

Colouring History: A Critical Analysis of Racial Representation in Bridgerton

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Abstract

Since its release, the Netflix show, *Bridgerton*, has been a hit series among its mass audiences as it harnesses an average of 103,550,000 views per season and currently holds fourth place in Netflix's most popular English-language series (Tudum, 2024). The show has gained immense popularity not only because of its captivating plotlines but also because of the diverse cast of characters placed within the Regency Era. From this, it is critical to dissect and understand how race is represented within the show to discern the discourses being perpetuated to its viewers. Throughout this essay, I will employ Stuart Hall's theory of representation and the politics of signification to unpack the racial representation within the Netflix show, *Bridgerton*, and how it reproduces colour-blind casting, interracial relationships, and dark versus light symbolism to perpetuate post-racial and Orientalist discourses. This analysis explores how colour-blind casting sustains post-racial discourses in the guise of escapist media, which strips the Other of their lived experience. Moreover, it highlights how the depiction of interracial relationships within the show contributes to both post-racial and Orientalist discourses by placing the Occident over the Orient, and disregarding the prejudice often faced by interracial couples during that period. It further reveals how dark versus light symbolism is embedded throughout the interactions between multiple characters, which elicits the disruption of the white imaginary by Black individuals. As the show progresses and continues to release seasons that reach such large audiences, it is crucial to analyze what discourses surrounding race are being perpetuated and its potential impact on reinforcing stereotypes and misrepresenting marginalized communities.

Keywords

Representation, politics of signification, race, post-racism, Orientalism, *Bridgerton*

Introduction

Netflix's hit show, *Bridgerton*, has gained immense popularity for its captivating romantic and dramatic plotlines. The period drama series is based on the books written by Julia Quinn and takes place in London during the Regency Era of 1811-1820. The show follows the lives, scandals, and romances of the wealthy and prestigious Bridgerton family and their interactions with other elite members of high society. Each season spotlights a different member of the Bridgerton family and their journey for love in high society, with the current two seasons focusing firstly on Daphne Bridgerton and then Anthony Bridgerton. Besides showcasing lavish balls, intricate costumes, and scandalous gossip columns, the show is known for adding a contemporary twist to a historical setting through the incorporation of a diverse cast. In analyzing the representation of race in *Bridgerton*, Stuart Hall's theoretical lens of representation and the politics of signification proves to be a useful tool as it challenges the conventional interpretations of media texts and underlines the cultural power embedded into those meanings. The politics of signification functions to unpack representation in media by challenging the 'preferred reading' of media texts and understanding the cultural power of those meanings (Campbell, 2017, p. 11). Hall's analysis of media representation is imperative to uncover the power of the dominant meanings ascribed to representations, which are defined as the ways media re-present multiple meanings in presenting certain images (Campbell, 2017, p. 11). This representation of individuals can reinforce stereotypes, misrepresent marginalized communities, or challenge dominant narratives.

Under this lens, ideals from Edward Said's influential work on Orientalism can also be revealed. Orientalism is the hegemonic relationship in which the beliefs and cultures of the Occident (West) are assumed superior to the Orient (East) (p. 126). Within this relationship, Said introduces the idea of the Orient as being exotic and romanticized, but still inferior to the Occident. He further argues that Orientalism survives because the Occident attains its wealth through colonizing other countries and their culture (p. 138). Through this, Orientalism has become quietly embedded into our practices and policies. This relation of the Occident/West over the Orient/East has become widely accepted and is manifested throughout various forms of discourse. As Said emphasizes, "it is a statement of power and a claim for relatively absolute authority. It is constituted out of racism, and is made comparatively acceptable to an audience prepared in advance to listen to its muscular truths" (p. 134). Throughout this essay, I will utilize

Stuart Hall's theory of representation and the politics of signification to unpack the racial representation within the Netflix show, *Bridgerton*, and how it reproduces colour-blind casting, interracial relationships, and dark versus light symbolism to perpetuate post-racial and Orientalist discourses.

