

ഇശൽ
വൈത്യകം
ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 46

Ishal Paithrkam

Online issue 31

print issue 46

June 2026



Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar

Mappila Kala Akademi

Department of Cultural Affairs

Government of Kerala-India

June 2026

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2026 ജൂൺ

പകർപ്പാവകാശം: പ്രസാധകർക്ക്

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Ishal Paithrkam

E-ISSN: 2582-550X

Peer-Reviewed

Two issue per year

Bilingual

Issue: 46

Online issue: 31

June: 2026

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Editor

Dr. Shamshad hussain. KT

Publisher

The Secretary, Mahakavi

Moyinkutty Vaidyar mappila

Kala Academy, Department of

Cultural affairs, Government

of Kerala, Kondotty Post

Pin: 673638

India

Ph: +91 483 2711432

Printed at

Kerala state C APT

Kozhikode

പ്രസാധകർ

മഹാകവി മോയിൻകുട്ടി വൈദ്യർ

മാപ്പിള കലാ അക്കാദമി

കൊണ്ടോട്ടി: 673 638

ഫോൺ: 0483 2711432

www.mappilakalaacademy.org

www.ishalpaithrkam.info

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Human Surplus and the Politics of Exclusion: Reframing Refugeeism in Gaza

**Ms. Geethu Johny
Dr. Jeena Ann Joseph**

The investigation into what cultures consider garbage, its management, and the underlying values of power structures explains the concept of discard studies by examining the cultural, economic, and environmental effects of waste and discard practices. Discard studies is a metaphor for understanding how immigrants and refugees are treated by exposing the systematic marginalisation and exclusion of particular individuals, things, and activities. The current study engages discard studies, especially the works of Susan Strasser and Robin Nagle, along with Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics to illustrate how Dervla Murphy's narrative documents the structural production of refugee disposability in Gaza. *A Month by the Sea: Encounters in Gaza* is an authentic examination of how certain communities and individuals are systematically excluded and marginalized, akin to waste in society. Discard studies provide a distinctive perspective on how communities value and devalue human life in general and immigrant and refugee life in particular. Like the waste examined in discard studies, immigrants and refugees frequently find themselves on the periphery of society. Often located in inhospitable environments, refugee camps symbolize 'wastelands' and portray harsh realities such as border controls, denial of basic rights, and confinement in over-

crowded camps. Literally like items that occupy a position between being useful and being garbage, immigrants and refugees occupy a place between being welcomed and being excluded. Through Murphy's narrative observations of everyday life in Gaza, the study demonstrates how environmental degradation, infrastructural breakdown, and political containment collectively contribute to the production of refugee disposability. Discarded populations' ability to withstand and fight their enforced marginality is profoundly reflected in the way the physical, psychological, and socioeconomic aspects of being discardable are intricately woven into the fabric of life for refugees in Gaza. By positioning Gaza within the framework of discard studies and necropolitics, the paper argues that refugeeism can be understood as a condition produced through geopolitical structures that manage and regulate surplus populations.

Keywords: Refugeeism, Discard studies, Immigrants, Gaza, Necropolitics, Disposability

Introduction

Risk, hope, and resilience are often characteristics of the journey taken by refugees and immigrants. Yet, many of them encounter dehumanising treatment after reaching what they believe to be secure places of refuge. Host nations and governments, conquered by the political, economic, and societal forces, view these vulnerable populations as disposable, depriving them of their rights and dignity. Refugeeism, characterised by displacement, loss, and the struggle for survival, intersects with discard studies, a field that investigates the social, cultural and political aspects of waste and disposability. In this framework, refugees often become 'disposable' populations, marginalized and considered surplus by host societies. The condition of disposability is structured well in the framework of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "wasted lives". This notion is generated as a result of modernity and globalization, creating a surplus of humanity. This study examines how discard studies can shed light on the lived experiences of refugees, revealing the systemic structures that make them invisible and undervalued by analysing the connections between waste, value and human life.

A fledgling interdisciplinary field, discard studies examine the socio-cultural, economic and political dimensions of waste, discarding, and disposability. With an initial focus only on material waste, discard studies have broadened to explore how societies determine value, who or what is considered disposable and the significance of these perceptions. Geopolitically discard studies offer an evaluative stance on the systemic exclusion and marginalization of certain populations, resource exploitation, and the environmental and social impacts of global policies. Primarily the concept challenges the view that any unwanted byproduct of human activity is waste. The argument as per the study claims that discarding is deeply embedded in social, political and economic systems. The focus is on what societies choose to discard, whether it is waste, marginalized communities, or neglected spaces and why certain materials, ideas, and people are labelled as waste. This reveals insights into power dynamics, cultural values and societal norms.

