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**Volume 10 Issue 2 (December 2022)**

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"(De)constructing identities: the depiction of post-Brexit migration in *Years and Years* (2019)"

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**Recommended Citation**

Mora-Ramírez, Pedro. "(De)constructing identities: the depiction of post-Brexit migration in *Years and Years* (2019)" *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 10.2 (2022): <<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>  
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**Abstract:** The BBC TV fictional series, *Years and Years* (2019), presents how policies of exclusion complicate migratory movements. The series displays controversies in the definition of identities according to the nation-state and family models. The present study investigates the de/construction of identities through a critical perspective of post-Brexit Britain in *Years and Years*. Drawing from postcolonial scholars like Bhabha or Gilroy, this essay examines the script of the series to shed light upon the construction of (national and migrant) identities and the portrayal of new family models that reshape the nation-state. The methodology followed focuses on the critical and textual analysis of the series. Previous research has documented the value of "postcolonial melancholia" on the construction of identities and on how migration has been adversely affected (Gilroy 52). Lastly, the results of the current study show how the series portrays the complex issue of migration, stressing how (national and migrant) identities are defined within a post-Brexit society.

**Keywords:** *Years and Years* (2019), migration, Brexit, nation-state, identities, postcolonialism

**“(De)constructing identities: the depiction of post-Brexit migration in *Years and Years* (2019)”**

**1. Introduction**

Migration studies is an academic field within cultural studies that are involved in the study of human migration and its representation in cultural products.<sup>1</sup> Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field concerned with topics that explore how culture has evolved over time and how it constructs power. It is commonly held that migration has been present in all eras of history and has shaped current cultures. For Barker, this discipline in relation to power encompasses sociocultural issues, such as race or ethnicity (5-9). Consequently, migrants are affected by the intersections of race, ethnicity and nation.<sup>2</sup> Racial differences are understood as a socio-political construction, whereas the latter refers to the representation of cultural values, albeit both accentuate racial discrimination (McLeod 131-132). In the United Kingdom, migration plays a crucial role in the development of British (post)imperialism, the Commonwealth of Nations and the racial disparities resulting from both.

Historically speaking, the UK has tended to maintain its control over the Commonwealth of Nations (Leach 157).<sup>3</sup> This association of states may lead to the volatile political and cultural position of current British politics. Thus, this view could be associated with racial discrimination due to migration. Considering what has just been said, this research work will aim to expose the evolution of British politics to examine how migration has been adversely affected by imperialism and Brexit.

Migration studies present several inequalities that are caused and have been worsened by the current situation of Brexit. It - composed by the words ‘Britain’ and ‘exit’ - consisted of Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union. As it is widely accepted, this process was fostered by imperialism and opened the gate to racist speeches. It highlights that imperialist discourses interweave the ways in which British identity is built (Roe-Crines 187). Brexit identifies the EU as the problem and immigrants as British enemies. For instance, this “speech” of exclusion gave way to problematise the fragmentation of British society.

In this way, the movement from one country to another also emphasises the rise of “hybrid” identities. This concept is posed by Bhabha, and it refers to the mixture of two or more cultural identities (4). Thus, this combination of identities occurs when individuals have a “sense of belonging” in diverse cultural places. Brexit, in addition, can alter individuals’ perspective on identity. Consequently, the present study will analyse the representation of the issue of race

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<sup>1</sup> See Scholten et al. for a comprehensive research on Migration studies.

<sup>2</sup> I am well aware of the intersection of race and ethnicity with clusters such as gender, age and social class. However, in this research, the terms are seldom mentioned, even when aware of the intersection of sex, gender and age in the debates discussed here.

<sup>3</sup> The Commonwealth is an association of countries around the world belonging to the United Kingdom. It is historically linked to the British Empire (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica “Commonwealth”). At the 1926 conference, Britain and the countries dominated by the British Empire “agreed that they were all equal members of a community within the British Empire” (“Our history”).

through the TV series *Years and Years* (2019), examining identities based on “race” between British people and migrants. In fact, Dyer claims that whiteness is beginning to be considered a racial identity among others, ending the supremacy by which the white race is the measure of everything (1).<sup>4</sup> Border crossings create, therefore, new identities and ethnicities.<sup>5</sup>

The present study examines the representation of migration in the UK after Brexit and how national and migrant identities are influenced by this withdrawal in the TV BBC fictional series *Years and Years*. It will also examine to what extent migration, and therefore how migrants have been affected by racist speeches. Brexit starts from feelings of “postcolonial melancholia,” and, in terms of migration studies, it complicates how British and migrant identities are defined (e.g., Gilroy 52; Cummings 605; Rodríguez 25). Thus, the result of this study intends to analyse the evolution of British and migrant identities after Brexit, shedding light on how this withdrawal aggravates the position of migrant individuals.

More specifically, this essay focuses on the representation of Daniel Lyons and Viktor Goraya in the series to examine how migration affect the de/construction of their identities. In order to do so, the present study follows a critical approach to the representations of migration in the series in which this aspect is examined through a critical perspective. Therefore, the research conducted in this paper focuses on the contents that are listed as follows: a sociocultural context tracing a correlation from the government of Margaret Thatcher to current British politics; their adaptation portrayed in the series; the depiction of ethnicity and national identities and a deconstruction of identities to shed light upon how an identity is constructed.

The series *Years and Years* addresses the evolution of Britain over the years culminating in a dystopic near future. As such, the series introduces socio-political events through the perspective of the members of the Lyons family, presenting how Brexit policies have affected migration. *Years and Years* displays how Brexit procedures have aggravated this issue for those refugees and immigrants who have moved to the UK since their countries are involved in wars. Hence, the series proves the problems faced by migrants and refugees. In order to analyse episodes 4, 5 and 6 properly, the present study focuses on the case of Viktor Goraya (Maxim Baldry) and Daniel Lyons (Russell Tovey).<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, a context of the series shall be presented to understand better this analysis.

