. Historical scholarship demonstrates that veiling practices existed in ancient Mesopotamia long before the emergence of Islamic civilization. Assyrian legal codes regulated which women were permitted to veil, linking the practice directly to class distinction. Elite women were required to cover themselves in public as a sign of status, while enslaved women and prostitutes were forbidden from doing so. Veiling thus functioned less as a moral prescription than as a visible marker of social hierarchy.

Ghada Hashem Talhami's historical research emphasizes that early veiling was a political instrument used to control women's mobility and signal ownership within patriarchal systems. The garment created a boundary between respectable and non-respectable women. This early association between veiling and social power is crucial for understanding its later transformations.

During the Hellenistic period, Greek philosophical ideas about female inferiority reinforced practices of seclusion. Aristotle's writings positioned women as naturally subordinate to men, a concept that influenced Byzantine social structures. Over time, veiling became integrated into elite urban cultures as a sign of virtue and family honor.

These historical developments reveal an important pattern: veiling practices evolved through interactions between political authority and gender ideology. Religion later absorbed and reinterpreted these customs, but their origins were deeply social rather than purely theological.

Veiling in Early Islamic Societies

With the emergence of Islam in the seventh century, modesty became an ethical principle emphasized for both men and women. Qur'anic references to hijab primarily address issues of privacy and social decorum. Scholars such as Leila Ahmed argue that early Islamic communities practiced a range of dress customs rather than a single uniform code.

Historical accounts indicate that prominent women in early Islam participated actively in public life. The strict seclusion associated with later periods developed gradually as Muslim societies encountered Byzantine and Persian cultural norms during territorial expansion. Under the Abbasid Empire, elite urban women increasingly adopted veiling and seclusion, while rural and working-class women maintained more practical forms of dress.

This diversity challenges modern attempts to treat the Burqa as an essential religious requirement. Instead, it illustrates how clothing practices are shaped by local interpretations and power structures. The Shuttlecock Burqa specifically emerged within regional contexts influenced by tribal

customs and social conservatism rather than universal Islamic doctrine.

South Asian Context: Cultural Adaptation of Veiling

In South Asia, veiling practices intersected with pre-existing traditions of female seclusion. The concept of *parda* developed as a social institution regulating interactions between genders. During the Mughal period, elite households practiced architectural and sartorial forms of seclusion that emphasized honor and lineage.

The Shuttlecock Burqa, associated particularly with Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan, represents a localized adaptation of these broader practices. Its distinctive structure — a full-body covering with a mesh screen — produces a powerful visual effect. The wearer becomes simultaneously present and absent: physically visible yet visually inaccessible.

Sociologists interpret this duality as a negotiation between participation and restriction. The Burqa allows women to occupy public space while maintaining symbolic separation. This paradox explains why the garment holds such strong metaphorical potential for artists. It embodies contradictions between agency and constraint, visibility and invisibility.

Colonial Encounters and Modern Transformations

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries introduced new dimensions to veiling debates through colonial encounters. European observers frequently interpreted veiling as evidence of cultural backwardness. Colonial administrations used such interpretations to justify intervention in local social structures.

Frantz Fanon, writing about French colonial Algeria, observed that colonial powers often fixated on women's clothing as a symbol of cultural difference. Attempts to unveil women were framed as acts of liberation but frequently ignored women's own perspectives. Veiling thus became entangled with questions of national identity and resistance.

In South Asia, reform movements produced diverse responses. Some elites advocated Western-style dress as a sign of progress, while others defended traditional attire as a marker

of cultural autonomy. The Burqa acquired political significance beyond its everyday function. It became a site where debates about modernity and authenticity were staged.

Post-9/11 Global Politics of the Burqa

The events of September 11, 2001 dramatically intensified global attention on Muslim women's dress. Media images repeatedly used the Burqa as a visual shorthand for extremism and oppression. Scholars of visual culture note that such repetition transformed the garment into a global icon detached from local realities.

Edward Said's critique of Orientalism is particularly relevant here. Western representations often reduce complex societies to simplified symbols. The Burqa became one such symbol, circulating in news media and political rhetoric as evidence of cultural otherness. This global framing influenced how Pakistani audiences perceived their own visual culture.

