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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Narratives of Middle East

Course Code: ENG5EJ304(2) • Module 4 Notes

Unit 13: Hunger Ward – Dir. Skye Fitzgerald (2020)

Skye Fitzgerald and the Cinematic Witnessing of Humanitarian Catastrophe

Skye Fitzgerald's Oscar-nominated documentary short *Hunger Ward* (2020) provides an excruciating, unflinching audiovisual record of the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, caused by years of brutal civil war and an unrelenting naval and aerial blockade imposed by the Saudi-led, US-backed military coalition. Filmed inside two of Yemen's most overburdened therapeutic feeding centers—one in the rebel-controlled north in Sana'a and the other in the government-controlled south in Aden—the documentary forces the global spectator to confront the devastating human cost of geopolitical warfare.

Child Starvation as a Weapon of War

Fitzgerald centers the film upon two extraordinary pediatric healthcare workers: Dr. Aida Alsadeeq and Nurse Mekkia Mahdi. Operating with severely depleted medical supplies, frequent power outages, and no salaries, these women wage an agonizing, round-the-clock battle to save skeletal, severely acutely malnourished children who are brought to their clinics on the brink of cardiac collapse. The camera documents the grueling physical reality of starvation: sunken eyes, peeling skin, listless infants too weak to weep, and frantic mothers who have sold every possession merely to afford the bus fare to the hospital. By refusing sensational voiceover and focusing on intimate observational cinema, *Hunger Ward* indicts international complicity and exposes how mass starvation is systematically weaponized against civilian populations.

Unit 14: A Tale of Three Sisters – Dir. Emin Alper (2019)

Emin Alper and the Claustrophobic Geographies of Anatolia

Acclaimed Turkish filmmaker Emin Alper's third feature film, *A Tale of Three Sisters* (*Kız Kardeşler*, 2019), which premiered in competition at the Berlin International Film Festival, is a stunning, atmospheric exploration of rural poverty, class servitude, and patriarchal entrapment in contemporary Turkey. Set in a remote, snowbound village tucked inside a desolate Anatolian mountain canyon, the film revolves around three sisters: Reyhan, Nurhan, and Havva.

The Besleme System: Domestic Servitude and Rural Expulsion

The film investigates the historical Turkish social practice of *Besleme*—a system wherein impoverished rural peasant families send their young daughters to affluent middle-class households in distant cities to serve as foster daughters/unpaid domestic maids, in the faint hope of social mobility. All three sisters have failed in the city and been expelled back to their destitute father's decaying stone house: Reyhan returns pregnant out of wedlock and is hastily married off to the village's half-witted shepherd Veysel; Nurhan is returned after beating her master's child; and Havva is returned following the death of the infant boy she was hired to care for.

Patriarchal Confinement and the Myth of Escape

Alper films the sisters within claustrophobic, candle-lit domestic interiors, capturing their fierce sisterly bickering, secret dreams, and shared despair. The surrounding towering mountains function as a physical prison: outside lies crushing rural stagnation, while inside reigns an inescapable patriarchal order governed by their aging, weak father and the predatory local village headman. The film serves as a devastating allegorical portrait of contemporary Turkey's deep socio-economic polarization and the impossibility of escape for subaltern women.

Unit 15: Ajami – Dir. Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani (2009)

Scandar Copti, Yaron Shani, and the Neo-Noir Cartographies of Jaffa

Nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, *Ajami* (2009) is a monumental cinematic achievement co-directed by Palestinian filmmaker Scandar Copti and Israeli filmmaker Yaron Shani. Set in the impoverished, multi-ethnic, gentrifying Ajami neighborhood of Jaffa, the film breaks completely with cinematic conventions by casting exclusively non-professional actors and structuring the narrative through a complex, non-linear, five-chapter portmanteau structure that continuously shifts perspectives.

Intersecting Tragedies in a Divided City

The film weaves together the desperate lives of Israeli Jews, Palestinian Muslims, and Christian Arabs caught in an inescapable web of violence:

- **Nasri and Omar:** Two young Arab brothers marked for death by a ruthless Bedouin crime syndicate after their uncle shoots a clan member during an extortion dispute.
- **Malek:** A young Palestinian refugee from the West Bank working illegally in an Ajami restaurant to raise money for his mother's life-saving bone marrow transplant.
- **Dando:** An Israeli Jewish police officer consumed by grief and obsessive vengeance following the disappearance and murder of his younger brother during military service.
- **Binj:** A peaceful Palestinian Christian cook who dreams of moving to Tel Aviv with his Jewish girlfriend, but is dragged into catastrophe through his brother's drug trafficking.

The Tragic Inevitability of Structural Misunderstanding

Through its dizzying chronological shifts, *Ajami* demonstrates how every act of violence is rooted in incomplete knowledge, prejudice, and systemic trauma. When Officer Dando encounters Malek and Omar in a dark alley during a botched drug deal, he mistakenly believes they are the terrorists who murdered his brother, unleashing a fatal shooting. The film offers no comfortable political catharsis; instead, it exposes the crushing structural brutality of the Israeli security apparatus, the abandonment of Arab neighborhoods, and the tragic cycle of retributive bloodshed that traps all communities within shared suffering.

Unit 16: Warsha – Dir. Dania Bdeir (2022)

Dania Bdeir and the Skyward Liberation of Queer Masculinity

Dania Bdeir’s electrifying short film *Warsha* (2022), which won the Short Film Jury Award at the Sundance Film Festival, is a luminous, groundbreaking exploration of queer desire, migrant labor, and ecstatic self-emancipation set against the bruised urban skyline of Beirut, Lebanon.

The Precarious Everyday Life of Migrant Labor

The film centers on Mohammad (played with mesmerizing physical grace by celebrated queer artist and dancer Khansa), a Syrian migrant worker toiling on a chaotic high-rise construction site in Beirut. In Lebanese society, Syrian refugees and migrant laborers endure extreme economic exploitation, police harassment, and xenophobic hostility, confined to crowded dormitory rooms and forced into silent, invisible subjection. Mohammad’s quiet, gentle demeanor makes him an outsider among the hyper-masculine, rough construction workers.

The Crane Cabin as Sanctuary of Aerial Transgression

When the construction crane operator dies under mysterious circumstances, Mohammad boldly volunteers to operate the notorious machine—one of the tallest and most dangerous tower cranes in the city, which sways precariously in the ocean winds. Climbing hundreds of meters into the clouds, Mohammad escapes the panoptic gaze of the foreman, his fellow workers, and heteropatriarchal society. High above the ruined city, the cramped crane cabin transforms into a magical, sacred sanctuary. In an astonishing, ecstatic climax, Mohammad applies vibrant red lipstick, lets down his hair, dons a glittering sheer garment, and steps out onto the metal arm of the crane. Suspended between heaven and earth, he performs a breathtaking, defiant aerial dance to the legendary voice of Syrian diva Sherine, reclaiming his bodily sovereignty, artistic brilliance, and queer freedom against the open sky.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

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The literary and cinematic narratives explored in this course operate as powerful acts of epistemic counter-insurgency. By centering local voices, regional historical memories, and intricate domestic realities, writers like Jokha Alharthi, Abdul Rahman Munif, and filmmakers like Scandar Copti and Dania Bdeir shatter orientalist hegemony. They reveal a region pulsating with internal ideological contestations, where subaltern subjects continuously resist both domestic authoritarianism and external imperial interference.

2. Petrofiction, Neoliberal Urbanism, and Ecological Displacement

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3. Gender, Bodily Sovereignty, and Subaltern Transgressions

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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