

REVIEW: 'Becoming,' the (very) authorized biopic of Michelle Obama



CHENNAI: It is never easy to make a biopic of someone who is still alive, as Nadia Hallgren's "Becoming" — based on Michelle Obama's bestselling memoir — shows. Hallgren is clearly wary of displeasing her subject, or opening her up to more criticism than she already attracts as a former first lady of color. Not least because the film is overseen by the Obamas' own production company, Higher Ground Productions.



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Still, the film, in its way, gives some fascinating insights into Obama's life as she tours 34 counties (two years after Barack Obama's eight-year tenure as US president ended) with her memoir.



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Obama, the documentary makes clear, is lawyer first, writer next and — finally — the wife of a man who was once the most powerful in the world. She is independent and values her own achievements, and has stepped out from the shadow of her husband, while still being a loving wife and mother, and, above all, the epitome of dignity and decorum. Barack once described his wife as “the rock of our family” — a woman who cares deeply.

In a scene from “Becoming,” she rues the fact that her grandfather could have been a great doctor or professor if not for the color of his skin. Not that she had it much easier. Her school counselor once told her that she was not Princeton material. Of course, she proved that counselor wrong.

Obama was born into a typical working-class family in the south of Chicago. Her mother was strict, but never let her or her brother feel that they were invisible, boosting her confidence at a time when racism was still rife in the US.

“I have been at probably every powerful table there is in the world. ... I am coming down from the mountaintop to tell every young person that is poor and working-class and has been told, regardless of the color of your skin, that you don't belong, ‘Don't listen to them!’ They don't even know how they got at those seats,” Obama says in the film.

But the film is, ultimately, not that revealing. Hallgren treads very carefully. We never see her subject letting her guard down. The movie is manicured to perfection. It could have been far more interesting — and equally flattering to Obama — were it less hagiographic.