Colour-Blind Casting

Bridgerton uses colour-blind casting, which Hanus (2023) defines in her article as, "the process of excluding racial identities from character descriptions. This tool is implemented to increase diversity in numbers on screen by opening the positions to anybody while boasting the concept of meritocracy" (p. 2). The use of colour-blind casting in *Bridgerton* attempts to challenge dominant ideologies of racial representation in period dramas but ultimately represents post-racial discourses that remove the racialized body from the sociohistorical context. Post-racism is a utopian environment where it is believed that such significant racial progress has been made, that racial prejudice is absolved and no longer a major social issue (Cho, 2009, p. 1594).

Bridgerton is well-known for its diverse representation in casting which is a trait common to the works of producer, Shonda Rhimes. This deserves some commendation as giving people of colour screen time in such large media productions challenges myths of representation, especially since previous historical dramas lacked diverse representation. Further, it provides a multicultural celebration of people of colour in television spaces and represents them in positions of power and prestige. However, considering that *Bridgerton* is set during the Regency period, the colour-blind casting fabricates a post-racial reality. During the Regency period, people of colour were highly oppressed and rarely participated in extravagant social events of aristocratic families (Ruiz Cantu, 2022, p. 6). Most people of colour in Britain were relegated to domestic work and seldomly part of the nobility, or the *ton*. In *Bridgerton*, however, people of colour are portrayed as holding much higher social positions with more power. For instance, the original books do not suggest that Simon Basset, the Duke of Hastings, is of African descent. According to Ruiz Cantu (2022), "he is described in the books as, 'striking... tall and athletic, with thick dark hair,' and his eyes are, 'icy blue, with an oddly penetrating gaze'" (p. 10). However, in the television series, his character is played by an actor of Zimbabwean descent which demonstrates colour-blind casting at play. Other examples of colour-blind casting include Simon's nobility,

Lady Danbury, and multiple members of the *ton* who are played by African-British actors. Similarly, in season two, viewers are introduced to Lady Sharma who is South Indian but comes from an aristocratic English family. Another example is the introduction of Marina Thompson who is a Black debutante. Marina is well sought out during the courting season and receives many offers from white suitors after her first appearance at a ball. Her admittance into the ball, let alone her popularity among the white men in high-society London, is not something that would have occurred during the Regency Era and therefore signifies the existence of a post-racial society (Hanus, 2023, p. 7). Ultimately, these positions of power were privileges many people of colour were not afforded during Regency London, despite being demonstrated as such on the show.

These examples illustrate how through this escapism, television media can gloss over the harm and oppression brought onto people of colour by white supremacy. The colour-blind casting of Black actors as prestigious individuals in London Regency downplays the historical racial hierarchy, slavery, and colonialism that existed during that period. Further, by glossing over the oppression of people of colour, it is simultaneously stripping the Other of their lived experiences. The Other is categorized as being foreign, lacking in identity and propriety, and unfamiliar to the dominant culture or society (Al-Saidi, 2014, p. 95). In being stripped of their lived experiences, the oppression endured by the Other as a result of being marginalized is ignored. By disregarding historically accurate backstories and character interactions, *Bridgerton* is reproducing pre-existing narratives around race and naturalizing oppression through this utopia. Therefore, by having people of colour play the role of white characters, there is a lack of attention to cultural specificity which homogenizes the characters and erases cultural richness (Hanus, 2023, p. 3). As stated by Ruiz Cantu (2022), “colourblindness creates a reality where people’s identities have been erased and they are simply people” (p. 22). In attempts to challenge dominant narratives and solve racism by including a diverse cast, *Bridgerton* ultimately misrepresents marginalized communities. This separation of the cultural and racial body from socio-historical contexts aligns with Hall’s discussion that there is often not a true representation of history, people, or events in media; Rhimes’s colour-blind techniques in *Bridgerton* do not offer a true representation of people of colour during London Regency.

