



## Attitudes to Afrocentrism: A Contrastive Appraisal Analysis of Opinion Pieces on the Netflix Docudrama “Cleopatra”

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### Abstract

This research aims to unravel the implied ideologies in the evaluative discourse used to comment on the public reception of Netflix docudrama “Cleopatra” and the nature and distribution patterns of this evaluative discourse in three Egyptian and three non-Egyptian online opinion pieces. The problem that motivated this study is twofold: the need to understand the nature of the Egyptian audience’s angry reactions to the docudrama as well as lack of academic knowledge of Afrocentrism and its relatedness to Egypt. For this purpose, the study employs the Appraisal Theory as its framework of analysis. Analysis of the annotated discourse with the use of Monococ.Pro software indicated a stronger tendency in the non-Egyptian pieces to use evaluative discourse than is found in their Egyptian counterparts with Judgment and Appreciation as the two systems of attitude mostly favored across the sample. Highly opinionated language is expressed as judgement of Netflix producers’ decisions and appreciation of the quality of the docudrama rather than as an expression of emotions. It was also indicated that the non-Egyptian sources embrace multiculturalism and the concept of the Afrocentric origins of ancient Egyptian civilization and acknowledge the need to reconsider the motives behind the Egyptian audience’s irate reactions to the docudrama. Moreover, the Egyptian sources express an unwavering belief in the Egyptians’ ownership of their history, and adamantly dismiss the concept of Afrocentric Egyptian civilization. The study recommends conducting future in-depth research on a larger sample of texts from different genres to understand public attitudes towards the propagation of Afrocentrism from different cultural perspectives.

**Keywords:** Online opinion pieces – Appraisal Theory – Afrocentrism – Ideology – Netflix “Cleopatra” docudrama

## **Introduction:**

The Netflix docudrama “Cleopatra” not only ignited public rejection, but also triggered Egyptian wariness of Western irredentist attempts to redefine local histories and racial origins, accelerating their fear of Afrocentrism, which they interpret as the balkanization of the Egyptian nation. This study carries out a contrastive analysis investigating the attitudinal resources as reflected by the discursive evaluative representations in six opinion pieces on the show from two different stances, namely, Egyptian and British/American. Egyptian audience’s reactions to the docudrama as well as lack of academic knowledge of the nature of Afrocentrism and its relatedness to Egypt call for a systematic investigation. This investigation rests on the premise that media discourse encodes and builds on ideological choices; therefore, media discourse is never void of value-laden and unbiased assessments and stances (van Dijk, 2006; Fowler, 1991).

An appraisal of the opinion pieces on this docudrama needs to be contextualized within the wider social context of Afrocentrism, a movement that emerged in the eighties. This was an era that witnessed proliferating capitalism accompanied by “spiritual wreckage” (Cobb Jr, 1997, p.124), polarizing neoconservatist policies, and the horrific ethos of a Reaganesque welfare economy. Malcolm X, by far the most popular black leader of the late eighties and early nineties, inspired an era of overt rejection of the White society which materialized itself in the Afrocentric movement. After the term was first coined by Molefi Asante in his book entitled “Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change” (1980), Afrocentrism became a central issue in debates over multiculturalism, history, identity, and diversity. The movement attacked the cultural oligarchy of the eighties which aimed to impose “collective identity” and cultural homogeny based on

granting the right to be Anglophile to anyone. Not only did this feed the notion of White supremacy, but it also failed to integrate the black middle class in post-industrial urban America, thus undermining African-American self-perception (Cobb Jr, 1997, p.126). More damaging still, the Afrocentric movement blamed Eurocentric mythology for directing world history in a direction that diminished African contributions to Western civilization by fostering "cultural amnesia" (Cobb Jr, 1997); another charge levelled at White Anglo-Saxon Protestants was designing curricula threatening to the wellbeing of black children. Therefore, the ultimate goal of Afrocentrism was to impose a narrative that positioned Africans "as subjects rather than objects of history" (Cobb Jr, 1997). This narrative insists that only black heroes can act as role models for black children, calling for educational reform by proposing a pedagogy to combat the homogeneity existing in the American school curricula.

Afrocentrism argues that Egypt, rather than Greece, and the ancient Egyptian civilization represent the true matrix of Western civilization to the extent that "Afrocentrism could more accurately be termed Egypt-centrism" (Cobb Jr, 1997, p.122). This argument is built on several premises: first, Egypt as a Black/African civilization is the source of all art and philosophy; second, the civilization of Ancient Greek is but a poor replica of the Egyptian one; third, Christianity draws inspiration from a reduction of ancient Egyptian mythology; finally, the Afrocentric project claims that racist nineteenth-century scholars "stole" Egypt from Africa, thus denying Africans credit for mammoth achievements such as the Great Pyramids of Giza (Shohat, 2021).