In the first episode of the series, viewers are presented with the situation of immigrants and refugees. Here, Daniel Lyons explains that refugees must abandon their possessions, since they will live in emergency housings. Additionally, those who are refugees are to be allowed

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<sup>4</sup> According to June Ying Yee in her entry in *The Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity and Society*, “the concept of racialization refers to the processes by which a group of people is defined by their ‘race.’ Processes of racialization begin by attributing racial meaning to people’s identity and, in particular, as they relate to social structures and institutional systems, such as housing, employment, and education. In societies in which ‘White’ people have economic, political, and social power, processes of racialization have emerged from the creation of a hierarchy in social structures and systems based on ‘race.’ The visible effects of processes of racialization are the racial inequalities embedded within social structures and systems” (Shaefer 1110).

<sup>5</sup> This fact is evident in application forms where British universities ask students about their ethnicity, not considering non-British students as “white.” An example of universities in the UK is University College London.

<sup>6</sup> Viktor Goraya is a Ukrainian refugee who enters the UK to seek asylum. Daniel Lyons, on the other hand, is a British citizen from Manchester working as a housing officer, and he is in charge of managing houses for refugees. In order to avoid repetitions, the name of the actors and actresses will be mentioned once when they are referred to for the first time.

to seek asylum. It is in this moment when Daniel Lyons meets Viktor Goraya. Daniel is married at first with Ralph Cousins (Dino Fetscher). However, he and Viktor start to develop a romantic relationship, which is considered a turning point in Daniel Lyons' divorce from Ralph Cousins and in Daniel's attempts to prevent Viktor from getting deported. However, Daniel Lyons' ex-partner, Ralph Cousins, informs the Home Office that Viktor Goraya is an illegal asylum seeker receiving a salary. Therefore, the Three Bridges removal centre, which is presented as an immigration detention centre in the series, deports him to Ukraine. This is also evident in the policies adopted by the British Home Office, such as the request of permission to seek asylum (Home Office 6). Consequently, Brexit complicates the issue of immigration since it contains policies that aggravate migrant conditions.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the series shows "Rule 35" which permits the detention and deportation of immigrants. In the series, this rule foregrounds the dystopian vision of Brexit, as it represents reality to some extent and also a negative vision of the future of migration.

The narratives of Brexit discourses permit to examine the de/construction of national and immigrant identities, as will be explained through an analysis of the protagonists' family unit. Family units are varied in the series, but this study focuses on that of Daniel and Viktor. However, the family unit changes when Daniel Lyons and Viktor Goraya fall in love. Both homosexual couples are accepted in the society presented in the series. However, it should be noted that, as will be mentioned in the analysis, Viktor Goraya is deported due to his sexuality.

Many migration studies have mainly focused on the British socioeconomic situation and how Brexit is presented in literary works. The importance of this paper relies on the fact that migration will be analysed to identify how national and migrant identities are constructed. More specifically, this analysis will be conducted by comparing this issue with the motif of migration depicted in the BBC fictional series *Years and Years*.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Several researchers have investigated migration in postcolonial studies as a compendium of race and racial disparities caused by xenophobia. Indeed, Said suggested that culture - seen as a way of foregrounding identity - portrays instances of racism (xiii). In addition, it has been proven that colonial underpinnings are essential in the depiction of xenophobia in the Brexit referendum campaign (Ashiagbor 524). Nevertheless, other research has found a lack of attention to racism in Brexit discourses; Mintchev, for example, notes that this is because the problem of racism is still unresolved, since there has been a polarization between Remain and Leave supporters (129-130). Therefore, it is certainly possible to see how the Brexit referendum campaign was based on imperialist foundations.

Thus, this study analyses Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005) and Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) as works that foreground racial concepts in current academic works on Brexit. Bhabha's contribution to a further development of the concept of the "other" within

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<sup>7</sup> At this point, it is worth pointing out the differences between migration and immigration. The former refers to the movement of people from one country to another, whereas the latter is entering into a country to settle there. In this paper, I mostly use the term 'immigration' as the series presents the case of Viktor as illegal immigrant.

postcolonial theory could also be related to Gilroy's term of "postcolonial melancholia" (52). These postcolonial concepts are crucial when analysing the depiction of identities in a post-Brexit society, since they are useful to understand how racism operates in speeches and attitudes present in today's culture and media. This study also examines other numerous academic works on Brexit to discuss meticulously the influence of Brexit on migration. To be more precise, they investigate border crossing, racial disparities and the intersections of race, class and nation. According to Hill Collins, intersectionality refers to "the critical insight that race, class . . . [nation] operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (2). Hence the intersections of race, class and nation are interrelated and foreground racial disparities. In addition, secondary sources have been examined to argue more precisely the consequences of this EU withdrawal on migrants.

Another focus of interest is the fact that the politics of Margaret Thatcher served to foreground racist policies. For instance, De Gregorio-Godeo points out that there is a correlation between Thatcher's speech and current British politics (8). According to Gilroy, "[t]he role of race thinking ... is a pivotal issue in specifying how the racialization of governmental practice impacted upon the pragmatic exercise of colonial power" (45). Hence, this variability in findings suggests that migration plays a crucial role in how migrants are seen by British politicians. McLeod, in turn, points out that racial differences - seen as political constructions - are employed with the purpose of fitting into the ideological concerns of some individuals (131). Brexit, therefore, foregrounds imperial nostalgia and gives way to racist attitudes and speeches. Consequently, Bhabra concludes that a comprehensive study of inequality based on the history of British imperial policy is needed to avoid racial disparities (97). In this way, it can be observed how Brexit is prominent in the way that immigrants are seen nowadays, since it emphasizes racial inequalities.

