

Article

## Bridging Romance and Representation Through Colour Blind Casting in the Bridgerton Series

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**Abstract:** The research paper examines *Bridgerton* as a transformative case study in adaptation and inclusive casting. The paper argues that *Bridgerton's* casting reshapes traditional narratives and challenges dominant representations in historical romance by analysing how the Netflix adaptation departs from Julia Quinn's original novel series. While Quinn's novels reflect the racial homogeneity typical of Regency-era fiction, the series reimagines the aristocratic world by integrating Black and Brown characters into the upper echelons of society. *Bridgerton* disrupts the Eurocentric frameworks of period drama through this racial reconfiguration and engages with present-day discourses on diversity, power, and visibility. The essay also explores how casting choices function as tools of narrative innovation, enabling new modes of identification and audience engagement. Further, it investigates the series' global cultural impact and reception, situating *Bridgerton* as a significant media phenomenon that reflects and influences evolving expectations of representation in popular romance and television. This analysis contributes to a broader understanding of adaptation as a site of ideological negotiation, aesthetic reinvention, and socio-political commentary.

**Keywords:** adaptation; inclusive casting; representation; historical romance; the Bridgerton

## 1. Introduction

The *Bridgerton* series stands at the intersection of historical romance and contemporary discourse on representation, making it a landmark adaptation in modern media. While *Bridgerton* has been widely discussed for its race-conscious casting and progressive approach to period drama, there remains a gap in research concerning how casting decisions influence representation in adaptations. Most academic discussions broadly focus on diversity in media but lack a focused inquiry into the implications of adaptive casting strategies, particularly in a genre historically dominated by whiteness.

This essay will analyze *Bridgerton* as an adaptation, highlighting key differences between Julia Quinn's source material and the Netflix series. Through an in-depth examination of the show's casting approach, this chapter evaluates how inclusive casting not only reconfigures audience expectations but also serves as a tool for rewriting historical narratives. Additionally, the analysis extends to the cultural impact of *Bridgerton*, interrogating how its global reception reflects broader shifts in the romance genre and media industry.

## 2. Bridgerton Novel Series: A Background

Julia Quinn's *Bridgerton* series is a collection of eight historical romance novels set in Regency-era England. The series published between 2000 and 2006 focuses on the romantic journey of the eight *Bridgerton* siblings as they navigate the aristocratic society and the "marriage market" to find their ideal love match by the end. The novels are grounded in traditional structures of the romance novel, while including historical aspects like courtship narratives, societal propriety, and aristocratic hierarchies. The series distinguishes itself through Quinn's unique blend of narrative style by incorporating humour, familial dynamics, and emotional complexity.

The *Bridgerton* family is the emotional focus of the series, led by their matriarch, Violet Bridgerton. A key narrative element that connects the entire series is that of Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, a scandal sheet authored by the mysterious Lady Whistledown, whose writings expose the secrets of the ton. Whistledown's presence adds another layer to the environment and world of *Bridgerton* throughout the novels. Notably, the novels present a very homogenous socio-cultural landscape reflective of the white aristocracy of the time and thus do not delve into the discourse of race, class, and sexuality.

The first three novels of the series have been adapted into a Netflix series named *Bridgerton: The Duke and I* (book 1), *The Viscount Who Loved Me* (book 2), and *Romancing Mr. Bridgerton* (book 4) as well as a prequel novel which was written based on the prequel series *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* (the novel written on this was by the same name). Quinn was able to make these stories deeply personal and contained while operating within the larger monarchical system. The marriage market, after all, was designed to sustain the monarchy and the hierarchy of the aristocracy. The first three novels explore the stories of Daphne Bridgerton, Anthony Bridgerton, and Colin Bridgerton.

## 2.1 Book 0.5- 2 Summary

*The Duke and I* introduces the readers to Daphne Bridgerton, the family's fourth child and eldest daughter, as she navigates the Regency courtship. Daphne struggles to navigate the marriage market due to being viewed as a good friend rather than a romantic partner. Her Brother Anthony's overprotectiveness also acts as an obstacle in her view. Then she is introduced to Duke Simon Hastings, a reluctant bachelor determined never to marry due to the emotional scars of his childhood. As a newly titled Duke, Simon becomes the target of numerous matchmaking efforts.

The couple decides to engage in a fake courtship to increase Daphne's desirability and ease the pressure of marriage from Simon. Anthony tries to intervene, but Daphne quickly rebukes him by saying:

Fine," she snapped. "Then I'll reduce this conversation to one single fact. Today I had six callers. Six! Can you recall the last time I had six callers?" Anthony just stared at her blankly. "I can't," Daphne continued, in fine form now. "Because it has never happened. (Quinn 101)

The fake courtship ultimately turns into genuine affection and desire. The desire that culminates between the two leads to circumstances where they must marry, but their marriage struggles as Simon refuses to have any children, something Daphne wishes for. In the end, Simon works through his trauma, and the novel ends with a happy-ever-after or HEA.