Critics of Afrocentrism posit that it is merely chauvinistic demagoguery of the oppressed, implying that Afrocentrism is unsubstantiated, irrational and absurd; it is

even described as “divisive”, and “a culturally separatist movement” that fosters balkanization of the American nation (Cobb Jr, 1997, p.124). On a wider scale, Afrocentric claims have ignited battles over the “true origins of history” and provoked controversies related to race and ethnicity (Shohat, 2021). One such battle, dating back to the late nineteenth century, is the black-versus-white dispute over Cleopatra’s ethnic background which claimed that the issue of her origin underlines a “long history of glorification of whiteness and the devaluation of blackness” (Shohat, 2021, p.164). More specifically, the controversy over Cleopatra’s origins “has transformed into a metaphorical site” for contemporary racial discourse reflecting the Eurocentric/Afrocentric bias that unleashed culture wars between the Africa versus Europe dichotomies (Shohat, 2021; Royster, 2003). While 19th-century colonial discourse, along with its Eurocentric bias attempted to endow the controversy over the whiteness of Cleopatra with an objective scientific stamp, it also raised questions on the criteria that defines black versus white as a racial-biological category.

In modern times, media has further aggravated this historical controversy. The ideology controlling stardom status in Hollywood compels producers to consider face and skin color as reflections of race in their casting decisions to match their visualization of “the grandeur [of] ... a larger-than-life historical figure” (Shohat, 2021, p.159), thus denying the possibility of a non-white Cleopatra. This ideology propelled recent feminist movements to draw public attention to the intellectual and personal abilities of Cleopatra in an attempt to deemphasize her physical characteristics. Despite the prominent role of TV in promoting “negative diversity attitudes and, at other times, positive ones” (Zerebecki, Oprea, Hofhuis, & Janssen, 2021, p.1), it was also noted that television has consistently reinforced negative

representations of black ethnicity in the shape of thugs and brutish with flagrant disregard for reality. These stereotypical images heavily influenced the behavior of black youth as a result of seeing themselves thus demonized.

In response to this controversy, the present study employs the Appraisal theory as the analytical framework for the operationalization of discursive evaluative mechanisms in a linguistically systematic manner to conduct a contrastive analysis of the attitudinal resources in the opinion pieces on the Netflix docudrama "Cleopatra" from two different cultural perspectives, namely Egyptian and British/American online opinion pieces (Martin & White, 2003).

The Appraisal framework of analysis is applied in a variety of text genres for various purposes: to investigate the distribution of attitude resources and the nature of the discursive tools that songwriters use to build interpersonal relationships with the audience (Li, 2016); to highlight types and nature of affects in authorial and non-authorial speeches by political and public figures (Ananda, Nababan & Santosa, 2018; Mazlum & Afshin, 2016.); to explore the prevalence of the three subsystems of attitude in Chinese presidential remarks at BRICS press conference (Zhang, 2018) as well as gradability in attitude discourse as embodiment of political ideologies (Naghia, & Cahyono, 2021); to investigate the discursal reflections of the dilemma of the Palestinians who were forced to abandon their country in a short story by Ghassan Kanafany (Abdel Meguid, 2022); and, finally, to examine the evaluative discourse in the representation of victims of two terrorist attacks in Egypt and New Zealand (El-Nashar & Nayf, 2023). The Appraisal framework is applied to compare the use of Judgement and Engagement resources for the homogenization and legitimization of ideological stances in speeches delivered by two prominent British statesmen, Winston Churchill and Tony Blair (Helander, 2014). Another purpose is

to conduct a contrastive analysis of Chinese and English diplomatic speeches to enhance translation from and to the two languages (Zhang, 2018) as well as to explore the feasibility of applying the Appraisal framework to underline the use of Affect and Engagement markers as key interpersonal resources in corporate public discourse (Fuoli, 2015), court discourse (Dai & Zhou, 2019), and narrative texts in English high school textbooks (Magfiroh, Herdiawan & Rofi'I, 2021). The same framework is applied to investigate the intersubjective resources in Shetty's multimodal, social and evaluative standpoints for the propagation of Buddhist practices (Elyamany, 2023).

Research integrating Appraisal theory with corpus linguistics by applying corpus management tools focused on exploring prevalence and patterns of language resources for either one or three systems in the framework. For example, Jing and Lihuan (2021) employed the corpus tool AntConc 3.5.8. to explore patterns of attitudinal resources in English news reports from the official website of China Daily on COVID-19; Cavasso and Taboada (2021) carried out a corpus analysis of the news comments while Engelbrecht (2020) used two corpus management tools on selected news reports on rhino poaching to explore the use of emotive language.

## **Research questions:**

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1- What is the distribution pattern of evaluative systems in a sample discourse of Egyptian and non-Egyptian opinion pieces on the Netflix docudrama "Cleopatra"?
- 2- What ideological stances does evaluative discourse reflect in the sample?

