A Racialized Rhetoric of Immigration and Asylum: A Cause or Byproduct of Right-Wing Populism?

by Nadine Bhawanlall

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Introduction

The UK has witnessed an ongoing rise in anti-immigration rhetoric, driven by right-wing populism. With immigration and asylum applications at a record high, and ongoing contention regarding border security and detention centres, the competing priorities of humanitarian obligations and nationalism continue to shape political discourse. Populist actors, such as the Reform Party within the UK, push this nationalist agenda, using fear-mongering tactics to frame immigration and asylum as a threat to national identity, and inciting racialised hate towards migrants. This has also resulted in current governments pandering to the right to appease reform voters.

This research will, therefore, explore how the rise of right-wing populism has produced and perpetuated a racialized rhetoric of immigration and asylum, drawing upon Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse contemporary media coverage, political campaigns, speeches, and manifestos, to understand how dominant public discourse on immigration is shaped in the UK.

Populism

The definition of populism is a widely contested issue. Ernesto Laclau argues that populism is 'a political logic that involves an appeal to the entirety of the political community against a common enemy, and in particular against unresponsive political elites' (Laclau, 2005). Right-wing populism, therefore, presents itself within nationalism, tending to take 'highly exclusionary and xenophobic forms, whereby the people are constructed in opposition to migrants and ethnic and religious minorities' (Gerbaudo, 2018, p.747).

Brief history of anti-immigration and populism

The racialisation of immigrants in the UK is not a new phenomenon but is situated in decades of racial and national anxieties. The 1950s oversaw the migration of Commonwealth citizens to the UK, known as the Windrush generation, culminating in the 1962 and 1968 'Commonwealth immigration act,' which aimed at restricting access of Commonwealth citizens to the UK. These laws constructed immigration as a problem of national identity, 'with colour/race becoming a key marker of belonging

and validated specific forms of social identity - as white, as British' (Carter et al., 1996, p. 150). Such laws paved the way for anti-immigrant rhetoric, through narratives of 'anti-Britishness,' in which right-wing populist beliefs are grounded on.

1993 oversaw the formation of UKIP, a Eurosceptic far-right populist party pushing a nationalist agenda, and exacerbating anti-immigrant sentiment, proposing a crackdown on illegal immigration. It is important to note that the top nationalities of immigrants arriving through illegal routes are predominantly from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria - disproportionately affecting immigrants of colour (Green, 2023). Despite failure within national election, UKIP gained much traction amongst voters, with membership rising in the 2000s. This pushed its anti-immigrant agenda to the forefront of political discourse.

The 2010s observed a rise in the racialisation of immigrants and asylum seekers, perpetuated through the 2012 Hostile Environment policies, which aimed at creating 'a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants' (Kirkup & Winnett, 2012). This hostility was further demonstrated in the 2014 and 2016 act which restricted illegal immigrants' claims to "everyday services of social reproduction," and thus their access to basic needs (Gedalof, 2022, p.543). In turn, this produced the 2018 Windrush Scandal; the wrongful detention and deportation of Caribbean-born migrants under the Home Office, in which The Guardian journalist, Amelia Gentleman, argues that hostile environment policies had a "clearly racially weighted outcome," and were 'clearly discriminatory,' evidenced by victims of the Windrush scandal (Gentleman, 2021).

The Brexit referendum marked a turning point in saliency of immigration and asylum debate. Fuelled by the conservative party, and assisted by the Brexit Party, the overwhelming narrative of immigration as a threat to economic stability, national identity and public services manifested. "Take back control" became the slogan synonymous with Brexit, inherently interlinking national identity and whiteness, exacerbating racial discrimination towards immigrants and practices of racial exclusion.

Following the failures of the post-Brexit state in curbing immigration, the Reform Party emerged, appealing to disillusioned, 'ordinary' voters. Through exploiting the current political climate that has dehumanised immigrants and asylum seekers of colour in the UK, Reform has successfully won over voters.

Methodology

This research will draw upon Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the relationship between right-wing populism and the racialised rhetoric towards immigrants and asylum seekers. Critical discourse analysis is the study of 'real, and often extended, instances of social interaction which take (partially) linguistic form. The critical approach is distinctive in its view of (a) the relationship between language and society, and (b) the relationship between analysis and the practices analysed" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p.448). It is used to study 'relevant social problems, such as those of sexism, racism, colonialism and other forms of social inequality' (Van Dijk, 1995, p.17). Employing CDA as a theory will, therefore, provide a framework to test the research question and understand how language within media and politics has perpetuated an 'us vs them' rhetoric, polarising communities against immigrants and asylum seekers of colour.

Research

Us vs them

Right-wing populism has constructed the narrative of 'othering' within immigration discourse. This is built on the concept of 'whiteness' as a fundamental characteristic of Britishness, creating a distinct division between Britishness and immigrants of colour, perpetuating a narrative of us vs them. Language and lexical choice have played a crucial role in perpetuating the rhetoric of 'othering,' and have been successfully mobilised by the Reform party.

