

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Shirin Nezamafi and the unmaking of postcolonial Japan

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Abstract

This article takes up the short work of fiction *Salam*, written in Japanese in 2006 by Shirin Nezamafi, and deploys it as a primary source in the history of the Japanese present. *Salam* tells the tale of Layla, an Afghan migrant detained in and then expelled from Japan in 2001. The article argues that *Salam* exposes the unmaking of postcolonial Japan: if postcolonial Japan meant a territorial, sovereign nation-state built on hegemonic national myths, then now it is unsustainable. *Salam* calls to an inevitable if uncharted post-national, post-territorial future. To advance this argument, the article focuses on Nezamafi's treatment of three humanistic categories tied up with geopolitical territoriality: language, art, and gender. These categories, when associated with the nation-state, generate irony in *Salam*. That irony stems from the anachronism of nations: territorial nations, Japanese or otherwise, appear as past entities that have outlived their possibility.

Keywords: migration; nation; postcolonial; postwar; sovereignty; territory

Geographies of identity in twenty-first-century Japan

The year is 2001. Tanaka, Esq., is working indefatigably to avert the imminent deportation of Layla, an illiterate undocumented migrant to Japan from Afghanistan. The unnamed narrator interpreting for him wonders why Layla cannot remain by registering as a refugee. He replies:

It isn't as if I want to defend the state, but if Japan were to readily recognize Afghan refugees, then hundreds of thousands of Afghans might start flowing into Japan, and not just Afghans, but people from other countries. Japan is relatively safe and there are jobs and an environment where you can lead a secure life; it's a very attractive place to people whose own countries are in chaos. But Japan is a place where pretty much only Japanese people live, and it's extremely difficult to change it into a multinational country. And besides, where people of different cultures and nationalities all mix together, problems easily arise.¹

He has learned his lesson from the West, where “today, the children and grandchildren of refugees have lots of problems,” everything “from citizenship and rights, education and employment, to violence and crime” (121).

The narrator interprets Tanaka as she interprets for him; he is her earnest and well-meaning if rather buffoonish foil. She is “a little surprised” at him: he feels no cognitive dissonance or moral compunction in doubling down on the very official policies from which he is working to rescue Layla.

¹Nezamafi (2009, pp. 120–21); hereafter, page citations are provided in-text.

Tanaka sensei appears in *Salam*, an apparently fictional story written in Japanese in 2006 by Shirin Nezamafi. The plot follows the efforts of Tanaka to learn and then document evidence of Layla's calamitous past in Afghanistan; his unnamed Iranian interpreter observes, narrates, judges, and grumbles at his side as Layla moves from confinement in a Japanese detention center to a church and back to detention before being expelled. The story turns not only on legal rigmarole and cold bureaucracy but even more on the central irony that Tanaka blithely articulates, an irony that engulfs everyone, most of all the judgmental narrator herself, into its inescapable, invisible fold. At every step, the characters obviously, unconsciously, adopt at the cultural and intellectual level the very formal legalistic structures against which they struggle. They adopt the nation while battling against the state. And they do so sanctimoniously. The nation provides them with specious cultural security and smug, uncritical conviction in their own rectitude. They wield the nation at the dispossessed migrant, oppressing and dehumanizing her precisely because they seek to emancipate and humanize her.

They cannot see it. But Nezamafi constructs her story so that the reader can see it, everywhere. Layla, the migrant, is her mechanism. She deploys her to tell of the irreconcilability of the unbounded universalism of human identity with the bounded particularism of territorial nationality. She exposes the catastrophic moral and social consequences of adopting the territorial nation-state as a hegemonic cultural and humanistic frame, as a supreme locus of cultural allegiance. She lays bare the irony of the nation-state.

This irony of nations derives from the anachronism of nations, or of the identity of nation, state, territory, and sovereignty, a concatenation whose destructive power comes from its temporal out-of-placeness in the present.² The migrant disrupts time by traversing space. Her story offers a fatal prognosis of the Japanese instantiation of the present-day global cultural-geopolitical form, exposing and defamiliarizing elements that otherwise render invisible its anachronism and buttress its ironic sanctimony.

Salam tells, then, of the derangement of the geographies of identity in twenty-first-century Japan. Born in Iran 20 years earlier, Nezamafi arrived in Japan in 1999 "knowing only 20–30 kanji and how to say greetings."³ She graduated from an engineering program at Kobe University and proceeded to work at Panasonic the year she wrote *Salam*, which won the 2006 Prize for Literature by Foreign Students in Japan. Her next two stories, *White Paper* (*Shiroi kami*) and *Pulse* (*Hakudō*), were finalists for the Akutagawa Prize, perhaps Japan's foremost literary honor. Many have tried to construe her as a "transborder" (*ekkyō*) writer of "transborder" literature. She has clapped back at the epithet: "Drawing a national boundary and saying, 'from here to here is Japanese literature,' is like I'm being imprisoned in the word 'transborder' and I'm being told, 'you're expected to write this kind of story,' and I hate it." She quips: "Isn't it fine just to be a regular author?"⁴

With *Salam*, the regular author Nezamafi proffers a primary source in the history of the present, normalizing Layla's condition and defamiliarizing the defining feature of Japan's postcolonial condition. She deconstructs the sovereign, territorial nation-state by lampooning its scaffolding ideological elements. First is language. Members of dominant national groups reify language and essentialize it as an embodiment of national culture, one that must be cherished as an emblem of difference and cultural respect. To Layla, divisions of language impede life. Art, as a cultural form, offers an escape from the oppression of the national linguistic form, an appeal to universalism and commonality against the presumption of national particularism and exceptionality. It summons to a transcendental universalism. But to which universalism? Even as *Salam* dismantles postcolonial national structures, it heeds the lessons of the postcolonial era. For genders expose the national particularism of what powerful national groups consider the universalism of their norms. *Salam* thus offers a history of the present: as humanistic universalism and geopolitical particularism militate against each other, territorial

²See also compelling readings in a similar vein by Hibi (2012) and Siercks (2015).

³Yang and Nezamafi (2009, p. 194).

⁴Yang and Nezamafi (2009, pp. 201–202).

sovereignty itself crumbles, yielding a future beyond the now-unsustainable nation-state, a future that is already present and whose denial constitutes the denial of life itself.

Postwar Japan as postcolonial Japan

It is, in the words of Kendall Heitzman, “one of the great parlor games of modern Japan studies”: Is postwar Japan over? If it is, then when did it end? If it is not, then why not?⁵ What observers generally mean by the end of postwar Japan is, of course, the end of the Japanese postwar, the passing of conditions that characterized a bounded period of Japanese history. Their concern is every historian’s concern: time. Nezammafi arrives uninvited to this scholarly soiree, and with an anodyne yet dastardly *Salam*, she bids a caustic farewell to the entire party. Her concern is every migrant’s concern: place. She intimates a prescient existential truth. It is not only the Japanese postwar that has had its day. It is postwar Japan itself.

Layla jolts her reader out of it – the territorial sovereign nation-state, that solipsistic postcolonial nightmare whose phantasm generates its reality and whose Sisyphean quest to overcome its own impossibility marks its very *raison d’être*. Like the narrative form of *Salam*, postwar Japan persists by presenting its own fictiveness as an inert, irrevocable, natural reality. It is not just, as the signal sociologists Mita Munesuke and then Yoshimi Shun’ya have influentially theorized, that Japan since the war has moved through eras of ideality (*risō*) and reverie (*yume*) to falsity (*kyokō*).⁶ It is, as Ōsawa Masachi has said in response, that the era falsity has now collapsed into an era of impossibility (*fukanōsei*). No longer do we escape from reality, he observes. We escape to it, confronting through terrorism and self-harm and every manner of self-destructive violence the self-destructive violence that is the reality within our present reality. And as we rain down on reality, we lurch simultaneously toward hyper-falsification, toward virtual idols and cybersexual intimacy and relentless impersonality, seeking to overcome and sublimate this inaccessible reality-within-reality. We mire ourselves in paradox as we thus respond self-contradictorily to this same inscrutable reality, an illusory entity that cannot be obtained or experienced, a reality that is impossible.⁷ Layla, utterly real but utterly false, one-ups Ōsawa on this sweeping theorization. Turning impossibly on the abhorrent violence against the migrant that effects its own hyperreal effacement of that violence, perduring vampiristically on its destruction of her life in order to sustain its own life, the Japanese nation-state itself has become, she suggests, impossible.

