

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

## Skinfolk, but Not Kinfolk? Paradoxical Representation Among Ethnic Minority Conservative Political Elites in the UK

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As the number of ethnic minority politicians increase across countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, so too have instances in which these officeholders act against the communities they descriptively represent. In this contribution, we introduce the concept of paradoxical representation which we argue functions through neoliberal, post-racial scripts of color-blindness and meritocracy. Similar to research on gender representation which calls into question assumptions that substantive representation will follow unproblematically from women's descriptive representation (Celis and Childs 2012), we argue that ethnic minority representatives can act as “post-racial gatekeepers.” This means paradoxically working *against* rather than for marginalized ethnic minority groups (Saini, Bankole, and Begum 2023). Through political discourse and policymaking, these representatives construct and “gatekeep” hegemonic ideas around race, racism, gender, and migration.

Paradoxical representation is exemplified in contemporary British politics, which has become increasingly ethnically diverse. Around 10% of members of the UK Parliament are now from an ethnic minority background. Studying the British Conservative Party, we find paradoxical representation in ethnic minority politicians endorsing hostile environment policies for immigrants, which harm ethnic minorities and women indirectly, and advocating directly for regressive policies on racial and gender equality. Paradoxical representation can also be seen among anti-feminist “femonationalist” (Farris 2017) representatives. Thus, the

influence of hegemonically white and patriarchal structures on ethnically diverse conservative politics demands further theoretical interrogation.

### **Paradoxical Representation and Post-Racial Gatekeeping**

Rather than substantively representing the most intersectionally marginalized and economically vulnerable ethnic minorities, particularly precarious migrants, the actions of some conservative party actors can prove actively harmful to the communities they descriptively represent or “look like” (Saini, Bankole, and Begum 2023). Paradoxical representation does not suggest that there is a stable or homogeneous set of ethnic interests which ethnic minority politicians should consistently represent, or which speak to all types of ethnic minority voters. Nor does it deny the popularity of conservative ethnic minority politicians amongst certain diasporic communities — for example, on the basis of increasingly contentious issues of immigration, as well as in relation to economic and foreign policy concerns.<sup>1</sup> The concept of paradoxical representation does, however, allow us to further our critical understanding of heterogeneity in political representation within hyper-multicultural societies characterized by rising political conservatism.

A weaker sense of linked fate, group consciousness, or mutual recognition with dispossessed subgroups (Dovi 2002) can be seen in the ways in which ethnic minority conservative political elite actors endorse neoliberal discourses of post-racial individualism and meritocracy. Reinforcing the idea that we now live in post-racial societies where race and racism have diminishing impacts on the life chances of racialized minorities, these actors attribute their successes to conservative values of commitment to hard work and “family.” Their elevation<sup>2</sup> to key positions of political power is proclaimed as only being possible in a society which has transcended racial categories. However, this allows ethnic minority “post-racial gatekeepers” to advocate for politics that are at best neglectful, and at worst harmful, to the most vulnerable and structurally disadvantaged ethnic minority groups (Patrick 2022).<sup>2</sup>

### **Paradoxical Representation in Practice**

Paradoxical representation and post-racial gatekeeping manifest in the politics of ethnic minority conservative political elite actors, primarily through the denigration of anti-racism and the denial of the significance of race. For instance, Kemi Badenoch, who serves as Leader of the Opposition and Leader of the Conservative Party, and former Secretary of State for Business and Trade, rejected calls for more teaching of Black history in schools and insisted that any school teaching Critical Race Theory would be breaking the law. Similarly, former Home Secretary, Priti Patel, criticized Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests and dismissed England’s football players taking the knee in support of BLM as “gesture politics.”

Paradoxical representation is also evident when minority politicians, seeking to position themselves as “model” minorities, distance themselves from

stigmatized minorities. For example, former Home Secretary Suella Braverman claimed that grooming gangs are “almost all British Pakistani men,” despite contrary evidence that perpetrators of organized sexual exploitation in the UK are predominantly white. Moreover, former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak suggested that “political correctness” and “cultural sensitivities” were getting in the way of stamping out grooming gangs. This is rhetoric laced with gendered racism — the interlocking of sexism and racism (Essed 1991) — that posit Brown, particularly Muslim, men as a sexual threat to white women.

The paradox of conservative ethnic minority politicians actively going against the interests of the most marginalized and vulnerable ethnic minority communities in the UK is no more evident than in the descendants of immigrants and refugees supporting the hostile immigration policy environment, which makes remaining in the UK as difficult as possible for immigrants.<sup>3</sup> The UK Home Office hostile environment policy has now been presided over by two female Home Secretaries of British Indian background and the first UK Prime Minister of color, Rishi Sunak. The initiative refers to a set of administrative and legislative measures aimed at identifying and reducing the number of immigrants in the UK with no right to remain. Debates transpire from the design of these measures, which make staying in the UK difficult, in the hope immigrants may leave voluntarily. Sunak and Braverman have also introduced the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which heightens detention powers for undocumented immigrants and has been criticized as amounting to a refugee ban, contravening the UK’s human rights obligations.<sup>4</sup> This is despite Sunak’s own grandparents being among the Hindu and Sikh refugees who fled the region of Punjab following the partition of India, while former Home Secretary Patel admitted that her own parents would not have been allowed into the UK under her immigration laws.