Pakistani contemporary artists responded by reclaiming the Burqa as a subject of critical reflection. Their works challenge both external stereotypes and internal social hierarchies. By transforming the garment into an artistic motif, they expose the instability of its meanings.

The Burqa as Visual Metaphor

From an art-historical perspective, the Shuttlecock Burqa operates as a potent visual metaphor. Roland Barthes describes clothing as a system of signs through which societies communicate values. In artistic representation, these signs become open to reinterpretation.

The Burqa's visual properties — uniform color, enveloping form, and obscured face — create a striking silhouette. Artists exploit this silhouette to explore themes of anonymity, surveillance, and identity. The garment becomes a canvas upon which broader social narratives are projected.

Feminist theorists emphasize that clothing can both constrain and enable agency. Some women interpret veiling as empowerment or spiritual expression, while others experience it as restriction. Artistic representations often highlight this ambiguity rather than resolving it. The Burqa

thus functions less as a fixed symbol than as a field of contested meanings.

Cultural Identity and Collective Memory

The Shuttlecock Burqa also participates in collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs' theory of social memory suggests that cultural symbols carry historical narratives shared by communities. For many Pakistani viewers, the Burqa evokes associations with regional traditions, family structures, and moral values.

When artists reinterpret this symbol, they engage with collective memory itself. Their works invite audiences to reconsider inherited assumptions. This process can provoke discomfort because it unsettles familiar frameworks. Controversy arises not from the garment alone but from the challenge to established narratives.

Transition to Artistic Analysis

This historical and theoretical background clarifies why the Shuttlecock Burqa holds such significance in Pakistani contemporary art. It is not merely an object of representation but a condensed symbol of centuries-long negotiations over gender, power, and identity.

The next section will move from history to practice by examining how specific Pakistani artists transform the Burqa into a visual language. Each artist engages the symbol differently, revealing the diversity of contemporary approaches.

Pakistani Contemporary Artists and the Shuttlecock Burqa: Visual Strategies of Resistance and Reflection

Pakistani contemporary artists do not treat the Shuttlecock Burqa as a literal object. Instead, they transform it into a conceptual device through which complex negotiations of gender, power, and identity are staged. The Burqa becomes a visual field where personal experience intersects with collective memory and global politics. Each artist engages the motif differently, revealing how a single cultural object can generate diverse artistic languages.

This section examines key artists whose works foreground the Burqa as a central image. Through close visual analysis, it becomes clear that these works operate simultaneously at aesthetic, symbolic, and political levels.

Rashid Rana: Fragmentation, Distance, and the Politics of Seeing

Rashid Rana's Veil Series I–III (2004) represents one of the most intellectually sophisticated engagements with Burqa imagery in Pakistani art. At first glance, the large-scale images appear to depict monumental veiled female figures rendered in soft tonal gradients. However, closer inspection reveals that the surface is composed of thousands of miniature pornographic photographs assembled into a digital mosaic.

This dual structure forces viewers into a shifting perceptual experience. From a distance, the Burqa reads as an icon of modesty and concealment. At proximity, the hidden fragments expose a visual economy of desire and commodification. Rana thus constructs a dialogue between public virtue and private consumption.

Formally, the work depends on scale and resolution. The monumental size compels physical engagement, while the micro-images destabilize the illusion of unity. The Burqa becomes a screen — both concealing and revealing — echoing Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, where surfaces mask unstable realities.

The strategy parallels Manet's *Olympia*, which similarly exposed contradictions between social respectability and erotic commerce. Rana, however, reverses the Western tradition of revealing the nude body. Instead of displaying flesh openly, he hides it beneath a symbol of modesty, intensifying the tension between visibility and secrecy.

His later installation *Red Carpet* (2007) extends this logic. Ornamental carpet patterns dissolve into microscopic images of slaughterhouse violence. The viewer's aesthetic pleasure is disrupted by the recognition of brutality embedded within beauty. Here the Burqa's logic of concealment expands into

a broader critique of how societies mask violence beneath decorative surfaces.

Waseem Ahmed: Miniature Technique and Psychological Anxiety

Waseem Ahmed approaches the Burqa through the discipline of contemporary miniature painting. His *Silver Bullet* series combines exquisite craftsmanship with unsettling imagery. Veiled figures appear alongside hybrid creatures and fragmented landscapes, suggesting a psychological terrain shaped by fear and instability.

