

Emma Kawawada about MY SMALL LAND

“Not a single Kurdish refugee has been accepted to Japan so far”

Sarya and her younger siblings were born in Japan to a Kurdish immigrant family. They are torn between their desire to integrate and the attachment to their Kurdish origin that their father tries to implant in them. For MY SMALL LAND director Emma Kawawada says to be inspired by the Dardenne brothers, Ken Loach’s KES and of course Hirokazu Kore-eda (SHOPLIFTERS), who serves as executive producer, alongside Hidetoshi Shinomiya, who as a DoP recently provided the picture composition for DRIVE MY CAR.



Emma Kawawada’s prominently supported film had its world premiere in the Generation Kplus section at the Berlinale 2022 and was given a special mention in the Amnesty International Film Award. As the jury justified: *“This told film could take place almost anywhere in the world. It has the universal concern to denounce the inhumane treatment of refugees. The focus is on a Kurdish family, suffering from the authorities’ inhumane treatment, while their residence status in Japan is being*

revoked.”

Emma Kawawada: I became interested in Kurdish people in 2015 when I was shocked by the images of women soldiers fighting with the Kurdish militia against ISIS militants. That is when I first heard about this country and this ethnic group. I found out that a community of approx. 2.000 Kurds were living in Japan, and many of them were in the process of applying for refugee status. They had come all

the way from Turkey and still fought for the place where they wanted to live. In 2018 I started interviewing them; those visits have inspired me for my story.

What do you mean by this “Small Land”? Is it the prefecture where the protagonist is allowed to live or is the title referring to Kurdistan?

Kawawada: Both. If you are rejected as a refugee in Japan, there is an option that allows you to stay under very

strict conditions. For example, you are not allowed to leave your own region – in this case the Seitama Prefecture – this place is what Sarya defines as her homeland. But it also refers to Kurdistan, which can’t be called a nation, simply because it doesn’t exist. When I was looking for a word that could include both, I thought of ‘lando’ (land). In Japanese the word denotes “what can be my own” - in opposite to ‘country’ which is more a political label.

Born to an English father and a Japanese mother, Emma Kawawada directed the short CIRCLE as a student. She joined the Bun-Buku production company in 2014 and has served as assistant director to Hirokazu Kore-eda on THE THIRD MURDER (2017) and to Nanako Hirose on HIS LOST NAME (2018). MY SMALL LAND is her feature film debut.

What is the general situation on migration in Japan?

Kawawada: There are many immigrants from Asia, for example Rohingyas from Myanmar. But only 1% of the



candidates is granted refugee status and not a single Kurdish refugee has been accepted so far. Nevertheless it has become part of everyday life in Japan to have people from various countries standing at the checkout in the supermarket or working in convenient stores. But I have the feeling that the understanding is far from sufficient. For example, people meeting me will often praise me for speaking Japanese so well, though I was born here and master the language perfectly. I notice how my own identity, which is not at all different from other Japanese people, is questioned. As a teenager, this was a big issue for me and I struggled a lot with it. Now I can deal with it, even if I'm confronted with it on a daily basis.

This must have helped you to understand your Kurdish contacts.

Kawawada: These Kurdish youngsters grew up in Japan and don't speak their parents' language very well. The identity gap that has grown between the first and second generation was a level on which we could connect very empathetically. My father came to Japan as an English teacher, he met my mother here and has been living in Japan for over 30 years. He speaks Japanese, although his mother tongue is English and he feels English too. He

has absolutely no intention of becoming Japanese. That's completely okay with me, although there will always be something that I don't understand completely about my dad and that I can't fully empathise with. Since I was little, I have always had this feeling.

Why did you choose a feature film instead of a documentary?

Kawawada: I wanted to make a film that was not just about a distant problem, by telling a story that the audience can embrace as if it was their own. I wanted people to identify with the characters and tap into their own emotions. That is why I'm telling a story about a 17 year old girl struggling with her identity.

Are the actors in MY SMALL LAND all Kurds?

Kawawada: Initially that was the intention, but I decided against it. I was worried that appearing in a dramatic film with a social message may work against them in their rather delicate position of applying for refugee status. I held auditions for people with varied overseas backgrounds. That's how Lina Arashi, who started her career as a magazine model, signed up. She's a high school student and her roots go back to five different countries in the Middle East. Sarya's fam-



ily is played by Lina's real-life father, sister and brother. We never intended it to be like this, but we made the decision after seeing how well they all performed together. Lina's most natural expressions and emotions came through with her father; she then was completely different than with other actors.

What are your wishes in regards to your film?

Kawawada: In a story that is mainly about youth and coming-of-age, the issue of Kurdish refugees in Japan always plays in the background. It is something that, like the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine, spurs people on to question the meaning of borders. National borders will likely

never vanish, but I think those borders of the heart we carry inside us can be redrawn. I hope that by watching through the eyes of a young girl, we'll realise that these immigrant people are not so far from ourselves; they think about friends, love, family... These are issues that concern them and therefore we are all the same people with exactly the same feelings, exactly the same thoughts.

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Uta Beth