This section will focus on the analysis of right-wing populist political rhetoric, through campaigns, speeches, manifestos, and media, in producing a racialised view of immigrants and asylum seekers. This will largely examine the populist candidate Nigel Farage in the UK.

Campaigns

Political campaigns have been successfully utilised to exploit the anxieties of immigration in the UK. A notable example is the UKIP Party, in 2016, which mastered scare tactics and 'othering' through its 'Breaking Point poster.' This propaganda photo illustrated the mass migration of refugees, crossing the Croatian-Slovenian Border, with the subheading 'We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.' Deploying this image as a campaign photo for the Brexit Party, however, implied that these migrants were entering the UK (Tudor, 2022, pp. 234–235). This, coupled with calls

to 'take back control,' echoed populist beliefs of immigrants as a threat to national sovereignty and security, reproducing fears of racialised migrants 'invading' the UK. Scholar, Nadine El-Enany, has supported this view, arguing that possessive languages of 'taking back' and 'regaining control' are an indication of 'Britain struggling to conceive of its place in the world post-Empire.' (El-Enany, 2016),' thus producing a racialised rhetoric.

Manifestos

Political Manifestos have further provided an example of exclusionary politics through immigration discourse in which the Reform's manifesto is at the forefront, largely built on the vows of mass deportation and securing Britain's borders. The manifesto echoes Farage's earlier Brexit campaign, asserting that 'uncontrolled immigration has pushed Britain to breaking point' (Nigel Farage, 2024, p.3). His continued emphasis on immigration in destroying the security and values of Britain has constructed the narrative of immigration as a strain on public services, closely linking high immigration to societal crises. Farage further amplifies this depiction of immigrants through his emphasis on the 'small boat crisis' in 'threatening our security' (Nigel Farage, 2024). His claim reinforces the stereotypes of immigration as a criminal and existential threat, reconstructing the experiences of immigrants as a tool for fearmongering and creating a distinct separation of whiteness as intrinsic to Britishness and British culture.

The notion of 'othering' is further emphasised within the spread of multiculturalism, in which Farage suggests that 'Multiculturalism has imported separate communities that reject our way of life.' His manifesto perpetuates this division of immigration and Britishness in undermining core British Culture (Nigel Farage, 2024, p.1). He claims that "Britain is broken" and "in decline culturally", and that stopping immigration would "help us at least try to catch up" (McKiernan, 2024). 'Only Reform UK will stand up for British culture, identity, and values. We will freeze immigration and stop the boats. Restore law and order. Repair our broken public services' (Nigel Farage, 2024, p.1). These exclusionary terms of 'reject,' 'separate,' and 'our' have enforced the idea of immigration impeding upon national identity, emphasising the othering and separation of immigrants. It has produced a racialised perspective of immigration as a risk to British values and thus legitimising the action of mass detention and deportation.

Right-wing populist manifestos, framing immigrants as a 'threat to security, law, and order' and culture have, therefore 'exploited hostility towards asylum seekers and migrant families,'

dehumanising their experiences and turning immigrant lives into a 'political weapon' for mobilisation (Werneke, 2025). This has successfully produced an 'us vs them,' racialised rhetoric in the UK.

Speeches

The use of language as a tool in perpetuating divisiveness towards immigrants of colour is commonly employed within populist speeches and interviews. A notable example is a 2012 interview with Theresa May, discussing the hostile environment policy. Critics prompted questions of EU migration as contributing to the high levels of immigration in the UK. May, however, takes a diplomatic approach to discussing EU migration as 'something that needs to be considered and addressed.' This frames EU migration as a manageable issue as opposed to a national threat. This is contrasted with her draconian language towards non-EU immigrants, who are repeatedly described as 'illegal,' driving the narrative of criminality as an intrinsic characteristic of non-EU immigration (disproportionately people of colour). Such discourse invokes fear, legitimising restrictive immigration policy (Kirkup & Winnett, 2012).

Media

Populist rhetoric prevails through the narratives constructed within the media, holding great authority to influence public perception. Immigration is a salient issue amongst voters in the UK with growing public anxiety, fuelled by conservative newspapers such as 'The Daily Mail,' 'The Sun,' and 'The Daily Telegraph." Discourse within these media outlets amplifies misinformation and stereotypes of populism, reinforcing the 'us vs them' rhetoric.

Use of harmful language, within the media, has toxified this debate with many new outlets describing immigration through terms of 'invasion,' 'swarms,' 'scourge,' and 'surges.'

A headline from the Daily Mail reads:
'This tidal wave of migrants could be the biggest threat to Europe since the war' (Burleigh, 2015).

