AMÉLIE NOTHOMB’S NOVEL
FEAR AND TREMBLING :
REVEALING THE JAPANESE ETHNOTYPE
THROUGH FICTION

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Amélie Nothomb’s novel Fear and Trembling published in 1999 in Paris can be considered as a mere publication phenomenon, but also as a major literary testimony, reflecting the image of Japan in modern France. The book honored by the Académie Française prize soon became a bestseller in France and abroad and was adapted for the screen in 2003 by Alain Corneau. For the general public, it became essential as a reference which explains and describes not only some aspects of the working society in Japan, but also numerous features of the culture and mentality of Japan.

In spite of the word novel which appears on the cover of the book, the fictional substance has not inspired too many critical studies in the French media. Immediately the book was seen as a testimony, dealing with practical experience, where everything is true, not symbolically true as, for example, in a theorizing novel, but factually true. Various factors influenced this interpretation of the book:
• the author’s own statements, which repeatedly insist on the absolute veracity of the story, as outlandish as it may seem; 
• the great number of stereotypes, which are meant to render the story more credible. *Fear and Trembling* justly recycles the main features of ancient and modern Japan, confining them to the banal theme of a case of extreme violence, zeroing in on an individual;
• the publication strategy: *Fear and Trembling* has been the object of simultaneous publication of *L’Entreprise barbare*, an essay, the sociological context of which describes the phenomenon of harassment in French companies. The fact that Nothomb’s novel appeared in this pre-existing problematic atmosphere probably weighed on the authentication of the fiction.
• finally, the building of a writer’s ethos: Amélie Nothomb is deliberately in the romantic tradition which confers the writer a “mythical singularity,” as the writer Roland Barthes puts it (Barthes, 1970: 32). Her writing or reading activities, as described according to articles and interviews, “escape human determinism.” Her well-known hats exhibit her different nature, as well as her mode of sustaining herself — rotten fruit — on which she prides herself. Her Japanese experience is integrated in this very constellation of differential traits, with the complicity of the media surrounding her. At the time of the publication of *Fear and Trembling*, she took part in *Bouillon de Culture*, a TV magazine. The theme of the magazine is “Writers are weird people;” and in 2003 Jacques Chancel, on France Inter, addresses her as follows: “We must say that your life itself is a novel: you were born in Japan …”. We are obviously dealing with a very specific Japan. Its image has been programmed: it is a country given for real, but it cannot be a place of trivial experience or complicity. It has to be a country of the unheard of, as

1 During the radio program called *Alter ego* (Patricia Martin, 2009), Amélie Nothomb asserts the authenticity of the facts in the narrative, which she reveals as a personal experience:
   PM: “… Is what you write really true?”
   AN: “Oh, sure. It’s completely true.”
   PM: “A life experience…”
   AN: “An experience that I completely lived during the entire year of 1990.”
2 Jourdain & Durieux, 1999. Jourdain is a journalist, Durieux a consultant in organization. Both works are simultaneously introduced on France Inter, *Alter ego*, 1999. The theme of this program was “My first job.”
3 Barthes, *ibid.* Amélie Nothomb claims she has read Stendhal’s novel *La Chartreuse de Parme* 64 times (France Inter, *Dis-moi comment tu voyages*, 1999).
4 Laurent Ruquier’s TV program *On a tout essayé*, France 2, 2000.
well as of the long-lasting stigmas\(^5\), which embellish the unique halo of the writer.

This study shows that the novel *Fear and Trembling*, in spite of its pretentions as a documentary, is what can be called a pseudo-ethnological novel. As many other best-sellers dedicated to exotic consumption, from *Madame Chrysanthème* to *A year in Provence*, it belongs to a lavish tradition characterized by certain generic traits: the merging of the narrator with the author, the latter, assimilated with a “candid” character showing cultural differences, the caricatural oversized figures and situations, the discursive effects of the didactic process, the use of stereotypes and latent axiologisation.