The miniature format is significant. Traditionally associated with courtly refinement and narrative intimacy, miniature painting invites close viewing. Ahmed exploits this intimacy to embed contemporary anxieties within a historical medium. The Burqa figures are rendered with delicate precision, yet their surrounding environment conveys unease.

Symbolically, the works explore transformation and contamination. The werewolf motif recurring in the series functions as a metaphor for social mutation — a society struggling with internal contradictions. The Burqa becomes both shield and camouflage, protecting the individual while marking her as vulnerable within a volatile environment.

This tension echoes Picasso's distortion of the female body in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Both artists use fragmentation to express psychological unease. Ahmed's fragmentation operates not through geometric distortion but through symbolic layering within miniature space.

Imran Qureshi: Ornament, Violence, and Regeneration

Imran Qureshi's installation *Blessings Upon the Land of My Love* (2011) does not always depict the Burqa directly, yet its thematic resonance aligns closely with Burqa discourse. Splashes of crimson pigment resemble bloodstains that gradually transform into intricate floral motifs.

The work occupies architectural space, spreading across walls and floors. Viewers navigate a landscape where violence and beauty coexist. The transformation of blood into ornament

parallels the Burqa's dual symbolism: concealment that simultaneously suggests protection and erasure.

Qureshi's use of red carries multiple associations — martyrdom, sacrifice, and renewal. The ornamental patterns recall Mughal aesthetics, linking contemporary trauma to historical continuity. The viewer experiences oscillation between horror and fascination, echoing the perceptual shifts in Rana's mosaics.

Where Michelangelo's censored nudes provoked anxiety about sacred decorum, Qureshi provokes reflection on how violence becomes normalized within everyday visual culture.

Shahzia Sikander: Hybrid Identity and Fluid Form

Shahzia Sikander's *Perilous Order* (1994–1997) expands miniature traditions into animation and installation. Veiled female forms appear within layered iconographies that blend South Asian and Western visual languages.

Sikander destabilizes fixed identities. Her figures morph and dissolve, refusing stable categorization. The Burqa, when it appears, is not a static garment but part of a fluid visual vocabulary. This fluidity reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity — cultural identity formed through negotiation rather than purity.

Formally, Sikander uses transparency and movement. Layers overlap, creating depth and ambiguity. The viewer encounters identity as process rather than essence. The Burqa becomes one element within a shifting constellation of symbols.

Her strategy contrasts with Western modernist fragmentation. Instead of violently breaking the figure, she allows it to transform organically. This transformation suggests that identity itself is dynamic.

Aisha Khalid: Geometry, Silence, and Emotional Distance

Aisha Khalid's miniature works treat the veil as a poetic metaphor for emotional and spatial separation. In her compositions, geometric patterns intersect with veiled silhouettes, creating a sense of measured distance.

Color plays a crucial role. Muted palettes evoke introspection, while precise linework reinforces discipline. The Burqa becomes less a political emblem than a symbol of interiority. Khalid explores how silence and concealment structure emotional experience.

Her approach resonates with Renaissance experiments in perspective, where spatial organization conveyed psychological states. The viewer senses tension between intimacy and detachment.

Jameel Baloch: Sculpture and Emotional Visibility

Jameel Baloch's fiberglass sculpture *Valentine's Day* presents a Burqa-clad figure holding flowers. The juxtaposition is striking: romantic symbolism emerges from a form that demonstrates how artists negotiate visibility and concealment through different visual strategies. Their works resist singular interpretation, emphasizing the Burqa's capacity to function as a complex metaphor.

Sylvat Aziz and Sausan Saulat: Memory and Social Critique

Sylvat Aziz's photographic work *No Honour in Killing* employs the Burqa as an image of absence. A suspended garment evokes erased lives and silenced voices. The photograph functions as memorial and protest.

Sausan Saulat's *50 Shades of Gray* contrasts monochrome Burqa silhouettes with vibrant decorative backgrounds. The tension between uniformity and ornament reflects constrained individuality within social frameworks.

Both artists emphasize memory and social critique. Their works align with traditions of political art that seek to make invisible suffering visible.

