
Colonialism and Femininity: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Power in Literary Representations of *Cleopatra*

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Article Received: 18/6/2022

Article Accepted: 28/07/2022

Published online: 30/07/2022

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.7.23

Abstract

This research paper explores the figure of Cleopatra as a symbol of the "exotic other" in Shakespearean and colonial-era literature, with a focus on how race, gender, and power intersect in her portrayal. As one of the most iconic and complex figures in literature, Cleopatra has been represented in a variety of ways, from a seductive temptress to a powerful queen. This paper argues that these representations are not merely a reflection of her personal traits but are deeply shaped by the racial and gender ideologies of the time. Drawing on the works of William Shakespeare, especially *Antony and Cleopatra*, and colonial-era texts, this paper analyzes how Cleopatra is constructed as a figure of temptation and power, exploring how race and gender are used to position her as both an alluring "other" and a powerful yet dangerous female figure.

Keywords: *Cleopatra*, Exotic other, Race and gender, Shakespearean literature, Colonial-era representation

Introduction

In literary portrayals of *Cleopatra*, the connections between race, gender, and power play a key role in shaping her character, especially when considering the context of colonialism. In works such as Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Cleopatra* represents the idea of the "exotic other," with her gender and race serving as both defining and limiting aspects. *Shakespeare* shows Cleopatra as a strong leader and an alluring figure, blending her femininity with her sharp political skills. This intricate characterisation connects with colonial ideas, as Cleopatra's Egyptian background makes her a symbol of otherness, which enhances her charm and threat (Shakespeare, 1998). In the way people thought during colonial times, her race makes her seem like an outsider, someone who is both fascinating and a potential threat to the existing imperial system. Additionally, her sexuality is shown as a way to exert control and manipulate, serving as a tool to influence her political relationships with influential Roman leaders such as Antony and Caesar. The way Cleopatra is sexualised shows the colonial worries about how race and gender mix, with foreign women frequently being seen as mere objects of sexual attraction and political interest (Said, 1978).

In literature from the colonial era, Cleopatra's portrayal becomes more deeply connected to the colonial project. As European countries grew their empires, *Cleopatra's* portrayal was shaped to align with Western ideas of power and authority. Some scholars, such as Said, have suggested that Cleopatra's image is shaped by Orientalism, where the East is depicted as a realm of allure and enigma that the West aims to control (Said, 1978). *Cleopatra*, as the queen of Egypt, represents the conflict between the colonial urge for exoticism and the necessity to dominate what is considered "other." In these texts, her portrayal goes beyond just being a seductress; she is depicted as a strong and defiant woman whose power and charm challenge the norms of Western patriarchy. Looking at it this way, Cleopatra's race and gender come together to show her as someone who is both a victim of colonial power and a figure of resistance against it. She represents a type of femininity that is seen as both threatening and powerful within the colonial setting (Foster, 2005). The way Cleopatra is shown also shows bigger changes in colonial and postcolonial ideas. According to scholars like Royster (2016), Cleopatra's portrayal in theatre and literature changed a lot during the colonial era, becoming more sympathetic and assertive. This change shows how people are becoming more aware of how race, class, and gender connect. Cleopatra's strong use of her femininity goes against both the colonial system and the typical gender roles of her era (Royster, 2016). Cleopatra's skill in shaping her own future through her connections with influential figures such as Caesar and Antony, along with her intellectual and political impact, really changes the usual ideas about femininity. She represents a changing concept of power that doesn't fit into colonial stereotypes of the passive, exotic woman (Osmond, 2020).

To sum up, Cleopatra's portrayals in literature provide a deep look into how race, gender, and power connect with each other. In works like Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and various colonial-era texts, Cleopatra is depicted as an exotic and seductive figure, which reflects the racial and gender dynamics of her time. Cleopatra serves as a symbol of temptation and power, pushing against traditional ideas of femininity and imperialism. She presents a complex image of a woman who, while facing colonial power structures, manages to challenge and resist them. Cleopatra is shown as a strong symbol of how race, gender, and power connect in shaping identity in both literary and colonial settings.