The second novel shifts the focus onto Anthony *Bridgerton*, the eldest son born in the Bridgerton Family, who holds the title of Viscount following his father's death. Anthony suffers from the trauma of having witnessed his father's death from a bee sting when he was young. This experience made him develop a fear of his mortality and loss. His belief that his own life may be cut short, and realizing his enormous responsibility and duties, he decides to marry for practical reasons. He enters the matchmaking season looking for a wife: "He was the firstborn *Bridgerton* of a firstborn *Bridgerton* of a firstborn *Bridgerton* eight times over. He had a dynastic responsibility to be fruitful and multiply" (Quinn 142). He sets his eyes on Edwina Sheffield, the most sought-after debutante of the season. However, he finds obstacles in her elder sister Kate Sheffield, who objects to this match given Anthony's reputation as a rake. She is fiercely protective of her sister and thus finds him unworthy of her sister's hand in marriage.

Unlike the couple of season 1, who had chemistry and attractions developed through their friendship, Anthony and Kate constantly butt heads with each other, but also develop an attraction in the process, this ultimately leads the "Bee Sting" scene from the chapter 16 where they are found in compromising situation and must marry or find their reputation destroyed. The two gradually form a relationship where they overcome their fears and insecurities and learn to be vulnerable—the novel delves into emotional suppression, grief, and duty themes.

*Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* is the novelisation of the prequel *Bridgerton* series, co-authored by Julia Quinn and Shonda Rhimes. The novel delves into the life of Queen Charlotte, beginning with a young Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz being sent

to London for her marriage to King George III. Queen Charlotte learns to navigate her role as a monarch and a wife; she navigates the public pressures and responsibilities as the first black queen and her relationship with a man who struggles with his mind.

We observe Queen Charlotte coming into her power and influence as she learns the intricacies of ruling and maintaining the monarchical system.

"Great Britain stood on the precipice of something truly great and uplifting, and all because a young girl with brown skin had been chosen as Queen... she was the symbol of hope and change for thousands. No, not the symbol. She was the hope and change" (Quinn and Rhimes 210).

Thus, the marriage, although controversial, reshapes the political landscape, paving the way for a more inclusive aristocracy, but only in terms of race, as wealth and class division remained. From a media-theoretical standpoint, the prequel operates metatextually. It expands the *Bridgerton* universe and retroactively justifies its inclusive casting and diverse aristocracy. The series invites audiences to reimagine historical narratives through speculative empathy and reparative fantasy by grounding these creative liberties in an origin story. The show's racial reconfiguration does not mirror reality but offers an aspirational retelling that gestures toward a more equitable symbolic order without disavowing the realities of systemic oppression.

### 3. *Bridgerton* Adaptation Series: A Background

*Bridgerton* (2020- present) is a Netflix adaptation developed by Chris Van Dusen and produced by Shonda Rhimes. Based on Julia Quinn's popular romance series, the show departs and expands upon the books regarding themes, narrative choices, and character arcs. The series transforms the intimate love stories of the novels to construct an entirely new environment and taps more into the socio-political world to craft a fresh landscape.

#### 3.1 *Bridgerton* Season 1

The debut season of *Bridgerton* focuses on the romance between Daphne Bridgerton and Simon Basset, the Duke of Hastings. The novel presents a quintessential Regency romance with a fake courtship and marriage of convenience trope. The series is the most faithful adaptation as it follows and introduces the characters and their main storyline very closely to the novel. The series, however, also expanded on the original novel. The series introduced Queen Charlotte as a new character whose presence reshapes the context of the marriage market and lends greater structure to the show's social hierarchy. Along with the creation of the "Diamond of the First Water" tradition, these changes frame the marriage market not merely as a personal pursuit of love or status but as a carefully curated system designed to protect aristocratic lineage and uphold the monarchy's stability.

Daphne is portrayed as a brilliant girl who knows how to maneuver and navigate the marriage mart skillfully and even attains the Diamond of the first waters by the Queen making her the most coveted debutante, yet there is very clearly a lack of sexual education within the society, we see this through Eloise (Daphne's sister) when she

discusses how a woman comes to be with children with her best friend Penelope Featherington-

Eloise: "How did she become with child if she is not married?"

Penelope: "I do not know, but I will find out."