The everlasting parlor game of postwar Japan ends here. Or at least it stops being fun: its object has become impossible. Recent epistemological advances in at least the American academy might reinforce Layla in exposing the ontological phantasm. Until the United States destroyed it, Japan was foremost a colonial empire and must be known as such, historians have asseverated. And that empire was made and unmade by migration.⁸ The sovereign, demarcated Japanese nation-state and its modern myths originated, of course, in the mid nineteenth century,⁹ but as the scope of the Japanese imperium continually shifted, and as people, things, and ideas, whether colonial or metropolitan, civilian or military, moved across space, the relationships among territory, identity, and sovereignty fluctuated relentlessly, just as *dominium* and *imperium* did in the European imperial era. Divergence and anomaly in the exercise of territorial sovereignty became entirely the point of the colonial empire; the centralization, variegation, and layering of landed control all developed together.¹⁰ Imperial Japan had plenty of postwars: 1869, 1877, 1895, 1905, 1918, and again 1945. Each postwar disrupted the territoriality of sovereignty and the geographies of identity: was Satsuma Japan? was Taiwan? Sakhalin? Korea? Saipan? Singapore?

⁵Heitzman (2019, p. 12); seminally, Gordon (1993).

⁶Yoshimi (2006).

⁷Ōsawa (2008, p. 4, 165–86).

⁸Uchida (2011); O’Dwyer (2015); Shepherd (2018a, 2018b); Azuma (2019).

⁹For example, Howell (2005); Howland (2016); Yamamoto (2023).

¹⁰Benton (2010, pp. 4–5, 280); Azuma (2019, e.g. 6).

The last postwar Japan was the first postcolonial Japan. And that is the condition that has changed and has endured. The geographies of identity stabilized. Brutal violence brought Japanese “back” to the mainland and sent colonial people “back” to their places of ancestry. The “territorial premise of collective life,” as Charles Maier calls it, became immovable: decision space and identity space became one, coterminous, permanent, with little ambiguity.¹¹ The reversion of Okinawa in 1972 was understood, after all, as just that: a reversion, restoring territorial Japan to what it always supposedly really was and should have been. And the continuing row over demographically and geographically peripheral but culturally and geostrategically central islands only affirms the supremacy of the territorial premise. Japan as a territorial nation-state, bearing bounded sovereignty, governed by an authority with supreme control over its exclusionary, delimited, and unchanging borders, together with all the myths that enable the imagination of that bounded Japanese nation-state – these mark the enduring era after 1945.

It is to this postwar condition of static territoriality, to the stable geographies of identity, that the “postcolonial” gestures in the Japanese case¹²: to the geospatial, territorial reality of possessing only national dominion and exercising sovereignty over only it; to the importance of the physical movement and plantation of people, ideas, and things throughout the making of this condition; and to the theories and myths that enable and attend it: the critique of universalism; the valorization of and respect for national difference; the sacralization of landed autochthony, of heritage, and of indigenous knowledge; the hegemonic idea that certain people, and therefore necessarily not other people, are entitled to certain plots of territory by reason of identity.

Onto this postcolonial scene, the twenty-first-century Nezammafi appears and consigns the territorial premise of collective life precisely to where Maier says it belongs: to the twentieth century, to history. The migrant Nezammafi places her migrant Layla at the immigration detention center, where the Japanese nation and state meet, where the bounded Japanese nation is most direly threatened and therefore most viciously enforced, where Layla is made the Schmittian political and cultural exception.¹³ She shows how the vociferous enforcement of borders signals, ironically, the very disintegration of the so-called Westphalian order it purports to uphold: borders target not other states any longer but “nonstate transnational actors,” people like Layla. The primary political agent is no longer the sovereign nation-state, and therefore it agitates to reassert itself as such. “The walling of the nation-state [is] the death rattle of landed nation-state sovereignty,” as Wendy Brown elegantly theorizes.¹⁴ By writing a story of language, art, and gender at this legal, territorial end, in the dually temporal and spatial sense, of the nation-state, Nezammafi draws attention to the imbrication of the two sides of the nation-state dyad, to both hard, geopolitical, legal geographies and soft, intellectual, cultural identity, to both decision space and identity space. She summons to universalism over particularism, to the singular over the plural, to unification over difference, at the place where the brutality of the legal variegation of territory and the consequently engendered variegation of human identity interrupt the commonality that wells up in heterogeneous associational life. If one side of the symbiotic dyad falls, then so must the other.¹⁵

The matter might be less empirical than interpretive, for now, or until the migration catastrophe that everyone seems to see coming from across the turbulent seas sweeps over Japan. Layla, the refugee, is the vanguard, as Hannah Arendt would have her, literally ahead of her time, inhabiting the future and telling the present as history by revealing stories of her past.¹⁶ And her plight, as Arendt discerned, resists heaping blame on single individuals or nations, as if the problem is solely them or their ethno-nationalist society. Her suffering stems from the folly of the entire global system of nation-states, in

¹¹Maier (2000, p. 823); Maier (2016, esp. introduction).

¹²Unoda (2021, p. 2), on spatiality.

¹³On earlier postwar undocumented migration: Morris-Suzuki (2010); Avenell (2022, pp. 161–67).

¹⁴Brown (2010, locs. 55, 305).

¹⁵See also Morris-Suzuki (2010, esp. p. 166); Slater and Barbaran (2020).

¹⁶Horst and Lysaker (2019), citing Arendt (2007).

which those who fall outside the national aegis lose their very right to have rights.¹⁷ The system itself is a universalization of an old, tendentious European parochialism: the Reformation vitiated the unifying power of Christianity; wars of appalling violence ripped through Europe; sovereignty helped pacify the continent by letting states choose which Christianity they wanted.¹⁸ Everyone who operates in and perpetuates this moribund universalized particularism is guilty, just as all Nezamafi's characters, especially those who seem to be doing good, are guilty.¹⁹ The entire system must be unmade.

The tools historians have now innovated to deconstruct this system come from without, not only from within, from the literary and the aesthetic, not only the political or legal. For sovereignty is, as Lauren Benton characterizes it, “more a story that polities tell about their own power than a definite quality they possess.”²⁰ It requires “scaffolding” to endure, as other outstanding scholars have emphasized, because it is “mutable and fragile, requiring continuing care and support”: it “is established and maintained as much by aesthetic, artistic, theatrical, and symbolic structures as by political claims.” To understand sovereignty requires a “clear appreciation of the strange and complex theatricality involved,” “the frailty of its masks and the masks of its frailty.”²¹ If the aesthetic scaffolds sovereignty, then the aesthetic must also unmask it.²² After all, as Gili Kliger has argued in a paradigm-shifting study, “profound resistance” to “the conceptual foundations of sovereignty” emerged, from the very outset of the globalization of the idea, from “a domain far removed from either overtly political conflict or canonical political theory.”²³ And if, as Maier has it, the first factor in making the modern state since 1750 was none other than “critical thinking,” not only “formal ideas” but also “dramaturgies of discontent” to subvert the status quo ante, then what now that the modern state itself has become the old regime?²⁴

Then *Salam*, Nezamafi's dramaturgy of discontent, calls out to be read as a primary source in the newly surging field of the history of the present, telling of the unmaking of the sovereign Japanese territorial nation-state. She offers an entryway into our present-day episteme, “restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws,” soil that is “once more stirring under our feet.” She exposes how “institutions and practices we value and take for granted today are actually more problematic or more ‘dangerous’ than they otherwise appear.”²⁵ That dangerous institution is postcolonial Japan.

