

Queens: Re-inventing Matriarchal Myth in Contemporary Media

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Abstract: This essay examines the 2024 animal documentary *Queens* through a feminist lens. Against the backdrop of traditional storytelling dominated by androcentric perspectives, feminist scholars have long advocated for the creation of female-centered narratives to reclaim agency and challenge gendered norms. As both an educational and artistic work, *Queens* contributes to the practice of gynocentric storytelling in contemporary media. By showcasing matriarchal societies across various animal species, the documentary provides a narrative centered on female perspectives. This essay analyzes how the stories in *Queens* celebrate the power and qualities of femininity through the portrayal of anthropomorphic animal characters and female animal workers in real life. It also compares the narration of *Queens* with that of other wildlife documentaries and examines the Chinese translation to illustrate how language constructs female subjectivity. Finally, the essay identifies unresolved issues and controversies within the documentary and proposes directions for future feminist creators to advance matriarchal narratives further.

Keywords: *Queens*, Feminism, Media, Documentary

1. Introduction

Storytelling has long been a powerful tool for shaping cultural beliefs and constructing societal norms. Modern media has taken on the role once held by ancient myths, and continue to influence its viewers. Yet, the stories that dominate popular culture often center on male protagonists or androcentric experiences. The absence of female-centric myths has left a significant gap in the cultural landscape of storytelling. Feminist creative workers face the challenge of the lack of relatable paradigms when they want to construct empowering narratives. In this context, the animal documentary *Queens* (2024, National Geographic), by presenting female-led societies in the animal world and exploring themes of reproduction, leadership, and personal growth, reframes femininity as a source of power. This essay uses *Queens* as a case study of feminist media. The essay will examine the plots, character building and language usage of the documentary, to understand how *Queens* constructs its matriarchal narrative and offers a gynocentric perspective that highlights and affirms female agency.

2. The Absence and Re-Invention of Matriarchal Myths

Since Joseph Campbell proposed the “monomyth” framework, the repetitions and variations of the hero's journey model have been spotted constantly in popular culture works. [1] The stories feature

heroes who achieve transcendence through their journeys, inspiring the viewers. However, women are often excluded from such experiences. Not only are works featuring female protagonists significantly fewer in number but also the experience of male heroes cannot simply be transplanted to represent the life journeys of women. [2] Later when Campbell wrote about goddess myths in *Goddesses: Mysteries of the Feminine Divine*, he remarked, "There are no female mythological models (in the field of individual quest, achievement, and self-realization)". [3] Simone de Beauvoir also argued that goddess worship is a myth of 'the Other'. The goddesses constructed by patriarchy, are the mystified and alienated objects. Men, through their pursuit and conquest of these objects, establish their subjectivity. [4] In this matter, while modern feminists are resisting the female paradigms imposed by patriarchy, and also rejecting to "be a man", "what do represent women?" has become the next question to answer. The re-invention of spiritual materials is part of the task in the progress of the feminist movement. Constructing narratives that acknowledge women's life experience and empower femininity is no easier than deconstructing patriarchy, given the lack of existing frameworks to serve as a foundation.

One of the approaches modern feminists have been exploring is imagining a matriarchal society. Raine Eisler, in her book *The Chalice and the Blade*, presents a model of matriarchal societies centered around cooperation, harmony, and peace. [5] Cynthia Eller, although she critiques the romanticized interpretations of matriarchal prehistory, does acknowledge the appeal of matriarchal myth. [6] In modern cinema, the creators of *Barbie* (2023, Greta Gerwig) and *I Am Not an Easy Man* (2018, Eleonore Pourriat) attempt to imagine a world in which women take the lead. *I Am Not an Easy Man* is based on a parallel universe in which gender roles are reversed, and *Barbie* builds a female utopia. The pink Barbieland also collides with the patriarchal society in the real world, placing the protagonists on the battlefield for the power struggle between the two genders. However, these highly fictional worlds are not presented as the ends of matriarchal ideals, but as means to expose gender inequality in the real world through comparison and irony.

The creators of *Queens* have their eyes on the female-led animal kingdoms. The documentary shows 10 species that have matriarchal structures in their clans. Some of the animals are led by an alpha female, like the hyenas, bonobos, African elephants, Ethiopian wolves, and orcas. The kingdom of eusocial organisms, such as leafcutter ants, is primarily established by the reproductive queen and the infertile female workers and soldiers. Female lions and gelada monkeys live in sisterhood and collaboratively nurture each other's offspring. In these animal cultures, females constitute the nucleus of a clan and are accountable for the survival of their society. The documentary serves to disseminate the existence of female-led civilizations in the animal kingdom and to illustrate the structures and strategies of the matriarchal groups.