## **Objectives of the study:**

This research paper is a systematic contrastive discursive analysis that aims to unpack the evaluative mechanisms utilized by Egyptian and non-Egyptian online opinion pieces writers in reaction to the Netflix docudrama “Cleopatra” by employing Martin and White's (2003) analytical framework of the “Appraisal theory. Its aim is to investigate any cultural differences and/or similarities in the use of evaluative discourse, nature and distribution patterns as well as any implied ideologies.

## **Analytical Framework:**

### **Appraisal Theory:**

The Appraisal Theory, an extension of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics, is a system of interpersonal meanings that is “concerned with evaluation: the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text and how values are sourced and readers/listeners aligned” (Martin & Rose, 2007, p. 25). It is concerned with the “subjective presence of writer/speakers in texts as they adopt stances towards both the material they present and those with whom they communicate” (Martin and White 2003, p.1). Martin and Rose (2007, p.22) state that this theory can be used to evaluate the attitudes expressed in a text, as well as the strength of the feelings involved. There are three interconnected systems in this framework: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation.

Under Attitude, there are three subsystems: Affect, which assesses the speakers’ positive or negative stances in relation to their emotional disposition

toward the focus of communication. Factors contributing to Affect are happiness/unhappiness, security/insecurity, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction; Judgement, is the semantic source which assesses individual or group behaviors in comparison to moral and legal norms. While moral judgement of behaviors is carried out in relation to normality, and tenacity, which evaluates the person's dependability and resolution, legal judgement assesses veracity of behaviors in relation to honesty, truthfulness, and propriety or observance of ethical, legal, and religious codes and values; and Appreciation, which is the aesthetic impact of objects in relation to form, processes, and appearance. Factors contributing to Appreciations are quality, balance, complexity, value reliability, importance, and social desirability. These subsystems are assessed in relation to negative and positive polarities (Martin & White, 2003, pp. 52-53).

The second system in the appraisal framework is Engagement which is built around acknowledging other voices and assesses the extent to which the writer interacts with these voices. In contrast to monoglossic propositions, heteroglossic ones include references to other voices. These two are defined as two discursive interpersonal choices for signaling the absence or presence of other voices within the category of Engagement (Martin, White, 2003).

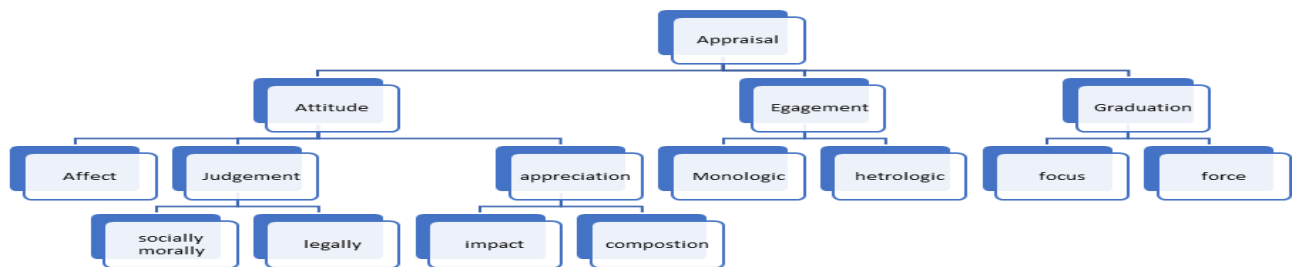
The third system in the appraisal framework is Graduation, which is the process of scaling attitudes by evaluating the speakers' utterances as either elevating or lowering claims or associated meanings and which is beyond the scope of the present study.

The first two systems forming the Appraisal theory are used in the annotation and analysis of the data. Assessing the different ways in which the opinion pieces writers judge and evaluate the docudrama and the public reactions to it may highlight



any recurrent ideological patterns. Carrying out this analysis should also help develop a better understanding of any culture-specific differences by which people make and express their judgements and evaluations.

This analysis will be carried out below followed by a detailed discussion of issues related to the two systems in the Appraisal framework used for analysis.



**Figure 1:**

*An overview of appraisal resources (Martin & White 2003)*

## **Methodology:**

### **Data Collection Procedures:**

Data was compiled using the keywords “Netflix”, “Cleopatra”, ‘Controversy’, and ‘opinion pieces’ on Google search. This search yielded numerous articles: seven from Egyptian online sources, three from Middle Eastern online sources, three from Greek online sources, and 31 from British and American online sources. News report pieces or those that were limited to commenting on the viewing rate of the docudrama or those published in subscription-based journals as well as opinion pieces in non-British/American or non-Egyptian sources were excluded.

Since Queen Cleopatra premiered on Netflix on Wednesday May 10, 2023, analysis was limited to online opinion pieces produced after the docudrama was

aired. This resulted in narrowing down the number of included opinion pieces to a total of three from Egyptian online sources published between May 21 and June 8, and three opinion pieces from British/American online sources published between May 11 and 17.

