

No Refuge: Ethics and the Global Refugee Crisis. By Serena Parekh. Oxford University Press, 2020. pp. 247

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Volume 38, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091351ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40986>

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Éditeur(s)

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University

ISSN

0229-5113 (imprimé)

1920-7336 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Islam, S. (2022). Compte rendu de [No Refuge: Ethics and the Global Refugee Crisis. By Serena Parekh. Oxford University Press, 2020. pp. 247]. *Refuge*, 38(1), 148–150. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40986>

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No Refuge: Ethics and the Global Refugee Crisis

Sariful Islam

BOOK REVIEW

Parekh, S. (2020). *No Refuge: Ethics and the Global Refugee Crisis*. Oxford University Press, pp. 247. ISBN: 9780197507995

HISTORY Published 28 April 2022


The debate on moral obligations to provide shelter and humanitarian assistance to refugees has resurfaced with the recent flow of refugees from the Global South to the Global North. Amid rising hostility towards refugees, Serena Parekh, in her book **No Refuge: Ethics and the Global Refugee Crisis**, aims to settle the debate on moral obligations to stand with refugees. The Western states and their citizens have “political responsibility” to ensure the “**minimum conditions of human dignity**” for the refugees, she argues.

The six chapters in the book are divided into two parts. The first part of the book, titled “The First Crisis—The Crisis for Western Countries,” consists of three chapters. The second part, titled “The Second Crisis—Crisis for the Refugees,” includes a further three chapters. While Parekh frames the overwhelming flow of refugees that the European countries faced in 2015 as the **first**

crisis, she terms the precarious life for the refugees produced with the restrictive policies and measures by the Western countries as the **second crisis**.

The book opens with a preface, in which Parekh challenges the stereotypical notions regarding refugees as a security threat and economic burden as she sets the tone for the debate on moral obligations to help refugees. In the introduction, Parekh offers an overview of the refugee crisis with a statistically informed discussion and clarifies two clashing principles—national sovereignty and human rights. Her narrow definition of the concept of “minimum conditions of human dignity” (pp. 11–13) includes the basic needs—that is, food, housing, medical services, and elementary education—that any human being requires to live with dignity. She opts to keep facilities such as advanced education and sophisticated medical services outside of the minimum conditions of living

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a life.

The first chapter is dedicated to the definition of a **refugee**. The author notes the vagueness of the existing definition and its exclusivity in recognizing someone as refugees based on the source of harm. Parekh argues that due to the definitory ambiguity associated with the terminology of **refugee** and the inconsistent national practices in assigning refugee status, a genuine refugee oftentimes fails to receive status. She expands the existing definition to offer a broader, more inclusive alternative whereby refugees are all those people

whose human rights are so severely under threat that they have been forced to flee their home and seek international protection, whether they are fleeing state persecution of their religious practices, violence by private actors the state won't protect them from, or climate change-induced drought (p. 49)

Moving forth, Parekh sets a general philosophical ground for discussing the question of having moral obligations in the following two chapters. She brings secular views, religious traditions, and human rights perspectives forward to present the rationales for moral obligations. Among the secular philosophical strands, she bases her discussion on consequentialist and Kantian views; according to Parekh, these two views have been “proven durable and intuitive” (p. 56). The consequentialist view encourages taking action that produces “the best outcome for the most people” even it might harm some people. In contrast, the Kantian view argues for treating each person as “ends in themselves” and guides them to act in ways that can be universalized (p. 58–59). By stating that religious ethics dictate many people to stand with distant strangers, Parekh interpolates the texts from the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and

Islam—as they share a “tremendous consensus” (p. 66) on treating refugees. The secular philosophy, religious ethics, and legal human rights perspective are presented to complement each other. If there is reluctance to accept moral obligations on religious and secular-ethical grounds, Parekh indicates that “all people are entitled to basic human rights” (p. 54) by virtue of their birth as human beings. In these two chapters, specifically in chapter 3, she also registers the nationalist view that argues for border control and stronger moral obligation to fellow citizens over strangers.

Before introducing a new perspective, she brings the second crisis to light in chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 4, the dire living conditions of refugees in camps and urban squalid settlements are depicted with vivid descriptions of refugees’ lives from Bangladesh to Turkey to Jordan. This discussion provides a conspicuous picture painted with refugee narratives about the situations that force them to escape from host countries to the West. The following chapter deals with Western countries’ deterrence policies and responses. Parekh argues that deterrence measures such as increasing border control, putting up fences, and containing refugees in third countries make refugees’ lives terrible or “more deadly” (p. 139).

The philosophical discussion in chapter 6 makes Parekh’s contribution distinct as she presents her approach of framing the injustice to the refugees as “structural” and conceptualizing the responsibility of the Western countries towards the refugees based on the work of Iris Young (2011), **Responsibility for Justice**. In the words of Parekh, Young observes that structural injustice emerges from social and political structures, the norms and practices that privilege some over others. Following Young, Parekh terms the current refugee protection system as unjust

as it falls short in providing the “minimum conditions of human dignity” (p. 162) to the refugees. Parekh sparsely delineates the shortage of the system throughout the book. In this chapter, she urges the Western actors—individuals and states—to shift from mere rescuers or charitable stakeholders and to take responsibility.

With an apt analysis of locating the lacunae of the current refugee protection system, Parekh categorically holds Western states and other institutions responsible for the structural injustice experienced by refugees. According to her, the Western actors are responsible as they have played “the biggest role in creating, influencing and supporting” the existing system (p. 161). In order to correct this systemic injustice, the author states that Western states should take the responses as part of “political responsibility.” Following Young, Parekh contends that the concept of **political responsibility** refers to the shared responsibility that the Western countries have to bear of rectifying the injustice rather than identifying a particular policy or an actor guilty. Parekh prefers the term **responsibility over duty or obligation**, as the former is no less obligatory but allows for more discretion in determining how to rectify structural injustice, whereas **duty and obligation** demand specific requirements to be met (p. 171).

In her conclusion, Parekh prescribes Western countries to provide more funds for the refugees staying in the Global South, giving incentives and logistical support for temporary integration. She also prescribes political integration of refugees by providing “disaggregated citizenship,” an entitlement that embodies certain social or political rights for the refugees but not all rights that a citi-

zen enjoys (p. 187). Beside arguing for relaxing the asylum-seeking procedures, she advocates for increasing the number of refugee resettlements.

Parekh keeps the reader engaged with narratives of refugees drawn from secondary sources, carrying a story-oriented framework, a lucid writing style, and conceptual clarity, all while dealing with core concepts in each chapter. The book’s intricately woven contents hold the potential to satiate audiences from diverse backgrounds in understanding the problems faced by refugees while aiding in the formulation of arguments in favor of helping refugees. However, the book does not adequately engage with the concept of **dignity**, which is an abstract, ambiguous concept and refers to much more than the mere basic needs of living. Another point that a reader might find missing is the discussion on the rationales behind poor non-Western countries, which host more than 85% of refugees, to provide shelter and share resources with refugees.

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