

Discover oneself through cinema, advises Qumra Master Naomi Kawase

Masterclass by Kawase becomes a spiritual journey into her life and outlook

Doha, Qatar; March 7, 2016: The masterclass by award-winning Japanese filmmaker Naomi Kawase at Qumra today evolved as a profound spiritual and philosophical journey into her life and outlook, as she highlighted her experience of making films after being challenged by the two existential questions: “Who am I? What is my purpose?”

These questions seeded her journey into filmmaking despite living in Nara, a close-knit old township with a heritage of over 1,300 years but removed from the bustling industry and limelight of Tokyo.

A Qumra Master, whose film ***The Mourning Forest*** was earlier shown as part of the Modern Masters Screenings at the annual industry event of the Doha Film Institute, Kawase said she did not grow up watching films nor did she have the environment that would have nurtured her into a filmmaker.

“Even being born into this world was a miracle,” said Kawase, narrating how her parents divorced when her mother was pregnant with her. “Now that I was here in the world, I wanted to live it and leave behind a trace of my presence. The God of filming came to me... cameras and film came to me. I wanted to know myself and that is how I started making films.”

Her films, naturally, have a strong autobiographical element. Kawase’s earlier works included documentary tributes to her grandmother, who raised her. Having ignored her grandfather’s request to record his voice while he was on his death-bed, she recorded the last moments of the elderly woman, turning it into “something universal to be shared with others.”

Stating that she does not see her films as a diary, Kawase said that how anyone responds to these situations is unique to individuals. “The images and memories that we record within ourselves are very different in each person. A writer and filmmaker’s role is to interpret these different memories and encounters in life. We are all spending the same time here on earth but the memory of time elapsed is different. With movies, you can distort the reality in front of you but you also can get the right perception of what is happening. As a filmmaker you are tested on those terms.”

That is why she is candid in admitting that she does not have a direct answer to what moments from her own life she would want to show on film (she has depicted autobiographical moments on film including her father’s abandonment of her and her aunt’s dementia).

“The fact that I could have been non-existent in this world forms the basis of my filmmaking. Asking who I am, realising fact that I live here, and probing what that means to me leads to answers on the value of life. On a daily basis, writers around the world struggle to capture this. You only have one choice of perception that you can present in a movie. But you must be aware that there is another eye looking at yourself - through your film. Understanding this is key to making films.”

Kawase said she has been a tough task-master on her actors, confining actress Makiko Watanabe to a hospital for four days before shoot began on the protracted death scene that is artistically shot in her movie *Still the Water*. “She wanted to run away to Tokyo,” laughed Kawase. “I put my actors through hardship but I never doubt them. Eventually, she trusted me too, and she today says the film was an important one for her.”

However, Kawase said she goes by instinct and gives enough leeway to the actors while shooting. “My scripts are not too conversational; they are more explanatory of what the characters feel; the actors have the freedom to read between the lines.”

She advises filmmakers to learn the value of patience in filming. “Taking time to film is a characteristic of my films. Today, you can perhaps control it with the latest technologies. But to me, the waiting for things that you cannot get hold of right now, your desire for that experience... that is also important. After all, if you want to watch a cherry blossom, you have to wait till spring.”

She said the reason she makes films is not driven by money. “There is no guarantee of monetary success for films, and if a film does not bring returns, a director can be out of work for five to six years. But that is a risk worth taking. If the director has the will, he or she will find the producer. I have been creating films that only I can make, and that is the reason of my continuity in creativity. More than money, the reason I make films is that there are things I want to leave behind.”

Now having launched a film festival in Nara, Kawase said she is telling the young generation of the world that they can also do something in their own hometown. “That is similar to what you are doing here in Doha with Qumra; you have filmmakers from all over the world. But why here? That is because we want to hand down culture to our young generation.”

On women in films, she said that since there are relatively fewer women filmmakers, “you have the opportunity to make yourself visible before you can make an impact. Initially, it is difficult but once you clear the first hurdles, you will have increasing support coming to you. You have to make your own efforts before you can do anything – be it in any profession. You have to take a positive view on life.”

During Qumra, Kawase and the four other Qumra Masters are mentoring filmmakers from Qatar and around the world whose projects are participating in an intensive development programme including: Writer/Director Laila Hotait Salas and Nadia Hotait for their project ‘Stolen Skies’; Sophia Al-Maria and Anna Lena Vaney for their project ‘Evil Eye’; Uda Benyamina and Marc-Benoît Créancier for their project ‘Bastard’; Deepak Rauniyar and Joslyn Barnes for their project ‘White Sun’; and Jewel Maranan, Director and Ingmar Trost for their project ‘Tondo’.

Kawase is one of five Qumra Masters at the event - the others are screenwriter, director and leading US indie producer James Schamus; Turkish auteur and Cannes Palme d’Or and Grand Prix winner, Nuri Bilge Ceylan; Russian auteur, Aleksandr Sokurov; Japanese writer/director Naomi Kawase and two-time Academy Award nominated US documentarian Joshua Oppenheimer.

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About Qumra:

Qumra is an initiative that seeks to provide mentorship, nurturing and hands-on development for filmmakers from Qatar and around the world, alongside a series of screenings for Doha audiences featuring films by international masters and recipients of support from the Institute.

** The Arabic term ‘qumra’ is popularly said to be the origin of the word ‘camera’, and to have been used by the scientist, astronomer and mathematician Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham, 965-c.1040 CE), whose work in optics laid out the principles of the camera obscura.*

About Doha Film Institute:

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film



screenings; the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar's 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

Doha Film Institute

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