Restrictive immigration policies are being formulated and enacted by politicians of migrant backgrounds which allows for the framing of such policies as post-racial. However, the UK’s hostile environment policies have been found to have had disproportionately negative impacts on people of color (Gentleman 2023). Despite post-racial scripts of immigration policy being formulated on the basis of cost-benefit analyses — for example, of skills and labor requirements — migrants continue to be evaluated against white, patriarchal, and capitalistic thresholds of acceptability, albeit now under a more ethnically and gender diverse cabinet. Immigrants and citizens of color bearing the brunt of such hostile environment immigration policies and negative discourses around immigration is no more apparent than in the events of the Windrush Scandal (BBC 2023), whereby a hostile environment framework created the conditions for older people of Black Caribbean background who arrived in Britain as children from the 1950s to be erroneously classified as illegal immigrants. Unable to prove their legal status,<sup>5</sup> Windrush immigrants were prevented from accessing healthcare, work, and housing, and many were also wrongfully detained and deported. Despite the scandal causing public condemnation and significant upset within Black and minority communities, Braverman has dropped key commitments to redress injustices, which were made by the Home Office following the scandal outbreak.<sup>6</sup>

## Gendered Racisms and the Migrant “Threat”

The disproportionate impact of the UK Government’s Illegal Migration Act 2023 policy on migrant and refugee women of color has been raised by some women’s charities, who argue that it could make victims of trafficking and women fleeing violence more vulnerable. This includes exposing pregnant women seeking asylum to greater risks of still birth or maternal death if the government can more easily detain and deport them (Women for Refugee Women 2023). Gendered racisms in discourses of migrant threat can be seen in underlying stereotypes of migrant women as hyper-fertile and the reproduction of Black and Brown people as a threat to the white nation (Coddington 2021), as well as placing irresponsible burdens on the welfare state.

Gendered racisms can also be observed in the deservingness of migrant men being called into question, who are cast as a threat to the (white) Western nation (Bhattacharyya 2008). Associations frequently made between “foreign” men and criminality in British public discourse (Griffiths 2017), have been reproduced by ethnic minority conservative political elite actors, despite being of similar racialized backgrounds. For example, Sunak and Braverman’s discourse on grooming gangs is noted above. Similarly, former Home Secretary Priti Patel was found to have misled parliament in her claim that “70% of people crossing [the English Channel] are single men and they are economic migrants...who have been masquerading as asylum seekers and elbowing to one side women and children” (House of Commons 2021). Moreover, as well as repeatedly making rhetorical connections between male asylum seekers and organized criminality, Braverman has claimed that they often pretend to be children in an attempt to secure protection. The threat from migrant women and men is thus constructed through exclusionary and intersecting racialized and gendered notions of belonging, acceptability, and value.

There are a number of likely interrelating and possibly conflicting drivers behind the discursive and policy movements made by politicians such as Sunak, Braverman, Patel, and Badenoch, apropos of ethnic minorities, women, and migrants. Strategically, and if we regard politicians as motivated primarily by re-election (Mayhew 1974), it would serve the first non-white UK Prime Minister well to not demonstrate overtly anti-racist politics whilst he headed a party which has a history of anti-immigration politics. However, paradoxical representation, for example, in being “tough” on migration and refugees, could pay off electorally, as well as demarcate Sunak and other middle-class, conservative British South Asians from those constructed as racial or immigrant threats.

Furthermore, conservative economic and social ideology and values can be broad enough to appeal to value systems beyond the white British context to socially mobile diasporic communities. Any presupposed irrationality associated with voting against or standing against the interests of your “group” (whether class, race, gender, or otherwise) can be offset by the firm belief, rooted in white hegemonic ideology, that these conservative policies and principles are rational. This is certainly exemplified by the politics and discourse of the current Leader of the Opposition and Leader of the Conservative Party, former UK Prime Minister and former Home Secretary. Adopting the figure of the Black/Brown border

guard (the acceptable outsider within) cements the image of the ethnic model minority as committed to protecting national order from internal “threats” of multiculturalism,<sup>7</sup> and the nations’ borders from “unacceptable outsiders.”

## Conclusion

Ethnic minority conservative political elite actors capitalize on their “model minority” positioning, while amplifying hegemonic whiteness and gendered racisms, despite their own minoritized identities. Harsh immigration policies, in particular, are presented as “post-racial,” rational, and necessary for the gendered and cultural stability of the nation. The implications span far beyond the UK and this specific political party, however. Paradoxical representation as a concept highlights the need to view descriptive versus substantive representation intersectionally, and the complex motivations of women and minoritized politicians in their routes to political power. Going beyond questions of whether politicians from marginalized backgrounds work in or for the interests of the group(s) they descriptively represent, we posit that some politicians can, paradoxically, actively represent against the interests of minoritized groups, but-tressing and reproducing white supremacist patriarchal structures.

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## Notes

1. This trend has been observed among British Indians (Duckworth, Kapur, and Vaishnav 2021).
2. For example, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has hailed his efforts in diverting funding away from deprived urban areas, where ethnic minorities tend to reside, toward more prosperous areas. <https://www.independent.co.uk/tv/news/rishi-sunak-tunbridge-wells-deprived-b2139008.html>.
3. Instituted in 2012, the Home Office’s hostile environment policy measures included obligations for public and private sector actors such as employers, landlords, doctors, educators, and community workers to check people’s immigration status and enforce immigration-related restrictions.
4. The UK Government’s plans to send asylum seekers to detention centres in Rwanda has been blocked by the European Court of Human Rights for breaching Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits torture and inhuman treatment.
5. Though the 1971 Immigration Act gave Commonwealth citizens living in the UK the permanent right to live and work in the UK, the Home Office had kept no records nor issued any documentation to confirm the status of those who had been granted permission to stay. Landing cards belonging to Windrush migrants had also been destroyed by the Home Office in 2010.
6. The Home Office commitments had included establishing a migrants’ commissioner and holding events with people affected by the Windrush Scandal to listen and reflect.
7. As seen in the denigration of the Black Lives Matter movement.

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