Languages as infantilization

Salam is a story about migration, and because it is about migration, it is about language, and because it is about language, it is about history. Nations need cultural languages: to venerate language as the embodiment of the national essence is, of course, as old as the nation itself. And so in *Salam*, language, far from an object of cultural veneration, continually obfuscates, interrupts, demeans, and perverts. Or more accurately, it is languages in the plural that function in this way. Languages undermine language. By depriving adults of the ability to communicate, they generate absurdity, reducing grown people to children, even non-human beings. They appear both infantile and infantilizing. The migrant, transgressing the boundedness of national language communities, exposes this reality and is destroyed by it.

From the very start of *Salam*, national language at once buttresses and betrays national sovereignty by trafficking it in ill-disguised forms. The narrator sardonically wonders about the place where she

¹⁷Arendt (2017, p. 388, 390); Adelman (2016); Benhabib (2004, pp. 49–69); DeGooyer *et al.* (2018).

¹⁸Herzog (2020, ch. 1); dissenting: Zarakol (2022, esp. pp. 18–22), on “Chinggisid sovereignty.”

¹⁹See Moyn (2020).

²⁰Benton (2010, p. 279).

²¹Benite *et al.* (2017, pp. 3–4); also Howland *et al.* (2017, pp. 1–22).

²²Compare Adal (2019); see also Tsuboi *et al.* (2020); Bleiker (2001).

²³Kliger (2022, p. 1104).

²⁴Maier (2012, p. 6).

²⁵Garland (2014, pp. 369–71), quoting Foucault with “soil”; also Geroulanos (2022); Steinmetz-Jenkins (2022); Steinmetz-Jenkins (2020).

will meet Layla for the first time: “It’s like a prison, but it isn’t a prison. It is said it is more appropriate to refer to it as a detention center. What’s the difference?” She settles on this mocking if factual disclaimer: “Whatever it is, though, it isn’t a detention center for people who’ve done really bad things!” (80). It is a place for foreigners only, she notes with trepidation, she herself a foreigner. Slyly, she articulates a penetrating historical insight, one obscured and thus ironically revealed by the clumsy sleight of language, now exposed by feigned ignorance: The detention center is a prison, and twenty-first-century prisons cease to be primarily about punishment. They are, instead, a “part of the national border. Indeed, they produce it,” as Emma Kaufman puts it.²⁶ In the late nineteenth century, that was true ideationally: the Japanese prison performed and created sovereignty amid fears it could not be achieved. It disciplined and punished the national population, exercising internal sovereignty to defend against more powerful external sovereigns.²⁷ Now that sovereignty must be rescued rather than created, the prison is physically the national border. The threat is no longer the British or American empire. It is Layla. She is neither disciplined nor punished. She is walled out.

With a subtle, ironic, and indeed derogatory jab, the narrator flips the national boundary as she passes literally and figuratively right through it. She encounters the policeman guarding the door: “His physique was so good that you wouldn’t think he was Japanese; his muscles bulged as if they were going to tear through his uniform,” she observes (81). The acerbic cruelty lies not only in its casual racism but in the purposeful irony of that racism. At once because of and in spite of the brute force that he personifies, the guard at the literal iron door of the nation does not look like he belongs to the nation he is guarding. The state undermines the nation, and the other way around. As she intimates all this in plain, unaffected Japanese, the narrator positions herself, the foreign interpreter, as belonging to the nation, and the state as opposed to it. She sees what Wendy Brown sees: that the result of the “theatricalized and spectacularized performance of sovereign power at aspirational or actual national borders” is only to “performatively contradict” the power the state purports to hold.²⁸ If the purpose of twenty-first-century detention centers – it is more appropriate to refer to them as prisons – is to “counteract the diminution of national sovereignty,” Nezamafi shows that their very existence ironically counteracts their own counteracting.²⁹

Having seen through its exterior scaffolding, the narrator enters the “dark” heart of the nation-state, the interior of the detention center (81). Absurdity amplifies with the very first word the lawyer Tanaka utters to Layla. “*Saramu!*” he says giddily, “trying to conjure a sense of intimacy with a greeting in Dari,” in the narrator’s telling (83). The narrator glances down toward his feet. In his files, she spots “a thin book for children with the words *Greetings from Around the World* written on it in vivid colors” (83). She offers no commentary, as if she will not deign to remark on the farce of a lawyer using a children’s book to offer legal help to a destitute migrant. Layla, too, has no response to Tanaka’s childish appeal. Tanaka glances sideways at the narrator. “It was a signal meaning, ‘I’m asking you to translate!’” she understands (83). Tanaka, the man-child, finally communicates when he retreats from languages.

But the interrogation requires languages, and so it cannot rise above travesty. Tanaka settles on a straightforward but compassionate self-introduction, what the narrator calls “a Japanese-style, tied-together greeting.” Delivering that remark, he looked, the narrator says, “relieved, as if he was at last able to say what he wanted to say.” Yet the greeting still has no impact on Layla, whose eyes “were hardly those of a living being” (84). “I’m translating properly!” the narrator protests (85). She is defensive because she is incredulous: “I had anticipated that she’d be glad to hear Dari after so long, but” (84–85). The sentence ends as a fragment; languages generate fragmentation. If they make Tanaka a child, they rob Layla of her very humanity. Layla at last stirs to life when languages

²⁶Kaufman (2015, p. 7)

²⁷See Botsman (2005).

²⁸Brown (2010, locs 105, 109).

²⁹Kaufman (2015, p. 12).

break down: she seems amused when the narrator, forgetting the word for “date of birth” in Dari, panics.

The first interrogation over, the narrator heads to the bustling train station. Everywhere, advertisements and billboards for cram schools and English-conversation schools “jump into your eyes,” “to the extent that you cannot even imagine that there’s someone in a center just down the street who cannot even read and write her own mother tongue” (93). We learn Layla is illiterate. The very physical infrastructure around the interpreter blares this irony of languages, which generate an inequality not only cultural but economic. That inequality provides some with a means to capitalize and profit as others try to overcome it. And that irony, which Nezamafi depicts spatially, is the entire point of the detention center: it must continually produce the nation precisely because the globalizing forces of migration, of global capital, and of a supranational lingua franca demolish the basis of bounded sovereignty in favor of a global sovereignty.³⁰ This truncated globalization effected by the prison-turned-border victimizes those it purports to protect: those of the non-globalizing language. The narrator complains that interpretation work always goes to “native speakers” – of English – and never to her, as a second-language speaker. She took this job in Dari “from the simple desire to do a job for once that only I can do” (94). The disadvantaged migrant narrator has found an even more disadvantaged migrant on whom to capitalize. The sacralization of linguistic diversity in the face of the irrevocable globalization of language functions as a mechanism of economic oppression, a means of sustaining the economic ascendancy of the privileged. Settled into a café, the narrator deadpans: “This is the opulent country I live in” (93).

She strikes a blow against the construction of the Japanese postwar, a period characterized “by a level of affluence that was previously unimaginable and a society of mass consumption that was virtually inescapable,” Eiko Maruko Siniawer writes.³¹ As Siniawer argues, the persistence of the postwar into the stagnant “lost decades” after the 1980s induced a shift, a search for what defined Japanese individuals and the Japanese nation beyond material affluence. That search led to the “pursuit of an affluence of the heart, mind, and spirit,” for “the material things which people had worked so hard to acquire had not delivered the gratification they had promised.”³² Nezamafi burlesques the materialistic malaise of the Japanese postwar through a deliberately ridiculous opening to her story, when the narrator describes the somnolent, dehumanizing ennui of the Japanese morning train commute, where life is ubiquitous yet absent. The only reason she endures its ignominy is money, hardly a desire to help the dispossessed Layla:

They told me this will be your approximate remuneration and I heard how much I’d make and I was so shocked that my eyeballs nearly popped out of their sockets and my heart began blaring disruptively. When I screamed with excitement, ‘I will do it! I accept!’ it had not even registered in the recesses of the recesses of my brain that I am not very good at waking up in the morning (80).