### **Data Analysis Procedures:**

There is significant room for subjectivity of analysis when applying the Appraisal theory, which presumes the existence of differences in the conclusions reached by different researchers analyzing the same data. Certain measures were taken to minimize these differences while maximizing the reliability of the research results and the validity of its procedures. First, the same instances of discourse are tagged in the same way. All the sentences in the sample were annotated with labels corresponding to different categories of the Appraisal framework. Some were tagged differently as necessitated by the context. Second, an inter-rater was hired. Any differences in the tagging between the researcher and the inter-rater were discussed to settle these differences. The inter-rater is a PhD. candidate with sound qualifications in Applied Linguistics and corpus analysis. She is also familiar with the processes involved in coding and analyzing data following the Appraisal framework. Second, we conducted a comprehensive process of drafting and testing guidelines as the first step. While the appraisal framework is well established, the process of labelling particular situations becomes complex due to the subjective nature of certain decisions, such as the amount of context required for interpretation or the number of evaluative expressions to be marked.

To determine whether or not linguistic items are evaluative, the researcher referred to examples of evaluative expressions from previous research. Examples of

which are researches by Li (2016), Magfiroh et al. (2021) and Mazlum and Afshin (2016).

The data was qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed. Firstly, the files were saved as plain texts to be machine-readable. Secondly, Monococ.Pro software for text searching is used. Frequencies of occurrences are calculated. Finally, qualitative analysis was carried out by the researcher and the interrater to explore the characteristics and specific use of attitudinal resources for data interpretation.

For space limitation, the words 'positive' and 'negative' will be abbreviated to '+ve' and '-ve', respectively, while the Egyptian online opinion pieces are referred to as (EOP) and their writers as (EOPWs). The non-Egyptian online opinion pieces are referred to as (NEOP) and their writers as (NEOPWs).

## **Results:**

### **Table 1**

*Distribution of attitude resources in Egyptian online sources*

Attitudes to Afrocentrism: A Contrastive Appraisal Analysis of Opinion Pieces on the Netflix Docudrama  
"Cleopatra"

Appraisal System	Subsystem	APPRAISAL OF PUBLIC REACTION	Polarity	PAST DEPICTIONS OF CLEOPATRA	Polarity	APPRAISAL OF THE DOCUSERIES	Polarity	APPRAISAL OF PRODUCTION	Polarity	CLEOPATRA AS A HISTORICAL FIGURE	Polarity	Total
Attitude Aff.DisSat		4	(4 Neg)			1	(1 Neg)			1	(1+)	
<b>Dis.Sat. Total instances of evaluation as per appraisal system</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>(4 Neg)</b>			<b>1</b>	<b>(1 Neg)</b>	<b>0</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>(1+)</b>	<b>6 (5 Neg) (1+)</b>
Judg.	Ver	2	(2 Neg)					2	(2 Neg)			4
	Prop	3	(3 Neg.)					5	(5 Neg)			8
	Norm					1	(1 Neu)					1
	Cap							1	(1+)	1	(1+)	2
	Ten							1	(1 Neg)			1
<b>Judg. Total instances of evaluation on the System of Judgement</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>(5 Neg)</b>	<b>0</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>(1 Neg 1 Neu)</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>(1+ 8 Neg)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>(1+)</b>	<b>16 (2+ 13 Neg 1 Neu)</b>
App.	Qty					19	(3+) (4 Neu) (12 Neg)	1	(1 Neg)	5	(1 Neu) (4 Neg)	25
	Imp					2	(2 Neg)					2
	Bal											
	Comp					1	(1 Neg)					1
	Val					1	(1 Neg)					1
	Reac					2	(2 Neg)			1	(1 Neg)	2
<b>Total instances of evaluation on the system of Appreciation</b>		<b>0</b>		<b>0</b>		<b>24</b>	<b>(3+ 4 Neu 17 Neg)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1 (Neg)</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>(1 Neu 5 Neg)</b>	<b>32 (3+ 24 Neg 4 Neu)</b>
<b>Total instances of evaluation per variable</b>		<b>9</b>	<b>9 (Neg)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>(3+ 5 Neu 19 Neg)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>(1+ 9 Neg)</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>(2+ 1 Neu 5 Neg)</b>	<b>54 (42 Neg) (6+) (6 Neu)</b>

As indicated in Table 1, the variable most frequently appraised is the docudrama, with a total of 27 instances of evaluation. Numbers of received instances were 10 evaluations for Netflix Producers and 9 for Public Reaction. Finally, Cleopatra as a historical figure, received 8 instances of evaluation while the variable of past depictions of Cleopatra is not addressed in the EOP .

