



Veiled Ambition

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Synopsis

Frida is a young Lebanese woman with a thick Aussie accent and a dream of creating her own fashion empire. When she wins \$4000 in a radio competition, Frida opens a shop in Sydney Road Coburg, hoping to create a fashion emporium for Islamic women. But business is slow. With creditors knocking at her door, Frida ditches the slow selling hijabs to make room for a glamorous range of Hollywood styled gowns.

But just as success is back on the agenda, Frida's new husband Albert asks her to move to Sydney where he is building a house for their future family. Albert is captivated by Frida's ambition but he also has his own dreams of making it as a big time boxing promoter.

With passion, humour and relentless stamina this 'little Aussie battler in a scarf' negotiates her long distance romance and the dramas that ensue when couture and cultures collide.

Veiled Ambition was produced by Jeni McMahon and written and directed by Celeste Geer.

Using *Veiled Ambition* in the classroom

The documentary is suitable for students of a Secondary level. It is of specific interest and relevance to teachers and students of:

- Studies of Society & Environment (SOSE/HSIE)
- English
- Business Studies
- Fashion Design

Learning Outcomes

- Critically compare representations of people, events and issues.

- Analyse the core values of groups and societies.
- Describe and explain the responses of various cultural groups to issues of human rights.
- Consider the context in which the text was created and how this is reflected in the text.

Glossary of key terms

halal – foods (especially meat) permitted by the Qur'an and prepared in accordance with Islamic rites.

hijab – the modest mode of dress of Muslims. The term is often used to describe the headscarf worn by Islamic women.

Islam – a religion that believes in one God (Allah) and respects the actions and teachings of prophet Muhammad.

Muslim – a follower of the Islamic religion. The word means 'one who submits to God'

Qur'an – the central and most holy religious text of Islam, believed by its followers to be the exact words of God as revealed to the prophet Muhammad.

Ramadan – the ninth month of the Islamic calendar during which Muslims abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset and are encouraged to pay more attention to the teachings of Islam.

Sharia – the legal framework of Islamic law. The word means 'the way' or 'the path'.



Sydney Road, Coburg

The shop windows advertise kebabs, felafels and strong Turkish coffee. However, they are not the only sign that Sydney Road, Coburg is the heartland of Melbourne's Islamic community.

A little further north on the same thoroughfare is a campus of King Khalid Islamic College. Standing opposite the high bluestone walls of the former Pentridge prison, the school educates Muslim primary and secondary students from a range of backgrounds. Most have Middle Eastern heritage but there is a smaller number from Southeast Asia and the Indian sub-continent.

Only a few kilometres further east, the stately Preston mosque is yet another Islamic landmark in the area.

Seemingly, Frida could not have chosen a better place to establish her fashion enterprise. Her potential customers are the young women in headscarves who window-shop in Sydney Road or who wait patiently behind counters in other



businesses. Clearly there is a market for halal food and Islamic clothing here.

Unfortunately, Frida's attempts to win a share of local Muslim spending are not successful. Whatever the reasons, Frida is sliding further into debt and has to alter her approach if she is to achieve her dream of building a business empire. She expands her vision by changing direction

and thinking about other potential buyers in this cosmopolitan part of the city:

This transition that I'm making is probably from one extreme to another, from modest clothing to really revealing clothing ... Like you're Italian, come into my shop, Australian, you're Greek, ... You're in here for a reason, you're in here for the dress, where religion shouldn't be a problem.

Frida refers to herself as 'a little Aussie battler with a scarf' and challenges us to agree with that assessment



A little aussie battler with a scarf

The Oxford Dictionary of English (2002) lists 'battler' as an Australian and New Zealand word meaning 'a person who refuses to admit defeat in the face of difficulty'. With the attachment of two extra words ('little Aussie'), the battler has achieved icon status. The term not only appeals to national sentiment but has also come to mean someone with few natural advantages fighting courageously to make a living.

On these grounds, little Aussie battlers win our admiration. They embody the national characteristics that Australians have admired for generations.