This mockery of the postwar condition of affluence is an even more damning blow against its territorial premise. The point, which both Siniawer and Nezamafi explore, is the irony, the impossibility, of trying to resurrect postwar meaning by hitching it to the nation-state. What Nezamafi illustrates with her plaint about linguistic inequality grafted onto spatial inequalities of the Japanese city is what Maier argues through Saskia Sassen about territoriality: that the modern city is part no longer of a national network linked to the countryside but rather of a global network of metropolises. And in the modern city, “discrepancy of life chances and rewards” operating at a global scale “finds itself replicated in the spatial segmentation and ethnically based class structure of the modern metropolis,” as

³⁰Famously, Hardt and Negri (2000).

³¹Siniawer (2018, p. 12).

³²Siniawer (2018, p. 14, 224).

Nezamafi too observes.³³ As inequalities of global wealth and opportunity, supercharged by inequalities of language, infiltrate Japanese cities, Japanese actors ironically double down on spiritual wealth as a national feature, doing culturally with “spiritual wealth” what the detention center does geopolitically with economic wealth. Actors construe “spiritual wealth,” Siniawer explains, as a “supposedly lapsed national virtue,” a marker of the “unique spiritual world of the Japanese people.”³⁴ Against this cultural backdrop, when the narrator of *Salam* deadpans that “this is the opulent country I live in,” she skewers the attempt to shed the materialist myths of the postwar while retaining those of the postcolonial. The emptiness of postwar Japanese economic prosperity derives from the spiritual impoverishment of its anchoring in national geographies of identity: it is an ironic, impossible world in which the self-defeating project of spending money to learn a global language at cram schools as a means of connecting to hegemonic supranational forces that capitalize on one’s own less powerful national self, all while shutting out an illiterate non-national to languish invisibly in a detention center just down the street, only exposes the fatuity of the entire notion of national boundedness.

The same problem recurs again and again: national language dehumanizes Layla and perpetuates inequality; the narrator observes with snide bemusement; Tanaka doubles down on the childish use of language as a source of enchantment and cultural appreciation.

Apparently graduating from the children’s book, Tanaka invests in *Easy Dari for Travel*. He tries to write something in Persian script for the interpreter, who thinks he is “at the level of a kindergartener.” The narrator recounts: “After staring at the deeply idiosyncratic letters for a few seconds, I confirmed, ‘Layla?’” And then, for a second, I thought, “I might be a genius for being able to read such unreadable writing” (104–105). The narrator thinks the entire affair is moronic – “I swallowed the comment, ‘You’re really quite bored, aren’t you’ (104) – but condescendingly indulges the man-child: “His effort is really something” (105). Tanaka is enchanted, “as if taking flight.” “I want to show it to Layla, too,” he quietly mumbles as he dedicates himself to the challenging curls of the Persian letter H. But Layla cannot read. What does it mean for a lawyer to show his foreign, illiterate client his cultural appreciation of her by learning her written language? In the childish imagination of Tanaka, the scripts and languages of the other are worlds of wonder, exciting symbols of cultural diversity, his chance to learn about other cultures. To the migrant, it is a matter of sheer survival, hardly of genius, that forces multilingualism. The narrator’s snide judgment gestures at yet another irony: why does Tanaka cherish and marvel at the very thing that is preventing him from executing his job? Is it cultural appreciation, or unctuous self-gratification?

The tragicomic humor of this childish fetishism of languages lies in the trope of anachronism. Tanaka appears as a child: he looks preposterous as he infantilizes himself by learning a language. This construal of the inability to communicate across national boundaries as something essentially puerile, something anachronistic at the individual level, functions as a parable of anachronism at a larger scale, the anachronism of an entire multinational linguistic system.

It is the other side of what historians well know about the past: that the production of national languages was part of a distinctly modern project of constructing the modern cultural nation-state.³⁵ In all postcolonial states, not least in postcolonial Japan, language functioned and functions as a mechanism to reorganize people and impose categories of national affiliation where the imperial system defied them; it was an expression of indigeneity, and in the Japanese case, a sign of postcolonial bounded indigeneity, something not to be imposed any longer on those in other lands.³⁶ For nations to take their hold on the hearts of everyday people, a conception of supranational, scriptural language had to be lost: as Benedict Anderson explains in his classic telling, it was the conception “that a

³³Maier (2000, p. 828, 819).

³⁴Siniawer (2018, p. 243, 253, 255–62).

³⁵For example, Ueda (2021).

³⁶For example, Leow (2016); Ghadimi (2018).

particular script-language offered privileged access to ontological truth, precisely because it was an inseparable part of that truth.³⁷

If national language needed the profane subversion of sacred, supranational religious communities, then its disintegration means another profane subversion of another form of sacredness – the national language itself, which, as Tanaka’s enchantment with Layla’s script-language suggests, has been afforded an enchanted sacrosanctity akin to that of the sacred scripts of Latin or Arabic and constitutive of the sacralization of national sovereignty itself. In Tanaka’s imagination, and implicitly in general hegemonic imagination, languages still offer access to ontological truth: not theistic truth, as in the past, but its mutated form, national-cultural truth, the truth of the bounded group to which Layla belongs and therefore of Layla. The migrant, whether Layla or the narrator or the language-jumping Nezamafi herself, by her very nation-transgressing being, blasphemes that sacred association of language with national culture – and the sacredness of the national *nomos* and its sovereignty.³⁸ The migrant thus acts as both symbol and agent of historical rupture. The conflation of nation, language, and culture appears as a childish moment in the life of humanity, and in the life of Japan, just as in the life of Tanaka, a moment that, in light of the migrant, appears risible, preposterous, anachronistic. For language exists to enable humans to communicate. If it only achieves that among a subset of humans, it fails in its purpose. So Layla, in her dead silence, intimates.

Art as emancipation

Once Layla is released from the detention center partway through *Salam*, language, too, is released from its childish captivity in the nation. Liberated, language enables culture writ large to supersede cultures as national entities. The freedom of Layla frees language from languages and thus culture from cultures. Yet Nezamafi does not rely on the concept of freedom to make this point.

Art acts as her emancipatory mechanism. If national language lurches the characters to a prior time, deepening national divisions through a temporal mismatch, then art, as a supranational form, collapses time altogether, speaking across rather than in divisions of history. And it sheds light on deeper, hidden forms of irony and sanctimony that emerge from the historically contingent nation-state. The narrator, as interpreter, can control the migrant’s contingent language. But she cannot control her transcendental art. Layla seizes control over her own narrative, and the narrator becomes suspect. The narrator has exposed the childish, national sanctimony of Tanaka; now Tanaka, in his interactions with Layla, exposes the narrator’s own national sanctimony.

