

FILM

## Asian And Arab Cinema

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Osian's Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema (New Delhi, July 07) presented a retrospective of Kenji Mizoguchi (Japan) and frescoes and themes of cinema from Asia and north Africa. James Longley's "Iraq in Fragments" (English/Arabic, colour, 94 mins) is a documentary on war torn Iraq, focusing on characters from the three major ethnic regions. Street traffic, red double decker buses, bridges a vast Euphrates river, an aquarium with red fishes introduces Mohammad, an eleven-year-old boy living in Baghdad. He believes that before the US led war, everything was beautiful. The child speaks off-camera, as slow frames and rapid image flow sequences record brick kilns, troops in trucks, and damaged buildings caused by war. Mohammad recalls that it was scary, as his house trembled and shook during the air strikes. Hand held close-ups knit faces, ceiling fans, helicopters, funeral processions and play of dice games on checkered boards, by the roadside. Local men observe that the war was for oil.

Mohammad lives opposite a cafe, and work in a car repairing shop. Men in tea shops and by the roadside, look forward to a new outlook on the world, beyond divisions and dominations, which would be better for Islam and Muslims. At a school, children stand in the open, and listen to a head covered lady teacher, calling for a new Iraq, without oppression and tyranny, and exhorting expulsion of imperialism.

The scenrio shifts to Sadr's south of Iraq, with large mosques and less crowded streets. With the crescent moon, there are celebrations for the end of Saddam's tyranny and oppression. Students of Hawza, led by Mohammad al Sadr, were a challenge to Baathists, and suffered cell imprisonment. Followers of al Sadr explain that differences between Shias and Sunnis were created by Saddam, who was scared of the Shia revolution in Iran. Flagellations accompany Ramadan processions. There are community prayers in the open spaces of Nasarayella. Speakers call for legal elections to a literate Iraq, or remain under Americans. Factional discords were sown in Iraq, since World War I.

With shots of gunfire, people scramble in markets. Wine sellers are in custody, and gun wielding militias beat up suspected alcohol peddlers. During the holy month of *Ashura*, a woman pleads for release of her husband. Spanish troops fire on a peaceful demonstration. The local radio broadcasts torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib,. Men with hookas discuss events in tea shops. References to US support for Israel arise. Moqtada al Sadr on TV, demands the expulsion of the Americans. Some individuals feel that if USA leaves, Saddam will reappear in new forms and new images.

In Orens, summer is very hot; and dark smoke billows from brick kilns in spring, summer and autumn. Men play chess with pebbles. Teenagers, Sulei, Suleiman and Bazhar tend to sheep, and walk to school. The landscape is dotted with Kurdish water springs. A lady teacher with head scarf gives English lessons. A few believe that the Kurds brought America to Iraq, for ruin. As the camera pans from an oven fire to a fire spreading in the village trees, somebody mentions that Saddam had razed the villages in 1987. While the Jews have their own state,

the Kurds have no independent state. Children burn tyres, sing and dance, and play with snow. The Kurds feel that God is always on the side of the winner. James Longley's camera enters present day Iraq with stylistic options and composed plan sequences. The people of Iraq and the camera remain witnesses to the disorder and political desires in Iraq. The statements and observations before the camera are spontaneous. The film offers a dialectic between history, current events, economic conditions and religious beliefs. The battles and violence do not leave any hallucinatory effect on the reality. In Longley's documentary, the camera and the sound recorders, are instruments of enquiry.

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