In the context of *Veiled Ambition*, the term comes as a surprise. Frida refers to herself as 'a little Aussie battler with a scarf' and challenges us to agree with that assessment. At first her use of the term seems contradictory. Is it possible to be both Aussie and Muslim? The answer the documentary gives is a resounding 'yes'. Apart from her appearance, Frida is just another Australian businesswoman trying to make a living.

The business of fashion

Veiled Ambition provides us with a snapshot of Frida's attempt to make it big in the retail fashion industry. From humble beginnings of winning \$4,000 in a radio competition, Frida tells us that she wants to create an empire and become successful so that she can have a say in the community. 'No matter what religion you are, money talks', she says.

Frida's enthusiastic approach to Muslim clothing is evident by comments such as 'Wearing the Abajas, wearing the Jilbaabs ... probably better than wearing anything else because you just slip it on and off you go'. Slipping an outfit over her head, she says 'This feels grouse ... I'm going to wear this one day'.

Unfortunately for Frida, her enthusiasm doesn't increase trade. '... They want to cover their faces and cover their bodies, they don't want to spend the money to buy it', she says and six months after opening her boutique, the escalating debt forces her to change tactics. A little dismayed by the failure of her initial product line, Frida packs away the conservative clothing and begins importing an exclusive range of glamorous American dresses in order to target a broader and more mainstream market. Frida admits she went from 'one extreme to another' but is confident of her future success - 'I know I've got the best dresses in the strip now', she says.

Frida has abandoned her beliefs for the sake of success, however she stays true to her faith by offering the option of tailoring the dresses to comply with Islamic dress regulations



At first it appears that in doing so, Frida has abandoned her beliefs for the sake of success, however she stays true to her faith by offering the option of tailoring the dresses to comply with Islamic dress regulations.

Frida utilizes many advertising methods in her attempt to rebuild her business. Her husband, Albert, agrees to let Frida dress the boxing ring models in her exclusive collection of dresses instead of their usual

oppression by men. The Qur'an instructs its followers to dress in a modest fashion (sometimes described as hijab) yet there are many interpretations of the Qur'an's teachings about dress. What is classed as 'modest' varies between different Muslim communities.

However, it is generally agreed that clothing must be loose-fitting and cover a woman's entire body. Some scholars believe the hijab should only leave an opening for the eyes, yet most agree that the face and hands may be shown. In most communities these rules only apply when a woman is in public or in the company of persons other than her family.

The principle behind hijab is that by dressing modestly and acting in a way that does not draw attention to her, a woman may be admired for her intellect and not for her physical attributes. It is also believed that women who wear hijab are safe from harassment, sexual abuse and crime.

Although some countries' laws are based upon Sharia (Islamic law), it is not necessarily a country's government which enforces the wearing of hijab, but social pressure. Nevertheless, many women living in more liberal Muslim communities choose to wear hijab as they believe it to be liberating and the will of Allah. Some countries do enforce Islamic dress, for instance the Islamic Republic of Iran insists that all people, not only Muslims, comply. In other countries such as Turkey, it is illegal to wear the headscarf in certain situations, such as when attending a public school.

Men are also expected to dress modestly although expectations of them are less demanding. It is widely accepted that a man should be covered from his navel to his knee and in some communities his arms should also be covered.

bikinis. She also holds a stall at the bridal exhibition and is given her own special section on the catwalk. Her bright gowns make a stand out display amongst the white wedding dresses and she gets publicity by appearing on the radio program where she won the money to start her business.

Frida's determination to succeed is admirable and she sets an example for those who wish to go into business for themselves. Undeterred by setbacks and surprises and spurred on by her initial business failings, Frida now caters to two markets and may have found the way to create her empire after all.

Islamic dress

There is a lot of ambiguity surrounding Islamic women's dress and a common conception among non-Muslims that Muslim women are forced to cover their entire bodies as a sign of inferiority and

In the documentary, Frida says 'by wearing the scarf, it's probably completed my personality ... it's completed me totally ... I know where I'm going, I know who I am, I know what I'm doing'. This statement implies that it is Frida's choice to wear the Islamic hijab. She does not feel oppressed by her conservative attire – in fact it boosts her self-confidence.