Boundaries of all kinds collapse once Layla leaves detention, once the state enforcement of the national boundary loosens. Layla relocates to a church where a faith-based relief group is working to aid migrants. Religious divisions crumble. Layla casually mentions participating in the prayer gatherings. “Aren’t you a Muslim?” the narrator asks, perplexed. “Of course I’m a Muslim,” Layla says, laughing (117). The daft narrator is confused; to Layla, it quite literally goes without saying that prayer transcends denominational variance, that this transcendental form mediated by language exceeds the limitations of bounded groups. At another point, the narrator overhears Layla singing “in that husky voice of hers” – an important detail, as we will see (111). Singing, like the migrant herself, cannot be contained in space: the narrator goes and stands at the door of the room to quietly eavesdrop, as if she must respect, in vain, a certain boundary that incantation has transgressed. Layla chants in a heavily accented dialect unfamiliar to the narrator. “I knew that, in Afghanistan, they speak a Persian from a long time ago,” she observes, rendering Layla a past form, making Afghans an anachronistic deviation from a present Iranian norm: “I could sort of make out the words that fell from Layla’s mouth, but they’re so old-fashioned that practically no one uses them anymore.” Layla disrupts this settled nationalist epistemology. The narrator realizes that Layla is singing a poem that the narrator had learned in a school textbook long ago, “a poem I knew but couldn’t quite remember” (112). She is forced to

³⁷Anderson (2016, p. 36).

³⁸Compare Konishi (2013).

confront this world so strange yet so familiar. If earlier Layla had consigned Tanaka to childhood, and if the narrator tried to consign Layla to the past, now Layla has done the same to the blinkered Iranian narrator.

The narrator is stirred: out of the security of the detention center, her secure ways of knowing are stirred; her heart is stirred. It is a typical case of artistic defamiliarization. She closes her eyes as Layla sings in her “warm dialect.” Recurring synesthesia signals the breakdown of sensory divisions. “For the first time,” she writes, “I realized that Persian is a language with such a plaintive sound. The words were old-fashioned [lit., stinky-old] things no one uses anymore today” – she cannot escape this mentality of Layla as past – “but as I heard her husky voice, my heart was moved” (112). The narrator realizes that Layla is singing a poem of Hafez, whose “sweet words” the narrator describes as having “a hidden message that you cannot see just by reading” (112). Hafez is like Layla; art is like the migrant – inscrutable at first, not comprehensible by regnant structures of thought and language. To understand the migrant, and to understand her invocation of Hafez, one must first dismantle the present and draw up the past. “How many years has it been?” the narrator asks rhetorically of the last time she heard the poem (113). She cannot find an answer. She lurches to the past; time collapses.

The past does not suffice either. The crumpling of the Iranian present from this apparition of the ostensible Afghan past opens up a future, a new present. The narrator intuitively suspects that there must be some sort of meaning to Layla’s incantation of this poem, yet she cannot surmount her own prejudices: “Is it possible for Layla, who cannot read and write, really to understand the poetry of Hafez?” she wonders (113). She cannot fathom how a self-described “intellectual” like herself, someone who got a perfect score on her Hafez test at school, as she humble-brags, can know Hafez less well than an illiterate Afghan. Now it is she, the interpreter, who cannot extricate herself from divisions of language, from the blithe supremacism of the Persian assuming her educational and intellectual superiority to the strangely accented, illiterate Afghan. She cannot understand.

Tanaka can. “Is this an Afghan folk song?” he asks, entering the scene. Corrected peremptorily by the narrator – “No, it’s a poem by a famous Persian poet” – he continues, “Oh, so do you understand the meaning, then?” “Of course!” she replies presumptuously. She does not. Prompted to translate the poem, she cannot. She figures, “Since this is part of my job, too, I might as well just translate it, like whatever, in simple words” (114). She wiggles out of the problem by changing the topic. But Tanaka discerns: “If Layla is singing it, surely it must have some profound meaning.” Tanaka understands Layla, who understands Hafez, though neither of them can read the language of Hafez, purportedly the language of the narrator, who scored full marks on her Hafez test.

Though the road you walk now be perilous, though the destination be far off, up ahead... (115). The narrator cannot complete the poem Layla incants. She omits the critical point, the mollifying message that the road will end: it is as if she cannot fathom a happy ending for Layla, the assurance from Hafez that Joseph can return to Canaan in glory.³⁹ When Hafez is but the Persian poet, his unbounded humanism curtailed and truncated by a blinkered Iranian national, there can be no imagination of a happy ending. It is a subtle moment of foreshadowing. But is it only the interpreter who is to blame for her failure to translate the glorious future of Joseph and to transport the art of Hafez to a postcolonial world? At least Pharaoh, stirred by the transcendental vision of Joseph, set him over all the land of Egypt, enabling him to bring his family to join him. Layla’s immigration officials would have shoved him back into the detention center until he could produce evidence of the exact number jealousy-inducing colors on his coat. Pharaoh had nothing on the postcolonial immigration regime.

The situation turns on the familiar problem of the dual, contradictory meanings of “culture”: one, culture as the meaningful, creative production of a person, and the other, culture as the uniquely meaningful, creative production of a territorial people, usually a national people. Detained, the migrant is captive in the territorialized conception of culture in the latter sense; Layla is the incarnation of the Afghan nation, a passed past, her “ethnic costume” something that “I had only ever seen in

³⁹Hibi (2012, pp. 43–44) highlights the intertextual parallelism.

the movies,” as the narrator says when she first sees her (83), her exotic language something quaint and charming. Caught in cultures and languages, the narrator cannot interpret Layla’s culture and language.

The national divisions that obstruct the communication of the transcendence of art to the narrator – this intrusion of cultures as a divisive mechanism into the unifying transcendence of culture – function as the parallel plotline to what ostensibly acts as the main conflict in the story. Throughout the story, and particularly toward the climax, Tanaka faces the problem of verifying that Layla deserves refuge in Japan. To do so, he must demonstrate, with concrete evidence, that Layla is the daughter of a man in Afghanistan who was deliberately murdered because he was a leader in the Hazara Shi’a minority. If he was simply incidentally killed, or if there is no concrete proof that Layla is his daughter, then Japanese regulations state that the application cannot go forward. It is another irony. The Japanese state refuses to accept Layla’s nationality as adequate grounds for asylum, insisting that she, personally, must be in danger. Yet the characters cannot see her as anything but an Afghan. Art breaks through this tendentiousness and raises the characters to a higher level, supplanting cultures with culture.⁴⁰

This anthropological dismantling of the conflation of culture with nation yields to a historical dismantling. Just as the individual puerility of the fetishization of cultural language reflects the social and historical puerility of the concept, Layla’s incantation of Hafez exposes the individual puerility of the narrator’s conception of national art along with the sociohistorical puerility of that conception. To apprehend the Afghan singing of Hafez in Japan, the narrator must reach into her childhood and recover an earlier moment in her life, bringing it into the present – and yielding to a future free from national divisions. It is what Hamid Dabashi calls the “re-worlding” of Persian literary humanism. For Persian literature was of course not national in its origins; it became national because of the contingencies of European Orientalist thought and anti-colonial nationalist movements within Persianate domains.⁴¹ This historically incidental, postcolonial “ethnic nationalization of worldly literatures,” borne of the necessity of resistance against European colonialism, “categorically de-worlds them against the very grain of their historical unfolding,” he writes.⁴² And this territorial de-worlding of culture operates in tandem with the postcolonial making of the sovereign state, which Dabashi has excoriated elsewhere: “The postcolonial state, rooted in Christian theology and the byproduct of European colonialism, lacks any legitimacy whatsoever outside its European genealogy,” he fulminates. Of the “very notion of the nation-state,” he continues, “We in the postcolonial world had no business buying into it. It has never worked – in or out of Europe.” The merging of the nation and state, he theorizes, is “an impossibility, a self-alienation, a self-hatred.”⁴³ To “re-world” Persian literature, to excavate its original yet buried transcendently human rather than parochially nationalist character, means to “restore” it. It is to reach into the past before the nation-state to recover a future beyond it, one of “cosmopolitan worldliness,” one that “includes *ethnos* but is not limited to it.”⁴⁴ Layla, the migrant, enables this restoration, this re-worlding. After all, Hafez speaks to Tanaka even though he understands not a word of Layla’s chanting.