Synthesis: Diversity of Artistic Approaches

Across these artists, several common strategies emerge:

1. Fragmentation and layering destabilize fixed meanings.
2. Contrast between beauty and violence exposes hidden tensions.
3. Hybrid visual languages challenge cultural binaries.

4. Scale and intimacy shape viewer engagement.

The Shuttlecock Burqa operates as a shared visual anchor within these diverse practices. It is not a static symbol but a dynamic field of negotiation. Western precedents show that controversy often accompanies radical reinterpretations of the body. Pakistani artists extend this tradition by interrogating concealment rather than exposure. Their works reveal that visibility itself is politically charged.

Survey Analysis and Public Perception: Interpreting the Shuttlecock Burqa Through Social and Visual Theory

The empirical survey conducted as part of this research provides a crucial bridge between artistic representation and public perception. While the previous sections examined historical and artistic constructions of the Shuttlecock Burqa, the survey reveals how contemporary audiences interpret the garment within everyday social frameworks. The findings demonstrate that meaning is not produced solely by artists; it emerges through interaction between visual representation and collective perception.

This section expands the raw survey results into a theoretical interpretation grounded in sociology, visual culture studies, and cultural psychology.

Methodological Context

The survey targeted 135 Pakistani art students and practitioners through an online questionnaire consisting of twelve structured questions. The respondents represent a demographic that is visually literate and actively engaged in artistic discourse. Their perceptions therefore provide insight into how the Burqa functions within an informed cultural community.

From a methodological standpoint, the survey operates within what Pierre Bourdieu calls a field of cultural production. Respondents are not passive observers; they are participants in shaping artistic meaning. Their interpretations reflect both personal experience and broader social narratives.

Awareness and Cultural Familiarity

A majority of respondents indicated strong awareness of the Shuttlecock Burqa. This familiarity suggests that the garment remains embedded within lived cultural experience rather than existing solely as an abstract symbol.

From a semiotic perspective, Roland Barthes describes such objects as mythologies everyday items that accumulate layers of cultural meaning. The Burqa functions as a mythological object: it is simultaneously ordinary clothing and a carrier of ideological narratives.

The survey indicates that awareness does not automatically produce consensus. Even among informed participants, interpretations vary widely. This diversity supports Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, which argues that audiences actively interpret images rather than receiving fixed meanings.

Class Perception and Social Stratification

Respondents largely associated the Shuttlecock Burqa with lower and middle socioeconomic classes. This association reveals how clothing participates in systems of social stratification. Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption suggests that dress communicates status through visible markers.

In the Pakistani context, the Burqa becomes entangled with class identity. Artistic representations that foreground the garment therefore intersect with issues of social hierarchy. When artists depict the Burqa critically, viewers may interpret this as commentary on class structures as well as gender relations.

This dynamic parallels Western controversies surrounding representations of working-class women in nineteenth-century art. Manet's *Olympia* scandalized audiences partly because it confronted bourgeois viewers with uncomfortable class realities. Similarly, Burqa imagery may provoke discomfort by exposing social divisions.

Conservativeness and Symbolic Identity

Nearly half of respondents viewed the Burqa as a symbol of conservativeness, while a significant minority rejected this

characterization. This division highlights the instability of symbolic meaning.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that clothing functions as a boundary marker separating purity from danger. For some respondents, the Burqa signifies moral order and tradition. For others, it represents imposed restriction. These opposing readings coexist within the same cultural field.

Artists exploit this ambiguity. By recontextualizing the Burqa, they reveal how symbols shift according to perspective. The survey confirms that viewers bring diverse interpretive frameworks to artistic encounters.

Reasons for Wearing: Religion, Culture, and Social Practice

The majority of respondents linked the Burqa to cultural and social reasons rather than purely religious obligation. This finding aligns with historical scholarship demonstrating that veiling practices are shaped by regional traditions.

Clifford Geertz's concept of thick description is useful here. Social practices cannot be reduced to single explanations; they emerge from dense networks of meaning. The Burqa operates within such networks, where religion, culture, and social norms intersect.

Artistic representations that isolate one dimension of the garment risk oversimplification. Pakistani artists often emphasize complexity, presenting the Burqa as a site of negotiation rather than a fixed statement.

