

11-2013

The Undesireables of 'Les Intouchables': A Feminist Critique of the French Blockbuster

Bendi Benson Schrambach

Whitworth University, bbschrambach@whitworth.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/worldlanguagesfaculty>



Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schrambach, Bendi Benson, "The Undesireables of 'Les Intouchables': A Feminist Critique of the French Blockbuster" Whitworth University (2013). *World Languages and Cultures Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 1.

<http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/worldlanguagesfaculty/1>

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the World Languages and Cultures at Whitworth University. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Languages and Cultures Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Whitworth University.

THE UNDESIRABLES OF 'LES INTOUCHABLES': A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF THE FRENCH BLOCKBUSTER

by Bendi Benson SCHRAMBACH, Ph.D.

World Languages and Cultures

Whitworth University

300 W. Hawthorne Road

Spokane, WA, United States of America

bbschrambach@whitworth.edu

509.777.4372

Abstract

'Les Intouchables' by Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache was an extremely popular 2011 French film. Based on a true story, it relates the unexpected friendship of two 'untouchable' members of society: one minority criminal from the housing projects and one handicapped aristocrat. Touting such values as tolerance, respect and determination, the film melted the hearts of millions both in France and overseas to become the second most viewed French film of all time.

The present study will undertake a feminist critique of this film based on its portrayal of women. Pursuing the first variety of feminist criticism outlined by Elaine Showalter in her 'Toward a Feministic Poetics,' we 'probe[...] the ideological assumptions' of the film, analyzing 'the images and stereotypes of women.' Ultimately, we conclude that the film's female characters represent semiotic signs of weakness, overindulgence, and facetiousness. Together, they construct a negative portrait of womanhood.

The Undesirables of 'Les Intouchables': A Feminist Critique of the French Blockbuster
'Les Intouchables' by Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache was an extremely popular 2011 French film.¹ Based on a true story, it relates the unexpected friendship of two 'untouchable' members of society: one minority criminal from the housing projects and one handicapped aristocrat. Touting such values as tolerance, respect and determination, the film melted the hearts of millions both in France and overseas to become the second most viewed French film of all time.

One of the more compelling aspects of this film is its efforts at characterization. The audience meets and grows to love complex and endearing personas. After closer inspection, however, they discover that only the two male protagonists unambiguously shine. The more numerous female characters, on the contrary, evince various forms of feebleness and fragility.

The present study will undertake a feminist critique of this film based on its portrayal of women. Pursuing the first variety of feminist criticism outlined by Elaine Showalter in her 'Toward a Feministic Poetics,' we endeavour to 'probe[...] the ideological assumptions' of the film, analyzing 'the images and stereotypes of women,' and 'the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience.'² For a means of comparison, we begin with a review of the male characters.

¹ Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache, 'Les Intouchables' (Gaumont, 2011)

² Elaine Showalter, 'Toward a Feministic Poetics', in *Women's Writing and Writing About Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 1377.

Omar Sy plays the role of Driss, a down-and-out Senegalese immigrant. When not serving time in jail, he lives with his hardworking aunt/mother-figure in a well-known *cit * outside of Paris, a hotbed of crime and vagrancy. Driss is the eldest of a brood of children, most from different fathers. It becomes immediately evident that this 20-something miscreant has neglected any sense of responsibility toward his financially-burdened family. While handsome and capable, Driss exhibits a plethora of character flaws. Brash, he chooses not to wait his turn for a job interview. Manipulative, he works the system to maintain his unemployment benefits. Unprincipled, he steals a valuable *bibelot* from his prospective employer. Lawless, he neither respects the speed limit nor the ban on certain illegal substances. Damning though they are, these character traits are somewhat mitigated by the forcefully-presented reality of his difficult upbringing.

It is ironically these same qualities that will serve to improve the life of Driss's new quadriplegic employer. The film reveals that it is Driss's forceful approach that goads Philippe into working harder and doing things that he might not otherwise do. It is, for example, *precisely because* Driss ignores his wealthy patron's pleas to load him into a van for the disabled that Philippe learns firsthand that even a handicapped man can experience the thrill of speed. Driss mocks the bored party-goers of Philippe's annual *f te*; instead, he takes the opportunity to let loose on the dance floor and encourage those in attendance to do the same. When alone with a depressed Philippe, he heeds not his superior's cries to the contrary but takes the occasion of the other submissive house staff to raise Philippe's spirits by sculpting different mustaches from his facial hair. Even Driss's coarseness lends itself to Philippe's betterment; the bold caregiver scares the discourteous neighbour from ever again parking in the marked-off area in front of Philippe's home. And in what might have been the final straw in Driss's

budding relationship with Philippe, Driss dares to call Eléonore, heretofore only communicated with by Philippe through epistle, and connives a means to bring her to meet his boss at last.