This re-worlding of Persianate literature in a Japanese church cuts into deeper myths that sustain an ostensibly postcolonial Japan. As Layla struggles against the injustice of a system of oppression not only legal but also intellectual and cultural, nowhere is there a recourse to freedom, or rights, or democratic principles. The entire plot is bifurcated between Layla’s captivity and freedom, and throughout, there is the underlying question of where Layla’s rights are. But Layla sings of a higher liberation, the artistic liberation of the soul through an irrepressible, unbounded literary heritage. It is as if Layla has taken cues from Arendt and refuses to seek refuge in the swaggering ostensible universalisms of

⁴⁰See e.g., Appiah (2006).

⁴¹Dabashi (2012, pp. 313–19); also Kia (2020).

⁴²Dabashi (2012, p. 321).

⁴³Dabashi (2020, p. 7, 9, 15).

⁴⁴Dabashi (2012, p. 319).

freedom and rights that, irrevocably tied to the nation-state, deny her the very privileges they afford everyone else inasmuch as she exists beyond the nation. She finds solace, instead, in her art in a church. She turns to hope and resilience, to beauty and lyricism, to a humanism so inebriating and stupefying that it obliterates all contingent limitations and boundaries – to Hafez’s oeuvre, replete with these under-elaborated yet all-compelling, freeing, unifying political principles, does she turn.

Just as it did in the late nineteenth century, the Japanese national state, like all national states, needs dispossessed migrants to assert and perform internationally its own territorial sovereignty. But now, it builds its myths of sovereign freedom on their imprisonment, not their emancipation. The migrant must emancipate herself from the state and its ideologies.⁴⁵ Away from the stupendous power of American global cultural and geopolitical hegemony, Layla intones Hafez free from the fetters of American “freedom” at precisely the time the United States is invading her motherland, “killing thousands of guiltless Afghan women and children,” as the narrator puts it (137). Why must this supremacy of freedom, intelligible only in the context of bondage and captivity, the particular, tendentious legacy of America’s ignominious history of slavery, be universalized and imposed on everyone else? Layla transcends these ideological struggles. Her emergence from detention and her emancipatory re-worlding of Hafez mark a liberation from the incarcerating concept of freedom itself.

Her artistic liberation is linguistic. As Gili Kliger argues, the “contagion of sovereignty” that swept the globe beginning in the late eighteenth century” was “not only geopolitical but also linguistic”: it entailed the imposition of often the English word “sovereignty” onto peoples across the globe. In this very act of proliferating the concept, translators encountered alternative conceptions that could compete with the original concept. They encountered “God words,” words about transcendental beings without analogs in English that presumed “a pervasive power not exclusively held by humans,” something that could not be contained by a single global concept of sovereignty. This conjuring of God-words as untranslatable was thus “an exercise of linguistic sovereignty that was also *about* sovereignty.”⁴⁶ Like untranslatable God-words, the narrator’s confrontation with Layla’s carefree attitude toward prayer and the untranslatability of Layla’s singing, together with Tanaka’s comprehension of that singing, mean no less than “to confront the possibility that the power of the state might be imagined otherwise.”⁴⁷ The state cannot obstruct Layla’s connection to her Japanese neighbors, her integration into them by untranslatable means. If, as Kliger has it, non-Christian visions of transcendentalism resisted bounded sovereignty, a concept derived precisely to resolve the collapse of Christian transcendentalism, then the migrant’s linguistic transcendentalism resists the bounded national-linguistic form, itself originally devised to resolve the collapse of supranational language. But if, in prior centuries, the “resistance of words to translation is, in every case, an act of sovereignty: a denial that all things can be ... assimilated within a single, rapacious language,”⁴⁸ here, with Layla, it is the opposite: the return not to a multilingual but to a transcendental, monolingual, transcultural order, one that emancipates Layla and her expression from the dehumanizing interpretation of a daft, judgmental Iranian narrator, enabling opposition to the paradoxical, false universalism of bounded national sovereignty with an alternative transcendentalism. To the once-lifeless Layla, who comes alive once she is freed from the captivity of interpretation, everything can and must be assimilated within a single language, one that must be and necessarily is intelligible to all, one that reflects the universalism of humanism itself. Otherwise, what freedom – what hope, what life – is there for the migrant?

Genders as alibi

If *Salam* thus conjures art, or culture in its non-pluralizable sense, as an escape from the destructive moral and intellectual framework of the sovereign nation-state, from the pretenses of particularism

⁴⁵On the Maria Luz Incident: Botsman (2011); Howland (2016, pp. 30–37).

⁴⁶Kliger (2022, p. 1128).

⁴⁷Kliger (2022, p. 1108, 1125).

⁴⁸Kliger (2022, p. 1128).

and nationalism that characterize the Japanese postcolonial condition, it is not as if Nezamafi dismisses critiques of universalism. They remain urgently relevant. For there are traps: elements of the post-postcolonial that masquerade as noble universalisms but only ensnare the migrant back into the nation. There are, foremost in the story, genders, which smuggle the nation back into culture and provide the grounds for moral sanctimony and intellectual hubris, enabling the host society to impose on others its narrow, tendentious worldview with impunity. In yet another narrative irony, as characters cavalierly assume in language and art a national particularism where there is in fact universality, they assume uncritically in genders a universality where there is in fact national particularism. Or more precisely: they impart to the tendentious particularism of genders, like to the tendentious particularism of sovereign nations themselves, a false, paradoxically divisive universalism, which stems from and then merely supplants and disguises the particularism of nations. Genders act as an intellectual alibi for the nation.

Two motifs communicate this irony of resolving one divisive particularism-turned-universalism by displacing it with another: that of skin cream and that of Layla's voice. The everydayness, indeed kitsch, of the symbolism is precisely the point: gendered thought acts as an alibi because it is pervasive, so utterly ordinary as to be invisible.

We have seen how Nezamafi sets up her narrator's entry into the detention center as a gendered transgression into a muscular, masculinist world, as an exposition of the frailty of the mask and the mask of the frailty of sovereignty. She plays up the narrator's femininity as her bags are searched at entry: "If I had known they would check our bags, I wouldn't have brought that sparkly pink make-up pouch and an extra pair of stockings" (82). The satire is multilayered. The remark pillories the ridiculous theater of the security check: the danger against which the Japanese state must guard is a sparkly pink bag. But, of course, the threat is immense. More than any physical arms, it is the transgression of a multilingual woman who likes sparkles that poses the greatest threat to sovereignty. To impose national variance, the state imposes gendered variance: the very physicality of the swaggering, bulging male, like that of the detention center-turned-border, induces consciousness of gendered division. Confronted by this hegemonic gendered power, the narrator, conceding "embarrassment" before the "guard-man" and a desire to acquiesce, becomes sensitive to, digs into, and ironically flaunts her own gendered identity. And thus, even as or precisely because she is forced to resist the state's masculinist force, the narrator self-satirizes, inadvertently. As throughout the story, her blithe, satirical judgmentalism is a gossamer cloak over astounding flippancy: she is about to meet a migrant woman facing deportation, over the color of whose sparkly khaki bandana she will momentarily obsess, and her concerns are with bulging muscles and pink sparkles. We again wonder about the reliability of our narrator – and about an entire system that generates the conditions for this divisive, particularist pettiness to thrive.

Nezamafi doubles down on this technique of self-incriminating gendered narration. In their very first meeting, after she decides from Layla's "ethnic costume" that Layla is "someone who reminds you of nomads living in the plains" (83), the narrator fixates on Layla's cracked, hardened, dirty hands: "They were the hands of someone who probably had never heard of the word 'hand-cream' before" (85). Layla has not yet spoken in the story. The only conceivable explanation, to the narrator, of an Afghan woman with cracked hands is ignorance. Such is the opulence of the country she lives in. Layla literally cannot speak: she is lifeless, mute, at the mercy of one who not only interprets for but interprets her, falsely. Having been interpellated as a gendered deviant by the swaggering national border, the interpreter turns around interpellates Layla in the exact same way. National division engenders gendered division, which engenders further gendered division that furtively traffics national division.