Eloise: "You must. Otherwise, how can we make sure it never happens to us? We have accomplishments to acquire." (Dusen & Rhimes 7:30-7:42)

This inexperience also acts as the "reason" why Daphne ultimately engages in a non-consensual encounter with Simon. Daphne does not realise that during her sexual encounters with her husband, the Duke makes sure to conduct the "coitus interruptus" so that Daphne is not made pregnant. This leads to the sexual encounter where Daphne forces the Duke to climax inside of her against his wishes: "She bore down on him with all her might... she would not lose him this time, she would not lose this chance" (Quinn 324-325). The book *The Duke and I* received criticism for a lack of consent, so did the Netflix show, with many viewers asking the need to incorporate such plot device from the book especially since it has been two decades between the books and the series and they could have done something different and better (Reese 24). The problematic strains of the series adaptation were rectified in the second season as the showrunners became more attuned to the modern viewers and made necessary changes to the adaptation.

### 3.2 Bridgerton Season 2

The second season adapts *The Viscount Who Loved Me*, explores the romance between Anthony Bridgerton and Kate Sharma. The basic storyline that is transferred into the adaptation remains the same. The story revolves around Anthony's decision to marry out of duty instead of love and Kate Sharma's overprotectiveness of her sister, Edwina.

The major transformation is seen in Kate's family being shown as Anglo-Indian. Her representation becomes very important as darker-skinned female main characters (FMC) are hardly seen in the popular romance movies. The show also tries to portray a different culture through the incorporation of the Haldi ceremony as well as Indian colours in their western attire: "When spread on an unmarried person, Haldi will help them find a worthy partner" (Dusen & Rhimes 5:10).

Anthony is also portrayed as the reformed rake within the series, but his fears and trauma are given more psychological depth. Although his father's death is depicted in the novel, the series also explores the consequences as Anthony is thrust into the role and responsibilities of a Viscount at only 18 years old. Additionally, the sudden death of his father sends Violet, his mother, into early labour, where Anthony is asked to decide whether they should prioritise his mother or his future sister's life in case of complications; this further compounded his trauma and explains his decision to keep away from true romantic pursuits.

In contrast to the novel, which focuses primarily on Anthony and Kate's romance, the series takes time to explore grief, duty, and the weight of societal expectations. By

broadening the narrative focus, *Bridgerton* season two crafts a richer, more textured world where personal desires collide with familial responsibility, creating a more modern and emotionally resonant adaptation.

#### 4. Casting and Cultural Impact: An Analysis

"I get to exist as a Black person in the world [...] It does not mean I am a slave. It does not mean we have to focus on trauma. It just means we get to focus on Black joy and humanity" (Lenker). This was remarked by Regé-Jean Page in his interview when asked about being cast in a role that previously had been exclusively the domain of white actors. The casting of any series always seems to play a crucial role in bringing a character to life, so to speak. As Amy Cook writes in her essay *Casting The Future in Bridgerton's Past* "As many Twitter users pointed out, of course, Lady Danbury's skin color seemed wrong to some, but hearing Ariana Grande's "Thank You, Next" felt right. Language about casting generally centers on the idea of believability or what is "right for the part," as if what the "part" called for was self-evident" (23).

In order to bring change, Brandi Wilkins Catanese argues in her book *Black Performance*, it is better to visibly make casting choices that expand the realm of what was thought acceptable and invite the "bad manners" (5) of evoking conversations about race and representation (Cook and Hautsch 23). Casting presents the audience with the subjectivity of visualising and makes them confront why they thought only a specific "type" of actors could be cast within a role. This could be seen by the conversations on social media about casting Steve Toussaint as Corlys Velaryon in the television series *House of the Dragon*. In a fantasy show where dragons, magic, and even incest were accepted, a black man cast for a white role sparked controversy. This forced a conversation about how "fan casting" is often about our biases, expectations, and desires. This was confirmed even by casting director Kelly Valentine Hendry of *Bridgerton*, as she spoke about the backlash received on social media for the casting choices initially, she further stated how such criticisms centre more around historical fictions "where perceived notions of historical accuracy are often critically foregrounded" (Hogg 187).

This bias can also be felt when an adaptation is criticised for not being faithful to the text. The writer Sarah Phelps comments:

Often, when people talk about "faithfulness", they talk about something that seems true to their interpretation and experience of the book. That says more about them and the quality of their thoughts than it does about the quality of the adaptation (Hogg 79).

Casting is a process embedded within our cultural system that affects or can affect the conversation around who belongs and who does not (Cook & Hautsch). The positive fan response to the second season of *Bridgerton*, in which Simone Ashley plays the lead female role, shows that popular culture demands more diversity and inclusion. Seeing the dark skinned heroine as a lead instead of a side character has pushed for conversations and upturned expectations about who belongs "waltzing through the regency-era ballroom, promenading through the St. James's Park, or in a steamy



enemies-to-lovers romance with an eligible viscount" (Cook and Hautsch 23). Actress Simone Ashley felt the same as she talked about how she felt as an Indian, dark-skinned female lead in *Bridgerton*:

So, when people ask how it feels, I say I feel great, I think I look great, I think my skin looks great, and I am here to root for all brown girls, black girls, all of us. We are beautiful in our own right and never let anyone tell us otherwise. Representation is important, especially for the younger generation. What we see is powerful, and the more we see ourselves on the screen, the more diversity we see, the more it helps us connect in the world and think about ourselves and our ambitions (Tanti).