Waste, according to Susan Strasser, is historically produced and is closely tied to the rise of modernity and convenience. It depends on the change of cultures, repair or reuse vs. throwaway. According to Strasser's argument, discarding is not a natural phenomenon but something that is organised and normalised. Humanitarian law has been extensively reviewed through refugee scholarship, but it has rarely been analysed through the lens of disposability. Discard studies primarily focus on 'material waste', engaging with environmental degradation and vulnerability, with limited acknowledgement in the production of "surplus populations". This paper intervenes at the intersection of discard studies in the realm of refugee crisis through Dervla Murphy's testimony in *A Month by the Sea: Encounters in Gaza*.

A review of Gaza through Murphy's lens provides an understanding of how disposability is lived and experienced through space and infrastructure. The paper examines how discard studies provide a critical framework for understanding refugee disposability in Gaza, and how Murphy exposes the societal structures that render Gazan lives surplus. Gaza is not just a metaphor but a material structured through sanitation breakdown, environmental toxicity, dependency on

aid and forced marginality. Thus, refugeeism is not simply about displacement but management of surplus life with broader geopolitical realms.

Discarding the Discarded

The concept of refugeeism and disposal might appear paradoxical to individuals and nations who are beyond the factual reality of insecurity. Applying the concept metaphorically in a geopolitical context it is evident that refugees, immigrants and indigenous communities who often face displacement are disregarded similar to ‘material waste’. Depending on the dominance of political systems they are often figuratively treated as ‘waste’ or ‘impure’, and excluded from availing socio-economic benefits. The global movement of waste, including electronic and hazardous materials, from wealthy countries to poorer one’s results in exploitation of less powerful regions, leading to environmental degradation, health impacts and social upheaval. Discard studies critically examine how certain regions become dumping grounds for material waste and for human beings treated as waste. Murphy mentions the “broken sewage system in Gaza,” which was destroyed by repeated bombing, and, like Nagle, points to the time when “concealed systems of waste management” start to reveal “political priorities.” However, when sewage is pushed out into the open, it is not only a technical and humanitarian issue. It becomes grounds for abandonment. In Gaza, sewage contamination brings to light the failure of the structures that sustain life, such as infrastructure. It's the literalness of Nagle's argument here that sanitation is a determinant of whose lives are made liveable: destroying sewage networks is the erasure of the basic conditions by which life becomes possible. As per Robin Nagle, waste is an infrastructure and corporeal regime where garbage is kept concealed, and the systems decide on whose lives are liveable and whose are left to neglect and toxicity.

The concept of waste is symbolically employed in political discourse to justify the act of exclusion of certain groups, ideologies, or territories as ‘waste’ by nations and political entities. This enhances the symbolic use of discarding by power hierarchies and validates the control exercised over marginalized groups. Nagle’s idea of a geogra-

phy of waste comes through strongly in the way Murphy moves between Gaza's better-off areas and Shatti camp. These are not distant worlds. They sit almost side by side. That is what makes the contrast so disturbing. A space of relative comfort can keep waste, hardship, and visible decay at a distance, while the camp nearby has no such protection. The hundred yards between them is therefore not just a physical distance. It shows how discard is organised: some lives are shielded from it, while others are made to live inside its consequences. For instance, the treatment of refugees in regions like Gaza, as explored by Murphy, highlights the geopolitical dimensions of discarding. Similarly, Ali, a teenage refugee from Syria, described the camp in which he was residing as a "garbage dump" (Dawson & Blake, 2014). Refugees are dumped in dump yards, disposed by both home countries and host nations, often dismissing basic human rights. Positioning of toxic waste sites and polluting industries in low-income and minority settlements accentuates geopolitical discarding. The field of discard studies analyse how such inhumane practices are accounted and perpetuated along with long term impact on affected populations. Discard studies penetrate deep into sustainable and just practices by highlighting the inequalities in global supply chain and consumer cultures in wealthier nations.