Across the three sources, polarity is mostly negative with a total of 42 instances of evaluations, 19 of which are for the docudrama and 10 instances on Netflix producers, indicating a tendency to emphasize negative over positive attitudes towards the docudrama and its producers. Only 6 instances of positive evaluations were recorded as appraisals of Cleopatra, as a historical figure, of the Netflix docudrama for its celebration of legendary African queens and the striking dramatic elements in some scenes.

Appreciation is the most used appraisal system, with 31 instances outnumbering those of judgement, which received 17 instances while Affect received 6 instances. However, appreciation is mostly negative, with 21 negative instances clustering under the subsystem of quality of the docudrama in relation to the content and of the representation of Cleopatra, as the main figure, which received 17 negative instances. The very few positive instances are used to appraise the docudrama as being "much anticipated" and "romanticized drama" that is "brimming with dramatic undertones" despite sarcastic references ridiculing the inclusion of scholars' testimonials for a docudrama that "is based around a complete fib" (Hesham, 2023, para.4). However, in their reaction to the docudrama, online users, and media outlets "reproached it for its representation of Cleopatra", commenting that the while docudrama has become "controversial", the scenes are "disproportionate" with content that is riddled with "historical inaccuracies". In addition, the show lacks dramatic value due to its blandness, focusing only on entertainment value and wasting the opportunity to "showcase Cleopatra's intelligence, ambition, and political acumen on a forced ideological argument completely irrelevant to Egypt" (Hesham, 2023, para.10). Overall, the element of "fictitiousness in the making of the show" is overwhelming.

With respect to Judgement, the two main subsystems mostly used are propriety and veracity, with a total of 8 and 5 negative instances, respectively. While negative propriety is used by EOPWs in reporting the producers describing the audience reaction as the "worst backlashing". All 5 negative instances of veracity occur in skepticism of the historical accuracy of the docudrama and the relevance of Afrocentric ideology that Netflix is forcing on Egyptian culture and civilization.

As for Affect, the EOPWs appraise audiences' dissatisfied reactions as attempts to "voice their contention online" (Khadr, 2023, para.10), which amounted to "outraged accusations" ("Queen Cleopatra' director", 2023). In contrast, the only positive Affect was reserved for Cleopatra, who is a "revered figure in ancient Egyptian history" (Khadr, 2023, para.16).

## **Table 2**

*The distribution of attitude resources in non- Egyptian articles*

Attitudes to Afrocentrism: A Contrastive Appraisal Analysis of Opinion Pieces on the Netflix Docudrama  
"Cleopatra"

Appraisal System	Subsystem	Appraisal of Public reaction	Polarity	Appraisal of past depictions of Cleopatra	Polarity	Appraisal of the docuseries	Polarity	Appraisal of Production	Polarity	Appraisal of Cleopatra as a historical figure	Polarity	Total
Attitude Aff.DisSat		9	(9 Neg)									
<b>Dis.Sat.</b> Total instances of evaluation as per appraisal system		<b>9</b>		<b>0</b>				<b>0</b>		<b>0</b>		<b>(9 Neg)</b>
Judg.	Ver	1	(1+)			2	(2 Neg)	2	(2 Neg)	1	(1 Neg)	6 (5 Neg 1+)
	Prop	11	(11 Neg)					5	(5 Neg)			16 (16 Neg)
	Norm	6	(1+) (1Neu) (4 Neg)					1	(1 Neg)			7 (5 Neg 1+ 1 Neu)
	Cap							2	(2 Neg)			2 (2 Neg)
	Ten							1	(1 Neg)			1 (1 Neg)
<b>Judg.</b> Total instances of evaluation as per appraisal system		<b>18</b>		<b>0</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>11</b>		<b>1</b>		<b>32 (29 Neg 2+ 1 Neu)</b>
App.	Qty	2	(1 Neu) (1 Neg)	2	(1+) (1 Neg)	6	(1+) (1 Neu) (4 Neg)	1	(1 Neg)	2	(1+) (1 Neu)	14 (7 Neg 3+ 2 Neu)
	Imp	2	(2 Neg)									2 (2 Neg)
	Bal											
	Comp									1	(1 Neg)	1 (1 Neg)
	Val			3	(2+) (1 Neg)	2	(1+) (1 Neg)					5 (2 Neg 3+)
	Reac	6	(1+) (5 Neg)	2	(2+)							8 (5 Neg 3+)
<b>App.</b> Total instances of evaluation as per appraisal system		<b>10</b>		<b>7</b>		<b>8</b>		<b>1</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>29 (17 Neg 3 Neu 9+)</b>
<b>Total</b> instances of evaluation per variable		<b>37</b>	<b>(32 Neg) (3+) (2 Neu)</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>(2 Neg) (5+)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>(7 Neg) (2+) (1 Neu)</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>(12 Neg)</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>(1+) (1 Neu) (2 Neg)</b>	<b>70 (44 Neg 11+ 3 Neu)</b>

As indicated in Table 2, the variable most frequently appraised is Public Reaction, with a total of 37 instances of evaluation, followed by 12 instances of appraisal of production. The docudrama received 10 instances while past depictions of Cleopatra received 7 instances. The least evaluated variable is that of Cleopatra as a historical

figure, with only 4 instances of evaluation. Polarity of evaluations is mostly negative, with 44 instances of negative evaluations, including 32 instances on Public Reaction, 12 on Production, and only 7 instances on the docudrama.