Similarly, a headline from the Daily Telegraph reads:
'Net migration to rise by 100,000 as asylum claims surge' (Hymas, 2025).

Populist rhetoric, however, has also seeped into mainstream political coverage, in which the BBC headlines read:

'Migrants flood trains in desperate bid to leave Italy' (Bell, 2015).

These metaphors to describe the movement of immigrants into the UK have become normalised within the media, perpetuating a narrative of destruction. Floods 'wreck property and drown people,' and 'invasion' suggest aggressive entry into another's territory to conquer or control (Shariatmadari, 2015). This rhetoric overstates the threat of migration as a danger to livelihoods, nationality, and sovereignty. This depiction of immigrants and asylum seekers, while not explicitly racialised, normalises harmful language that dehumanises the immigrant experience and perpetuates racial stereotypes.

Unequal media treatment of refugees fleeing war emphasises the racialisation of immigrants. During a BBC news interview, reporting on the war in Ukraine, a general stated that 'it is very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blonde hair … being killed every day." He goes on further to state that 'we are not talking about Syrians fleeing bombs…but Europeans' (Bayoumi, 2020). This echoes populist rhetoric of 'othering,' distinguishing between non-Europeans fleeing war as something to be expected. This contrasts with the portal of their white, European counterparts fleeing war as 'civilised.' The differential portrayal of asylum seekers of colour, fleeing conflict, reinforces racial hierarchies, in which white immigrants and asylum seekers are perceived as victims of war, whereas immigrants of colour are framed as a threat and burden to UK nationals.

This characterisation of immigrants of colour, within non-partisan media coverage, demonstrates the normalisation of destructive and racialised language, demonstrating the circulation of populist rhetoric throughout the political sphere. In conjunction with this, The Guardian argues that it is 'a symbiotic relationship with politicians jumping on populist bandwagons and using the right-wing media to do so' (Martinson, 2025). For example, Theresa May's justification for the hostile environment policies was portrayed through a right-wing populist lens in 'The Daily Telegraph,' emphasising hostility and criminality (Kirkup & Winnett, 2012). Her one-to-one interview demonstrated a populist narrative seeping into mainstream political parties. Similarly, David Cameron, a conservative politician, described the movement of migrants across the Mediterranean as a 'swarm' during media reporting (BBC News, 2015). This language was criticised for its connotation with dehumanisation, in which his depiction of immigrants disproportionately targeted Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugees fleeing conflict. Thus, highlighting the racialised rhetoric of immigrants and asylum seekers. Despite this, right-wing media took to Cameron's defence, highlighting the existential threat of immigration as an economic burden and security threat (Walton, 2015).

The media, therefore, plays an ever-increasing role in perpetuating right-wing populist rhetoric, normalising language of dehumanisation to legitimise the racialisation of immigrants and asylum seekers. This, as well as the conformity of politicians to this rhetoric, demonstrates the influence of the media in shaping public perception of immigration.

The political discouragement of immigration

The discouragement of immigration and racialisation of immigrants are justified under ideologies that prioritise the protection of economic stability and state sovereignty. Evident in the Reform Party's manifesto, immigration is depicted as a danger to economic stability, linking high numbers of immigration and asylum to the NHS crisis, housing crisis, benefits crisis, high crime rates, shortages of jobs, and stagnation of wages (Nigel Farage, 2024). This economic framing of immigration overlooks governmental policies of austerity and systemic causes of the breakdown of public services and infrastructure. Practices of scapegoating, instead, attribute economic instability to immigration, legitimising practices of hardline immigration policy and restrictions.

This is justified under the political philosophy of state sovereignty, which creates the 'asymmetry of duties to protecting human rights' as there is 'no positive duty to protect foreigners' human rights' (Arnaiz, 2025, p. 174). Right-wing populism is rooted in this belief, prioritising the protection of its borders and national identity over humanitarian obligations

This justification of strict immigration laws is framed as strategic. However, these ideologies inadvertently reinforce racialised practices of immigration, through the emphasis of 'illegality,' which as we have seen, is a term inherently linked with immigrants of colour.

Conclusion

The UK has witnessed a rise in right-wing populism, driving a harmful narrative that racialises immigration and asylum debate. Media coverage has played a significant role in perpetuating this rhetoric, constructing the narrative of immigration as a threat to economic stability, national identity and culture, through fear-mongering and scapegoating tactics. This discourse is driven by right wing party campaigns, manifestos and speeches that perpetuate this narrative, legitimising harsh restriction on immigrants and asylum seekers

Language plays a significant role in perpetuating these fears of racialisation through exclusionary terms, as well as the emphasis on criminality. This rhetoric disproportionately impacts immigrants of colour, in which discourse describes them as 'illegal' and thus a threat to national security. Conversely, their white, European counterparts, are described as 'civilised.' Media coverage amplifies this narrative, circulating misinformation on a larger scale and placing fears of immigration into everyday political life.

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