Skin cream becomes a minor but ironic leitmotif associated with the narrator and symbolizing this nationalistically condescending imposition of gendered assumptions: because she is of a more powerful nation, the narrator believes her version of gendered life is *de facto* normal, correct. Nezamafi constructs the narrator so that the narrator appears to think that she raises Layla's calluses and wrinkles to demonstrate suffering and disadvantage, but the references ironically function as a symbol of

the callous sanctimony of the narrator herself. Layla intimates, for example, that her mother is dead and that her father might have befallen the same fate. The narrator complains jarringly in response about feeling awkward among this mismatched group of interlocutors: “What kind of people are the friends of a young woman of marriageable age who doesn’t use hand cream? A bored student and a fat lawyer!” (89) It is decidedly unfunny. And that is the point. Where Layla’s recollection of her suffering has enabled this motley collection of individuals to find common ground in the universalism of human pathos, the narrator has inserted hand cream to engender separation. Or when the narrator legitimately laments the structural linguistic inequality of the city exposed by migration, she simultaneously betrays her own myopia, subliminally messaging her own oblivious complicity: “No question about it: Layla has never even heard words like ‘game center’ or ‘karaoke’ in her life. I mean, ‘cause she hasn’t even used hand cream before” (93). Or amid her blinkered befuddlement over Layla’s participation in Christian prayer, the narrator notices that Layla has developed the capacity to laugh. She pivots to Layla’s vanishing wrinkles. “Maybe it’s just me,” she observes, “or maybe it’s because Japan is humid? Or maybe she was gifted some cream from someone here?” Rather than ponder the momentous shift that has occurred, or the power of joyous transcendence after liberation from the masculinist, segregating detention center, she retreats to a gratuitous, gendered swipe at Layla’s appearance, which now appears “childish” to her (117). Hand cream becomes a catchall causal explanation for everything wrong with Layla. She is trapped in a national narrative of cream, of what gendered life must be.

The irony of this leitmotif turns again on the relegating of Layla to the past and her hammering out in the nation. In rather maladroit moments in the literary construction of the story, Nezamafi seems determined to cast this gendered smugness as a function of general Iranian condescension toward Afghans: “From the condition of Layla’s skin, for some reason I had an image of Afghanistan as a desert country with strong sunlight, but looking at the map, it turns out it’s a mountain country,” the narrator confesses, again self-incriminatingly (122). All she knew before of Afghanistan, she acknowledges, was what she saw of “Afghanis” on street corners in Tehran. “I just lined up words in interpretation without understanding anything about anything when I first met Layla,” the narrator concedes toward the end of the story, starting to understand her own inability to understand (123).

An even starker symbol of this culture of assumption and blithe disparagement lies in Layla’s physical voice. Through her gendered impositions, the female interpreter perverts the very means of Layla’s self-expression. When Layla at last speaks for the first time in the interrogation, she utters but one word: “Layla.” “It was a husky voice that didn’t match her general impression,” the narrator puzzles. “There’s no way the person in question could have known it herself, but it was a sexy voice that college boys would find intolerably attractive” (85). All it takes is for Layla to say “Layla” before the narrator imposes on her a narrative of sexualization. The migrant has spoken, but she cannot speak. She has been framed as a non-sexual object that is sexual, something that should be sexual but does not know it. She might have been better off mute. That way, her narrator would not even have bothered.

The release of Layla from secure detention frees her from this stultifying narrative and renders insecure the narrator’s own role as a gendered, cultural interpreter, just as it undermines the narrator’s security in linguistically interpreting Layla’s art, which Tanaka understands better than she does. The sexual symbolism of huskiness comes undone: the narrator persists in describing, ad nauseum, Layla’s voice as “husky,” as if clinging to her secured ways of thought, but unmoored from its sexual suggestiveness, it is no longer clear why that detail is significant to her or what role it plays in the broken-open symbolic universe of the story. Here, the roles of the narrator and Tanaka as foils are again flipped: if the narrator exposes the linguistic tendentiousness of Tanaka in Japanese captivity, then Tanaka exposes the gendered tendentiousness of the narrator beyond it. When Tanaka hears Layla’s voicing of Hafez, he recognizes it not as “husky” but as what it is: “that’s a beautiful, plaintive voice, isn’t it?” (112–13). By the narrator’s own telling, women in the poetry of Hafez are symbolic, representing an ungendered passion and desire for something transcendental, mystical. The male Tanaka articulates the transcendental beauty in the alluring but not sexual voice of the female

Layla. The female narrator ironically cannot. In a sense, Tanaka has ceased to be meaningfully male or Japanese. He has transcended.

Layla is abruptly detained again at the end of the story. The terror attacks of 9/11 have just occurred. The United States has just invaded Afghanistan. Afghans have been “branded as dangerous murderers,” Tanaka says, suspecting Layla will soon be deported (135). And indeed, Layla is deported. Or, if we believe the immigration police whose account to the incredulous Tanaka the narrator conveys secondhand, “this was not forced deportation but rather her own will” (141). The state ventriloquizes behind Layla: she is the frail mask of sovereignty for a state that arbitrarily decides her state of exception. We last hear the “dry, husky” tone of Layla’s voice speak of something that college boys would probably not find attractive: her recollection of watching her mother being bludgeoned to unconsciousness and kidnapped by five Taliban ruffians. The narrator cannot interpret her story, yet everyone, even the immigration police, understands the horror.⁴⁹ “I want to go back to where my mother is. It’s fine if I return to Afghanistan,” she says (146). Her mother is dead. To Layla, ironically imprisoned by borders, what difference is there in individual volition and state compulsion, between this territory or that, between this language or that, in a world where states have uniformly unleashed inhumane violence against her, a world in which the sensuous life and voice of women, in the purest meaning, have evaporated? “Layla’s dry, husky voice sounded distant,” the narrator notes (145).

Devastated, the narrator is reduced to fits of tears, haunted by guilt that she had taken this role of interpreter out of sheer pecuniary interest and has refused to admit to herself both the sincerity of Tanaka and her own growing moral dedication to the plight of Layla. Her snootiness has come back to wreck her. She turns on Tanaka, demanding an explanation for how this could have been. “You’re up against the state, you know,” he says (148). But is she? Is it just the state that has destroyed Layla, or also all the invisible, cultural forces Tanaka and she herself deploy while scapegoating the state? She hears Tanaka’s penultimate words, just before a perfunctory “thanks,” spoken in “a dry, low voice,” as if Tanaka has become Layla – he has escaped the nation, and Japan has become Afghanistan. He has changed, but he cannot change anything. He wonders: “Maybe Japan is a cold country” (149).

Inasmuch as Layla incarnates, in the eyes of the narrator-interpreter, not only a spatial but also a temporal other, that because she is from Afghanistan, she is also a person of the past, *Salam* functions as a critique of the narrativization not only of the migrant but also of history. To narrate, of course, means to build from incomplete evidence, to interpret. And to fill in the gaps of evidence and turn disparate facts into a coherent story enables all manner of tendentiousness and subjectivity to determine narratives and then masquerade as objectivity, even heroic virtue, as postcolonial scholars have determinedly emphasized. What Nezamafi reinforces through her oblivious narrator is the familiar postcolonial critique that gendered thought in particular renders innocent and unproblematic this tendentiousness. The migrant is not legible, yet genders, when enforced by the nation, enable the narrator not only to abandon self-scrutiny and critical thought, not only to read the migrant and to tell of her a false narrative, one that says far less about the migrant than about herself, but to do so with sanctimonious, secure conviction in her own rectitude.