Judgment is the most used appraisal system, with 32 instances outnumbering those of Appreciation, which received 29 instances compared to Affect, which received 9 instances. 29 of the instances of Judgment are negative while the most used subsystem of Judgement is Propriety, with a total of 16 negative instances. On one hand, the NEOPWs used negative Propriety attributing the Egyptian public reaction to "white supremacists who've crawled out of the darkest corners of the internet to spew hate and racial slurs at the cast and creators of the show" because of their racist language (Mohamed, 2023, para.6). The West was similarly lambasted for attempting to appropriate ancient Egyptian culture to Afrocentric ideology and for being disrespectful towards Egyptians demands to acknowledge sole ownership of their heritage. That said, the few positive appraisals of the Egyptian audience result from viewing their reactions to the docudrama as a revolt against monopolistic attempts to deprive them of their own history. Hollywood and Netflix producers are negatively judged for their 'flawed' representation of this iconic figure. The subsystem of tenacity, which evaluates dependability and resolution, negatively marks Hollywood's insistence on "denying modern-day Egyptians ownership of their history" (Khorshid, 2023, para.9). The capability of "the scholarly and scientific works promoting Cleopatra's whiteness or her Blackness" is evaluated as "inadequate" (Khorshid, 2023). In relation to veracity, the NEOPWs negatively judge the behaviors of western filmmakers and politicians for their denial of the relationship between modern Egypt and its ancient civilization. Yet, Egyptian reactions are no less negatively judged for lacking honesty and truthfulness since



they are regarded as “simply racism masquerading as a heroic quest for factual accuracy” (Mohamed. 2023, para.10). Finally, in relation to normality, the NEOPWs negatively evaluate Egyptian claims of “Egyptian genes” that supposedly make up a race-based Egyptian identity” (Khorshid, 2023, para.11) along with exaggerated fascination with the Egyptian civilization which was “peaking during waves of Western imperialist expansion” (Khorshid, 2023, para.6).

As for appreciation, the two main subsystems mostly used are quality, with a total of 14 instances, including 7 negative evaluations, and reaction with 8 instances, 5 of which are negative. On one hand, the quality of the docudrama is negatively appreciated because it reflects “cultural appropriation and racism” and honors the rights of black people at the expense of the true owners of this history. The Egyptian audience reaction is also negatively described as a racist outrage, a “heavy-handed backlash”, with high levels of ‘vitriolic’ criticism of the cast (Mohamed, 2023). Moreover, “ardent criticism’ of this docudrama was unexplained by the NEAWs when they compared it with the placid reception of Egyptian audiences of previous Hollywood representations of Cleopatra.

Finally, dissatisfaction is the only used subsystem of Affect. The NEOPs highlighted feelings of frustration with the backlash to the series (Butler, 2023) as well as Egyptian dissatisfaction which took the form of “massive anger” towards the decision by American producers to transfer their battle against anti-black racism through “revisionism of another racialized people’s history without caring about how these people might react” (Khorshid, 2023, para.10)

**Table 3**

*Engagement*

	<b>Egyptian Sources</b>	<b>Non-Egyptian Sources</b>
<b>Hetro</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>25</b>

Under the subsystem of Engagement, Table 3 shows an observable difference in the number of references in the two types of sources. NEOPs regard rejection of the docudrama by Egyptians as their reaction against what they claim to be the incorrectness of the historical narrative as well as an expression of their belief that the West is not only promoting Afrocentrism at the expense of their civilization, but that it is also erasing the existence of the Egyptian heritage. Some of these references include Egyptian voices such as Bassesm Youssef, a satirist regarded as a liberal figure, Monica Hanna, a nationalist archaeologist, Mahmoud al-Semary, an Egyptian lawyer, Zahi Hawass, former Egyptian Minister of Antiquities, Islam Issa, an author, and the Arab press. These Egyptian voices insisted on Cleoptra's Hellenistic background which entails that she must be light-skinned and demanded that the docudrama be banned and be countered by a new series revealing the true identity of the legendary queen from the Egyptian perspective.