By exploring the themes of marginalization, dispossession, and the management of unwanted entities; both people and objects, discard studies and refugee studies intersect in their emphasis on power imbalances. Often losing homes, livelihoods and identities due to war, persecution or any disaster, refugees are pushed away from the mainstream society just like waste. Treated impure or dangerous, refugees are kept out of sight or hidden from public and ignored from mainstream discourse. Refugee camps and detention centers serve a similar function, physically segregating refugees from the broader population, often in substandard conditions and out of sight. There is a sense that Mbembe's idea of necropolitical space is becoming real in the body in the context of Murphy's movement through Gaza. It's in the sense of being watched or stopped by the speeding taxis, in the no-go areas, and in how people are shut in like "as though in a dungeon." The city of Gaza is not a city of borders and orders alone. It is re-

strained by movement, it is restrained by denying movement. Understanding starts to come about the effect of confinement on the body. The person who can't move can't live. If a person is always contained, they can never live. Life goes on in the shadow; it seems as if it has diminished. Giorgio Agamben conceives a refugee camp as a political space where they are reduced to what he terms “bare life”, deprived of basic rights and recognition. They are excluded from any legal benefits, suspended between protection and abandonment. Thus, camps become zones of institutional disposal, reinforcing the metaphor of human discard.

The physical aspects of waste, its management, and value are closely knit to the material conditions of refugees like the quality of shelter, resource access and dignified life. The material conditions, economic structures, immigration policies and international aid are linked to the global political system. Discarding them in environmentally hazardous conditions, along with additional risks from climate change and environmental degradation pose threat to life.

Refugee Displacement and Crisis

Murphy (2015) writes that “the inhabitants of Gaza, like their fellow citizens on the West Bank and in the Diaspora, are victims of the cruel geopolitics of the region” (p.x). Refugees are produced as the ‘other’, enduring stigmatization and inferiority, which is embedded in spatial segregation and sanitation breakdown as Nagle might address to as a disguised system of waste management. A useful point from Nagle’s work is that sanitation workers keep social life running, but the people who depend on them rarely notice them. Murphy’s Gaza reveals something close to this. The people she writes about are not simply waiting for help, nor are they suffering in some abstract way. They are constantly doing the work of survival. They deal with contaminated water, damaged homes, shortages, and all the small, exhausting adjustments that become necessary when institutions withdraw or stop functioning. This is survival as labour. It is necessary, draining, and often unseen. Like the sanitation workers in Nagle’s account, Gaza’s inhabitants are made to manage the consequences of a collapsing system. Yet the system that places this burden on them

also refuses to recognise their labour.

The extensive movement of individuals escaping war, natural catastrophes, and persecution, force nations to rethink the concept of inclusivity, compassion and community and to perceive individuals as unworthy of aid or retreat. Displacement deeply affects the identities of refugees. The process of assimilation to unfamiliar cultural settings due to forced migration results in trauma and grief. Identities are in flux, caught in tension between the new environment and their places of origin. Denial of complete integration by the host countries aggravate societal rejection leading to transitionality. Policies and regulations by the government is crucial in shaping the experiences and identities of refugees. Policies of inclusion help rebuild lives and identities.

History explains the existence of refugees since time immemorial, so does their trauma and question of identity. The situation is not contemporary; it existed in different forms often neglected and abandoned. Through her work Dervla Murphy portrays the neglected life of Palestinians in Gaza, within the broader geopolitical landscape. The insights on refugee plight and the complex socio-political realities of a region defined by conflict and the resilient spirit of its inhabitants are explored in the book. Ongoing conflicts and military operations in Gaza results in constant displacement, loss of homes, communities and personal possessions.

In order to address refugee crisis, it is important to have a fundamental shift in how displaced individuals are viewed and valued. A compassionate future can be developed by implementing inclusive policies and practices and recognizing their inherent worth and contributions. The study represents a region tormented by extended warfare, addressing the rights of refugees and various humanitarian issues. The paucity of independence, choice, and the desolate dependence on aid lead to profound complications and self-doubt among the discarded. Through human stories, Murphy presents a meticulous view of the difficulties, resilience, and adaptations people undergo when deracinated from their homes. These accounts help to understand the human side of recognition and displacement, shedding light on how refugees are often treated as disposable by the global community.