In a broader context, Netflix as a media conglomerate partakes in colour-blind casting within *Bridgerton* to absolve societal responsibility for addressing systemic racism. Through

Hall's lens of representation, Campbell (2017) discusses how one myth of representation is the "myth of assimilation," where the media assumes that by representing people of colour, especially African Americans, we have "overcome racism and fully assimilated into the American mainstream, where equality has been achieved. This is now referred to as post-racialism" (p. 15). The colour-blind casting of *Bridgerton* signifies post-racial imaginations that not only disregard the reality of racism but also suggest our society does not require further activism to achieve racial equality (Sipe, 2023, p. 338). Therefore, not only does the colour-blind casting of *Bridgerton* downplay the lived experiences of the Other, but it also perpetuates the ideology that racism is resolved in society. To further emphasize this, one must look at Netflix as a whole, which is the production and distribution company of *Bridgerton*. An article by Salsabila (2023) discusses how Netflix uses cultural diversity to fill the demand of the American audience for racial inclusivity even though it still involves Americanized homogenization within their series (p. 23).

In relation to *Bridgerton*, Salsabila (2023) discusses how, "the portrayal of diversity in *Bridgerton* [is] purely to maintain the cultural diversity image Netflix has, as a market and a trend to the 21st century demand" (p. 23). It is evident how Netflix as a media conglomerate produces post-racialism through its cultural casting and Americanization of series such as *Bridgerton* which reinforces how this is a 'fantasy' and myth of assimilation. Through this, "colourblind racism relegates the responsibility of racism from the system to the individual, allowing society members to wash their hands of the current issues" (Hanus, 2023, p. 4). This further emphasizes how media tends to convince itself and the audience that by portraying diversity in their content, they have done their duty in representing race and have therefore reached a post-racial utopia. Taken together, when analyzing the colour-blind casting of *Bridgerton*, it represents a post-racial fantasy that downplays historical oppressions experienced by people of colour and promotes the myth of assimilation.

Interracial Relationships

Another common theme in the *Bridgerton* series is the portrayal of interracial relationships. Throughout all current seasons, this signifies both Orientalist and post-racial discourses. Edward Said (1978) explains Orientalism as the hegemonic discourse where Western superiority is assumed over Eastern cultures (p. 126). Such discourse is particularly manifested

in season two of *Bridgerton* which focuses on Anthony Bridgerton, the Viscount of the Bridgerton family, who first courts Edwina Sharma before realizing his true feelings for her sister, Kate Sharma whom he ends up marrying. Anthony is seen as being of high prestige, due to being the eldest son in a highly respected aristocratic family and is therefore extremely sought after during the courting season. Edwina and Kate were raised in Bombay, are daughters of a lowly clerk, and are thus not part of the established aristocracy or have the same long-standing social status as the Bridgertons. Therefore, the interracial relationship between Anthony and Kate highlights the trope of a powerful white person desiring and courting the racial Other and the encouragement of the Orient to fulfil this desire (Sipe, 2023, p. 345). The racial difference within this post-racism fantasy, “exists solely for the fulfillment of white desire” (Sipe, 2023, p. 345). This relates to Said’s (1978) idea that the Orient cannot live without the Occident, and the Occident cannot live without the Orient and because of this dynamic, Orientalism sustains (p. 128).

Since Anthony is from high society and Edwina and Kate come from lower society, their courtship represents the hegemonic notion that the West/Occident is always on top of the East/Orient. Coming from Bombay and being a new member of the social season, Edwina is seen as mysterious to other characters in the show. Adding to this, when the Queen names her the ‘diamond of the season,’ she becomes extremely sought after and thus exoticized. Moreover, Edwina’s character is portrayed as quite naïve and innocent, but still intelligent and poised as she shares her appreciation for literature with multiple suitors. This, coupled with Anthony’s pursuit of her at the start of the season, signifies the Orientalist ideology of the East (the Orient) as something interesting and exotic but still inferior to the West (the Occident). Since Anthony is the Viscount of the Bridgerton family, he is also responsible for the finances of the family and assisting the counts in the running of their province. This can be paralleled to Said’s (1978) idea of the West acquiring its wealth through the colonization of other cultures, as he specifies “... the actual practice of imperialism by which the accumulation of territories and population, the control of economies, and the incorporation and homogenization of histories are maintained” (p. 138). Therefore, Anthony’s relationship with Kate functions to emphasize the reliance on the East for financial gain. By drawing connections in season two of *Bridgerton*, it is inferred that the signifier is the interracial relationship between Anthony and Kate. This signifies the prestigious white man courting the exotic Other which signs Orientalist discourses.