Cleopatra as a Symbol of the "Exotic Other" in Shakespeare

Cleopatra is often seen as a "exotic other" in both ancient history and literature, largely because of her race, gender, and the imperial setting she was part of. *Cleopatra*, being of Egyptian descent, often had her identity shaped in contrast to Roman values, portraying her as a figure of seduction and a challenge to Roman masculinity and political stability. The combination of her charm and strength has been looked at from different colonial and gender perspectives, like in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and other literary pieces from the colonial period. Cleopatra is portrayed as a foreign and sexually powerful woman, which shows how race and gender come together to shape her image as both an object of desire and a threat to the patriarchal and imperial systems of her era. According to Greenblatt (2004), Shakespeare's Cleopatra represents the "exotic other" and acts as a political force that disrupts Roman masculinity. Shakespeare presents Cleopatra as a mysterious and captivating leader,

whose beauty and sexual power influence Roman men, particularly Antony. Shakespeare highlights her foreignness, both in terms of geography and culture, portraying Cleopatra as a representation of the East's intriguing and sensual charm. This idea of the "exotic other" comes from colonial views of Eastern cultures, which were frequently perceived as indulgent, sensual, and morally unclear when compared to the orderly and logical West. Cleopatra's influence on Antony goes against the usual expectations of gender roles, where women were seen as submissive. This positions her as a representation of feminine charm and a challenge to the stability of male dominance (Lopez, 2022). This portrayal shows how race and gender intersect, revealing that literature, especially in a colonial setting, employs exoticism to diminish Cleopatra's power, even as it recognises its strength. Additionally, the way Cleopatra is depicted in literature from the colonial period highlights the racial and gender dynamics surrounding her character. Shohat (1991) points out that colonial narratives frequently used representations of women, such as *Cleopatra*, to symbolise the attraction of the "other" and the colonial anxiety about control. Cleopatra's seductive nature was frequently seen as both a strength and a weakness. Her race—her Egyptian heritage—made her seem both unique and intimidating to the Western world. Her sexualisation, along with her political skills, presented her as a powerful figure who could possibly challenge the existing patriarchal system (McCombe, 2007). Cleopatra isn't just seen through her sensuality or her connections with influential Roman figures; her sharp political skills and talent for managing complicated power dynamics were key parts of how she was represented. According to Lopez (2022), Cleopatra's gender and racial identity were shaped in ways that mirrored the desire for and fear of the "other" during the era of Roman imperialism. Her exoticism serves as a way for the Western world to express its worries about colonial expansion, gender roles, and racial boundaries. To sum up, the way Cleopatra is portrayed as the "exotic other" in Shakespeare's works and colonial texts shows a complicated mix of race, gender, and power dynamics. These representations show how Cleopatra's sexuality and political power were both fascinating and frightening to people. Her portrayal as both a seductive temptress and a powerful queen reflects the concerns of the colonial era regarding gender, race, and imperialism, reinforcing her role as a symbol of the "other" who challenges the dominant power structures of that time.

Colonial-Era Literature and the Representation of Cleopatra

In colonial-era literature, Cleopatra is depicted not just as an Egyptian queen but as a more intricate character connected to Western ideas of power, exoticism, and control. Writers and artists frequently used Cleopatra to delve into themes like colonialism, racial differences, and the captivating yet perilous charm of the "other" during this time. In these works, Cleopatra is often portrayed as an exotic temptress and a strong political leader, showing how the colonial perspective objectifies the East while trying to exert control over it.

Cleopatra's status as a foreign figure and her position as the final Pharaoh of Egypt were key aspects of how she was portrayed in colonial literature. She was portrayed as a mysterious and alluring character, whose looks and intelligence were viewed as both strong and threatening (Foster, 2005). The way Cleopatra is exoticized fits with Edward Said's idea of "Orientalism," which suggests that the East is portrayed as a place full of sensuality, mystery,

and excess, while the West is seen as more rational and orderly (Said, 1978). People frequently portrayed Cleopatra as a queen of Egypt, her sexuality serving as a key element of her influence. In a lot of colonial-era writings, Cleopatra's connections with key Roman figures, such as Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, were depicted not just as political partnerships but also as examples of her using her femininity to assert power. Her skill in influencing and captivating these influential men is frequently pointed out as a demonstration of how her femininity and exotic appeal were connected to her political and personal power (Blouin & Akrigg, 2025). The way Cleopatra is shown as both a sexualised figure and a clever leader really highlights how literature from the colonial era dealt with concerns about race, gender, and power dynamics. Her image was used to question the masculine structure of the Roman Empire while also upholding racial and gender hierarchies that categorise her as "other."