Though refugee history spans centuries, the study narrows its focus to Gaza as an immediate site where the logic of discard becomes structurally visible. Back in 1500 BC, Gaza was a prosperous region, with rich soil and deep-water harbour. Exploitation successively by Egyptians, Philistines, Israelites, Persians, Greeks and Romans resulted in cultural and commercial decline. With frightful movement restrictions, Gazans face limited access to employment, education and healthcare. This initiates a cycle of poverty and dependency, manifesting them to be invisible and irrelevant to those in power. Polluted water in Gaza is not just the indicator of failed infrastructure. It reflects a deeper value of the value of life in Gaza. As Strasser's history of the reform shows, there has never been a purely technical aspect to sanitation. It has always been fraught with moral and political presuppositions that determine who has the right to live cleanly, safely and with a certain degree of dignity. That logic seems to be inverted in Gaza. It's not only neglect when people don't have clean water. It makes them a sign of a distinctiveness from the people who are covered by a hygienic life. Withholding sanitation, in other words, is a sovereign message: these lives can be left open, polluted and disposable. Significantly ignored and suppressed, Gazans are overlooked, reinforcing their status as disposable populations. Humanitarian aid, though present, is often inadequate and inconsistent. The international community's response to the crisis in Gaza is frequently criticized for being insufficient and politicized, further entrenching the sense of neglect and abandonment among the refugee population.

Dervla Murphy in her 80's immersed herself in a society largely overlooked by the rest of the world. She spends a month living within the community and highlights the resilience and dignity of the people despite the unfavourable conditions they are put in. Murphy (2015) states, "what little I could see of the Strip from a speeding taxi was as expected: depressing. Time has been unkind to the region" (p.12). Read through Mbembe, time in Gaza feels less like something moving forward and more like something being held in place. The blockade does not only stop people from crossing borders. It reaches into the future itself. Houses cannot be rebuilt properly, development is stalled, and every plan seems to run into the same wall. Life contin-

ues, but it is pushed into a kind of endless present. This is where Mbembe's idea of the "death world" becomes useful. Death here is not always sudden or dramatic. It can also mean being kept in conditions where life cannot grow, repair itself, or imagine what comes next. Murphy seems to grasp this almost immediately when she enters the Strip. She is not only seeing poverty or ruins. She is sensing a place where time has been made to stop.

The travelogue details personal stories and encounters revealing how individuals and communities maintain humanity and hope amid adversity. The Israeli blockade and recurring conflicts illustrate how these geopolitical actions shatter the economy, infrastructure and social fabric of the region. Here, Mbembe's idea of necropower makes the question of colonial sovereignty difficult to avoid. In this setting, power is not directed only at the named combatant or the armed enemy. It spreads across ordinary civilian life. The blockade's control over food, fuel, medicine, and other basic necessities therefore cannot be treated as a security measure alone. It becomes a way of putting pressure on life itself, making survival harder, slower, and more uncertain. Murphy's figures from Operation Cast Lead make this imbalance stark. More than 1,400 Gazans were killed in twenty-two days, while 23 Israelis were killed by Gazan rockets. These numbers are not incidental. They show the scale at which power is being exercised. The disproportion matters because it reveals a moral and political sorting of death: some deaths are treated as intolerable, while others are made to appear manageable, expected, or even administratively acceptable.

Gazans showcase strong cultural identity, heritage, traditions and sense of community among the population. The book delves into the intricacies of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, highlighting the historical and political nuances of the situation and Murphy criticizes the international community for its indifference and complicity in the suffering of Gazans, pointing out how geopolitical interests and alliances often take precedence over human rights and justice.

Murphy explores displacement and marginalization, yet celebrates the resilience and cultural richness of the Gazans through de-

tailed observations and empathetic storytelling. Strasser traces the shift from a culture of repair and reuse to a throwaway economy, and her point is clear: the ability to discard is itself a modern privilege. Murphy's description of Gazans sheltering under "jagged lengths of corrugated iron, shreds of carpet, ragged curtain fragments, sheets of cardboard nailed to half-burnt door panels, battered plastic trays that read 'Adam Hotel'" (P.61) captures the other side of that privilege. These materials are not being reused out of nostalgia or thrift. They are being pressed into service because there is no alternative.

Gazans, in this sense, cannot afford to throw things away. They are forced into a kind of harsh stewardship over broken objects, burnt fragments, and leftovers from other worlds. The hotel tray is especially striking. Something once belonging to the tourist economy, already discarded, becomes part of a shelter. This is the double bind that Strasser helps us see in Gaza: people are caught inside the larger throwaway economy, surrounded by its waste, but at the same time excluded from the privilege of discarding anything themselves. Murphy challenges readers to confront the harsh realities faced by refugees and consider the broader implications of geopolitical actions on vulnerable populations.