When de Beauvoir wrote about 'La Biologie' (the biology) in *The Second Sex*, she remarked that in ancient philosophy, the male gamete used to be taken as the active one and the female gamete the passive one. In her times, to argue against the gender bias of gamete narratives, she had to argue that "the two gametes fuse in fertilization" and "the features of the gametes shouldn't be the metaphor for individuals of the two sexes". [4] Later researches on women's bodies and the function of eggs has transformed the understanding of the biological nature of the sexes. Studies show that not only human egg carry more genetic materials than sperm [7], but the biochemical processes in women's bodies also are actively selecting the sperm [8], and repairing sperm DNA damage [9]. Contemporary women, informed by such scientific knowledge, naturally refute the androcentric gamete narrative. Consequently, the dissemination of updated scientific study findings is significant for the feminist cause. On the other hand, biological and sociological cognition is constantly updating, and studies, especially those on gender differences may be affected by preconceived political bias. [10] For the same reason, feminists argue against patriarchy using nature philosophy to defend its legitimacy, the recognition of animal or human matriarchal cases cannot be used to arm feminist ideas in public

arguments. Thus, the role of works like *Queens* is to build the matriarchal vocabulary in the alliance of women. It serves as a spiritual counterforce against traditional androcentric narrative, challenging gender biases in sociocultural recognition. This case study of *Queens* focuses on the mythical role of storytelling embodied in the documentary and the female power conveyed by the stories in *Queens*.

3. *Queens*: Empowering Femininity

In *Queens*, the empowerment of femininity is a driving force behind the narratives, intricately woven into the stories of the female characters. While offering authentic portrayals of animal behaviors, the narrative also attributes human-like emotions and motivations to the animal characters under the classic narrative motifs of each unit (Table 1).

Table 1: Species, Heroines and Themes of Each Unit in *Queens*

Episode	Species	Heroin(es)	Theme
1	Lion	Shani and her two sisters	Unity of the sisterhood
1	Hyena	Malkia and her younger sister Ayisha	Competition between sisters
2	Orchid Bee	Glossa and her daughter Dila	Mother's trickery
2	Leafcutter Ant	Queen Atta One and worker ant Atta 359	Sacrifice
3	Bonobo	Zowie	Growing up
4	African Elephant	Taji and her granddaughter Binti	Legacy and heritage
5	Brown Bear	Aana	The hardship of motherhood
5	Orca	Sofia	Legacy
6	Ethiopian Wolf	Tar and her daughter Seti	Growing up
6	Gelada Monkey	Diarra	Sacrifice

In these specially tailored female-centered stories, femininity is empowered on three levels:

3.1. Validating and Empowering the Role of Reproduction

While having children can limit women's public participation, it's also a core part of their identity. Barbie visits the gynecologist to learn about her body as a woman in the last scene of the movie. *Queens* emphasizes reproduction and motherhood further in its story. The first episode depicts a hyena community governed by the female with the most allies, who relies on her children. Malkia, the hyena queen, is threatened by her younger sister Ayisha, who has more prime-age daughters. Bonobo Zowie and Ethiopian wolf Seti leave their families in episodes 3 and 6 to start their own families and have children. The narrative suggests that young females have earned their chance to leadership by having children. The documentary explains how reproduction empowers mothers to lead society and reframes motherhood as a source of agency, growth, and social impact, both biologically and culturally.

3.2. Recognizing that Females Possess Qualities commonly Celebrated in Male Heroes

From the very first episode, the documentary has introduced qualities like courage, when hyena Yeye protects her sister from strong enemies, intelligence, when lion Shani and her sister perform their tactics to cheat the male lion, and ambition, when hyena Ayisha sets her goal on the throne. Also, the documentary does not shy away from presenting complex and, at times, less traditionally 'positive'

qualities in its female characters. Like in episode 2, the queen bee Glossa secretly replaces her daughter Dila's eggs with hers, tricking Dila to do the hard work of child raising for her. The Ethiopian wolf matriarch Tar expels her daughter Seti from the region mercilessly to prevent resource depletion. These features seem to be contradictory to the idealized image of selfless mothers, adding depth and complexity to the portrayal of female characters. By exhibiting the multifaceted natures of the females, the making of them transcends the barriers of stereotypical gender identity. The females are presented as full-developed characters on the screen.

3.3. Reclaiming Feminine Strengths and Destigmatized Female-associated Traits

Episode 3 shows a scene, in which two bonobo families meet each other. The male members release their aggression, making a fuss to show off their strength, while the females entertain each other and make a peaceful diplomacy. The female leaders of the two families have forged a bond between the families with their wisdom. In episode 4, the African elephant grandmother Taji leads her family with wisdom, but during the dry season, human activity disrupts her knowledge of water sources. Taji's young granddaughter Binti shows her courage and adaptation to the unknown, guiding Taji across the highway to reach the river. Unlike the classic Patricide motif in patriarchal myths, Taji and Binti's relationship is not about the overthrowing of the older generation, but about heritage, support, and mutual respect. The female-led societies exhibit unique traits –such as cooperation, nurturing, and adaptability – that could be powerful tools in resolving conflicts and fostering unity, offering a refreshing alternative contrast to the male-dominated narratives.