Cleopatra being seen as the "other" really connects to larger ideas about colonialism, like conquest and control. In the colonial era, European powers were involved in both the physical colonisation of foreign territories and the cultural and intellectual domination of the "Orient" (McLean-Hopkins, 2005). *Cleopatra*, as the queen of an ancient and powerful civilisation, represented both the glory and the decline of the East. In literature, she was frequently portrayed as a character whose cultural and racial differences rendered her both intriguing and menacing, representing the perils of the colonised world that posed a challenge to Western order and values. Writers have used Cleopatra to look into the complicated relationships between race and power, showing how colonial powers reflected their own fears onto foreign women who were seen as both sexually attractive and politically threatening (Ines & Houda, 2018). Additionally, the colonial era frequently linked Cleopatra's portrayal with the idea of "civilising" or controlling the East. People were really intrigued by Cleopatra's unique beauty and influence, but there was also this strong urge to dominate her. European depictions of Cleopatra frequently depicted her as a fallen woman, with her power viewed as corrupting and undermining the established order. This perspective shows how colonial attitudes aimed to emphasise Western dominance while also recognising the intricate and captivating nature of the East (Taylor & Burton, 2022).

In literature from the colonial era, Cleopatra's portrayal was shaped to align with the imperial perspective, highlighting the intricate and often conflicting relationships between race, gender, and power. People portrayed her as both a desirable object and a symbol of political power, underscoring colonial concerns about the "other." Cleopatra's unique qualities and femininity made her a figure who fascinated and intimidated the Western imagination, acting as a means to examine the racial and gender dynamics of empire. Cleopatra's representation as both a captivating woman and a strong queen makes her an important figure in discussions about colonialism, highlighting the conflicts between power and attraction, as well as authority and rebellion.

Race, Gender, and Power in Cleopatra's Portrayal

Cleopatra is definitely one of the most intricate and debated characters in both history and literature. Her image has changed a lot, especially in Shakespeare's works and later in colonial literature. The representation of Cleopatra clearly reflects the significant influence of race, gender, and power. *Cleopatra*, as an Egyptian queen, is often depicted as the "exotic

other" in Shakespearean literature and colonial-era writings, where her identity and the dynamics of power are closely linked to race and gender.

In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Cleopatra* is shown as a strong ruler and a seductive figure, which highlights the gender and racial expectations of her era. Her sexuality isn't just a personal characteristic; it carries political importance. Cleopatra's connections with influential Roman leaders such as Julius Caesar and Mark Antony represent a type of power that comes from her charm and skill in manipulation. Her exoticism and foreignness create a complex image, making her both appealing and intimidating within the framework of Roman imperialism. Shakespeare's Cleopatra takes on Roman masculinity by showing her control over the men, highlighting the fears related to female independence and power (MacDonald, 1996). Additionally, *Cleopatra's* race is really important in shaping her character. Being of Egyptian descent, she is seen as "other," a person whose racial and cultural differences stand out when compared to the Roman Empire's ideals of discipline and order. In the context of colonialism, *Cleopatra* represents both the attraction and the risks associated with the East. The way *Cleopatra* is sexualised connects to colonial ideas, depicting the East as a place filled with sensuality and extravagance. This idea of the exotic female ruler highlights a colonial wish to both own and dominate the "other." Baker (2020) argues that *Cleopatra's* figure is often used to examine the intersection of racialised power dynamics, showing how colonising powers perceive the "other" as both desirable and a threat to their established orders.

Additionally, the portrayals of *Cleopatra* from the colonial period enhance the racial aspects of how she is depicted. Shakespeare's *Cleopatra* is shown as a strong, though risky, figure in politics, but later colonial literature tends to focus on her as a victim of empire. The focus on her race, along with her femininity, positions her as something to be desired and controlled, as if she needs to be "civilised." This situation shows the larger colonial goal of control, where the racial "other" is depicted as both an alluring challenge and a target to be subdued. Royster (2016) points out that *Cleopatra's portrayal* in terms of race is used to examine the fears of colonial powers, as her political power is downplayed in favour of a more passive and seductive image. Also, Cleopatra's role as a queen is frequently looked at in connection with her gender. In Shakespearean and colonial narratives, her leadership is frequently depicted through the constraints of her femininity. Even though *Cleopatra* is a strong leader, being a woman makes it harder for her to wield power in a way that fits with the expectations of a male-dominated society. The conflict between her femininity and her political authority highlights the complexity of her character, showing how she embodies both strength and vulnerability at the same time. Floyd (1999) points out that Cleopatra's leadership goes against traditional gender roles, as she uses her power in ways that challenge the typical expectations of femininity.