Gazan history was shaped by the 1948 war for Palestine and the 2008-09 onslaught. The Egyptian army controlled the Gaza Strip until 1967. The Israel- Palestine conflict was brutal in Gaza particularly as an aftereffect of colonialism. The food supplied was hardly edible, the tents were old and damaged, and the water was usually contaminated. Murphy (2015) recollects, "Nabil had warned me never ever to drink tap water- or even rinse my mouth, or boil an egg in it. The level of contamination is high enough to penetrate eggshells" (p.34). There was hardly any medical care available, and many people with untreated ailments lived together. Refugees are more of a burden than a duty, and hence the host government restricted assistance for their regeneration. The camp became a shadow of abusive work conditions, long hours of labour in dangerous scenarios, with minimal wage, and forced prostitution. These unnoticed abuses resulted in an uninterrupted cycle of exploitation and neglect. Murphy's description of water contamination resonates how water becomes an instrument of

vulnerability. Disposability in Gaza is implanted to everyday survival practices through the evidence of risk involved in drinking tap water. Gaza's water crisis reflects what discard studies describe as the uneven distribution of environmental risk. The everyday life of Gazans is entangled with polluted infrastructures that lead to a condition of managed vulnerability.

Gazans endure collective punishment in the form of blockade, impacting not just arms but also restricting the flow of food, fuel and medical supplies. This has deeply affected the civilian population, leaving the ordinary people in agony and wreckage. Depleted sewage systems are the aftermath of bombings and gunfire resulting in evident mistreatment. The extreme pollution reflects a lack of basic provisions and a disregard for human well-being. The idea of disposability is deeply explained by Achille Mbembe through the notion of 'necropolitics'. Mbembe argues that it is the sovereign power that decides who may live and who must be dead. In the context of Gaza, it is a power play that determines the creation of "death worlds".

Murphy was terrorised to learn that empathy towards the problem of poverty and the responsibility to satiate hunger was not affecting the wealthy group. There exist individuals worldwide who rely solely on food assistance to prevent starvation, while others despise food or regard wasting food as normal. The rich class is quite detached from the surrounding poverty. Susan Strasser discusses about the moral economy of waste, which Murphy portrays, how abundance is parallel to hunger diverging it as a social relation prevalent in the world. Strasser's argument is crucial as she discloses that waste is rather produced naturally than historically. The waiter replies "Is garbage" demonstrates the commonness of the practice of discarding. This is, in Strasser's own words, normalised waste: the whole thing does not appear to be in the moral frame of the scene, when Shatti camp, with its 80,000 inhabitants, is right next door. The camp is close by, but it's created which is not to matter. It is this that disturbs Murphy. Her anger is over seeing what Strasser has been telling her all along: that it's not a natural or inevitable thing to throw things away. It is a social choice that has been commonplace. There's no such thing as being too extravagant with the lemon used for washing hands. It rep-

resents the moral economy of waste as a social relation, as it were, in a theatrical performance. This little gesture is an extremely revealing one in a place where everyone else has to do everything they can to salvage scraps for survival. Waste here isn't just "waste. It's a status, a distance, a moral separation.

As the table was being cleared- all these delicacies being jumbled together in a dirty basin with fish bones and bread- I asked where leftovers went. Our waiter friend looked perplexed. 'Is garbage,' he said. I controlled a surge of rage; Shatti camp (80,000 plus) is scarcely 100 yards away. And my self- control broke down as Atef sliced a large juicy lemon to clean his fishy hands, ignoring the washbasin in the corner. How many obviously vitamin- deficient children had we just seen, none of whose parents could afford lemons? (Murphy,2015, p. 24)

Supporting this is Nagle's thought of garbage that states powerful spaces can afford to discard while adjacent camps cannot. Refugees like other people in the world yearn for stability, safety, recognition, opportunities and education. They are shaped to aspire for brighter future having experienced unique challenges and hardships during displacement and violence. Strasser equates sanitation not just a struggle against disease, but with civilization, morality and the orderly way of life. In Gaza disposability becomes bodily and ecological. Nagle asserts that garbage is sewage, contamination and infrastructure failure. The exposure of waste signifies the exposure of governance failure. Mbembe's idea of necropolitics needs to be read in Gaza not only through the physical blockade, but through what the blockade does to time. It does not simply stop goods, people, or materials from moving. It blocks the future. Rebuilding becomes almost impossible, ordinary plans are suspended, and an entire population is made to live with the sense that tomorrow has already been narrowed.

