

THE FRONT ROW

MARCH 12, 2021 ISSUE

# REDEFINING THE GENRE IN “DHEEPAN”: A NUANCED PORTRAIT OF AN ERSATZ MIGRANT FAMILY.



BY EMILEE KAMINSKI



*Kalieaswari Srinivasan shines as Yalini in Jacques Audiard's boundary-pushing 2015 Film.*

**Screenshot.**

“**F**rance is a Judeo-Christian country, of white race.” At first glance, one might think this phrase was merely uttered in the bygone era of the conservative ‘50s. After decades of liberal progression in the Western world, no one with any ambition or desire for a political future would dare say something so archaic. Wrong. In a pathetic homage to the famous, albeit racist, General Charles de Gaulle, former MP Nadine Morano proudly reminded France of how ingrained

xenophobia is in their society, on a Saturday evening in 2015 while a guest on a French talk show (Vermeren). Surely not in a country like France—where images of chocolate croissants and intelligent conversations amidst wafts of cigarette smoke are sensationalized in American media—could blatant racism exist among core principles such as “liberté, égalité, fraternité, ou la mort.” Wrong again.

The former colonial empire is plagued by irony and hypocrisy. Underneath a guise of unification, palpable divisions exist within separate and forgotten factions (Cohen). A considerable proportion of France’s immigration population from their one-time North African colonies reside in the outskirts of major cities, forming the *banlieue* that has so notably has been depicted on the silver screen. Since the premiere of *La Haine*, the grandfather of *banlieue* cinema, in 1995, disillusioned youth living in spaces of violence and poverty are popular subjects among French filmmakers. Guns, hip hop, baggy clothing, slurs, and crime are linked to the *banlieue*, home of the societal outcasts, the displaced, the unwanted (Goreau-Ponceaud and Vevret). The Parisian *banlieue* is a prominent lead character in such films, taking on a role as a zone of urban warfare and existing peripherally to the romantic capital of the metropole. Hatred is omnipresent there and central protagonists are typically stricken with struggles to belong (Cohen). Race and racism are barely acknowledged in European politics—a shocking prospect to fellow Americans out there—so films become a medium of representation for displaced people of color (Köksal). With vivid emotional turmoil and graphic brutality, *banlieue* cinema is certainly not for the weak-hearted. No one pushes the boundaries of the genre more than Mr. Jacques Audiard.

Jacques Audiard has proven himself a master of bringing marginalized voices into the centerfold. His repertoire of films includes the critically-acclaimed *Un prophète*, which places a

French-Algerian youth, played by the dynamic Tahar Rahim, in the middle of a culturally-divided prison where he uses his painful experiences to become a hardened gang leader by the film's end (King). The Paris-born director often blurs the lines between reality and fiction, choosing to illustrate characters that simultaneously exist in a mirrored space of realism yet could only exist in film (Carew). Audiard's films force a reexamination of French societal norms. Interestingly, the year Ms. Morano expressed her hackneyed beliefs was the same year Audiard released his genre-changing picture of *Dheepan*. A story of three dark-skinned Sri Lankan migrants—devoid of prior connection to France—that ultimately paints a mainstream France as an antagonist and won the Palme d'Or at the 68<sup>th</sup> annual Cannes Film Festival? Name a better way to kindly tell Ms. Morano "*ferme ta gueule*".

*Dheepan* features powerhouse Jesuthasan Antonythasan in the title character with Kalieaswari Srinivasan and Claudine Vinasithanmby as Dheepan's makeshift wife and daughter, respectively. The opening sequence begins in Sri Lanka after a list of French production companies concludes its status as a "French film". Immediately, Audiard cements violence as a central motif in *Dheepan* by panning over a pile of corpses that are then burned. Dheepan himself is seen as weary and then we are introduced to Yalini and Illayaal, who is a young orphan found by Yalini in a refugee camp. From then on, the setting sets to what is presumably Paris yet the Eiffel Tower, the pinnacle of French symbols, is never shown. Audiard focuses on the *banlieue* neighborhood of Le Pré, a shabby suburban area ran by a diverse gang of French youths. Most of the film centers on Dheepan's new life as the caretaker and his diaspora in a strange European space, eventually escalating into a full-scale and out-of-place violence in the last 20 minutes (Goreau-Ponceaud and Vevret).

While Dheepan's storyline is no doubt the principle focus, the portrayal of Yalini is the heart of the film. Following Audiard's pattern of using cinema as a medium for showcasing marginalized voices, *Dheepan* differs from past *banlieue* pictures with the prominence of Yalini's story. If migrant men of color are excluded from a mainstream narrative, *banlieue* cinema is a form of representation for them. Migrant women, however, are rarely portrayed with substance in either; more often than not, migrant women either written in a sexualized manner or as unfortunate victims of a patriarchal order (Reeck). One might recall the tediously long *L'Atlantide* (1921)—title cards accompanied with a deeply unsettling score were very *in* during the roaring '20s—and its note of the dangerous allure of “forbidden exotic women” (hint: WOC are fetishized). *Banlieue* cinema is a genre that consistently spatializes masculinist identities and Audiard differentiates by not filming Yalini with a voyeuristic gaze (Foster). Her sexuality is her own; she is the one that consummates her “marriage” with Dheepan shortly following the tension-filled scene of Brahim (played by a rather charismatic Vincent Rottiers) and Yalini watching sports together. Dheepan and Yalini's intimacy is then not a confirmation of their connection, but rather Yalini indulging in her fantasies with Dheepan as a replacement for Brahim. Audiard's choices of only filming Yalini's nude back and fading the frame to black are brilliant in the sense that he outright refuses to engage in the common trope of overly-sexualized women of color. Audiard's depiction of Yalini is by no means perfect, but what he does is bring her into the spotlight in a male-dominated genre and her blatant rejection of normative French culture as a migrant woman is a powerful form of representation in a country that refuses to accept a growing presence of migrants.