The heteroglossic references to non-Egyptian voices in the NEOPs belong to Jada Pinkett Smith, the producer, Sally Ann Ashton, a scientist who appears in the docudrama, scholar Shelley Haley, a professor of Classics and African studies, anonymous experts, Debora Heard, a PhD candidate in Nubian archaeology, Greg Carr, an associate professor of Africana Studies at Howard University, the show's director, Tina Gharavi, and Adele James, the actress playing the leading role, and Netflix itself. All of these voices vehemently disapprove of Egyptian audiences'

reactions, dismissing them as “racists attacks” and referring to critics of the docudrama as “anachronistically applying modern racial constructs to an ancient civilization” (Butler, 2023). Their arguments are based on their belief that since the identity of Cleopatra’s mother, who certainly was not an Arab, is controversial, then she must be African. They even went to the extent of calling “Cleopatra a “chameleon” in that “she looks different depending on who it is that’s depicting her” (Butler, 2023, para.4). While the NEOPWs claim that the docudrama does not target issues of ethnicity, and that it is simply part of a series of docudramas on African queens to introduce new generations in the black community to “underrepresented” powerful women in African history, it clearly states that the intention behind the docudrama is to bring the topic of Egypt’s multiculturalism up for discussion.

The fewer heteroglossic references in the Egyptian sources celebrated the film and television websites that reported the lowest audience ratings ever for the docudrama, which they attributed to its falsification of history. Apart from citing Bassem Youssef’s call for polite and respectful language to use in standing up for Egyptian history and proving the falsification in the docudrama, most heteroglossic references to anonymous history experts are used to prove the historical inaccuracies in the docuseries, not only about Cleopatra’s lineage, but also about her achievements and involvement in Ceasar’s death.

The EOPs used heteroglossic references to mock the inclusion of non-Egyptian voices in a docudrama that is nothing but a “fib”, to accuse Netflix producers of ethnic bias and to expose their Afrocentric ideological underpinnings. we have Professor Shelley P. Haley, whose explanation of the decision to cast a black British actor in the leading role, reflects her expertise in black feminism and critical racial approaches. In addition, Tina Gharavi, the director of the docudrama,

ignored Egyptian outrage amid threats to ruin her career. She went further claiming that the docudrama attests to the industry's efforts "to correct the course of "whitewashing" attempts" that has long been adopted by Hollywood and urging Egyptians to "have a conversation with themselves about white supremacy that Hollywood has pushed for years" ("Queen Cleopatra' director". 2023, para.4).

### **Findings and conclusion:**

This paper examines the evaluative language of online opinion piece writers regarding audience reactions to a Netflix docudrama representing a legendary figure in Egyptian history as a person of African origin. The investigation, which employed the Appraisal framework of analysis on a sample of Egyptian and non-Egyptian online opinion pieces to represent two different cultural perspectives, answered the research questions as follows.

What is the distribution pattern of evaluative systems in a sample discourse of Egyptian and non-Egyptian opinion pieces on the Netflix docudrama "Cleopatra"?

There is a stronger tendency in the NEOPs to use evaluative discourse than is found in the EOPs in their defense of the docudrama against what they considered as allegations by an Egyptian racist audience. However, findings also indicated that, across the sample, the highly opinionated language is expressed as judgement of Netflix producers' decisions and appreciation of the quality of the docudrama rather than as an expression of emotions. In other words, Judgment and Appreciation are the two systems of attitude mostly favored across the sample.

In the two types of sources, the overwhelming polarity of evaluative discourse indicates a tendency to emphasize negative over positive attitudes. In the EOPs

negative evaluative discourse conglomerates in appreciation of the quality of the docudrama emphasizing its "fictitiousness". In NEOPs, the overwhelming negative evaluative discourse clusters around judging the actions and the attitudes of Netflix producers, the West and the reactions of the Egyptian audience in relation to propriety and veracity.

Finally, the use of hetroglossic references in the NEOPs which outnumbered that in the EOPs, denotes the intention to acknowledge different sources of evaluation and an inclination to exhibit intersubjective positioning and to establish a dialogue with the readers, thus effectively expanding the dialogic space. The fewer hetroglossic references in the Egyptian sources tend to limit dialogue to convey to the audience an authoritative and inarguable tone for an adamant rejection of the falsifications of the docudrama.

In general, there are more differences than similarities regarding the systems of evaluations and how the writers of both Egyptian and non-Egyptian online opinion pieces make and express their stances.

*What ideological stances does evaluative discourse reflect in the sample?*

On one hand, the EOPs negatively appraise the veracity of the docudrama and accuse it of falsifying history. Not only do Egyptians believe in Cleopatra's purely Hellenistic descent, but they also object to misrepresenting her as a warrior implicated in the killing of Cesar instead of showcasing the legendary queen's actual achievements. The EOPs reject claims that the docudrama aims to encourage a more humanistic and multicultural approach to human history and abhor attempts to extend struggles over core issues in American social justice beyond American borders to foreign societies, regardless of their cultures and history.

