



* Kathryn Bigelow ... controversy surrounding her latest film *Zero Dark Thirty* may have caused her to miss out on a Best Director nomination at this year's Oscars.

Cinema that scares

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

More than word, image has the enormous power to distract, disturb, tease and torment us. Often, visuals have far greater ability to incite and inflame. No wonder, then, that cinema and television become our favourite whipping boys.

In recent weeks, the whole of southern India has been wracked by what I call "Viswaroopam fever". Kamal Hassan, the film's writer, helmer and actor, has been punched hard. His work is banned, and his losses have multiplied. The ban came after some Muslim groups alleged that *Viswaroopam* pilloried the community. In recent times, other religious and caste groups have been agitated for one reason or the other, conveying dangerously low tolerance level.

And in a climate as fragile as this now in India, Deepa Mehta's *Midnight's Children* is all set to open on February 1. She comes with

two black marks. One, *Midnight's Children* is based on Salman Rushdie's novel of the same name. Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* still remains proscribed in the country that he himself was born, and if Muslim radicals hate him for what he wrote in the book, the Hindu diehards purportedly dislike him as much. So much that he was stopped from visiting the Jaipur Literature Festival last year by "serious death threats".

Two, Mehta had earlier faced the wrath of radical Hindu political groups when she was set to shoot *Water* in Varanasi. She was accused of deriding Indian culture and chased away from the city without being allowed to can a single shot.

But, of course, India is not alone in displaying hostility or intolerance towards cinema. The medium easily creates panic, a fear psychosis. It may be entirely irrational and misplaced. Yet it happens all the time.

As we hurtle towards the Oscars night at the Kodak Theatre, we find that the latest victim of cinema-phobia is Kathryn Bigelow. She was the first woman to win the Oscar for Best Director in 2009 for *The Hurt Locker*, an exceptionally moving look at the

lives of a bomb squad during the Iraq war.

But Bigelow's latest work, *Zero Dark Thirty*, has while clinching five Oscar nominations, including one for Best Picture, missed out on the Best Director nod. The American helmer admitted to a BBC interviewer that a controversy surrounding her film might have been the reason why she had been kept out of the Best Director race.

Zero Dark Thirty explores the real story of the 10-year hunt for Osama bin Laden. And it was a woman who ultimately helped the American CIA nail down the Al Qaeda leader, the mastermind behind 9/11. She was herself a young CIA agent, and her dogged efforts are said to have led the American assault team to the Abbottabad home of Bin Laden in Pakistan — where he had been hiding for months. Or, was it years?

Zero Dark Thirty cracks some of the myths that have surrounded not just the cold-blooded killing of the terrorist, but also the shabby treatment which the CIA meted out to one who was arguably the key player in the drama.

Bigelow, whose movie is inspired by hard facts, shows how in the male-dominated

CIA, the agent's work (which could have eased America's years of tension and worry following 9/11), went unsung. She got neither recognition for helping to nab the world's most wanted man nor promotion. But, she reportedly received a cash bonus for, as even her male colleagues grudgingly admit, an excellent piece of investigation.

Now, *Zero Dark Thirty* has immortalised the agent's role in this whole sordid business. Bigelow and writer Mark Boal (who also wrote *The Hurt Locker*) were lucky enough to meet senior Government officials in the US, and also the woman herself around whom the film revolves.

In the movie, Jessica Chastain's (nominated for Best Actress Oscar) Agent Maya analyses the confessions of prisoners, broken completely after inhuman interrogations to zero in on a vital lead. There is a very important scene where we see three CIA officers looking at the television screen on which President Barack Obama is telling an interviewer that America does not torture. The camera then pans to a close up of one of the three officers, Maya, whose face is absolutely expressionless. What is on her mind? Is it disbelief or contempt? It is her blank face that has stirred up the controversy.

Critics have given top ranking for *Zero Dark Thirty*, but the US administration is clearly unhappy with the work. Three Senators who watched it said they were disappointed with the way Bigelow had presented "facts". According to them, torture did not produce truth. The prisoner who came closest to giving the information about the courier — who was regularly travelling from Peshawar to Abbottabad in order to pass messages to bin Laden, who did not want to use Internet or mobile phone for fear of being traced — did so before he was tortured, not after, according to one of the Senators.

Washington has been trying to underplay and even deny that it used torture to force confession, and it comes as little surprise that Bigelow's work, spinning a narrative around "facts" — might just about be ignored on the Oscars night. The helmer is already a persona non-grata of sorts.

Also, the male dominated CIA may not have taken too kindly to Bigelow's effort to place a halo around Maya. In an interesting piece, *The New Yorker* quipped: "That a woman is leading the charge is almost as surprising to the Americans as it is to the Muslim prisoners. After all the female avengers of the past 15 years — Uma Thurman and Angelina Jolie kicking men in the ego and other places — American movies have at last produced a woman clothed, like Athena, in wilful strength and intellectual armour."

We are told that Maya is still active, is in her 30s, remains undercover, and while receiving the agency's highest medal, was denied a promotion that would have raised her civil service rank from GS-13 to GS-14, bringing an additional \$16,000 in annual pay.

In an opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, Bigelow was scathing. "Critics (not film I presume) should focus on those responsible for torture and harsh interrogation techniques in the years after September 11, rather than on the artists portraying them ... Torture was, however, as we all know, employed in the early years of the (bin Laden) hunt. That doesn't mean it was the key to finding bin Laden. It means it is a part of the story we couldn't ignore."

Is this not how cinema ought to be? Frank and fearless!

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