

Critique

Tanvi Vyas

*Queen Cleopatra*



*Queen Cleopatra (2023)*

The Netflix docuseries (Docudrama) “*Queen Cleopatra*”, directed by Tina Gharavi, navigates a fine line between historical narrative and contemporary social commentary. Comprised of four episodes, the series chronicles the transformative journey of Egypt’s last Pharaoh from her teenage years to her adult reign. The format is distinct, with the narrative delivered in an interview-style setup featuring a panel of experts, predominantly black female scholars. This choice underscores the series’ intent to highlight Cleopatra’s African heritage.

The emphasis on Cleopatra’s African ancestry is so pronounced that it often seems the series is less about retelling her historical journey and more about using her story to vindicate and celebrate the rights and legacy of African women. This approach situates

“*Queen Cleopatra*” in a complex space, as it aims to educate viewers about one of history’s most enigmatic figures and serves as a broader commentary on representation and the reclamation of historical narratives.

However, this thematic focus has generated mixed responses, with some viewers appreciating the emphasis on Cleopatra’s African roots and its relevance to contemporary discussions on race and identity. Others feel that the series might have strayed too far from an unbiased historical recount, instead opting for a more modern reinterpretation. The series, therefore, exists both under the umbrella term of “*African Queens*” collections and simultaneously in its shadow, navigating the expectations and critiques of its audience.



The costumes and makeup in “*Queen Cleopatra*” are commendable for their authenticity and intricate detailing. The Queen’s crown, seemingly lifted from ancient carvings, lends an air of historical accuracy that enriches the visual storytelling. It would have been an even more striking touch if Cleopatra had worn the feathered, bejewelled crown inspired by the goddess Isis, as depicted on the stone walls of the temples she commissioned. This would have provided a direct visual link to her divine association and the legacy she sought to embody. (refer to Images 1 and 2 above).

The makeup, particularly the blue kohl and eyeshadows, evokes the lapis lazuli-embedded face masks found on mummies like Tutankhamun. This choice enhances Cleopatra’s regal appearance and connects her to the rich heritage of ancient Egyptian beauty practices.

The costumes throughout the series are understated yet true to the Egyptian style, avoiding pretension while capturing the era's essence. The Romans, too, are depicted with great attention to detail, donning their iconic regal armours, skimpy skirts, and leather sandals. One notable aspect is Mark Antony’s consistent Roman aesthetic. Despite immersion in Cleopatra’s world, he retains his

Roman identity until the end, signifying his internal struggle and allegiance.

The Queen’s hair is a powerful reflection of her mental and emotional states throughout the series. When entangled in the political drama and conflicts with her brother-husband, her hair is bound tightly pulled back to signify the constraint and formality of her position. A crown or diadem often accompanies this look, emphasising her role and heavy leadership burden.

As Cleopatra’s affiliations with the Romans deepen and her love affairs, particularly with Mark Antony, flourish, her hair becomes a visual representation of her liberation. It is now barely pinned up, with soft, flowing locks often caressing her face, giving her the look of a woman deeply in love. This loose and natural hairstyle contrasts sharply with her previously constrained appearance, symbolising her emotional freedom in her romantic relationships. Additionally, the series subtly uses her makeup, or lack thereof, to underscore the gravity of her circumstances. Cleopatra wears almost no makeup in the most serious scenes, such as Antony at war or the Roman attacks on the capital. This stark, unembellished look enhances the authenticity of these moments, portraying her as vulnerable and deeply affected by the turmoil surrounding her.

Another artistic and relatively economical trick employed in “*Queen Cleopatra*” is the portrayal of Octavian as a model dummy character. This approach cleverly minimises the need for extensive acting scenes by using still images of the character, complemented by non-diegetic narration to convey his thoughts, actions, and reactions. This technique maintains the

narrative flow and adds an intriguing layer of distance and enigma to his character.

By allocating only 7-10 minutes of screen time to Octavian in the final episode, the series efficiently economises its resources while delivering a compelling portrayal. The limited screen time and the narrated insights create a unique viewing experience that keeps the audience engaged without overwhelming them with excessive dialogue or action scenes. It's a testament to the series' creative storytelling methods and thoughtful production choices, ensuring that every moment on screen serves the broader narrative purpose.



The low-key lighting in "*Queen Cleopatra*" masterfully captures the mood of intimate moments, wrapping them in a warm, shadowy embrace. It is not just the tender scenes that benefit from this technique; suspenseful and mysterious scenes also employ low-key lighting and shadow play to heighten tension and intrigue. The authentic flicker of lamp light adds an aesthetic touch that grounds these moments in historical authenticity, making the visual experience captivating, believable, and immersive. This thoughtful use of lighting enriches the narrative, drawing viewers deeper into Cleopatra's world.