- Do you think it is really possible for women (as Frida says) 'to look like Hollywood' in Muslim clothing? Is it important that they should?
- How does Frida attempt to reconcile her religious beliefs with her beliefs about fashion and beauty?
- What could be some of the benefits of wearing traditional Islamic dress? What could be some of the disadvantages or problems?
- Is it only women who are pressured to look sexy and fashionable? Are there also pressures on men to dress fashionably and achieve the perfect body?
- Can people who don't fit the 'Hollywood image' still be popular

and beautiful?

Activities

Frida says 'We're not out here to look beautiful'. However, in today's society we are bombarded with glamorous photos of beautiful men and women with shining hair, flawless complexions and perfect bodies.

- In groups, search through magazine and newspapers and cut out photographs and articles in which physical beauty is central. Limit your findings to about twenty pieces and make them into a collage. Amongst your cut-outs, write some of the positive and negative conclusions expressed by your collection. As a class, discuss your key points and the impact your collage has on you personally. Has this exercise helped you gain a greater understanding of why some women would choose to wear hijab?

OR

- Think of someone you respect or idolize. It could be a famous singer, an actor or a member of your own

family. Why do you respect them? For their musical or acting talents? Their contribution to society? Does their appearance have an effect on your judgement/opinion of them? Write a paragraph about this person and why you idolize them.

OR

- Does your school have a uniform or dress code? Who decides it and why is it in place? Working in pairs, use a large sheet of poster paper to draw a representation of a student in appropriate dress and a student dressed improperly. Make notes on the poster pointing to key elements of the dress. Remember to include things such as hairstyles and jewellery.



Above: the director Celeste Geer and Frida

Marriage and family

Frida appears to combine the best of both worlds drawing on her Muslim background and integrating her values and traditions into an Australian way of life. When we first see Frida she is tying her headscarf but our perception that she is a typical Muslim woman quickly changes when she snaps her fingers in the mirror and puts on a pair of fashionable sunglasses.

We can draw some comparisons between Frida's commitment to her Muslim heritage and her adoption of some Australian values and customs. Things that we take for granted in our society such as our family and marriage, also play a vital role in Muslim life.

We see that Frida deeply values her mother's contribution to her business and her life in general by comments such as:

... my mum ... [is] my right hand. If she wasn't here, there was no way this place would survive.

Lots of things to do ... and not enough mothers.

... my mum's the type of person that will stick by us until we succeed.

It is customary among Muslims to ask for parental consent prior to getting married and in keeping with this tradition, Frida mentions that Albert asked her family



for her hand in marriage, a custom that is rarely practised by Westerners. However Frida and Albert's relationship can also be seen as somewhat liberal as they live in different states due to work commitments, a familiar practice in Western relationships yet not so common among traditional Muslims. Frida seems aware of the rarity of their relationship and says that Albert is 'one in a million ... you won't find much

Arabic guys that ... say "if your heart's in it, do it" ... Just the most perfect relationship ever.'

Frida has shunned the traditional Muslim role of stay-at-home wife and mother, instead opting to run her own business and to return to work soon after the birth of her baby.

Activity

- When Albert and Frida are organizing a feast to celebrate the end of Ramadan, Frida shows us that she is preparing roast chickens and says '... they want us to adapt to the Australian life ... A fair dinkum chicken roast ... you can't get more Aussie than this.' As a class, discuss what you think she means by this comment.

OR

- What is the ancestry of your own family? Does it observe any special traditions or customs? Write a paragraph describing the traditions your family members follow and explain why they do so. Perhaps there are cultural or religious practices or simply things your family has made into traditions such as always eating dinner together around a table or going to the cinema every Friday night. If you wish, you may share your writing with the rest of the class or put it in a clear plastic sleeve to contribute to a class book.

Useful Websites

Articles about Islam:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijab>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramadan>

Documentary website:

http://www.rebelfilms.com.au/veiled_ambition.html

Frida's shop website

<http://www.sassyboutique.com.au>

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