CULTURAL FALSIFICATION THROUGH DOCUMENTARIES: THE CASE OF CLEOPATRA

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ABSTRACT

Cultural falsification significantly impacts collective consciousness and reinforces stereotypes about peoples and communities in the eyes of others. Given the strong influence of visual media in shaping public perception, documentary films often seen as credible historical sources that can have a lasting effect when they distort historical facts. This study investigates cultural falsification in visual media through an analysis of the 2023 Netflix docudrama Queen Cleopatra, which sparked controversy for depicting Cleopatra VII with dark African features, despite historical evidence affirming her Macedonian-Greek ancestry. The film is compared to the documentary Queen Cleopatra: The Search for the Truth, featuring Egyptologist Dr. Zahi Hawass. The research adopts an analytical-critical approach and employs content analysis to examine visual and narrative elements that reflect cultural and historical representations. A comparative method is used to contrast both films against primary historical sources, including Ibrahim Noshi's History of Egypt in the Ptolemaic Era (1976), and scholarly literature on Cleopatra's heritage. Additionally, the study draws on the Afrocentric theoretical framework, particularly Martin Bernal's Black Athena (1987), to contextualize ideological influences. This multi-method approach reveals mechanisms of cultural distortion and assesses their impact on historical understanding and collective memory.

Keywords: Cultural falsification, Cleopatra VII, Documentary films, The Ptolemies

ABSTRACT

Pemalsuan budaya memiliki dampak signifikan terhadap kesadaran kolektif dan memperkuat stereotip tentang bangsa dan komunitas di mata orang lain. Mengingat pengaruh kuat media visual dalam membentuk persepsi publik, film documenter sering dianggap sebagai sumber sejarah yang kredibel yang dapat memiliki dampak jangka panjang ketika mereka memutarbalikkan fakta sejarah. Penelitian ini mengkaji pemalsuan budaya dalam media visual melalui analisis film dokumenter Netflix 2023 Queen Cleopatra, yang memicu kontroversi karena menggambarkan Cleopatra VII dengan ciri-ciri Afrika gelap, meskipun bukti sejarah menegaskan asal-usulnya yang Makedonia-Yunani. Film ini dibandingkan dengan dokumenter Queen Cleopatra: The Search for the Truth, yang menampilkan ahli arkeologi Mesir Dr. Zahi Hawass. Penelitian ini mengadopsi pendekatan analitis-kritis dan menggunakan analisis konten untuk mengeksplorasi elemen visual dan naratif yang mencerminkan representasi budaya dan sejarah. Metode perbandingan digunakan untuk membandingkan kedua film dengan sumber sejarah primer, termasuk History of Egypt in the Ptolemaic Era (1976) karya Ibrahim Noshi, serta literatur akademik tentang warisan Cleopatra. Selain itu, studi ini mengacu pada kerangka teoretis Afrocentric, khususnya Black Athena (1987) karya Martin Bernal, untuk mengkontekstualisasikan pengaruh ideologis. Pendekatan multi-metode ini mengungkap mekanisme distorsi budaya dan mengevaluasi dampaknya terhadap pemahaman sejarah dan memori kolektif.

Kata Kunci: *Pemalsuan budaya, Cleopatra VII, Film dokumenter, Dinasti Ptolemaik*

Introduction

In an age where visual media increasingly defines how people understand the past, the lines between representation and revisionism have begun to blur. Documentaries, while often seen as reliable sources, can sometimes distort historical narratives under ideological or political influence. This article explores the issue of cultural falsification in contemporary media, using the case of the Netflix documentary Queen Cleopatra as a focal point. It considers how the reinterpretation of Cleopatra VII's identity reflects broader tensions between historical accuracy and efforts to restore marginalized cultural perspectives.

One of the most effective means of perpetuating cultural falsification is the marginalization of truth. Although such falsification may not always be easy to detect, the issue becomes more critical when the media is treated as the sole source of information. This becomes particularly problematic when the media is deliberately employed to shape public consciousness and steer societies toward specific political or cultural directions.

