



* Jessica Chastain is compelling in her portrayal of CIA agent Maya, who goes looking for Osama bin Laden in the Oscar-nominated *Zero Dark Thirty*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow.

Bigelow's bold expose

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

American director Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* opens with a disclaimer. The film is based on true events. The movie talks about a highly controversial issue in her country. Yet, Bigelow is not afraid to say that her story and script are woven around what happened after 9/11 in the United States of America.

Let us, for a moment, take a plane and fly across the Atlantic and the Hindukush range of mountains and land in India. Despite a strict and often meaningless censorship, a film, duly certified for public screening, gets caught in a web of radical roadblocks.

Kamal Hassan's multimillion-rupee *Viswaroopam* was banned in the actor-helmer's home state of Tamil Nadu till the man had to go on his knees, pleading with the powers that be that he had staked his entire property on the movie. *Viswaroopam* had been okayed by the Central Board of Film Certification. Yet, hardline Muslim groups wanted the movie to be banned because they felt that it was "anti-Islam".

Days after Hassan was "permitted" to release his film in Tamil Nadu after effecting cuts/mutes, Mani Ratnam's *Kadal*, spinning a story around a Tamil Nadu Christian fishing community, ran into a storm. Some Christian groups grumbled about the movie showing their faith in "poor light".

Mercifully, the storm petered out without causing much damage.

Many, many films in India have faced such disruptive impediments.

In other instances, directors and producers have considered it wise to insert a disclaimer at the start of a movie. That this does not always help is a different issue. I am sure Hassan would have taken this path, though it turned out to be a useless exercise.

Some disclaimers, however, appear stupid, because the whole world knows that the helmer-producer is fibbing. A classic example of this was Mani Ratnam's *Guru*. Everybody knew that it was the actual story of Dhirubhai Ambani, the pauper-turned-prince who created Reliance Industries in India. Yet, Ratnam naively played a disclaimer, and I remember people actually laughing when the denial appeared on the screen.

In contrast, Bigelow has been bold. Very bold. She tackles a horrific chapter in American history, a chapter on torture which a president supposedly as noble and upright as Barack Obama had denied on television and in other mediums.

There is a telling scene in *Zero Dark Thirty*, where Jessica Chastain essaying CIA agent Maya stares into the camera with an absolute blank look, while we are shown Obama telling a television interviewer that "America does not torture". If I were to pick one most important shot in the film, it would be Chastain's expression, which to me implied not just utter disbelief, but

sheer disgust. For, the woman had merely hours ago been part of a special team sadistically torturing a Muslim prisoner — even stripping him naked and letting him be alone with Maya — in order to ferret out information about 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden or OBL, as the Americans chose to call him.

We never know why Maya agrees to be part of the persecution brigade, but we get a hint of what the reasons could be. She appears to have no family, not even a boyfriend and is not even the least inclined to have one. When questioned by a colleague if she would care have a fling, Maya replies that she is not that sort.

In the beginning, we see Maya flying down from Washington to a CIA cell in Afghanistan to join a team of ruthless interrogators. Soon, Maya makes it her life's mission to get bin Laden. Her pursuit of the mass murderer is determined and dogged.

Zero Dark Thirty — which comes from Bigelow, the only woman in the history of the Oscars to have been crowned Best Director for *The Hurt Locker* (incidentally her first film), about a bomb disposal squad during the Iraq war — is Maya's story all through. She searches for OBL for 10 long years, never giving up and never allowing anything or anybody frustrate her attempt. It is not easy for her — facing as she does a horribly bureaucratic, male-dominated CIA. In the end, she is happy when bin Laden arrives at a CIA base in a body bag.

This climax makes it different from other

9/11 movies, such as *United 93*, *World Trade Centre* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

Zero Dark Thirty — a title which reflects a military jargon referring to a state of darkness as well as the hour of the clock — despite its long running time of 180 minutes, engages you in no small way. We are taken into the film through a 90-second black screen where muffled noises and voices convey the horror of the Twin Towers.

Two years later, we see OBL's nephew being brutalised by the CIA — beatings, waterboarding, being bound by a dog collar and getting locked in a small wooden box. I suppose this may not be an ideal way to get a viewer hooked to the plot, but then Maya's hunt for bin Laden was no sweet love story.

Painstakingly researched (though some information was not revealed or fudged to protect identities/ Maya actually exists) and written by Mark Boal (who also penned *The Hurt Locker*) and ably photographed by Greig Fraser, *Zero Dark Thirty* goes into great detailing. Watch the scene of the actual attack on the Abbottabad house of OBL. We are shown through night vision glasses (worn by the American soldiers who fly into Pakistan in Stealth helicopters — low travelling machines that cannot be easily detected by radars) how troops go about searching for suitable places on doors to plant detonators.

The script is also structured like a newspaper story around a series of bomb blasts in Saudi Arabia (2004), in London's Tube and bus in 2005, in a star Karachi hotel the following year, and outside a CIA base in Afghanistan which nearly kills Maya. Described as a "killer" herself, she never flinches when she watches witnesses being tortured, and after escaping the explosion, she quips "I believe I was spared so I could finish the job."

Her boldness is on exhibition on several other occasions. I adored her confrontation with the CIA Big Boss. During a conference with CIA heads, the man asks who the girl at the corner is. "I am the (expletive) who found the (Abbottabad) house", she answers with biting sarcasm.

And how she does find that house? Early on in the movie, Maya is convinced that the best way to track bin Laden is to follow his couriers, who are the terrorist's "mobile telephones and Internet". OBL knew that he could never use a phone or the Internet for fear of being traced, and so he relied on couriers. There was one special messenger, who foolishly used the same white SUV (a Maruti Gypsy made in India!) to travel between Peshawar and Abbottabad, and Maya knew that this was the guy who would take her to OBL.

When the Big Boss asks the chiefs during the meeting how certain they are that it is indeed bin Laden who is hiding in the house, they answer "60%". But Maya is 100% sure that it is OBL holed up in the house. In the end, we know that she was right.

Boal said during an interview that there is a real "Maya", but he has wisely altered some facts to make sure that he does not leave behind a trail for possible assassins to follow.

Zero Dark Thirty can well be the most personal movie Bigelow has made, and we see her energy flowing through Maya — as the film steadily courses through intense moments before docking at a terrific point.

The question now is will *Zero Dark Thirty* clinch some Oscars? Hopefully it should at least get Chastain one.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for more than three decades, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com)