The presence of migrants has been widespread on the British Isles. Furthermore, because of that emergence of immigration, there has been a growing concern about the aim of controlling it. In fact, this control has been reinforced by Brexit, as can be seen in the restrictions adopted in the British borders. For instance, these restrictions are reflected in the change in visas, denying asylum to Ukrainian people, as was mentioned in *The Guardian* in February this year ("Changes to UK visa rules for Ukrainians called 'shameful' by Labour"). More specifically, Brexit and racist speeches have emphasised the concept of imperial nostalgia based on the desire to exert power over others. There are pieces of evidence that indicate that Brexit is a procedure embedded in imperial affairs (Koegler et al. 585), permitting a free hand to racist speeches and attitudes. Thus, xenophobia is present in British society as it has been normalised since the beginning of Brexit speeches (Ashiagbor 524).<sup>8</sup> It is widely accepted that postcolonialism helps one reconsider the history of imperialism, migration and cultural productions (Ivinson "postcolonialism"), and, for this reason, it seems necessary to contextualise Britain's imperialism to shed light on how Brexit emerged.

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<sup>8</sup> This normalisation of racism is evident in political discourses in which political leaders blame Black people for breaking the law ("Prime Minister Boris Johnson's words on Black Lives Matter" 1:49-3:14) even if they are not culpable.

To put it shortly, and focusing on the events during the twentieth century, British imperialism was affected by a process of decolonization in the decades following World War II. The term 'decolonisation' refers to the act of losing control over a country or territory. One of the primary consequences of decolonization in Britain was the arrival of immigrants. Subsequently, the substantial influx of immigration from the Commonwealth after 1958 created social and racial tensions due to its concentration in congested areas of industrial cities, which eventually became large urban ghettos. A few years later, in 1962, the Conservative Party passed the first Commonwealth Immigrants Acts to restrict entry of Commonwealth citizens who had no prospect of employment means or self-sufficiency. This act had a crucial role in foregrounding racial disparities, as it rejects individuals who do not meet that requirement.

The end of the British Empire was achieved, in most cases after the First and Second World Wars, with very little conflict. Therefore, after becoming independent, the former colonies chose to stay in the Commonwealth as members of a free association of sovereign independent nations. Nonetheless, in 1968, Conservative Member of Parliament, John Enoch Powell, gave his "Rivers of Blood" speech against immigration from Commonwealth countries (Meer 417). This increased social tensions to the extent that, in the 1970s, racial violence erupted in several cities. Later, during Thatcher's period of government, she complicated the connection to the Commonwealth through her strict policies. For instance, she remained opposed to sign the sanctions to depose the Apartheid regime. Significantly, Thatcher's opposition towards Apartheid can be related to the Brexit situation nowadays, since both emphasise racial disparities. Margaret Thatcher's call for "a clear end to immigration" ("TV Interview for Granada World in Action") advocated for Brexit as there were still profound inequalities and class divisions when she became Prime Minister in the 1978. These disparities led to a period of violence and decline, and, together with scepticism towards Europe and its proposed union, exacerbated British negative attitudes towards im/migration (Roe-Crines 187).

Distrust in Europe was one of Britain's primary legacies from the 1960s. Europe was a divisive issue. Nonetheless, Prime minister Heath began negotiations to enter the European Common Market in 1971. In 1972, the Parliament voted in favour of the Conservative party, which in 1973, in turn introduced the UK into a member of the Common Market. Labour confirmed it through a referendum in 1975. It entered the European parliament in 1979, although British Euroscepticism remained powerful and never disappeared. The Conservative Party had always been in favour of a pro-European vision. Nonetheless, over time, Labour became fully committed to Britain's role in Europe, while the Conservatives were affected by Euroscepticism (Morgan 98). This Euroscepticism is evident in the Brexit Referendum in 2016, and in Brexit negotiations from 2017 to 2020. The real problems of reconciling the British with Europe came in 1974, when Labour and Harold Wilson returned to power. The party had been disunited at the time of Heath's negotiations and, in turn, officially voted against British membership in 1972.

Thus, this evolution of British politics gave way to a mistrust towards immigration and Europe, ending in Brexit and perpetuating the idea that the British comes first. Consequently, migration to the UK after Brexit has become more restrictive. For instance, these restrictions caused migrants to have worse living conditions, such as health status or low-quality housing

(McDowall 177). Today, Brexit Immigration policies have affected movements such as the “Black Lives Matter” movement that was initiated in the States. In the UK, this movement has targeted racial disparities caused by Brexit. For instance, the British PM Boris Johnson emphasised the sense of controlling migration in his speech, stating that

. . . we are all right, to say Black Lives Matter; . . . But I must also say that we are in a time of national trial, when for months this whole country has come together to fight a deadly plague. After such sacrifice, we cannot now let it get out of control . . . And no, I will not support or indulge those who break the law, or attack the police, or desecrate public monuments. We have a democracy in this country. If you want to change the urban landscape, you can stand for election, or vote for someone who will (“Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s words on Black Lives Matter” 1:49-3:14).

Here Johnson blames black and minority ethnic communities for ignoring the rules against COVID-19. Yet, this makes clear the racist message of putting “Britain back on its feet” by criminalising ethnic minorities. For instance, his government does nothing to actually help control the COVID-19 health situation, such as not providing them with health resources. Rather, he clarifies that they will face the law. Examples of this lack of control include his government’s failure to test and trace COVID-19 and to order lockdown before the health situation worsened.