The Afrocentric movement, since its emergence in the 20th century, has aimed to restore the value and dignity of African culture. A notable example is Martin Bernal's Black Athena (1987), in which he argued for the African and Egyptian influences on Greek civilization. However, despite its restorative intentions, Afrocentrism may also represent a form of cultural falsification. Any attempt to attribute one culture's legacy to another without solid and credible historical evidence, regardless of the underlying motive, constitutes a clear act of falsification.

Documentary films, in particular, are often viewed as primary sources of information due to their direct and detailed presentation of events, people, and places. Consequently, any distortion within these films can be highly problematic, leading to cultural and historical falsification. This not only negatively affects the image and identity of the cultures being represented by reinforcing harmful stereotypes or distorting their historical narratives but may also result in broader political repercussions for both individuals and nations.

One of the most pressing issues in contemporary media studies is the distortion of cultural and historical narratives through visual media particularly in documentary films, which are often perceived by audiences as objective and factual. A growing concern lies in the role of media in perpetuating cultural falsification, especially when such falsification is legitimized under the guise of restoring marginalized identities, as is seen in some Afrocentric reinterpretations of history.

This problem is clearly illustrated in the case of the 2023 Netflix documentary Queen Cleopatra, which presents Cleopatra VII as having African origins, in contradiction to historically verified accounts of her Macedonian ancestry. Such representation not only marginalizes established historical facts, but also reshapes public perception and collective memory particularly among international audiences who rely on such media as educational resources.

The problem is located within the intersection of popular media and historical revisionism, where cultural narratives are reshaped for ideological or political purposes. Despite the significance of this phenomenon, few academic studies have critically examined how visual documentaries contribute to the spread of cultural misinformation under the influence of ideological frameworks such as Afrocentrism.

Therefore, this study seeks to address the lack of critical analysis of cultural falsification in contemporary visual media, focusing on the case of Queen Cleopatra as a primary example. The research aims to uncover the mechanisms through which such falsification occurs and assess its impact on historical accuracy and cultural identity. Cleopatra VII was born in 69 BCE, belonging to the Macedonian Greek lineage. She was the daughter of Ptolemy XII, and it is widely believed that her mother was Cleopatra V. Unlike her ancestors, Cleopatra took a keen interest in learning the Egyptian language and immersing herself in Egyptian culture. Cleopatra ascended to the throne in 51 BCE at the age of 18, co-ruling unofficially with her younger brother, Ptolemy XIII. Their relationship was strained due to his desire to rule alone, which led to a civil war and Cleopatra's subsequent exile. She later formed a political and military alliance with Julius Caesar, who led a campaign against Ptolemy XIII's forces and defeated them in a battle near the Nile River. As a result, Cleopatra was reinstated as queen, ruling alongside her even younger brother, Ptolemy XIV. Following Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE, the Roman Empire was divided between Octavian (Caesar's adopted son) and Mark Antony. Cleopatra aligned herself with Antony, forming a powerful political alliance against Octavian, who sought sole control over the Roman Empire.

In accordance with Ptolemaic traditions that favored dynastic marriages to preserve royal bloodlines, Cleopatra married her younger brother Ptolemy XIII upon ascending to the throne in 51 BCE. Their contentious relationship culminated in civil war and Ptolemy XIII's death. She later married her other younger brother, Ptolemy XIV, in 47 BCE. This marriage was largely symbolic, and it is believed that Cleopatra orchestrated his death after Julius Caesar's assassination to secure the throne for herself and her son Caesarion. In 48 BCE, Cleopatra became romantically involved with Julius Caesar, although Roman law prohibited formal marriage as Caesar was already legally married. Their union produced a son, Caesarion ("Little Caesar"). Their relationship ended with Caesar's assassination in

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44 BCE. Subsequently, Cleopatra married Mark Antony in 37 BCE under Egyptian law. Their relationship was both political and romantic, and they had three children: Alexander Helios, Cleopatra Selene, and Ptolemy Philadelphus. After their defeat by Octavian in the Battle of Actium, Cleopatra and Antony retreated to Alexandria to prepare for Egypt's defense. Realizing the impending doom, Mark Antony committed suicide. Cleopatra, refusing to be taken captive, chose to end her life by allowing an Egyptian cobra (asp) to bite her. With her death, the Ptolemaic dynasty came to an end, and Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire (Tlydesley, 2008; Noshy, 1967; Roller, 2010).