Controversy and Negative Representation

The survey produced nearly equal percentages of respondents who considered the Burqa controversial and those who did not. However, over half agreed that it is frequently depicted negatively in visual media.

This distinction is critical. It suggests that controversy arises not from the garment itself but from its framing. Michel Foucault's theory of discourse explains how repeated representations shape perception. When media consistently associate the Burqa with oppression or extremism, viewers internalize these associations.

Artists who engage the Burqa critically may unintentionally reinforce or challenge such discourses. The survey indicates that audiences are aware of this tension. Their responses reveal a sensitivity to how images influence social narratives.

Occasional Use and Spatial Boundaries

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the Burqa is worn primarily when women leave private domestic space. This pattern underscores the garment's role in regulating movement between public and private spheres.

Feminist geographers argue that spatial boundaries structure gendered experience. The Burqa mediates transitions between interior and exterior environments. Artistic depictions that foreground this mediation highlight the politics of space.

Imran Qureshi's installations, for example, transform architectural surfaces into sites of reflection on violence and memory. Although not always depicting the Burqa explicitly, they address similar spatial dynamics of visibility and concealment.

Psychological Dimensions of Perception

From a cultural psychology perspective, the survey reveals cognitive dissonance. Respondents simultaneously recognize the Burqa as culturally familiar and as a site of contested meaning. Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that individuals manage conflicting beliefs by negotiating interpretation.

Art operates within this negotiation. When viewers encounter Burqa-based artworks, they reconcile personal experience with visual critique. The resulting tension generates productive reflection rather than simple agreement or rejection.

Linking Survey Data to Artistic Practice

The survey findings illuminate why Pakistani artists' Burqa works provoke complex reactions. Viewers approach these works with layered expectations shaped by class, culture, and media discourse. Artists respond by creating images that resist singular interpretation.

Rashid Rana's mosaics exemplify this strategy. By embedding contradictory imagery within a unified surface, he mirrors the fragmented perceptions revealed by the survey. The viewer must navigate competing meanings, much as respondents negotiate conflicting attitudes toward the garment.

Similarly, Waseem Ahmed's miniature works reflect psychological ambivalence. Their delicate surfaces conceal unsettling content, echoing the tension between familiarity and discomfort expressed in survey responses.

Public Perception as Dynamic Process

The survey demonstrates that public perception is not static. It evolves through interaction with artistic and media representations. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology emphasizes that perception is embodied and situational. Viewers interpret images through lived experience. Pakistani contemporary art participates actively in shaping this experience. By reimagining the Burqa, artists contribute to an ongoing conversation about identity and agency. The survey confirms that audiences are engaged in this conversation, even when their positions remain divided.

Implications for Cultural Dialogue

The absence of consensus in survey responses should not be interpreted as weakness. Instead, it indicates a vibrant field of dialogue. Art thrives in spaces where meanings remain open to negotiation.

The Shuttlecock Burqa functions as a catalyst for such negotiation. It compels viewers to confront assumptions about gender, tradition, and representation. The survey shows that these confrontations resonate beyond artistic circles, influencing broader cultural understanding.

Discussion: The Shuttlecock Burqa as a Site of Visual Negotiation

The preceding sections demonstrate that the Shuttlecock Burqa cannot be understood through a single interpretive lens. It exists simultaneously as a cultural garment, a historical artifact, a political symbol, and an artistic metaphor. The interaction between these dimensions produces the

controversy surrounding its representation in Pakistani contemporary art.

At the center of this research lies a crucial distinction:

The Burqa Itself Is Not Inherently Controversial; Rather, Controversy Emerges Through Systems of Representation That Assign Competing Meanings to It.

This distinction becomes clear when historical, theoretical, artistic, and empirical perspectives are considered together.

Representation Versus Reality

Historically, veiling practices evolved through complex social processes involving class hierarchy, regional customs, and gender regulation. They were never uniform or static. The Shuttlecock Burqa represents one localized expression within a diverse spectrum of practices. When artists depict the Burqa, they are not simply representing clothing; they are engaging with accumulated layers of social memory and ideological discourse.

Western art history shows that controversy frequently arises when artists disrupt established visual norms. Renaissance nudes, modernist distortions, and religious frescoes all provoked resistance because they challenged expectations about how bodies should appear. Pakistani Burqa art extends this tradition by interrogating concealment rather than exposure. In both contexts, the body becomes a contested visual territory.

