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[Back to article page](#)

# London Review of Books

## A Scrap of Cloth

John Borneman

*The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore and Politics* by [Jennifer Heath](#)  
California, 346 pp, £12.95, April 2008, ISBN 978 0 520 25518 0

We are fascinated by the veiling of women. From Morocco to Iran to Indonesia, as well as in Europe and North America, the veil has come to signify the unbreachable difference between the West and Islam. In the post-Cold War imagination it stands for so many things in so many different cultural contexts – Muslims, women's rights, women's oppression, tradition, beauty – that talk about the veil cannot be contained, because each domain of life and action seemingly implicates every other. Rarely is the veil worn innocuously. In some places, wearing it carries the same connotations as wearing a cross or carrying a flag. Today, it is most closely identified with the issue of women's status in a politicised Islam. Veiling was briefly abolished in Iran by Reza Shah in 1936, but made compulsory under the revolutionary Islamic regime in 1979. Various political regimes have since followed suit in making it compulsory for Muslim women to wear, or (in the case of French schoolgirls) not to wear, the veil.

Reducing the veil's significance to a particular conjunction between religion and gender betrays the rich history of veiling and the wide variation in its meaning. The women who have contributed histories, memoirs, ethnographies and critical essays to *The Veil* make it plain that veiling can be motivated by a range of aesthetic goals, political ideologies, economic constraints, personal choices and opportunities. Yet their insistence on pluralism and sociopolitical context, necessary though it is, elides important questions: why has the veil become iconic? What explains its present power and its appeal to Muslims in particular?

Most women who wear the veil do so in order to enter the public sphere on particular terms, though these terms may be difficult to discern. They remove the veil in private, in

the company of intimates. Men veil themselves, too: the Berber-speaking Tuareg of West Africa, and resistance fighters in Mexico and Palestine, for example. Tuareg men are reported to veil even when asleep, leaving only their eyes uncovered – it is considered most important to cover the mouth and nose. The reasons are both ecological (protection from desert sandstorms) and symbolic (to ward off evil in encounters with strangers). Resistance fighters veil only in public, in order to hide their identity. Neither variety of male veiling provokes much controversy.

As Jennifer Heath writes in her introduction, veiling attracts attention to women's faces, to the eyes, the mouth and the hair. Veils don't hide the face so much as frame it. They illuminate one part of the face by setting it in relief to the part they conceal. At the same time, of course, concealment draws attention to the veiled object, awakening curiosity as to what might lie behind. Only the black burqa (in Syria women who wear them are sometimes called 'walking tents') tries to prevent looking altogether. It makes the face and other parts of the body invisible and indivisible, as if making any part of the woman distinct would provoke the unthinkable. The many other sorts of veil – headscarf, tagelmust, parandja, niqaab, muhapatti, bridal veil, sari, hijab, chadri, batula, abaya, kufiyya – make it possible to see and be seen. That said, a woman can see out from inside a burqa, though with darkened vision. In this respect, the burqa functions like sunglasses. By contrast, most veils highlight and minimally reveal the eyes, while covering other parts of the face and body.

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[Vol. 30 No. 24 · 18 December 2008](#) » [John Borneman](#) » [A Scrap of Cloth](#)

pages 13-14 | 2752 words

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## Letters

[Vol. 31 No. 3 · 12 February 2009](#)

From Marielle Risse

John Borneman's comment that 'in all-female settings, the veil functions like a uniform, to create equality and erase outer distinctions,' covers up one of the most basic, but seldom discussed, uses of an abaya: to display wealth (*LRB*, 18 December 2008). On the Arabian Peninsula, where I have lived for five years, women get their

abayas and sheilas (headscarves) from a tailor, so they know the weight, drape, feel and cost of every kind of black fabric. Some of the more expensive shops attach a label or symbol to publicise the brand, which the cheaper stores will then copy. The women may, at first glance, look equal, but the choice of fabric, cut and decoration of the abaya and sheila, and the method of wrapping the sheila, show how much money the outfit cost, as well as how stylish the woman wishes to appear. And since men have to buy their own fabric to have a dishdash made, and will sometimes also buy abaya fabric for their sister or mother, they too know how to tell the quality of fabric. A student, trying to learn this body of knowledge in a new context, recently asked a colleague of mine: 'How can you tell if a tie is expensive or cheap?'

**Marielle Risse**

Salalah, Oman