On the other hand, in their defense of the docudrama, the NEOPs adopt certain ideologies; first, they endorse claims of the multicultural heritage of the legendary queen, Cleopatra; second, they positively recognize the need to reverse the whitewashing efforts that Hollywood has long been carrying out to challenge stereotypical representation of blacks by choosing a black female actress to play the leading role of Cleopatra, who is a fully empowered agent in ancient Egyptian history. This choice aims to provide young blacks with a positive alternative conceptualization of themselves that encourages them to redefine themselves rather than being defined by others (Hemphill, 2017). The NEOPs refute the adamantly held ideology portraying Egyptians as having "pure blood" and a "pure culture" (Shohat, 2021). Therefore, the objections of the Egyptian audience are not only reduced to criticisms against the 'blackness' of Cleopatra but are also regarded as exaggerated and fake attempts to promote an unsubstantiated claim of an exclusive Egyptian gene. This explains the overwhelming dissatisfaction in NEOPs with the reactions of the Egyptian audience to the docudrama, which is evaluated as a "racist" backlash of anger.

Although the NEOPs positively justified the rights to correct racism in the entertainment industry by recognizing black people's roles in framing history, they questioned the veracity and propriety of Netflix producers' efforts to carry out these corrective actions at the expense of another culture, which has a different racial background. There are voices in the NEOPs that attempted to present a historical justification for the backlash of anger by the Egyptian audience. They attributed this anger to a long-held belief by Egyptians that "imperialism and imperialist hegemony" (Khorshid, 2023, para.22) are continually attempting to steal Egyptian history and impose a purely American racial conflict on another racially different

culture by promoting the narrative that the ancient Egyptian civilization is rooted in Afrocentric origins. Accordingly, the Egyptian audience regards the docudrama as yet another attempt, long iterated in politics and across various forms of entertainment to enforce the colonial ideology that the ancient Egyptian civilization has no links to contemporary Egyptians. To the surprise of the researcher, this historical justification of irate reactions to the docudrama by Egyptian audiences is offered by the NEOPs.

To conclude, the significance of this study lies in being a point of departure, albeit a crucial one, towards understanding public attitudes with regard to the propagation of Afrocentrism from different cultural perspectives. However, by investigating the "attitudinal meanings" in six online opinion pieces, this paper is expected to exhibit "a degree of subjectivity" (Hood, 2004, p.113). Therefore, it is expected that readers may take a different position from that of the researcher's when tagging and annotating the evaluative expressions within the systems of the Appraisal theory (Martin & Rose, 2007). This subjectivity necessitates carrying out future in-depth research on a larger sample of texts from different genres to understand public attitudes towards the claims of Afrocentrism from different cultural perspectives.

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## المواقف من المركزية الأفريقية: تحليل تقييمي متباين لمقالات الرأي في الدراما الوثائقية "كليوباترا" من نيتفلكس

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### المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى كشف الأيديولوجيات الضمنية في الخطاب التقييمي المستخدم للتعليق على إستقبال جمهور المشاهدين للدراما الوثائقية التي تقدمها نيتفلكس بعنوان "كليوباترا"، وطبيعة وأنماط توزيع هذا الخطاب التقييمي في ثلاث مقالات رأي مصرية وثلاث غير مصرية على الإنترنت. المشكلة التي حفزت هذه الدراسة ذات شقين: ردود أفعال الجمهور المصري الغاضبة تجاه الدراما الوثائقية، بالإضافة إلى نقص المعرفة الأكاديمية بالمركزية الأفريقية وارتباطها بمصر. ولهذا الغرض، تستخدم الدراسة نظرية التقييم كإطار للتحليل. أشار تحليل الخطاب المشروح باستخدام برنامج Monococ.Pro إلى توجه قوى في المقالات غير المصرية لاستخدام الخطاب التقييمي مما هو موجود في نظيراتها المصرية في الحكم والتقدير باعتبارهما نظامي التعبير عن المواقف المفضلين في الغالب عبر العينة. إنصبت الأحكام في التعبير عن الرأي على قرارات منتجي Netflix بينما إنصب التقدير على تقييم جودة الدراما الوثائقية ولم تركز اللغة المستخدمة على التعبير عن المشاعر. كما أوضحت النتائج أن المصادر غير المصرية تتبنى التعددية الثقافية ومفهوم الأصول الأفريقية للحضارة المصرية القديمة وتعترف بضرورة إعادة النظر في الدوافع وراء ردود فعل الجمهور المصري الغاضبة تجاه الدراما الوثائقية. بينما تعبر المصادر المصرية عن إيمانها الراسخ بملكية المصريين لتاريخهم، وترفض بشدة مفهوم المركزية الأفريقية للحضارة المصرية. توصي الدراسة بإجراء بحث متعمق في المستقبل على عينة أكبر من النصوص من مختلف الأنواع لفهم المواقف العامة تجاه انتشار المركزية الأفريقية من وجهات نظر ثقافية مختلفة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** مقالات الرأي عبر الإنترنت – نظرية التقييم – المركزية الأفريقية – الأيديولوجية – الدراما الوثائقية "كليوباترا" من نتفلكس