The signifier of interracial marriage functions to romanticize, hypersexualize, and objectify the exotic Other. When looking at the coupling between Daphne Bridgerton and Simon Basset in season one, it is evident that Daphne hypersexualizes Simon, who is the exotic Other. After Daphne begins to develop feelings for Simon, the portrayal of Simon is flipped to become increasingly sexual and the camera focuses on his body which, “not only hypersexualizes him, but also recolonizes his body... Rather than seeing Simon as a human being, we begin to see him as an object that Daphne intends to own, both sexually and maritally” (Ruiz Cantu, 2022, p. 16). This ownership over Simon’s body culminates in episode six when Daphne rapes him after discovering he lied about his ability to have children due to his long-lasting desire to not continue his bloodline (Ruiz Cantu, 2022, p.16). By violating his wishes, Daphne is asserting her power over Simon which both physically and metaphorically represents Said’s (1978) Orientalist discourse of the Occident assuming power over the Orient and Hall’s emphasis on representation being imbued with dominant ideologies. Overall, when analyzing the hyper-sexualization of the exotic Other under the politics of signification, it is evident how the representation of interracial relationships functions to convey the romanticization of the exotic Orient. This portrayal is infused with hegemonic interests, which disregard the racialized, lived experiences of the Other.

In addition to Orientalist discourses, the aspect of interracial marriage within the show symbolizes post-racial discourses by, “constructing a historical fantasy that centres authentic love and desire as the exclusive mechanism for constructing a post-racial and post-feminist society” (Sipe, 2023, p. 334). Hanus (2023) discusses an example of this discourse between the white king and Black queen, when in season one, episode four, Lady Danbury states,

“Look at our queen. Look at our king. Look at everything it is doing for us. Allowing us to become...We were two separate societies, divided by colour until a king fell in love with one of us. Love, Your Grace, conquers all” (p. 7).

In this scene, she is stating how the interracial marriage of the king and queen has yielded racial and cultural unity and allowed people of colour to attain higher positions of power. Lady Danbury argues that the king and queen’s love brought Britain to this racial utopia. Therefore, the king and queen’s relationship is used as a symbol for conquering all racial tension. Their relationship, along with the interracial relationship of Daphne and Simon, and Anthony and Kate, represents the post-racial construct that love is the only factor needed to overcome oppression, but that is not the case. Interracial couples often must overcome racial tensions, obstacles, and a

lack of acceptance, which would be even more evident during the historical context of the Regency era. By disregarding these struggles, the lived experiences of the Other are ignored, and the complexities of racism are oversimplified along with the solutions to overcome it. Campbell (2017) states how,

“Race as it is portrayed on fictional television, is consistent with the American Dream, and appeals to the utopian desire in blacks and whites for racial oneness and equality while displacing the persistent reality of racism and racial inequality or the kinds of social struggles and cooperation required to eliminate them” (p. 14).

Considering this quote with the interracial relationships of *Bridgerton*, it is evident how the diverse representation of race on television is an attempt to use racial oneness to minimize the amount of work and cooperation required to eliminate racism and overcome racial tension. Overall, the politics of signification refer to the ways certain images and symbols are used to convey meaning, and how this process is imbued with the interests of those in power (Campbell, 2017, p. 12). Drawing from the politics of signification to analyze *Bridgerton*, it is evident how using interracial relationships to convey a post-racial utopia is infused with social interests that disregard the racialized, lived experiences of the Other.

Dark vs. Light Symbolism

A third theme in *Bridgerton* is the dark versus light symbolism, where dark represents evil and danger, and corrupts the light which represents purity, safety, and goodness. An example of this is the boxing scenes in season one, which usually involve two Black characters – Simon Basset and his friend, Will Mondrich. In addition to training with Simon, Will partakes in interracial fights with predominantly white spectators. The match between Will and Gillepse is heavily gambled on in season one, episode eight, and this attachment of monetary value to the violence Will is going to both experience and place on his opponent emphasizes the white gaze viewing the Black body as an object to exert dominance on by essentially purchasing Will’s body (Ruiz Cantu, 2022, pp. 18-19). Another example of Black men being portrayed as violent is Simon’s father, who exerted both physically and psychologically violent acts on his son and wife (Ruiz Cantu, 2022, pp. 19-20). In season one episode two, viewers learn that Simon had difficulty speaking as a young boy. In the episode, there is a scene where Simon has a flashback to his father demanding to hear him speak, exclaiming that he “shall get a sound of him still”

while raising a hairbrush to hit him and calling him an “idiot” and a “half-wit” (Ruiz Cantu, 2022, p. 20). This correlation of both physical and emotional violence with Black characters in the show ultimately evokes the association of Black men as threatening in the white imaginary (Ruiz Cantu, 2022, p. 18).