Literature Review

Culture is understood as a construct composed of acquired behavioral patterns that are specific to a certain group of people. It becomes recognizable through a model that reflects the group's identity and encapsulates collective human experiences shaped into cultural products (Jaber & Ibrahim, 2023, p. 2). Kilpatrick (1956) further explains that culture includes everything discovered or invented by humans that plays a role in the social process everything man has created with his hands and mind within a social environment. These definitions underline culture not only as a set of traditions but also as a foundational element of identity and societal coherence.

Cultural falsification refers to the exploitation or distortion of cultural elements by individuals or groups often from dominant cultures without a genuine understanding or respect for the culture being represented. This process can serve to diminish the targeted culture's value, elevate another culture, or promote a political or ideological agenda. Hiatt (2019) defines this phenomenon as the deliberate manipulation of facts to construct a misleading narrative, often achieved by fabricating sources or altering texts. Bernard (2022) adds that falsification occurs when cultural or ethnic heritage is wrongly attributed to another group without historical evidence, including the appropriation of indigenous narratives or symbols.

The concept of collective consciousness is crucial when considering the consequences of cultural falsification. Collective consciousness refers to the shared awareness within a group that forms a unified perception of events and identity, shaped by common social upbringing and a sense of belonging (Sociology Portal, 2024). Cultural misrepresentation, therefore, not only distorts public

understanding but also affects how individuals within the culture perceive themselves. This leads to a phenomenon known as "cultural alienation," where people become disconnected from their own cultural identity due to external distortions.

Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism highlights how dominant colonial narratives have reshaped the identities of subjugated cultures. Said argues that these narratives created stereotypical portrayals that persist in contemporary media. One common example is the portrayal of Middle Eastern societies as underdeveloped and violent. Shaheen (2001) supports this by documenting how 90% of Arab representations in American cinema are negative, reinforcing damaging stereotypes. Srinivasan (2015) further explains how such misrepresentations in media increase prejudice and discrimination, leading to social fragmentation and reinforcing dominant cultural narratives.

Stuart Hall (1997) emphasized that representation is central to power dynamics, particularly in the media. Distorted representations influence not only public opinion but also policymaking, often justifying marginalization or the implementation of discriminatory practices. The appropriation of religious symbols, language, or traditional attire without cultural understanding or consent is another aspect of falsification that reinforces structural inequalities and undermines cultural integrity.

Afrocentrism is a political and intellectual movement that aims to reframe historical narratives by centering African values, perspectives, and contributions. As Asante (as cited in Midas, 2016, pp. 79–80) explains, Afrocentrism emphasizes that Africa is the original source of identity for African peoples and seeks to reclaim cultural pride. This movement is exemplified in Martin Bernal's Black Athena (1987), which argues that ancient Greek civilization was significantly influenced by African, particularly Egyptian, cultures. A more recent example is the Netflix docudrama Queen Cleopatra (2023), which portrays Cleopatra VII, a ruler of Macedonian descent as a dark-skinned African woman. Although aligning with Afrocentric perspectives, this representation contradicts scholarly consensus (Roller, 2010; Noshy, 1976), highlighting the tension between historical evidence and ideological reinterpretation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts an analytical-critical approach, utilizing content analysis as the primary method to explore the mechanisms of cultural distortion in visual media. The research focuses on a case study of the 2023 Netflix documentary Queen Cleopatra, analyzing its visual and narrative content to uncover cultural and historical representations and compare them with academically verified historical records. The analytical-critical method, often associated with critical discourse analysis (CDA), is a qualitative research approach used to deconstruct, interpret, and reveal the underlying ideologies embedded within media texts (Fairclough, 2001). It enables researchers to identify how narratives, visual cues, and symbolic representations shape public perception, particularly in relation to identity, history, and power.