The antiracist movement is getting increasingly evident on social media and in society at large. Nowadays, there are protests to increase awareness about racial disparities with the objective of putting an end to these inequalities. Nonetheless, occasionally there are individuals or politicians who try to exploit these situations in order to reap the benefits of them. This issue is evident in the previous quotation, since one can observe the remains of immigration policies of the Thatcherite government in the speech of Boris Johnson: “we cannot let it get out of control” (“Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s speech on tackling illegal migration”). Thus, as Meer suggests, it is crucial to “name racial inequalities and not pretend these inequalities are an aberration in an otherwise raceless, meritocratic society” to create an equal society (422). As Bhambra concludes, Britain is attempting to eliminate the racial issues present in today’s society and politics through the “white identity politics” of Brexit (97).

Williams adds the third meaning of “representative democracy,” which consists of representing the views of the individuals who chose them (qtd. in Harrison 99). Thus, both Remainers and Leavers vote for a political party that represent their ideas. Hence “representative democracy” perhaps gives free way to racist speeches if political parties stand for those demeaning ideas. It is certainly possible to argue that parliamentary supremacy can pass racist laws if individuals vote for political parties with these ideas.

As Younge points out, there were a lot of contributing factors to the result, the vast majority of which had been latent for years, if not decades, and which were brought into the open by the referendum (“Brexit: a disaster decades in the making”). Chief among these was a knot of issues encapsulated by the “take back control” slogan. A lot of people felt British “sovereignty” had been eroded by membership of the EU. Certainly, vanishingly few Brits felt part of Europe in the way that Spanish, Italians, French or Germans do; Europe was always, for several if not

most members of an older generation, over there somewhere else, which somehow excluded the UK.

The UK media - owned majorly by right-wing magnates - was instrumental in pushing an anti-Europe agenda for decades. In fact, Boris Johnson was an active part of this, as a political columnist for *The Telegraph*, being paid to invent stories criticising and ridiculing the EU ("How Boris Johnson's Brussels-bashing stories shaped British politics"). Additionally, the 'back' element in the "take back control" slogan was crucial as well, as it confirmed to people that by leaving the EU Brits were gaining something that "they" had taken from "us." Those who voted for Brexit did so principally because of their xenophobia, as is evident in the slogans of "Britain first" or "taking back control." They framed Brexit as a "them" and "us" scenario in which they just wanted to dispose of immigrants at any cost. However, rational analyses never entered the Brexit campaign debate.

It was never made clear what exactly the leavers wanted to control, beyond a vague freedom of EU-imposed rules (such as the Declaration of Human Rights) and, of course, immigration. The popular narrative was that, because of freedom of movement within the EU, the UK was being overflowed with immigrants who were taking "our" jobs, draining "our" resources, and living in "our" housing. For instance, this is exemplified in *Years and Years* when Viktor Goraya stays in Daniel Lyons's house after his death. In these scenes, the family of Daniel Lyons go to his house and start shouting at Viktor. What the attitudes of the Lyons family members demonstrate is a feeling of family nostalgia. They want to have Daniel Lyons back, but, as he dies helping Viktor Goraya, they verbalise their sorrow through hate against him. Thus, xenophobia is present in cultural representations of immigration to the extent that there are attacks - both verbal and physical - on minorities. In addition, among a large part of the UK population there was and still is a fervent hatred of Muslims, racialized people, Eastern Europeans and anyone else who is not Anglo-Saxon. This hate is actually based on the "take back control" of the Brexit campaign.

The Brexit campaigners wanted individuals to believe that there was an economic case for leaving, but this argument was dismantled at the slightest analysis, as the UK would lose its main trading partner and would not gain much in terms of new trade agreements with the rest of the world. For instance, the £350 million a week painted on a bus was admitted being a lie posed by Nigel Farage just hours after his cohort's victory. In fact, even fervent leave voters ultimately admitted that the UK would suffer economically but said it would be worth it nevertheless.

Additionally, Brexiteer former PM Theresa May stated that "Brexit means Brexit" ("Theresa May's launch statement: full text"). Although she did not achieve the exit of Europe as Prime Minister, she laid the foundations of Brexit. In 2020, the UK remained committed to making no major changes to the immigration section. Although there were no changes in that section, Brexit opened the debate to nationalisms and xenophobic discourses. Thus, this debate gave way to the division of the nation in terms of social created by Brexit policies (Duff 8).



### 3. The Representation of Migration in *Years and Years*.

In episodes 4 and 5 of the series, the storyline that follows the present study is the deportation of Viktor Goraya from the UK and Daniel Lyons' attempts to bring him back to the UK. As mentioned before, viewers are presented to Ralph Cousins denouncing Viktor in order to get him deported. Thus, through "Rule 35," as explained above, the police go to Viktor Goraya's house to arrest him. This makes spectators aware of the politics of exclusion caused by Brexit. Daniel Lyons notices this and becomes worried about Viktor Goraya. Thus, this reflects Daniel Lyons' concern when he tells his family that Viktor is a criminal in Ukraine for being homosexual, as is evident in Daniel Lyons' lines: "We've got to get him into a country that grants asylum but to do that he has to cross the border [illegally]" ("Episode 3" 09:25). As a matter of fact, Viktor Goraya is deported, but he crosses the border into Spain. Consequently, the Spanish authorities arrest him, and he applies for asylum, so that they cannot deport him.

Subsequently, in the fourth episode, Daniel Lyons attempts to get Viktor Goraya back to the UK, showing how human beings (or specifically refugees and immigrants) fight for their lives and their loved ones. To do so, Daniel Lyons requests his sister Edith Lyons (Jessica Hynes) a fake passport as Viktor cannot do so legally because of Brexit policies. He knows that, even if Viktor enters Britain, he will not be a legal citizen, but he still decides to risk his life by helping him. Therefore, he goes to Spain to cross the border into the UK with. These events also foreground how far Daniel Lyons will go to save his life. To do so "legally," they go to an unspecified place in the series to obtain a false passport and a breath test. It is in this moment that Alodie (Tamar Baruch), the woman who defrauds the protagonists, requests them money and Daniel's passport to copy. He supplies it to her, but then she leaves with the passports and the money. At this point, the identity of Daniel Lyons develops into that of an undocumented citizen. This is a very powerful image because without "papers" nobody is safe. What the series is trying to show is that race or ethnicity do not reside in the skin but in the legal system.