The casting choices in the series are commendable, particularly the decision to

have Adele James portray Queen Cleopatra. At 39 years old, she closely aligns with the age of the historical figure she embodies. This reduces the reliance on heavy makeup to create an age-appropriate appearance, allowing the audience to suspend disbelief and engage more easily with the character. James captures the devious glint and evil smirk that one might associate with Cleopatra, giving the character a certain depth and intrigue. However, these moments of brilliance in her portrayal are unfortunately overshadowed by her mediocre acting skills.

The male actors playing the Roman figures, such as Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, are also well-cast, with their ages closely matching those of their historical counterparts. This adds a layer of authenticity to their interactions with Cleopatra, grounding the series in a more believable reality. The visual alignment between the actors and their characters helps create a seamless viewing experience, minimising the distractions arising from significant age discrepancies.

While the physical portrayals are apt, the series struggles with delivering consistent, compelling performances. Despite Adele James's ability to nail specific expressions and mannerisms, her acting does not always rise to the same standard throughout the series. This inconsistency can detract from the overall narrative, leaving viewers wanting more depth and nuance in her depiction of such a complex historical figure.

The symbolic placement of objects in the frame in "*Queen Cleopatra*" is indeed noteworthy. The Egyptian amulets and gold headsets she often wears underscore her deep connection to Egyptian heritage. These items

aren't just decorative; they serve as a constant reminder of Cleopatra's devotion to her culture and the land she ruled. Her death scene is particularly striking, with the full moon fading into an abyss of darkness. This powerful visual symbolises the end of an era, the extinguishing of a great light, and the encompassing grief and loss that followed her death.

Even the title credits are laden with symbolism, filled with images that convey the grandeur and complexities of Cleopatra's reign. Unfortunately, the impactful imagery is somewhat marred by the overbearing music. The depiction of Cleopatra with typical Afro hair, maintained even in the animations, raises interesting questions. It could symbolise her African heritage as an Eastern Queen, anchoring her identity in her ancestry. Alternatively, it might reflect the series' intention to assert this aspect of her identity, deliberately portraying her with these features.

Moreover, the series excels in documenting the lives of Cleopatra's children, highlighting how her legacy continued through her daughter Selene. It's fascinating to learn how Selene and her descendants intertwined their lineage with both African and Roman heritage. This focus on Cleopatra's children is a less-explored area of history, as most romanticised versions of her story end with her and Antony's deaths. However, it was fitting for a documentary series to break these conventions and bring forth the known and recorded facts, thereby

shedding light on an often-overlooked chapter of history.

This approach honours Cleopatra's enduring legacy and emphasises the importance of historical accuracy and the continuation of her influence through her descendants. It adds depth to the narrative and enhances the viewer's understanding of Cleopatra's impact beyond her lifetime.

The aspect I most appreciated in the series was the acknowledgement of the unknown location of Cleopatra's tomb, which adds a layer of intrigue and poignancy to the narrative. Her final resting place remains a mystery, emphasising the enduring enigma of her life and reign. The uncertainty about her means of suicide, whether by asp bite, poison, or another method, underscores the dramatic and often speculative nature of historical accounts. This transparency extends beyond Cleopatra's death to other aspects of her life, creating a more nuanced and layered portrayal of the Queen. By not shying away from these historical uncertainties, the series invites viewers to engage with Cleopatra's story deeper, appreciating the known facts and the lingering mysteries.

Furthermore, this approach aligns with the documentary style of the series, where the goal is not just to entertain but to educate and provoke thought. It acknowledges the limitations of historical knowledge and encourages viewers to consider the complexity of historical narratives. Doing so adds a refreshing layer of authenticity and depth to the story of one of history's most fascinating figures.

### **Acknowledgements**

Gibbs, John. *Mise-en-scene - Film Style and Interpretation*. 2002, [centaur.reading.ac.uk/26532](http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/26532).

Queen Cleopatra. Directed by Tina Gharavi, Nutopia, 2022. Netflix, [www.netflix.com/in/title/81230204](https://www.netflix.com/in/title/81230204).

Shawkat, Ahmed, and Tucker Reals. “Why Some Egyptians Are Fuming Over Netflix’s Black Cleopatra.” *CBS News*, 9 May 2023, [www.cbsnews.com/news/netflix-cleopatra-black-egypt-controversy-ancient-queen](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/netflix-cleopatra-black-egypt-controversy-ancient-queen).

Vlessing , Etn. “Adele James Talks Netflix’s Controversial ‘Queen Cleopatra’ Series: ‘Blackwashing Isn’t a Thing’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 11 May 2023, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-queen-cleopatra-controversy-adele-james-1235485303](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-queen-cleopatra-controversy-adele-james-1235485303).

**Tanvi Vyas is pursuing a Master of Arts in English Literature at the Department of English and CLS, Saurashtra University, Rajkot, Gujarat.**