This is what makes Murphy's encounters with young Gazan men so moving. Some of them return, as she suggests, almost as "an act of presence." Staying, or coming back, becomes a political gesture. But it is a painful one, because the order surrounding them has already stripped the place of what a return should mean: work, secu-

rity, growth, the possibility of building a life. The blockade, then, works as a slow-death mechanism. It does not always kill immediately. It wears life down over time, across families and generations, until survival itself becomes the main horizon. This is why Gaza cannot be understood as an ordinary humanitarian crisis. What Murphy records is not only suffering in the present, but the organised shrinking of futurity. That is where Mbembe's framework becomes especially powerful.

Being cast aside or discarded are refugees from their homes, communities, and means of living, losing possessions and connections. They are treated as disposable, surplus or burdensome owing to political and societal interests. This reflects the major focus of discard studies of systemic disadvantages of a refugee. Gazan refugees are treated as second class citizens or marginalized groups encountering barriers to education, employment, healthcare and political participation. They are forced into uncertain situations, mirroring the way waste is managed with cheap labour and exploitation. They also take up laborious low-wage jobs that others do not want reflecting how limited opportunities and resources they have.

Gaza face alarming environmental challenges often suffering from inadequate infrastructure, unsanitary conditions, and environmental neglect. Waste management and environmental health are critically compromised thereby affecting the life of Gazans. Refugees struggle through deep emotional toll of being treated as disposable. Gazans reflect their perceived disposability through depression, anxiety and a sense of hopelessness. Gazan refugees become a political symbol of disposability as they serve as pawns in major geopolitical movements frequently politicized. Examining refugees in Gaza through the lens of discard studies enables us to comprehend the systematic and complex methods through which these individuals are marginalized and seen as expendable. Murphy's vivid narratives offer a striking depiction of the human toll of such systemic neglect, emphasizing the pressing requirement for more empathetic and inclusive strategies towards refugee assistance and integration.

Lack of basic amenities are a result of overcrowded camps

leading to unsatisfactory conditions and limited prospects. These prolonged situations lead to severe mental health problems and trauma. The regional politics and conflicts of the Middle East are strengthened due to the continuous struggles of the Gazan refugees. Economic and social strain leave host nations grappling with resource shortage, posing risk to opportunities and living conditions. If refugees from other nations seek asylum, there may be increased strain on international immigration laws and border security.

Refugee treatment is a major human rights issue that attracts global attention and may lead to severe violation of refugee rights under various political and economic situations. Host countries encounter challenges while integrating refugees into their system, putting a strain on global humanitarian resources. International laws and treaties, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, govern the treatment of refugees. Neglecting or mistreating refugees can violate these legal frameworks. In response to refugee crises, the international community often provides humanitarian aid, development support, and resettlement programs. The situation of Gazan refugees is a complex global challenge that requires coordinated efforts from all members of the international community to address root causes and implement lasting solutions. By positioning Gaza within the context of discard studies, the paper elaborates the field beyond material waste into geopolitical waste regimes. Refugee camps become discard spaces, connecting environment, governance and power and Gaza thus becomes a real scenario to analyse how modernity produces not just waste but “wasted populations”.

Conclusion

The treatment of Gaza refugees is a persuasive issue, due to continuing marginalisation and exclusion. To provide enduring solutions to the problem it is necessary to address the issue with unified effort and treat displaced people with compassion and humanity and acknowledge their hardships to ensure dignified living. Refugee problem needs to be treated as a global scenario, treat them as humans expecting safety, respect and chance for better lives. By recognizing the inherent value and the potential they bring, as well as by enacting

inclusive laws and practices, societies can progress towards a fairer and more compassionate future.

It is the duty of the international community to defend and assist refugees on the principles of human dignity. Gaza in the context of discard studies reframes the idea of refugeeism as a condition of modern geopolitics, where space and infrastructure are used to manage surplus populations. The theories of Susan Strasser allow us to rethink the concept of waste as single-use items, which is the politics of modern economy. Similarly, humans in the recent shift are treated as waste. Robin Nagle alongside states how facilities for waste distribution is unjust and those in sanitation labour bears the risk in the limited space and infrastructure. This framework helps understand how sovereign power produces and regulates human surplus. Rather than viewing Gaza as an area under humanitarian crisis, it could be recognised as a discard zone within geopolitics. Future research in the area has the capacity to examine how environmental degradation, climate change, and forced migration intensify the possibility of human disposability in conflict zones. A sustainable approach to discard studies, necropolitics, and refugee governance may largely contribute to the idea of international refugee law beyond global power asymmetry.

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