Following this, Daniel Lyons becomes an undocumented citizen and similar in status to Viktor Goraya, an illegal immigrant, resulting in the immigration policies complicating their entry into the UK. Knowing that, they go aboard a boat to enter illegally the country. Nevertheless, there are several migrants who struggle to get on the boat. Daniel Lyons knows the danger involved but decides to take the risk. They cross the border, but Daniel, the British citizen, dies and his body is left on the beach. Significantly, his death reflects what happens to people without "papers" when they try to cross the borders of countries in search of a better future. As was mentioned in the previous paragraph, undocumented people suffer the consequences of the norms that regulate the legal system. For instance, De Diego points out that the photograph of Aylan Kurdi's lifeless body symbolises that the plight of refugees is being neglected by the legal and political systems ("La muerte del pequeño Aylan ya tiene condena: 4 años por tráfico de personas").<sup>9</sup> Similarly, this situation transforms western cruelty to the east into a trivial event, since both Daniel Lyons and Aylan Kurdi die drown while struggling to survive.

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<sup>9</sup> See Figure 1 in Appendix 1.

Moreover, Viktor Goraya sees Daniel Lyons dead on the beach and then, when he is at Daniel Lyons's house, he calls the family to tell them that Daniel Lyons has drowned. Notably in the fifth episode of the series, the family goes to Daniel Lyons' house and insults Viktor Goraya. Stephen Lyons (Rory Kinnear) - characterised as a very sentimental and impulsive character - declares that he was irritated when his brother Daniel Lyons helped Viktor Goraya, blaming him for his death. As it can be seen in the series, Stephen Lyons starts to work for Vivienne Rook (Emma Thompson). Vivienne Rook explains that the Erstwhile "sites" - as they are named in the series - are immigration centres with poor sanitary conditions used to regulate the lives of immigrants and to let people die.<sup>10</sup> Afterwards, Stephen Lyons' hatred of Viktor Goraya leads him to send Viktor Goraya to an Erstwhile centre. Yet, Bethany Bisme-Lyons (Lydia West) - Stephen Lyons' daughter and a "transhuman"<sup>11</sup> - realises this and informs her aunt Edith Lyons (Jessica Hynes) to help Viktor Goraya. Eventually, in the last episode of the series, Stephen Lyons confesses that he sent several refugees to die, but then ends up regretting it. Edith Lyons exposes Vivienne Rook for her crimes and is consequently arrested.

Viewers are presented then with how Brexit politics and post imperial perspectives of supremacy affect British identities, as evident in the case of Stephen Lyons and in his desire to recover his former life. Nonetheless, as shown in *Years and Years* (2019), one can point out that identities can change. A clear example is that of Daniel Lyons, who is British. However, his identity is changed the moment in which he loses his passport, portraying a hybrid identity. By contrast, Viktor Goraya has a migrant identity when the series presents the situation. Yet, his identity is changed to some extent since his depiction in the series reflects a loss of the sense of belonging to a place.

Therefore, the foundations of Brexit complicate borders crossings by creating policies that do not help the development of migrant identities, as it will be explained further. These policies make migrants feel guilty for migrating to countries to improve their situation. The fact that Viktor Goraya's sense of belonging to a place is affected reflects, as described above, that racist policies can eventually eliminate this sense of belonging to a place. This is evident when he says, "I came home. Is this home?" ("Episode 4" 56:20). What this quotation demonstrates the doubts Viktor feels when he arrives in the community where he feels he belongs. However, he realises in the end that his sense of belonging at the beginning was wrong.

#### 4. The Thatcherite Influence on Brexit Discourses

The formation of national identity has evolved over the years and, according to the sociocultural and political beliefs of British citizens, as the previous section demonstrated. As the series exemplifies, each member of the Lyons family votes for different political parties. This political plurality dictates the way their identities are constructed according to political sympathies. In this respect, one can observe how these ideologies work within the characters. For example, Daniel Lyons tries to save Viktor Goraya, whereas Stephen Lyons attempts to

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<sup>10</sup> Vivienne Rook points out that Erstwhile centres will never cease to be completed, creating in turn a policy of genocide.

<sup>11</sup> The concept 'transhuman' is presented in the series to refer to people incorporated with technological devices. In episode 5, Bethany Bisme-Lyons uses her technological devices to report that her father has sent Viktor Goraya to an Erstwhile centre.

complicate his possibilities to survive after the death of his brother. Vivienne Rook, on the other hand, portrays a Brexiteer attitude by publicly commenting that “And I want to tell you that in standing alone this country has never been more magnificent. I promise you freedom and the ability to enjoy that freedom! An embolden society with the strength to enable itself!” (“Episode 5” 01:06).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, she tries to control migration within the UK by funding and promoting the development of Erstwhile centres, as it was explained before.

It seems crucial to surface the notion of ‘internal racism.’ According to Balibar, it refers to discrimination against those individuals living within a nation, but who are considered not to belong to the community imagined by the nation (38-40). Clear examples of policies that include internal racism are those of Margaret Thatcher. During her government, Thatcher applied restricted policies to control immigration. These policies can therefore explain internal racism in the Thatcherite period, since the desire to control migration shows how people living or willing to live in the nation are discriminated against. Restrictive migration policies only allow people who are considered “valid” by the system to live within the nation. Thus, it can be seen how racism is embedded in Thatcher’s policies. Indeed, in the interview mentioned before, Margaret Thatcher called for a “clear end to immigration” because of the fear that there were too many immigrants in Britain:

I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in (“TV Interview for Granada World in Action”).