Initially, Yalini is assumed to take on a stereotypical role as a migrant mother and appear passive in direct interactions with white French people. She does not utter a word during the

asylum interview, is typically filmed in a kitchen, and to a superficial eye, is assimilating to French norms. Yalini wears a veil at Dheepan's insistence as other women are doing so and does her job diligently. However, Yalini resists at nearly step of the way and subtly rejects the cultural expectations of her gender role. She flippantly responds to Dheepan's suggestion, saying "That's [wearing a veil] is not part of her religion," asserts that Illayaal can eat with her fingers, and is obviously unwilling to let go of her connection to Sri Lankan, a seemingly necessary requirement for French universalism (Foster). The image she projects to outsiders—the outsiders being the members of Le Pré—differs from who she truly is, heightening her complexity. The interactions between Brahim and Yalini serve as a reminder to who Yalini truly is. When Brahim offers her his cigarette in a strangely intimate gesture, she dutifully refuses. Once he leaves her, Yalini picks up the cigarette and takes a practiced drag by the window, immediately rearing back as if the *banlieue* members could see her. Audiard displays her silent rebellion in full view. She is not, in fact, a migrant mother satisfied in an inferior role, but rather a young woman who smokes, unapologetically expresses her opinion, and ultimately, holds the power in her relationship with Dheepan. It is through Yalini that we never truly buy into the illusion of their "family". She flings that reminder back in Dheepan's face and ultimately, Audiard is sending an unpleasant message that as France is unaccepting of migrants, a feeling of displacement is sadly inevitable.

Yet *Dheepan* works better if one praises its strengths for promoting representation of POC in French cinema rather than an overall objectively good film. The last 40 minutes of the film simultaneously picks up the pace and falls considerably flat. It's a disappointment that after so much focus on Dheepan's struggles to assimilate and Yalini's building resistance, Dheepan erupts into a violent killing machine to save Yalini, who is reduced to a plot point as a source of

motivation for Dheepan to even begin murdering (Köksal). *Banlieue* cinema does primarily explore displaced POC with positions and spaces of violence and crisis, but the climax of the film came so suddenly, there was practically no time to comprehend the shock of Dheepan slicing away with a machete. The film abruptly ends in a cliché fairy-tale ending with the three being a family in England, leaving even more questions for the audience. Audiard's films are rooted in social realism, so the choice of his ending is a bit odd. With all that said, *Dheepan* excels at redefining the genre of *banlieue* cinema. Audiard introduces new voices to a French silver screen and breaks the boundaries of not discussing racism by showing a migrant story attempting to assimilate and failing. With all of *Dheepan*'s faults, Audiard's message reigns clear. France is riddled with problems that are not the fault of foreign influences. Your move, *former* MP Morano.

## Bibliography

- Carew, Anthony. "Suffering in Sanctuary: Jacques Audiard's 'Dheepan'." *Metro* (Melbourne), no. 189, 2016, pp. 82–87.
- Cohen, Brian. "A Political and Historical Movement: French "Banlieue" Culture Films." *Williams Prize Submissions: Critical Writing by a Junior*. 2010.
- Dheepan*. Dir. Jacques Audiard. Canal+, Ciné+, France 2 Cinéma, France Télévisions, Page 114, Why Not Productions, 2015.
- Foster, Jeremy. "Sortir De La Banlieue: (Re)Articulations of National and Gender Identities in Zaïda Ghorab-Volta's *Jeunesse Dorée*." *Gender, Place and Culture : a Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2011, pp. 327–351.
- Goreau-Ponceaud, Anthony, and Veyret, Paul. "Dheepan, Un Film Postcolonial." *EchoGéo*, 2016, pp. EchoGéo, 2016–02-15.
- King, Gemma. "Urban margins: Un prophète and Dheepan." *Decentering France*, Manchester University Press, 2017, pp. 86-118.
- Köksal, Özlem, and ÇELİK Rappas, Ipek A. "A Hand That Holds a Machete." *Third Text*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019, pp. 256–267.
- L'Atlantide*. Dir. Jacques Feyder. Thalman & Cie, 1921.
- La Haine*. Dir. Mathieu Kassovitz. Canal+, 1995.
- Un prophète*. Dir. Jacques Audiard. UGC Distribution, 2009.
- Vermeren, Pauline. "Peut-on Dire La " Race " En France ?" *The Conversation*, 15 June 2020, [theconversation.com/peut-on-dire-la-race-en-france-48912](https://theconversation.com/peut-on-dire-la-race-en-france-48912).