A third example of dark versus light symbolism is the pivotal moment in season one when Simon and Daphne kiss for the first time. Since this occurred before marriage, it effectively ‘ruins’ Daphne. Even though Daphne returns the affection to Simon, they are caught by Daphne’s older brother, Anthony, and the duke is blamed for taking liberties with Daphne, even though she admits to reciprocating the affection. As Hanus (2023) points out, “in this instance, we not only see the dark’s corruption of light but also the ignorance of possible guilt from someone who is white” (p. 10). A fourth example is Marina Thompson and her comparison to white characters, as explained by Ruiz Cantu (2022, pp. 12-13). In season one, she temporarily moves into her cousin’s household, the white aristocratic Featherington family, and receives many suitors. However, as time goes on it is revealed that Marina is pregnant with a previous lover’s child which implies she is a ‘ruined’ woman because she is with child before she is married. Lady Featherington then locks her up in her room so that she does not spread her ‘corruptness’ onto the Featherington daughters. Adding to this, the Featherington and Bridgerton daughters, Penelope, Eloise, and Daphne, express their confusion on how a lady becomes ‘with child,’ which demonstrates their innocence regarding the topic. This innocence contrasted with Marina’s pre-marital pregnancy highlights the impure vs. pure connotations in dark vs. light symbolism. Through these examples, the Duke and Marina represent the portrayal of a Black character as problematic and destructive to a white character’s social standing (Hanus, 2023, p. 10). Taken together, these examples render another myth of representation from Campbell (2017) – the myth of difference (p.15). This myth argues that “...people of colour are routinely represented, in a number of ways, *differently* than white people” (Campbell, 2017, p. 15). Through the myth of difference, we can see how the Black characters of the show are portrayed differently than the white characters despite living in a post-racial fantasy. This holds true in the examples of Simon, Will, and Marina who are represented differently than white characters by being depicted as violent and problematic.

Conclusion

Taken together, by employing Hall's theory of representation and politics of signification to deconstruct racial representation in *Bridgerton*, it is revealed how Rhimes's colour-blind casting techniques deliberately skew a fantasy that ignores the lived experiences of the racialized Other. The show portrays a post-racial fantasy, both in the current day and the Regency period, which pushes the myth of assimilation in media representation. Moreover, while the presentation of interracial couples and romances may act as an escape for viewers of period pieces, it represents Orientalist discourses by exoticizing and romanticizing the Orient while keeping them inferior, and post-racial discourses by suggesting that love is the sole key to overcome racial tensions from interracial relationships. Lastly, by placing Black characters in violent situations and as disruptions to the white imaginary, the show reaffirms Hall's theory that media portrayals of racial stereotypes serve to construct real, existing ideologies around race. Ultimately, this is not to say that diverse casting poses a problem in media representation. It should be recognized that the presence of a diverse cast affords people of colour significant screen time in large-scale media productions. Showcasing diverse and complex relationships between characters of various backgrounds is vital in media representations, especially within genres such as period dramas that tend to lack diversity. However, it becomes problematic when it is used to disregard historical racial hierarchy and oppression while pushing the idea that our society has achieved racial equality. In both the viewing and production of these shows, it is crucial to consider whether it has accurate representations of people of colour and their lived experiences. Perhaps the emergence of honest, varied portrayals of the human experience in line with the sociohistorical context it is set in can serve to break away from these post-racial illusions. In presenting more accurate and authentic portrayals of characters grappling with the realities of identity, race, and power dynamics, shows like *Bridgerton* can offer a more nuanced reflection of society. Through this lens, media has the potential to not only entertain but also provide critical representations of the past and present realities of race and society.

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