In this interview, Thatcher alludes to the fear of mixing diverse cultures and, hence, overthrowing British culture. This causes British people to discriminate against people from other backgrounds. Racist discourses are not based on individual cultural identity. Rather, they rely on the loss of cultural identity, which is based on the idea of nationhood. There is a fear of cultural mixing and loss of cultural identity that is expressed through other fears, such as that of not finding a job. This issue then causes British immigration policy to want to regain control over its borders. The fear of immigration - also emphasised by Brexit speeches - is due to the fact that British politicians intend to regain control and maintain traditional British values (De Gregorio-Godeo 5). Thus, there is a correlation between the Thatcherite period and current politics. It seems that this desire of control and return to past values are caused by “postcolonial melancholia” (e.g., Gilroy 52; Cummings 605; Rodríguez 25). The term ‘postcolonial melancholia’ makes references to “the feelings, insecurities, and anxieties that have marked the necessary restructuring of British narratives of identity and narratives about itself in the wake of empire and the critical interventions of postcolonial studies” (Cummings 605).

Racist people regard migrants as the “others,” discrediting their identities as less civilised, valuable and, therefore, different. This issue reflects how internalized racism is in the UK and in the behaviour of a specific number of people. For example, the series portrays Stephen

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<sup>12</sup> The full speech can be found in Appendix 2.

Lyons' hatred of Viktor Goraya and his fear of his involvement in a relationship with his brother Daniel Lyons. This is the perfect excuse that leads Stephen Lyons to send Viktor Goraya to an Erstwhile centre so that he can make him disappear. Stephen Lyons' character and characterisation reflects how metaphors associated with nostalgia of a past life are used to express fear of social change. He does not want the relationship between Viktor Goraya and Daniel Lyons to be broken, but neither does he want his family unit to change. Therefore, Stephen's character is cleverly built to represent those that feel nostalgia for a past life. This causes it to be represented in political discourses and in family models. There are new family models, as the one represented by Viktor Goraya and Daniel Lyons, but *Years and Years* shows how these new family models cannot survive the outcomes of these racist discourses. Then, the fear of change - verbalised for example with the loss of cultural identity and the loss of jobs - is also present in the forms of renewal of the traditional state models by mirroring the new families that populate the series.

At the interfamilial and intrapersonal level, the series is modelling its characters to reflect current political discourses and debates. Considering that (traditional) state models are always based on (traditional) family models, it would appear that these new family models introduced in the series would also shape the state model; hence, *Years and Years* reworks traditional family models and tasks them with the aim of redefining the state model, yet this task is never achieved as Daniel's death at sea highlights. In addition, Daniel Lyons going to look for his partner, appropriating the traditional white male protector's role, emphasizes the incapability of the new family models to make substantial changes to the state model as it currently is.

As stated by Koegler et al., "[Brexit] has given racism a free pass, and hate speech a broader acceptance in society" (586). In fact, Thatcher's policies affected the beginning of the Brexit campaign, since it started revealing not only scepticism but xenophobia towards Europe. Thatcher's influence on current British politics preserved a Eurosceptic sector - as well as several modes of racism - what, as experts have affirmed, made Brexit win (e.g., Roe-Crines 187; Duff 3). Thereafter, the creation of Brexit maintained the legacy of the empire in the UK because it restricted the crossing of borders. Hence migratory movements became a "problem" for the western world since, after September 11, there was a continuity of growing concern about controlling migration.

Another point of interest when tracing Thatcherite influence is its consequences on British politics. This withdrawal foregrounds disparities within British society, such as the inability to own a house, but it also demonstrates xenophobia against people with cultural differences.<sup>13</sup> In the UK, there has been an ideological movement that has revived certain myths about national identity.<sup>14</sup> This need to maintain the idea of national identity is culturally manifested in the Brexit discourse. For instance, the British PM Boris Johnson recently stresses that the British government will ensure the borders to tackle illegal immigration:

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<sup>13</sup> This is a fact presented by many cultural texts of the last decades of the twentieth century and the current twenty-first century, some examples: Gurinder Chandra's *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) or Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2009).

<sup>14</sup> For example, the fact that there have been numerous versions of the myth of King Arthur reflects how British identity is breaking down. Within the UK, Scottish or Welsh nationalisms (among others) are not as united as they seem. Thus, it seems that, through adaptations of the Arthurian myth, an attempt is being made to maintain national identity when it is under threat.

It is controlled immigration, through safe and legal routes, which enables us to make generous offers of sanctuary while managing the inevitable pressures on our public services such that we can give all those who come here the support they need to rebuild their lives, to integrate and to thrive . . .

So just as Brexit allowed us to take back control of legal immigration by replacing free movement with our points-based system, we are also taking back control of illegal immigration, with a long-term plan for asylum in this country. ("Prime Minister Boris Johnson's speech on tackling illegal migration" 03:47-06:14).

Controlled immigration therefore only permits people to enter the UK who are deemed by UK policy post-Brexit to be "legal." Consequently, those people can enter the country to rebuild their lives, integrate and prosper. Nevertheless, the control of illegal immigration provokes many deaths of people fleeing from situations such as war, the most recent example being British not participating in the asylum policies that the war in Ukraine has imposed upon European nations. British politicians have therefore succeeded in regaining control over immigration with Brexit. Brexit allows British politicians to create borders and the crossing of these borders is sometimes determined by xenophobic beliefs that demand the fulfilment of criteria that many people is not able to do. An example taken from the series is that of Viktor Goraya, who tries to flee to his country asking for asylum in the United Kingdom, because he can be sentenced to death for his sexual orientation. Nevertheless, he cannot enter the UK legally because of such restrictive measures. As is seen in everyday news, the post-Brexit situation reflects racism, but also complicates the life of certain asylum seekers within the UK (Home Office 6).