Through all of these events, the audience is disposed to excuse Driss his wrongdoings due to their 'justifiable' nature within the context of the tale. His theft, for example, of the expensive Fabergé egg from the luxurious halls of the yet-unknown aristocrat who ostensibly didn't work for it to begin with, calls to mind the exertions of other heroic outlaws (like Robin Hood). Driss takes from this rich man to give to his poor, destitute aunt. Yet learning of the sentimental value of the object to its owner, the egg having been a gift from his deceased wife, Driss ultimately atones for this crime, returning the item to Philippe after having taken great pains to find and recover it. In another transgression of the law, Driss shares a joint with Philippe while endeavouring to assuage the quadriplegic man's suffering of phantom pains. This practice is repeated during other particularly trying times for Philippe: to render less *pénible* his annual birthday celebration, to reignite his spirits following the long-absence of his favorite caregiver (Driss).

Driss's other misconduct of speeding, observed in the first and last scenes of the film, has as objective – not infringement of the law, but – stimulation for the obviously desperate man: the very job that Driss was hired to do. Thus, in Driss, even 'negative' characteristics become positive qualities that serve to improve the life and mental health of his patron.

The portrait of Driss's wealthy employer, played by film and theatre actor François Cluzet, is similarly becoming. Philippe is portrayed as high-minded and unprejudiced. From the outset, he overlooks Driss's status as Other – in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic status, something about which the post-2005 French

émeutes viewers would immediately make note. Philippe is cultivated and talented. He loves art and writes with deftness and skill. Philippe is, moreover, adventurous. In fact, it was precisely his zest for adventure that resulted, the audience learns, in his handicap. Philippe is, finally, as observed via the exposition of his caregiver, a good judge of character. These qualities more than make up for his occasional bouts of anger, frustration and sadness. Indeed, given his tragic story of loss – emotional and physical – the portrait would not be realistic if unreflective of such common badges of humanity.

The audience sympathizes with Philippe on two fronts: as a grieving widower and as a quadriplegic. The combination of these calamities makes it easy to forgive Philippe's seeming laxness in his role as single parent. Yet when called out by Driss on his negligence in this area, Philippe is quick to react and reel in his unruly daughter. And while uncertainty about the reception of his infirmity stops Philippe from sending a photo to his beloved *correspondante*, Eléonore, he does not bemoan his consequent loneliness. Having already experienced a great love, Philippe appears peacefully resigned to live out the remainder of his life alone. Thus despite – and sometimes even because of his admirable acceptance of – his grief and his handicap, Philippe is a man to be admired.

These two impressive male protagonists soar literally and figuratively on the screen. They incite spectators to full-bellied laughter; they move them to tears. Indeed, the story of these men so warmed the hearts of the French public that both the actors and their real-life counterparts appeared countless times on television and in the press for months following the film's premier. Weakness turned to strength, troubles turned to triumph, alienation turned to friendship, these heretofore "*intouchables*" become, for the audience, idols.

The same, however, cannot be said of the female characters of the film. Instead, the women of “*Les Intouchables*” are portrayed as weak, disingenuous, or dupe to their own bad decisions. They are disappointingly and supremely undesirable representations of women.

Yvonne, Philippe’s most trusted assistant, is played by the very capable writer, producer and actress, Anne Le Ny. Her character, however, is nothing if not incapable. The audience first observes her while she is charged with manning the door of the conference room for her employer. She fails in this role when Driss pushes his way in for an “interview.” Later, she indiscreetly looks through the now-employed Driss’s affairs and, in so doing, sees switchblades. Yet, despite her alarm at this discovery, she neither broaches the subject with Driss nor denounces him to their very vulnerable common employer. And while it is suggested but never explicitly declared that Yvonne may have expressed reservations about Driss to a close confidant of Philippe, she takes no personal action to protect him from what could be a real threat to his safety.

Yvonne’s passivity and mousiness with regard to life and death morphs into something else entirely when it comes to the frivolous. She becomes quasi-tyrannical when it comes to planning Philippe’s birthday party. Revealing her obtuseness to her employer’s wishes, she doesn’t notice how much Philippe despises the boring annual bash that she insists on throwing for him. Philippe complains to Driss about her temperament during the planning (*‘Elle stresse encore’*) as he might about a nagging wife.

These scenes also reveal the lack of credence that Philippe places in her opinion. He dismisses Yvonne’s counsel on subjects ranging from what he should wear to the gala to how much alcohol he should consume. Indeed, when Yvonne suggests that he abstain from spirits, Philippe drinks more.

On the matter of Philippe's correspondence with Eléonore, it is again the weak Yvonne who, without question, encouragement or challenge, agrees *not* send a photo of his wheelchair-bound self, this despite the fact that she *disagrees* with Philippe's judgment on the matter. She is simply too cowardly to do otherwise. The audience learns of her dissent when she secretly gives the photo to Driss, as if asking for his help in remedying her failing.

Even with regards to her own love life, Yvonne appears incapable of honest assessment. For when Driss asks her about her affections for the gardener, she vehemently denies any interest only to eventually end up dating the chap. Weak, ineffectual, pathetic, Yvonne leaves nothing to be desired.

