

By Zillah Eisenstein

From Zillah Eisenstein WebBlog | [Original Article](#)

The film starts with a black blank screen and the voices from people stuck in the trade towers on that fateful day, September 11, 2001. I thought to myself: this is a set up to make sure we are lost to the saddened memory of that day, and the stance that we were wronged—and that this film will right this wrong.

This trope did not work for me so the film did not work. I thought the story and its telling was corrupt. I thought it exposed U.S. thuggery with no critique of it. I thought it screamed the revenge narrative of post- 9/11/2001 with no regret, or hesitation, or ambiguity.

Much of the controversy about the film has centered on the illegality of torture and the U.S. government and CIA complicity in it. Film Director Kathryn Bigelow says the film merely sets out the record and does not condone or condemn. But this is not as it seemed to me. Critics like Jane Mayer of the “New Yorker” who has tracked torture memos for forever begs to differ as well. She says the film normalizes and naturalizes the use of terror in American culture. Others have argued that the film misrepresents the success of getting information from the practice.

I agree with Mayer but my take is also a bit different. I actually think that the film presents torture but does so in very careful and limited fashion. I had prepared myself for the scenes and was ready to divert my eyes when I could bare no more. But I never had to divert my eyes. The audience was treated too kindly. We were not made to see the horrors of torture. There were glimpses and the rest was left for us to imagine, or not. We did not see the destruction of the human soul nor the horror of a broken human being. Torture leaves one no space to breathe. The fear is unrelenting. The humiliation is uncontrolled. If the film had been brave enough to really show us torture and its aftermath there would be no condoning or normalizing it.

So, for me, the real problem with ZDT is that it lets the audience and the American public think

that terrible things are allowable because they are doable. A courageous telling of the U.S. anti-terror narrative would demand critique and defiance.

Do not confuse imperial arrogance for courage. The U.S. does what it wants with impudence. It single handedly invaded Pakistan in order to kill Osama bin Laden. Even though it was no longer clear whether bin Laden was still a player of any sort, or if Al Qaeda remained viably intact or a threat, the need for revenge, and to kill Osama had its own justifiability.

Enter Maya. I wrote at the start of the Iraq and Afghan wars that Bush's war room should not use women's rights rhetoric to wrap the bombs in. Do not justify these wars and killing in the name of Afghan women's rights against the Taliban. You do not drop bombs on the women you are supposedly trying to save. Do not now cleanse the wars of/on terror with the face of a white blonde female. Do not detract from the heinous aspects of the terror war by making it look gender neutral.

My point: do not justify or explain U.S. war revenge with a pretty blond white woman with an "obsession" to catch the mastermind of 9/11. This film is not to be made seemingly progressive or feminist because it presents a female CIA agent as central to the demise of Osama. Nor should any of us think that it is "good" that Maya is female, or that several females had an important hand in the murder of Osama. There is nothing feminist in revenge. We can learn from the Indian feminists just now who say that they do not seek the death penalty for the men responsible for the brutal death and rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey. Kavita Krishman says: "Gender justice needs to be brought and kept in the centre stage of the debate, not the death penalty".

Maya is not believable to me. She is an awful stereotype: a driven, obsessive woman, alone with no friends. She has no depth. She is all surface. She says she prefers to drop a bomb rather than use the Seal team. She says she knows 100 percent that Osama is in the building. She says she is the "mother-fucker" who found the safe house in the first place. She assures the men of the Seal team that Osama is there and that they must kill him for her.

I was thinking through the film—if they hate us they do so because we are hateful. I am sad to know that this film will be seen across the globe. It will be read as another story of imperial empire with a (white) female twist.. How unfair to all the people in the U.S. who do not choose revenge and murder. How unfair to my Pakistani friends who are also U.S. citizens. How unfair to most of us across the globe.

I was hoping that maybe no nods would be given to Jessica Chastain for her role as Maya at the Golden Globes. I was hoping that no one would give a feminist nod to Kathryn Bigelow for directing ZDT. I was just hoping that maybe feminism would not get mucked up in the conversation about torture and the murder of Osama. But that was not to happen.

Chastain calls Maya an “unsung hero” and I think this is deeply troubling. But it got worse for me when Chastain accepted the Golden Globe Award for best actress and thanks Bigelow for putting forward “powerful, fearless women” who disobey and make a difference.

I do not like the film or the way that Bigelow and Chastain choose to depict it. Given both, and the way each bleeds into the other, there is no neutral ground here. I think it is important to reject the imperial feminism that is embedded here.

It would be good to remember that there is no worthy feminism without justice and if there is NO JUSTICE, there is NO PEACE.