As stated before, one of the main prominent aspects of migration studies and their depiction is related to identity, forging a sense of belonging to a specific nation. For instance, Viktor Goraya has a migrant identity, and his sense of belonging is changed the moment he sees the corpse of Daniel Lyons. He questions himself if he belongs to the place he has migrated, since he observes that the country does not want him. Therefore, the concept of nation-state plays a crucial role in foregrounding how an identity is constructed and defined.

## **5. Ethnicity and (the De/construction of) National Identity in *Years and Years***

The term 'national identity' is understood as the sociocultural construction of a person's identity based on the concept of nation-state. Ethnicity and race create stereotypes caused by sociocultural factors, such as ethics and values. An example of the representation of migration in filmography is the case of Viktor Goraya as he is a refugee living in housing facilities created by the British government. *Years and Years* also foregrounds how ethnic groups and national identities have been adversely affected by policies of exclusion. This section introduces a deconstruction of identities to examine how Brexit and racist discourses and attitudes are represented in *Years and Years* (2019).

The national identities of Brexit supporters are constructed on the belief that they are 'left-behind,' which is motivated by the concept of the nation-state. The term 'nation-state' refers to "a community of citizens who identify themselves as a nation" (Feinstein "nation-state"). In fact, the nation-state is prominent when depicting migrant identities as it is related to the

feeling of Englishness (Virdee and McGeever 1804).<sup>15</sup> It is normally associated with far-right discourses and supremacism. For instance, this is evident when Thomas Mair murdered Labour MP Jo Cox shouting the far-right motto 'Britain First' (Isakjee and Lorne 10).

Although the nation is culturally constructed, several members of the nation-state associate themselves with the belief that the state belongs to them. Thus, this belief is often associated with racist discourses that motivate anti-immigrant sentiments. For example, in the Brexit Leave campaign, it was argued that the UK should leave the EU to regain control of the borders.

The representation of migration in *Years and Years* allows to analyse the idea of "belonging" by examining the concept of "diaspora." This last notion refers to the dispersal of people from their homelands to other places. Thus, diaspora identifies "a new way of being, an emergent mode of perception and engagement with the world" (McLeod 237). Consequently, the representation of identity is influenced by the sense of belonging to a place. This idea is controversial for all those people who, for whatever reason/s, are forced to emigrate to improve their living conditions.

A political system like the one created by Brexit aggravates the issue of migration as it rejects any identity other than the British one. In the series, even though Viktor Goraya is not British, his "sense of belonging" could be explained using the concept of "hybrid identity" as defined by Bhabha. As said before, it refers to the combination of two or more cultural identities (4). Thus, the mixture of identities, as the ones shown by Viktor, occurs when individuals have a "sense of belonging" in diverse cultural places. However, Brexit policies alter hybrid identities by promoting racist discourses. For instance, there are pieces of evidence demonstrating that racism is present in society, such as in Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. Even after his speech, the situation has not changed at all since there are instances of violence, hate and beliefs against racial minorities, as recent instances of xenophobic violence expose. Nonetheless, Martin Luther King stated that

When we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual,

Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last! ("Martin Luther King - I Have A Dream Speech - August 28, 1963" 16:47-17:17).

Although this speech occurred in the States, there is still a parallel between Martin Luther King's speech and racial problems caused by Brexit. In fact, what Brexit emphasises is that the UK must consider British citizens first.

As previously mentioned, British national identities are constructed on the fact that the Britain should go first. Refugees and immigrants and, in turn, their sense of belonging is conversely affected by this since they are not considered "part of that Britain." In addition, this sense of belonging is affected by the representation of otherness (Bhabha 97). This concept

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<sup>15</sup> While Brexit supporters advocated that the UK should leave the EU, Brexit politicians have been more concerned with the interests of England. The sense of Englishness is therefore directly associated with Britishness, as it has no other identities within the UK. This has been reflected in the vote to leave the EU, as the votes of Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh citizens have not been taken into account as much as those of the English.

of the "other" has been treated by postcolonial criticism, who have found a relationship between this "other" and Shakespeare's *Othello* ("Critical approaches to 'Othello'"). For instance, Othello represents both the "other" and the identity determined by the "normativity," portraying in turn a hybrid identity. Othello's identity is due to his social status and his self-hatred. This is evident when Othello categorises himself as "malignant and turbaned" (Shakespeare 5.2.349). Bhabha's conclusion, however, is that racial stereotypes deny diversity by the fixity of differences in skin and culture (108). Indeed, this fixity is associated with forms of racist speeches and attitudes, which complicate the definition of identity and aggravates migrant's sense of belonging. Consequently, these instances of racism end in the conditioning factor of human behaviour and, therefore, in racist identities. As Fanon pointed out,

this behavior betrays a determination to objectify, to confine, to imprison, to harden. Phrases such as 'I know them,' 'that's the way they are,' show this maximum objectification successfully achieved... It is therefore not as a result of the evolution of people's minds that racism loses its virulence (44).

It is in the racist behaviour where Brexit bases its discrimination against migrants. For instance, the series *Years and Years* (2019) portrays the moment of Viktor Goraya's loss of identity when he questioned whether he belonged to the place where he had emigrated. This is evident in "I came home. Is this home?" ("Episode 4" 56:20). Significantly, these words may signify that Viktor Goraya has, as Daniel Lyons, a hybrid identity. Viktor's identity is at first that of a refugee; however, it doubles to a hybrid identity the moment he and Daniel Lyons get into the boat, portraying in turn the identity of an undocumented citizen within the UK. What the last quotation demonstrates is that the British legal system does not take into account the problems faced by immigrants and refugees. The fact that the series portrays the cruelty of British politics reflects how they affect British society. Consequently, Brexit policies complicate the sense of belonging of immigrants and refugees, as the legal system does not recognise the identities of people other than Britons.