The difference lies in direction: Western controversies often centered on excessive visibility, while Burqa imagery confronts enforced invisibility. Yet both reveal societies negotiating control over representation.

Pakistani Artists and the Rewriting of Visual Narratives

Pakistani contemporary artists transform the Burqa into a dynamic visual language. Rashid Rana's mosaics expose contradictions between surface modesty and hidden desire. Waseem Ahmed's miniature works embed psychological anxiety within refined craftsmanship. Shahzia Sikander's

hybrid forms dissolve fixed identities, while Aisha Khalid explores emotional distance through geometry. Other artists such as Jameel Baloch, Sylvat Aziz, and Sausan Saulat address memory, vulnerability, and social critique.

What unites these diverse practices is their refusal to treat the Burqa as a singular symbol. Instead, they reveal its multiplicity. Each artwork generates a new interpretive field in which viewers must negotiate meaning. This multiplicity aligns with contemporary theories of identity as fluid and constructed rather than fixed.

The artists' strategies also challenge Orientalist narratives that reduce Muslim women to passive figures. By reclaiming the Burqa as a site of agency and critique, Pakistani artists reposition themselves within global visual discourse. Their works speak not only to local audiences but to international conversations about gender and representation.

Public Perception and Cultural Dialogue

The survey analysis confirms that audiences approach the Burqa with divided interpretations. Respondents simultaneously recognize its cultural familiarity and its contested symbolism. This ambivalence reflects the dynamic nature of perception. Meaning emerges through interaction between lived experience and visual representation.

Importantly, the survey demonstrates that negative associations often arise from media framing rather than intrinsic qualities of the garment. Artistic representations that foreground complexity can therefore counter reductive narratives. They open space for dialogue rather than closure.

From a sociological perspective, this dialogue represents a healthy cultural process. Disagreement signals active engagement. The Burqa becomes a focal point through which broader questions about tradition, modernity, and agency are debated.

The Burqa as Visual Metaphor in Contemporary Culture

As a metaphor, the Shuttlecock Burqa condenses several key tensions of contemporary life:

- visibility versus invisibility
- protection versus restriction
- individuality versus conformity
- tradition versus transformation

Artists harness these tensions to explore the human condition. Their works resonate beyond specific cultural contexts because they address universal questions about how societies regulate bodies and identities.

The Burqa's power lies precisely in its ambiguity. It resists definitive interpretation. This resistance makes it an effective artistic tool. By confronting viewers with unresolved contradictions, artists invite reflection rather than prescription.

Conclusion

This research set out to investigate whether the Shuttlecock Burqa is inherently controversial or whether controversy arises through representation. By integrating historical analysis, theoretical frameworks, visual critique, and empirical survey data, the study arrives at a clear conclusion:

The Shuttlecock Burqa Is Not Inherently Controversial. The Controversy Surrounding It Is Produced Through Interpretive Frameworks Shaped by History, Media Discourse, And Artistic Representation.

Pakistani contemporary artists play a crucial role in revealing this process. Their works transform a regional garment into a powerful symbol through which global issues of gender, power, and identity are examined. By situating Burqa imagery within a broader history of controversial art, the study demonstrates that disputes over representation are universal rather than culturally isolated.

The survey findings reinforce this argument by showing that public perception remains fluid and contested. Audiences do not respond uniformly; they negotiate meaning through personal and collective experience. Artistic engagement with the Burqa contributes to this negotiation by exposing hidden assumptions and opening space for dialogue.

Ultimately, the Shuttlecock Burqa emerges as a site of visual negotiation where tradition and modernity intersect. Its representation in Pakistani contemporary art exemplifies the capacity of art to challenge stereotypes, provoke reflection, and expand cultural understanding.

Final Reflection and Future Research

The significance of this research extends beyond the specific case of the Burqa. It highlights the importance of examining how visual symbols circulate within global networks of meaning. Future studies could explore comparative perspectives across different Muslim societies or investigate how digital media further transform perceptions of veiling.

As public discourse continues to evolve, artistic interpretations of the Burqa will likely generate new forms of engagement. Rather than seeking definitive answers, scholars and artists alike must remain attentive to the shifting landscapes of representation.

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