

The Irony of Nations: Shirin Nezamafi and the Migrant's History of the Present

This paper has three objectives. First, it seeks to integrate Japan and Japanese history into the broader study of “migrant Asias,” using Japan as a site not for examining an outlier in global migration patterns but for productively engaging with universal problems of displacement with particular cultural and national inflections. Second, it advocates the use of fiction, literature and the “softer” humanities, rather than anthropological fieldwork or sociological and political studies, to examine the ideas and experiences of migration at an abstract, conceptual level. Third, and most important, it builds on these first two objectives to examine how the idea or cultural conception of the “nation” operates as a hegemonic, exclusionary mechanism to obstruct the integration of migrants into Japanese society—a mechanism just as powerful but far less visible than law, politics, or other bureaucratic systems.

To achieve these broad aims, the paper focuses narrowly on “Saramu” (or *Salam*), an ostensibly fictional story written in Japanese in the 2000s by the prize-winning author Shirin Nezamafi, then an Iranian exchange student in Japan’s Kansai region. The story tells of the experience of an interpreter working to secure the legal status of an undocumented Afghan migrant in Japan in the aftermath of the United States invasion of Afghanistan. Reading “Saramu” closely, this paper argues that the story uses layers of irony and an unreliable narrator to advance a subtle critique: the well-intentioned volunteers and activists seek to help the Afghan migrant all operate within the hegemonic cultural conception of the “nation,” which ironically, unbeknown to the actors themselves, undermines and vitiates their efforts at every step. The actors all seek to overcome the nation as a bureaucratic form, yet their ironic, blind acceptance of the nation as a cultural identity and marker prevents them. The paper thus investigates how thinking “with” the nation, even with good intentions, oppresses migrants—and it thus suggests that, in a contemporary world characterized by unprecedented flows of people across national boundaries, the nation as a historical cultural form has outlived its time. Ultimately, the paper uses literature to reveal how the nation as a sociopolitical construction is undermined by migration.

The paper advances this argument through several steps. It offers a general overview of the contemporary history of migration and refugeehood in Japan, reviewing evidence and literature on policy and practice. It also provides a broad background overview of the extant secondary literature on the conception of the “nation” in Japanese history, asking where the hegemony of that concept comes from. It then turns to Nezamafi’s story itself, placing a particular emphasis on the question of national language and national prejudices. It shows how language, when tied tightly to national culture, obstructs rather than facilitates communication, becoming a tool of stereotypes and a practical and cultural obstacle the migrant must overcome.

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