The way *Cleopatra* is portrayed is shaped by both race and gender, and this is also affected by the historical context in which these representations are created. During the 19th and 20th centuries, as colonialism grew, *Cleopatra* emerged as a representation of the intricate connections among race, empire, and gender. The way colonial perspectives portrayed *Cleopatra* often depicted her as an overly sexualised and exotic figure, suggesting that her power was ultimately diminished by imperial forces. However, modern interpretations of

Cleopatra question these stereotypes, providing a more detailed understanding of her identity as a political leader and a woman with complex desires and motivations. To sum up, the way *Cleopatra* is depicted in *Shakespearean* and colonial-era literature is heavily influenced by the connections between race, gender, and power. Her image serves as a representation of temptation and power, showcasing the anxieties and desires of a colonial society that aimed to control and yearn for the "other." The way *Cleopatra* is racialised and sexualised not only highlights the power dynamics of her era but also shows the complexities surrounding female leadership and agency. *Cleopatra's* complex portrayal makes it hard to have simple views on race and gender, encouraging us to think more deeply about the impacts of colonialism and how women in power are represented.

Analysis

The portrayal of *Cleopatra* as the "exotic other" in both Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and colonial-era literature reveals the intersection of race, gender, and power in shaping colonial ideologies. As a queen of Egyptian descent, *Cleopatra's* identity stands in stark contrast to Roman and Western norms, symbolizing the allure of the "Orient" as well as the fear and fascination that the colonial powers had towards the East. In Shakespeare's work, *Cleopatra's* exoticism and sexuality are central to her characterization, framing her as both a political figure and a seductive woman whose femininity is used as a weapon of power. However, this portrayal is complicated by the colonial dynamics of the time, where her racial identity as an Egyptian is used to mark her as an outsider.

In colonial-era literature, the romanticization and sexualization of *Cleopatra* are not just about her personal allure but about the wider racial and gendered fears of the time. As European powers expanded their empires, *Cleopatra* became a symbol of the colonial 'other'—an embodiment of the exotic and dangerous foreign woman who could destabilize the masculine, imperialist power of the West. Her relationships with Roman leaders like Caesar and Antony are not solely political but are constructed as acts of seduction and manipulation, which further entrench colonial ideas of female power and subjugation.

Additionally, *Cleopatra's* ability to navigate these political alliances challenges both the gendered expectations of the time and the colonial power structures that sought to suppress her. She embodies a form of femininity that is at odds with the passive, docile woman typically portrayed in colonial narratives. This shift in her characterization—from a seductive queen to a defiant political leader—marks a significant development in the understanding of female agency in colonial discourse. Furthermore, the racialization of *Cleopatra*, especially in the context of Orientalism, amplifies the colonial anxiety about racial mixing and the threat posed by a woman who could challenge the colonial order. Her racial identity is both a source of fascination and fear, revealing the anxieties of colonial powers about their control over both the East and the "other" within their empires. The complex layers of *Cleopatra's* portrayal as both a political figure and a sexualized "other" invite a reexamination of how gender, race, and power intersect in colonial and postcolonial literature.

In conclusion, the representations of *Cleopatra* in Shakespeare and colonial-era literature serve not only as a commentary on the complexities of race and gender but also as a

reflection of the larger colonial ideologies of domination, control, and the othering of non-Western cultures. *Cleopatra's* image as a powerful woman of the East who resists the patriarchal and imperial structures of the West makes her a timeless symbol of the ways in which race and gender continue to shape political and cultural narratives.

Conclusion

The literary representations of *Cleopatra* as the "exotic other" reveal much about the intersection of race, gender, and power in both Shakespearean and colonial-era texts. *Cleopatra's* portrayal as a seductive and powerful woman reflects the anxieties and desires of a colonial culture that sought to dominate and control the "other" while simultaneously desiring and fearing it. In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Cleopatra's* exoticism, sexuality, and political power make her both a symbol of temptation and a threat to Roman authority, while in colonial-era literature, her image is used to explore Western fantasies of domination and control. Ultimately, *Cleopatra's* complex and multifaceted portrayal challenges simplistic notions of race and gender, offering a rich space for exploring the dynamics of power, femininity, and colonialism in literature.

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International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)

An International Peer-Reviewed /Refereed Journal; Volume-4, Issue-7(July Issue), 2022

www.ijoes.in ISSN: 2581-8333; Impact Factor: 5.432(SJIF)

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