Philippe's adopted daughter, likewise, pales in every way from the noble nature of her father. Disrespectful, Elisa fails to address or even to try to learn the name of her dad's new assistant (calling him only '[...] *le nouveau de mon père*'). Prejudiced and self-serving, she nevertheless solicits Driss when she thinks he might be able to supply her with drugs, a request founded not on any observation of his drug use but on her preconceived notions of his character based on his ethnicity and social status. Snobby and unkind, Elisa criticizes Driss's efforts at painting, though she herself shows no sign of artistic aptitude. Foolish, she endeavours to commit suicide using the wrong combination of drugs. Elisa's character suggests that civility does not always accompany a life of great privilege and, perhaps, cannot even be taught.

Magalie, the striking secretary, is another of Philippe's employees. During most of the film, she is taking orders from her boss. While helping Philippe correspond with Eléonore, Magalie (who does not know how to spell the word "sphinx") refuses to weigh in on the (Driss-provoked) conversation about Philippe's future actions with regard to his *bien-aimée*. Whether Magalie's reticence in the moment is due to fear of

losing her job or to disinterest in Philippe's personal life, her silence does little to recommend her.

While Magalie first appears strict and severe, she later reveals herself to be something else entirely. Indeed, she seems to take pleasure in tantalizing the admiring Driss. When he invites her to join him in a bath, she feigns interest and begins unbuttoning her shirt only to leave him hot, excited, half-naked, and alone in the tub. She purposefully leads him on a second time at Philippe's birthday party, smiling alluringly and complementing him on his new suit before shutting down his advances. Near the end of the film, Magalie once again seems to welcome the advances of the doting Driss when she invites him to join her and a friend in a *ménage-à-trois*. A third time, she reneges. Ultimately, even the audience's initial impression of toughness and spunk, seen in her ability to rebuff the charming Driss, is undermined by the revelation that she is a lesbian. The beautiful Magalie, the audience concludes, is nothing more than a damsel of dissimulation and disappointment, deferential only when required to keep her job.

Other women also grace the reels of this blockbuster. Among them: *masseuses*, prostitutes, and a female interviewer foil-character charged with helping Driss find subsequent employment. Like the more-developed female roles, these women are overwhelmingly unimpressive. Instead, they serve mainly to further the character-development of the admirable male protagonists. While the *masseuses* and ear-lobe prostitutes testify to Driss's devotion to the needs and desires of his employer, the flushed, hair-twirling interviewer reminds the audience both of Driss's charisma and of the depth of his cultural amelioration while in the company of Philippe.

Only two women in this story could be characterized as admirable. Yet neither is enviable. Marcelle is the first nurse to train Driss in his new position. In this role, she is

appropriately serious, competent, and dispassionate. Yet the audience observes her for only three minutes while she trains the less-serious, less-competent and more-passionate Driss, who is exactly what Philippe needs. Marcelle is the un-ideal; her hard-work and care of her handicapped employer receive no accolade, no praise. On the contrary, she is unmemorable and quickly forgotten, replaced by an uneducated reprobate.

Finally, there is Driss's aunt, Fatou. The audience learns of her efforts to bring her nephew to France for a better life. They observe her hard work in the form of physical labor. They witness the destitution of her home and even of her broken family. Yet, despite her evident need for money, she rejects the stolen gift offered by Driss. Self-respecting, she expects manners and demands them of her nephew. It is Driss's behaviour, and not her volatile emotions, that leads her to make the rational decision to kick him out of their apartment for good. She has other children who need her. A person of faith, she reassures Driss of her prayers for him, but as a woman decided, she does not capriciously change her mind. The audience observes the wisdom of her decision while watching the subsequent story of Driss who, homeless, is forced to consider a different path for his life. This strong, determined, hardworking female is, finally, also loving and sensitive: she cries when Driss walks out the door.

The financial success of *Les Intouchables* has raised interest in its retelling for English-speaking audiences.³ Alice Develey recently reported in *Le Figaro* online that

³ Alice Develey, '*Intouchables*: Kevin Hart bientôt dans le rôle de Omar Sy ?' *Le Figaro* (31 March 2016) < <http://www.lefigaro.fr/cinema/2016/03/31/03002-20160331ARTFIG00133--intouchables-kevin-hart-bientot-dans-le-role-de-omar-sy.php> > [accessed 11 October 2016]

Bryan Cranston and Kevin Hart are being considered for the roles of Philippe and Driss. As of yet, there is no word on who might interpret the roles of the female characters.

Would it really matter, though? For unless the screenplay is dramatically altered, the women of *Les Intouchables* are nothing more than female foils. Worse, they become semiotic signs of weakness (à la Yvonne), of overindulgence and bigotry (à la Elisa), of facetiousness and prick-tease (à la Magalie). The reliable and strong women of the film, on the contrary, are either wholly disposable or weary, pitiable and penniless. Utterly unenviable, they are effectually silenced. Together, they construct a negative portrait of womanhood.