This method is especially relevant for analyzing documentary films, which serve as more than just conveyors of factual information, they are also cultural products that frame particular worldviews (Hunting, 2021). Documentaries can embed ideological messages within their visuals, commentary, casting choices, and narrative framing. By applying a critical lens, the researcher can assess whether the content aligns with verified historical records or exhibits signs of cultural manipulation or distortion. This method aligns with the goals of critical content analysis, which bridges empirical scrutiny with deep interpretation, thereby allowing for more nuanced insights into media representation (Hunting, 2021).

To enhance the depth of analysis, the study incorporates the comparative method, which examines two documentary films about the same historical figure: Netflix's Queen Cleopatra and Queen Cleopatra: The Search for the Truth. The comparative method is widely used in media, cultural, and historical research for its ability to illuminate how different narrative approaches, visual strategies, and epistemological assumptions lead to divergent cultural messages (Mkabela, 2005). The comparison is not superficial or thematic alone; it is central to the study's purpose, as it reveals how differing historical interpretations and ideological frameworks influence the construction of Cleopatra's identity and legacy.

In terms of units of analysis, this research focuses on selected scenes and sequences from Queen Cleopatra, particularly those that visually or narratively construct Cleopatra's ancestry, political role, and ethnic identity. These include visual depictions of Cleopatra, voiceover commentary, casting decisions, costume design, symbolic imagery, and any dialogue referencing cultural or racial identity. These elements are then thematically and discursively compared with corresponding scenes from the second documentary and with primary historical records such as archaeological findings, ancient manuscripts, and academic literature (e.g., Noshi, 1976).

The comparative method in this context serves to uncover not just aesthetic differences but also the epistemological grounding of each production how history is sourced, interpreted, and visually narrated. It highlights how perspective and intent influence the representation of historical truth (Fairclough, 2001; Hunting, 2021). Moreover, such a method reveals how cultural products shape collective memory, especially when history is contested or reinterpreted through modern ideological frameworks.

To situate the analysis within a broader cultural and ideological context, this study employs the theoretical framework of the Afrocentric paradigm. Grounded in the work of scholars like Molefi Kete Asante and Martin Bernal, Afrocentrism challenges Eurocentric historical narratives and seeks to re-center African identity and agency in the telling of African history (Conyers, 1997; Bernal, 1987). The Afrocentric method calls for culturally grounded, contextually relevant approaches to historical interpretation, emphasizing principles like ukweli (truth), ujamaa (communalism), and kujitoa (commitment to knowledge) as criteria for ethical and valid research (Reviere, 2001; Chilisa, 2014). In this study, Afrocentric theory helps interpret the ideological motivations behind the portrayal of Cleopatra as Black and contextualizes it within broader discourses of racial identity, postcolonial memory, and representation.

Ultimately, this methodological framework enables the study to identify instances of cultural distortion in media representations, assess the historical integrity of documentary content, and evaluate how visual narratives can reshape public consciousness of ancient history. It integrates a rigorous comparative method with a critical lens and a culturally situated theoretical foundation, ensuring that the analysis is both scholarly and responsive to contemporary cultural debates.

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Results and Discussions

There is a significant difference between cultural representation and cultural falsification, which depends on the accuracy of the content presented in documentary films and its consistency with academic sources such as manuscripts, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence. This study takes as its unit of analysis two documentary portrayals of Cleopatra: the Netflix docudrama Queen Cleopatra and a contrasting historically grounded documentary. Through comparative analysis of these two examples, the research examines how history can either be represented or falsified through audiovisual media.