The central problem in the plot of *Salam* is to establish the identity of Layla and her case for asylum, a task that requires the lawyer to track down evidence from Layla’s past and deploy it in the present to make an argument. It is exactly the task of the historian. The ridiculous, outrageous way the narrator renders Layla a past form and then narrativizes her demonstrates the deep contingency of hegemonic, commonsensical present-day ways of knowing, which are disrupted and exposed as preposterous when cast in the light of history and of the migrant, which in turn come together as one and the same in the narrative. Layla cannot *be* in Japan unless Japanese state officials know of her past in Afghanistan with certainty. Her being is contingent on knowing, yet to know her with certainty, beyond personal recollection, can never be achieved. And so, exposed to this epistemological and consequently ontological precarity, Layla, like actors in history itself, finds her existence itself at stake,

⁴⁹See Hibi (2012, pp. 41–42).

susceptible to every manner of interpretation. Prejudices and divisions of nation, originating at a masculinist border that forces a gendered identity of resistance on the narrator, then disguised in an assumption of the universalism of gendered difference, condition this interpretation freely. She becomes what the narrator tells of her.

What Layla, the present future, demands, then, is not a renunciation of but rather a full-blown embrace of sensitivity to the present in the narration of the past, a recognition that knowledge of the present and the past condition each other and thus determine the being of the future. She summons to a consequent temporal rather than spatial relativization of the present, a presentism attuned to what Joan W. Scott calls “an implicit operation of power (hegemonic belief systems, disciplinary orthodoxies) that appeals to difference to confirm its rule.”⁵⁰ It is postcolonial Japan itself through which power operates to appeal to difference and confirm its rule. And so Layla tacitly forces its dismantling. Impossibly, the nation, undermined at every turn, can only exist peacefully by wielding horrific violence against those who transgress it and expose its impossibility. Unless national territoriality is consigned to history, Layla is consigned to history.

Nations as past

He loses Layla, and Tanaka is “lost,” lost “between a feeling of wanting to help Layla and a feeling, as a Japanese person, that what his government was doing must be right,” the narrator observes (149). As she watches Tanaka walk away from the tragic scene of separation at the airport, the narrator sees a Japanese family of four toting Disneyland bags, their little girl of five or six sporting Mickey Mouse ears on her head as she drags a gigantic Pooh doll, bigger than she, across the airport floor.

There it is: the irony of nations, so lurid, so obscene, and yet so ubiquitous that no one can see it or be scandalized by it anymore, and most of all, so utterly puerile. A five-year-old Japanese girl, on the move at the airport, a migrant across sovereign boundaries, drags behind her a symbol of America’s sovereignty- and boundary-eroding global cultural and economic hegemony, a reified thing so ponderous, so overwhelming, that she quite literally cannot bear it herself, even as she crowns her head with the cultural power of the nation that carpet-bombed her grandparents and imposed on her the post-colonial myth of the territorial nation and the geopolitical boundaries of the nation-state in the first place. Japan cannot be a place where different cultures mix, Tanaka believes – different cultures, of course, meaning scary cultures with fun cultures, the shah- and ayatollah-parochialized Hafez with the Disney-globalized Winnie the Pooh.

Tanaka is, of course, entirely right. It is extremely difficult to make Japan into a multinational country. It is to that very difficulty, the convulsions and reactionary digging into difference wrought precisely by the erosion of sovereign territoriality in the face of global human universalism, that Nezamafi testifies. And she sets up a choice: either the sovereign nation with full control of its own exclusionary borders survives, or Layla survives. But in either case, it is not just Layla who suffers. She has taken down everyone with her. The paradox at the heart of the nation-state that Tessa Morris-Suzuki emphasizes in her study of migration and detention in early postwar Japan – that, impossibly, nations-states require migration to exist as bounded entities, yet they exist as bounded entities by denying migration – can no longer be sustained without devastating the cultural and intellectual lives of everyone.⁵¹ And so with that paradoxical impossibility must go the impossibility that is postcolonial Japan.

Unsettling questions follow. What lies beyond the postcolonial nation? If the nation-state goes, whither Japanese democracy? It might be, as Morris-Suzuki argues in the Japanese case with characteristic discernment, that the border post and the ballot box, as she puts it, are theoretical inverses of the democratic nation-state: at one place, the nation chooses its state, while at the other, the state

⁵⁰Scott (2022).

⁵¹Morris-Suzuki (2010).

chooses its nation; one place relies on universal participation while the other delimits.⁵² It is a classic contradiction that has bothered theorists at least since Kant, through Arendt and Schmitt: how can the bounded absolutism of the sovereign nation-state be reconciled with the humanist universalism undergirding democracy?⁵³ But that ostensible contradiction is the entire point of the democratic nation-state. The postwar construction of postcolonial Japan itself was an instance of applying this theory: to build a democratic Japan meant to build a sovereign nation-state, discrete, in control of its borders, demarcated against ideological nemeses and former colonies surrounding it. Does the unmaking of postcolonial Japan also mean the unmaking of postcolonial Japanese democracy, a departure from the imbricating American-imposed myths of nation-state and democracy and toward a new, uncharted, more imaginative, more radically universal system wherein the state is beholden to a demos wider than the nation and therefore cannot enforce the nation – and cannot rain devastation on Layla while supposedly defending Tanaka, Esq.? And how might that be, if it is not a reversion to imperial democracy?⁵⁴ Might not this unbounded cosmopolitanism lay the groundwork for global civil war?⁵⁵

Nezamafi prompts these questions. She does not provide answers. She is but the vanguard. “Japan’s Joseph Conrad,” the *Wall Street Journal* (2010) exulted as she awaited the result of her Akutagawa nomination. At one level, it is a hackneyed Orientalist trope. But the essential comparison might not be entirely wrongheaded. She does not use the term “history of the present,” but that is essentially what Maya Jasanoff reads of Conrad in her magisterial biography of him. Conrad was the dawn watch: in his ostensible fiction, he told a history of the advent of a new era, one of migration and movement and all the problems that attend the rise of a global present.⁵⁶ By virtue of his very spatial displacement, he watched from another time, uniquely clairvoyant, perhaps voyeuristic, seeing what others cannot see yet, telling a history of the future present, a history of the present *avant la lettre*.

Just as Layla, illiterate, uneducated, lifeless, but armed with knowledge borne of her experience of displacement, leaves her “intellectual” interpreter and narrator shamefaced, singing what her interpreter cannot understand, perhaps too Nezamafi, then but no one of renown, sees what some cannot see, including some writing at the exact moment when perhaps Nezamafi herself was banned from their nation: the era of the territorial nation, and of the state that produces it, is over. Its rambunctiousness is but its death throe. It is our choice to submit or resist.

Whether Nezamafi is right, it is too early to say. But she has told her history of the present. Or at least I have told her history of the present, I have told my dramaturgy of her discontent, interpreting and narrating her perhaps tendentiously, perhaps ironically, perhaps sanctimoniously, just as her narrator interprets and narrates Layla, but conscious, hopeful, of what dramaturgies of discontent can achieve. The story of her Layla, her Joseph, or my story of the story of her Layla, is the story of the unsustainable, impossible irony of the sovereign territorial nation-state. The story does not end happily. But to tell it is to dream of a happy future, to make Pharaoh know that only in throne is he greater than Joseph, than Layla.⁵⁷ For in the story of Layla, stolen away out of the land of the Hazaras, having done nothing that they should put her into the dungeon, lie lessons for those who inquire.⁵⁸

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⁵²Morris-Suzuki (2010, p. 5).

⁵³e.g. Benhabib (2004).

⁵⁴See Abizadeh (2002, 2008).

⁵⁵See Ghadimi (2022).

⁵⁶Jasanoff (2017).

⁵⁷Genesis 41:41.

⁵⁸Genesis 40:15; Qur’an 12:7.

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