In addition to conveying messages through the portrayal of animal behaviors, the documentary takes a step further by making the last episode a behind-the-scene special that features the female animal workers and their experiences. Female filmmakers who engage in production support emerging women in the filmmaking business. Team Lioness, a female-only animal conservation initiative, gathers information from rural women to enhance its activities. Human foster mothers are recruited to nurture orphaned newborn bonobos. These stories reemphasize the traits shown in the stories of animals. By bridging the documentary's female power themes with the real world, the last episode gives the series an inspiring finale.

4. Constructing Subjectivity in Gynocentric Narrative

Language plays an essential role in the construction of one's subjectivity. Thus, it's important for feminist practice to positively reclaim the language. [10] The choices of subject and perspective in the narration of *Queens* are carefully crafted to ensure the agency of the females. Take the mating process as an example, some of the other animal documentaries, like the fifth episode titled "Mating" from *Life Story* (2014, BBC Studios), focus mostly on the male's effort. The males show off themselves or fight each other to win over the hearts of the females. In these "effort–reward" narratives, the females are positioned on the role of object. In contrast, the young females in *Queens*, like bonobo Zowie, Ethiopian wolf Seti, and gelada monkey Zeudi, are all described as "setting their eyes on the males". When they are sexually mature, the young females develop the need for mating and actively push for progress. Another example is the orchid bee Dila's mating scene in episode 2. The mating process of orchid bees is similar to those of Japanese pufferfishes, bowerbirds, and long-tailed manakins in *Life Story* –the males show off their strength by the aesthetics of their nests or themselves. The scene in *Queens* briefly shows how the male orchid bee collects smells in the forest and then cuts back to Dila. The narration frames it as "she likes what she smells", emphasizing the female's active choice. Through deliberate linguistic framing, the documentary has constructed a gynocentric narrative.

The influence of language choices on the narrative is also shown in the controversial Chinese translation of the hyena mating scene in episode 1. At 24:09, the narration describes the unique

mating process of hyenas': "Only when she's ready, will she retract her sex organ, allowing him to mate." The Chinese subtitles translate the last clause as "so the male is able to mate with her". The original narration intends to emphasize the female's active control of the mating process while the Chinese translation implies that the male achieves the act of mating when certain conditions are met. Although both versions of the two languages describe the phenomenon accurately, the Chinese version has weakened the agency of the female. Another example is in the narration at 24:40, the original English version goes: "The need for consent is what makes hyena society so special. It hands control over to the females, gives them immense power." The subject "it" in the second sentence refers to "the need for consent" from the preceding sentence. However, in the Chinese-dub version, the subject is falsely rendered as "the males". "The males' hand control over to the females, giving them immense power." The original narration underscores that, thanks to their unique body structure, female hyenas naturally hold control over the reproduction process, but the Chinese translation distorts this meaning, suggesting that this power is not inherently the females to wield. Instead, the male is the one holding the decision whether to hand the power to the females or not. These examples show how the subtle shift of subject can alter the subtext of a sentence. The translation issues of the documentary are pointed out by the audience in the live comments on Bilibili, the Chinese streaming platform. It shows that the audience of *Queens* has developed sensitivity to gendered terminology.

5. Gaps and Challenges

In 1985, cartoonist Alison Bechdel brought up the Bechdel test that measures the representation of women in films, bringing attention to gender inequality on screen. *Queens* surely meets the basic standard, transcending from stereotypical narratives centered around sexual relationships, presenting complex fates and choices of the female characters. However, several unresolved issues remain evident. For instance, does the hardship faced by mothers in these stories represent the motherhood penalty or is it the cost of personal transcendence? Another example lies in the gender bias embedded in language, as reflected in the Chinese translation of the documentary's title. Unlike the English word "queen", which can denote both the wife of a king and a female sovereign, the Chinese term used, "female king", implicitly reveals a bias by suggesting that the default gender of a ruler is male. While *Queens* provides a template for feminist creative workers, it also raises new challenges for future feminists and creators to tackle.

6. Conclusion

In the context of the scarcity of female-centered narratives, this essay has analyzed how the animal documentary *Queens* constructs a matriarchal narrative through its creative approach, content and form. *Queens* presented female-led animal societies to the audience and provided a gynocentric perspective on animal behaviors. The stories of fully developed female characters have elevated the power of femininity. The thoughtful use of subjects in the narration further reinforces the documentary's goal to put female heroes in the spotlight. By contrast, translation errors in the Chinese version expose how deeply ingrained gender biases can alter a story's impact, while also reflecting the increasing sensitivity of contemporary viewers. The creation of *Queens* has contributed to the feminist material in modern media, setting a foundation for future creators, but also leaving some unsolved problems in its content. Due to limitations in distribution formats and the availability of public data, this essay is unable to compare the reach and audience acceptance of *Queens* with that of other wildlife documentaries or feminist works. Nonetheless, *Queens* remains a milestone in the matriarchal narrative, signaling the expansion of variety in feminist storytelling.

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