The portrayal of history in documentaries is shaped by intent and method. While some aim to reconstruct history based on newly discovered evidence and clear standards, others may deviate toward falsification to serve specific political or ideological agendas through manipulation of facts and suppression of evidence. As documentaries serve as vital sources of historical information, any deliberate alteration that contradicts established historical records constitutes falsification of history. This study emphasizes the crucial role documentaries play in shaping individuals' cultural awareness, making the accuracy and reliability of information and sources a fundamental necessity. Both examined examples address similar historical events; however, the main point of divergence lies in Cleopatra's ethnic origin. According to ancient statues and historical records, she was of Macedonian descent from the Ptolemaic dynasty daughter of Ptolemy XII and likely Cleopatra V.

Cleopatra's marriages to her brothers Ptolemy XIII and Ptolemy XIV were in accordance with Ptolemaic tradition, but their deaths were a result of her own decisions. The Netflix docudrama Queen Cleopatra relied heavily on dramatized scenes and voiceover narration, which added entertainment value and helped create a vivid mental image of Cleopatra and the main characters. In contrast, the other documentary used real images of temples and ancient carvings, lending it greater historical credibility (Netflix, 2023; YouTube, 2023).

Based on historical sources, ancient statues, and coins, the Queen Cleopatra series appears to falsify Cleopatra's ancestry by depicting her as a dark-skinned African woman, despite her non-Egyptian, Greek Macedonian lineage through both parents. Portraying Cleopatra VII as an African woman with

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dark skin, as seen in the Netflix series, has resulted in a misleading image of the Macedonian queen, reflecting the influence of the Afrocentric movement in reshaping historical narratives (Netflix, 2023).

It is essential to implement measures to counter such phenomena, including subjecting visual historical media to thorough review by specialized experts to ensure the accuracy of the presented content. Cultural groups concerned should be actively involved in the production of documentary content to ensure accurate and authentic representation of their culture, while also guiding audiences on how to discern between factual and falsified information.

The Queen Cleopatra docudrama (Netflix, 2023) consists of four 40-minute episodes and is narrated by Jada Pinkett Smith. It portrays Cleopatra as a woman of African descent, highlighting her intelligence, political tactics, and relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. However, it uses dramatization to fill gaps in historical evidence and leans into speculation regarding her ethnicity. In contrast, the YouTube documentary Cleopatra: The Search for the Truth (2023) presents Egyptology-based evidence, featuring experts like Dr. Zahi Hawass, and supports the view that Cleopatra was of Macedonian Greek origin.

While both films aim to educate and entertain, the contrast between them reveals how historical narratives can be shaped by present-day ideologies or cultural movements. This study highlights the need for critical consumption of media and urges producers and scholars alike to take accountability for the historical representations they circulate (Netflix, 2023; YouTube, 2023).

Conclusion

The study revealed that the relationship between the Queen Cleopatra docudrama and the Afrocentric movement is a complex one. While the movement seeks to eliminate the marginalization of African identity and culture, this documentary represents a form of cultural falsification. It deliberately disregards established historical evidence and instead focuses solely on promoting the movement's ideological perspectives. This distortion goes beyond mere factual inaccuracies it constitutes a reimagining of history that could alter public perception of the character, especially considering the widespread reliance on documentaries as a primary source of information.

The study indicates that although documentaries are commonly regarded as factual and objective, they remain vulnerable to ideological bias and distortion. As such, producers must engage in strict academic consultation and maintain transparency regarding their historical sources. This study is limited by its focus on a single case and lacks audience reception data, which could have provided deeper insights into the impact of such representations. It is therefore recommended that future research investigate how diverse audiences interpret and internalize documentary content, particularly in relation to controversial historical figures.

The study also recommends incorporating media literacy into educational curricula and encouraging streaming platforms to provide contextual framing or expert commentary for historically themed content. Such measures could reduce the risk of misinformation and promote more critical engagement with cultural history.

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