The viewers of the show also appreciated, as one South Indian viewer wrote on social media:

We see their joy and emotions in brilliant character arcs while deeply rooted in their culture. That is what made this series so special. Plenty of mistakes throughout the show irked some Indians [...] However, oh God, this was amazing as it was. Moreover, I did not care about historical accuracy or language confusion here. I was so in love with watching a storyline blossom, where the main character looks, talks, and thinks like me (Niveda).

Since its debut, the series' cultural impact could be seen expanding beyond its on-screen narratives, encouraging conversations about race, gender, historical period, and fandoms, while redefining the audience's expectations about historical fiction. Central to the cultural impact of *Bridgerton* was its casting choices. As Amanda Ray Prescott highlights in her essay, *Bridgerton* reversed the trend of only white monarchs being presented. At the same time, black characters had to be relegated to minor roles and often had to go through some traumatic event for historical accuracy (65). This race-conscious casting broadens the scope of representation while recontextualising existing power structures. The *Bridgerton* series set a precedent that has now influenced industry-wide changes in series such as *My Lady Jane*, *Mr. Malcolm's List*, and *Persuasion*, employing a colour-conscious cast. Additionally, a "Bridgerton effect" can be observed through the increased interest in regency-era culture, influencing everything from fashion to interior design, a marked increase in tea consumption in the UK, and sales of ornate tea sets (Taylor).

In addition to the racial and cultural impact, *Bridgerton* also tackled the gender dynamics in the period drama genre. The show portrays women who actively pursue their desires and navigate societal constraints imposed on them. We get varied examples through the show like Penelope (who earns her own money by writing as Lady Whistledown), Daphne (who actively pursues her pleasure and desires within the marriage instead of being a passive recipient), Eloise (who places more importance on her education and development and refuses to conform to societal expectations of lady like behavior), and Genevieve Delacroix (a working class lady who owns the most sought after modiste in the ton, who is unapologetically independent and enjoys that independence freely). Moreover, the show portrays the male characters through the

female's desire perspective by making an erotic spectacle of Simon Hastings and Anthony Bridgerton in the next season (Davisson and Hunting ). This signals a shift towards a more female-centred narrative of desire while acknowledging Historical women's desires and pleasures, countering the notion of the sexually repressed woman (Froide).

The cultural resonance of the series has been heightened through global fandom and social media discourse. *Bridgerton's* release in the pandemic era facilitated a special digital setting wherein fans, critics, and scholars actively exchanged real-time discourse surrounding representation and historical accuracy (Prescott 62). People celebrated on social media. It critiqued the show in equal measure, especially viewers from Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour (BIPOC) backgrounds who finally recognised themselves in a genre that had so often left them out. The show itself transformed into an experience with events like *The Queen's Ball: A Bridgerton Experience*, which toured several American cities, giving fans the chance to dress up in Regency attire, curtsy to a queen, and revel in the escapist fantasy that the show embodies (Taddeo).

*Bridgerton*, ultimately, has had an immense impact on the popular culture landscape. The show has paved the way for more inclusive storytelling with bold casting choices, modern storytelling elements, redefining gendered dynamics, and fan engagement. As Prescott asserts, the series "cannot be defeated by people posting mean tweets about the white actors deserving more fame than the BIPOC actors" (69).

## 5. Conclusion

*Bridgerton* marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of period drama. By reimagining the Regency era through race-conscious casting, the series transcends limitations of its source material to craft an inclusive narrative space. The show's willingness to interrogate historical fidelity, challenge aesthetic conventions, and centre marginalised identities reflects a broader shift in contemporary media where representation is no longer ancillary but essential. Through its global popularity and cultural resonance, *Bridgerton* has opened up critical conversations around who is seen, who belongs, and gets desired in mainstream narratives. This redefinition of the historical romance genre—not just escapist fantasy but a lens for re-examining race, gender, and power—positions *Bridgerton* as a cultural artefact of its time and transformative potential. The dissertation did not conduct any quantitative analysis, such as focus groups, audience interviews, or empirical reception research, which limits the extent to which audience engagement, critique, or appreciation could be formally analysed. Furthermore, a comparative analysis was not done with other contemporary or historical series such as *Outlander*, *Sex Education*, or *My Lady Jane*, which could offer valuable counterpoints or deepen the understanding of genre trends and global adaptation practices. These limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings but rather indicate the vast research area still left to be explored. These future productive avenues could expand, complicate, or build upon this study's foundation. Ultimately, this paper underscores the significance of adaptation not as a process of replication, but as one of reinvention, where stories are rewritten to reflect the plural realities of the audiences who consume them.



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