Postcolonial theories, therefore, help to identify migrant identities because they study, among other fields, race and help to trace the evolution of identity. The series shows two identities: that of Viktor Goraya, who is a refugee, and that of Daniel Lyons, a Briton whose identity is deconstructed when he loses his documentation. According to Rodríguez, British identity is composed of fragmented identities as Brexit excludes both the EU and immigrants as being considered a threat to the British system (25-26). This is reflected in the fact that belonging to a place defines and constructs identity, as migrants can, and try to identify the destination they arrive as their homeland. Conversely, Brexit rejects this issue as it advocates for a Britain belonging only to a non-existent community of Britons. This exclusion is also detrimental to Daniel Lyons, for example, since he is also discriminated because of his loss of race privilege. The policies created by Brexit prevents him from entering his own homeland legally when he lost his passport. Therefore, the fact that he dies in the series reflects how the British government - heavily influenced by Brexit and racism - put all their effort into maintaining the *status quo*. As a matter of fact, the exclusion caused by the Brexit campaign has led to xenophobia being dramatically normalised. As Eaglestone underlines,

Brexit is not only political, economic and administrative: perhaps most significantly it is an event in culture, too. ... A nation is too huge to be a real community in which everyone actually knows

each other. Instead, nations are produced in the imagination by concepts, narratives, memories and traditions: that is, through the work of culture (1).

## 6. Conclusion

At this point, and after analysing the representation of migration in *Years and Years*, it can be affirmed that the imperialist past of the United Kingdom played a key role in the development of Brexit politics and its accompanying discourses. Although after the Brexit referendum, it was evident that a withdrawal from the EU was going to happen, one can see how national identity has evolved over the years. With this in mind, it is not really striking how Brexit has emerged as a way of redefining national identity. In the wake of this withdrawal, British politics have redefined the racist values of the imperial past. The slogans "Britain comes first," "putting Britain back on its feet" or "take back control" reflect how a longing for an imperial past plays a key role in the construction of national identity. The series has showed family roles and how politics have a strong influence on the construction of identity and how migration situations are represented in cultural productions. The character of Daniel Lyons is very interesting as it shows in a fictional and dystopian way how Brexit policies could also exclude those who have a claim to belong to the community Brexit has put forward. Additionally, the character of Viktor Goraya draws curiosity to the point that Brexit excludes all non-UK citizens. An in-depth analysis of the intersections of race, gender and sexuality should be incorporated to further examine the de/construction of identities.

Margaret Thatcher played a crucial role in foregrounding British scepticism towards Europe and the desire of controlling immigration and, therefore, had a significant influence on how current British politics affects migration. For instance, Brexit discourses, as noted above, are largely based on the desire for control. Thus, there is an eagerness to continue British imperial legacy, which is manifested in the desire to control borders. As explained above, Margaret Thatcher also established the foundations of Euroscepticism.

The present study has sought to examine *Years and Years* to highlight the representation of Brexit policies and the issue of migration in recent cultural products. Particularly, this study has attempted to focus on how identities - both national and migrant - are deconstructed and affected by racist speeches and attitudes. The results of this study have found that the construction of identities is determined by the intersections of race, sexuality, nation and social class. Experiences of place and nationhood through migration imply broader contexts through which we might understand culture as rooted in and developing from these movements.

The concept of citizenship - sense of belonging - is presented in the series based on the documentation a person has. The concept of national identity is very clear in the case of Daniel Lyons, who is a full citizen because he can prove his citizenship. However, this national identity is transformed when Daniel Lyons' passport is stolen, and he has to cross the border into the UK. As previously mentioned, Brexit politicians have placed more importance on the feeling of Englishness. Brexit has therefore opened the debate in such a way that Scottish, Irish and Welsh citizens are questioning their national identity. Although this sentiment originated much earlier, perhaps the politics of Brexit have allowed this feeling to be exposed.



However, scholars may be still examining to which extent Brexit affects migration and the nation. Diaspora studies enable to broaden and expand the boundaries commonly associated with national cultures. Thus, further research is necessary since it is a field in which much progress has not been made yet. Further research should be carried out to establish the connection between identities and new family models as they appear in popular cultural products. It is also crucial to incorporate sexuality and gender as parameters in the study of the family models, migration issues and identities. In addition, it would be interesting to examine Brexit as represented in literary works such as Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016).

Finally, some difficulties and limitations need to be acknowledged. For example, it was complex to analyse Brexit, as this withdrawal took place last year and many studies on Brexit focused on the socioeconomic situation and how Brexit is presented in literature. Finally, an important limitation has been that the series currently has only six episodes. Many events in the episodes are shown as sequences without dialogue. This therefore makes the analysis considerably more difficult, as events are limited to interpretation.

Considering the observations above, a cultural identity is not fixed, but is formed and evolves according to factors such as culture, ethnicity, race or the place of belonging. People's citizenship is based on the documentation they have. The loss of documentation - as reflected in the series in the case of Daniel Lyons - causes exclusionary migration policy systems such as Brexit to disregard individuals' citizenship.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Depiction of the lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi



Figure 1: Representation of Alan Kurdi's lifeless body on a beach on the Greek island of Kos (Photograph: Reuters). Retrieved from *El Confidencial* (De Diego "La muerte del pequeño Aylan ya tiene condena: 4 años por tráfico de personas").

### Appendix 2: Vivienne Rook's speech

VIVIENNE ROOK:

Great Britain stands alone in the world.

To the West, America is the lone wolf. To the East, Europe is in flames. And beyond that, China is rising. And I want to tell you that in standing alone... this country has never been more magnificent!

I promise you freedom and the ability to enjoy that freedom!

An embolden society with the strength to enable itself!

I am only just beginning. I look ahead and see glories!

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, let me wish you a very merry Christmas ("Episode 5" 00:52).

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