

cinema



* Rani Mukerji as the bitchy journalist Meera Gaity, tends to take over the whole movie once the premise is set in *No One Killed Jessica*.

A hazy picture

By mixing too much of fiction with fact, Bollywood has killed Jessica Lall all over again, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

It is not always easy to spin a cinematic yarn out of a true story. It gets even more difficult if it had played out like a racy thriller whose dramatis personae happened to be celebrities and powerful politicians — some of whom are still alive.

I am talking about the brutal murder of Jessica Lall that rocked New Delhi in 1999, and continued to distress all of us for several years. She was a model who lived in Delhi, and was sort of a rising star. It so happened that one of the steps in her ladder to the skies was a party thrown by socialite Bina Ramani in her club called Tamarind Court.

That night, there were 300 guests, and in barged Manu Sharma, son of a powerful Congress Minister in Haryana, Venod Sharma. Manu wanted a drink, and Jessica who was playing a celebrity barmaid refused him, probably because the stock had run out or the counter had closed. An inebriated Manu took out his revolver and shot her at point blank range. Jessica had really no chance to live, for the bullet had pierced her skull.

Venod used his cash and clout to coerce witnesses into lying in court. Most of them denied under oath what they had initially admitted to the police, and at the forensic lab, the bullets were swapped. The court was forced to acquit the guilty — Manu and his friends

who had been with him when the bullets flew out of his raging hand into the woman's helpless head.

Jessica's sister, Sabrina, and the news portal, Tehelka, started a campaign that included a moving candle light vigil in New Delhi and elsewhere. Eventually, the case was reopened, and Manu was sentenced to life, and the others were jailed for shorter terms.

It is this murder that director Rajkumar Gupta scripts into a 130-minute film, and calls it *No One Killed Jessica*. Gupta, who had worked for Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday* and *No Smoking*, has conceived the Jessica plot as a docu-drama, packaged into a fiction.

But it is certainly not in the class of *Black Friday*, a superbly fictionalised documentary on the investigations that followed the 1993 Mumbai riots. *No One Killed Jessica* is narrated by a television anchor, Meera Gaity (Rani Mukherjee miscast as an Anglicised, venom spewing and cussing woman, who proudly admits she is a "bitch"), the channel here replacing the portal. In fact, Gupta has changed all the names except those of Jessica and Sabrina.

Bina Ramani, the owner of Tamarind Court, her daughter Malini, model-actor Shayan Munshi (a key witness in the case who turned hostile under pressure: "I do not want the Rs1

crore — Rs10mn — that has been offered to me, but I do not want that single bullet either", he quips.) and defence lawyer Ram Jethmalani live in Delhi/Mumbai. Apart from this, Gupta has changed details in the story perhaps to protect himself from legal hassles or to infuse greater drama or both. So what was reportedly a campaign essentially spearheaded by Sabrina in real life turns out to be in the reel world a television crusade, a movement that panders mostly to Meera's ego.

Fresh from Kargil, where she appears to be taking credit for excellent news coverage along with the victory of Indian forces, Meera at first dismisses the Jessica case as too insignificant. After all, with 300 witnesses to the ghastly incident, it could only be an open-and-shut case.

It is only later, when killer Manish Bharadwaj (essayed by Mohamed Zeeshan Ayyub) is freed that Meera dashes into the newsroom, bullying her boss into letting her handle the story. I am not sure whether a woman anchor/journalist can sit on the bonnet of her boss' car to force him into saying yes. But, then, Bollywood thrives on such exaggerated situations.

After this, the movie pretty much becomes Meera's, and Sabrina (portrayed by Vidya Balan with amazing natural grace and ease, and she is turning into a fine actress) is pushed to the

background. Even the investigating police officer (an extraordinary performance by Rajesh Sharma) — whose arresting presence in the first half of the film as a man who would take a bribe of Rs7mn not to touch the main accused, but would not ultimately let justice suffer — fades out with Meera's emergence that smacks of intimidating arrogance. Somewhere, the balance is lost in the work.

What about Jessica herself? We do see a fair amount of her. Newcomer Myra Khan (Jessica), whom we see through interesting anecdotal flashbacks, is promising as the bubbly and daring model. Which, of course, tends to leave the viewer with a little less sympathy for her: I certainly felt that the shootout scene in the movie showed Jessica as quite conceited and provocative. With a totally drunk, gun-toting Manish demanding a drink, it seemed foolish on her part to have challenged him to shoot her. Was that not tempting fate?

We would probably never know what actually happened at Tamarind Court that night, but in *No One Killed Jessica*, Gupta certainly diminished the sympathy I had for Miss Lall, the unlucky woman who paid such a terrible price. Did Gupta consciously do this to show the vulnerability of strong women in such circumstances?

There is another point I wish to raise here. It is bad enough that some Indian television channels have become sensationalism-driven with the halo around some anchors/journalists getting too heavy for their own good. But what is worse is that cinema writers and directors are getting too obsessed by them, losing in the bargain a sense of proportion, and even diluting the main theme. *Peepli [Live]* turned out to be a battle of television channels, rather than a film on the pathetic plight of Indian farmers that it was to have been.

Similarly, *No One Killed Jessica* appears more like Meera's crusade than Sabrina's, more like a victory for the television channel concerned rather than for the victim's family, which fought and won a modicum of justice after a frustratingly long wait. However, in the end, it was the ordinary man and woman on the streets of India, moved by Jessica's horrible end and her family's suffering, who pushed the judiciary to reopen the case and punish the culprits, who had imagined that a life was cheaper than a glass of drink.

Yes, one can say with some certainty that individual murders attract popular attention when they reflect the times we live in. Jessica's gory end exemplifies the spreading violence against women in Indian society, especially women who have begun to assert themselves.

A half century ago in what was an India steeped in Nehruvian ideology, the Nanavati case caused widespread concern, and caught the attention of the entire nation. It was a moral tale of a patriotic naval commander, a doting father and a loving husband, whose lonely wife strayed, and the other man here was a rich Mumbai playboy.

He supposedly provoked Nanavati into shooting him by saying that he could not be expected to marry every woman he slept with.

Russi Karanjia's *Blitz* sensationalised the story all right, but I do not think the attention ever veered away from Nanavati and his hapless family. Karanjia did not become a celebrity on account of this case, and he did not aspire to be one. Words and visuals remained focused on the commander till he and his family left for Canada.

Times have turned. Tenets have gone into a tailspin.

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