**The narrative**

Published under the problematic label of a “novel,” *Fear and Trembling* is written in the first person singular. The main character Amélie, a young Belgian woman, is hired by a company called Yumimoto (The narrator translates it as a fictional name: “The things from the bow”) because of her great Japanese skills. Paradoxically, her linguistic skills work against her quickly; she is given an absurd order “to pretend she does not understand Japanese anymore” (p. 20)\(^6\), and is assigned to do small unimportant tasks. She quickly falls into the clutches of her immediate superior, a young woman named Fubuki (“Snowstorm”). The tasks Amélie is forced to do become more and more tedious and it is soon impossible for her to perform them. At the same time, she feels a kind of loving fascination of masochistic nature for this person who is her torturer. In her desire to humiliate Amélie as much as possible and to make her quit her job, Fubuki finally gives her the task of cleaning toilets. Exposed to daily humiliations, Amélie will keep her job as the “Carmelite nun of the restrooms” for 7 months (p. 125), which represents more than half of her work contract. When the contract comes to an end, she leaves the Yumimoto company for good.

\(^5\) According to Poncet, 1999, Amélie Nothomb explains that “nine years were needed for “it” to come out, “it” being her painful professional Japanese experience” and that she remained “a little Japanese employee.”

\(^6\) For short quotations, the translation is mine, and the reference used is that of the French edition France Loisirs.
The main characters

The manner, in which the main Japanese characters are constructed, reveals that the novel deals less with incidental characters than with ethnotypes. The storyline helps recreating the most typical looks and reactions of these characters. The three main characters are Saito, Omochi and Fubuki Mori.

Saito, the head of the department is described as “small, lean, and ugly” – a description which does not disagree with a lot of caricatures representing Japanese in the French media. He appears first calling Amélie in a “hoarse” voice (p. 8). He is filled with tics, indicating the pressure that he constantly faces, both from his working environment and his culture. He even named his son Tsutomeru, that is, “to work,” revealing how much his personal sphere (family life) has been sacrificed for his social circle (the labour world and financial goals of Japan Inc.) Several episodes display his formalism and his narrow-minded authoritarianism. These different attributes, that Saito has, create a narrative basis for the stereotypical image of the salaryman.

The second character Omochi (vice-president of the company) also represents a stereotype. This character is constantly called “The Obese One” and is described as being enormous and repulsive. He is shown to use the most terrifying brutal language along with physical violence. The presence of his silhouette in the narrative suggests another fundamental fantastic image of a male Japanese individual in caricatures, the sumo wrestler. Moreover, this character obviously exhibits perverse tendencies and is prone to sexual violence (pp. 111, 141).

Fubuki Mori, Amélie’s immediate superior in the company’s hierarchy, appears as the most complex protagonist in that trio. She is the incarnation of perfect Japanese beauty, the “Carnation of Old Japan” (p. 15). Her perfect physical elegance is like that of a Geisha. She deeply upsets Amélie’s feelings and we notice that in this novel, a Japanese woman appears as a form of erotic crystallization once more. However, this beauty conceals some danger: Fubuki is a relentless sadistic creature. This psychological trait,

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7 According to the author. In fact, the precise meaning is “To make efforts”, “try hard to” but it sounds like the Japanese first name Tsutomu, which can be written with different characters.

8 If Fubuki’s picture reminds Amelie of a bow, it is maybe not only because of her military style: we know that in traditional Japanese engravings, geishas are often drawn in a figure, following a curved axis. This graphic theme is still present, even in the contemporary caricatures that we can find in the French press.
which moreover happens to be hidden, gets out of hand in an episode which may seem intended to illustrate the Japanese proverb “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down”\(^9\). Because (as the novel tells us) Amélie leaves the subaltern role which was allotted to her, and dares to take the responsibility to write a technical report, despite the promotion system inherent in a Japanese company, she infuriates her seniors and precisely arouses Fubuki’s retaliations. Besides, some aspects of her personality remind us of a samurai: her slender tall stature easily suggests the shape of a Japanese bow (p. 12) and her voice can be as sharp as a Japanese sword (p. 59). Finally, Fubuki Mori’s human silhouette conceals a kind of robot-like infallibility, which is especially striking when she handles her calculator “with stunning speed” and “in twenty minutes” solves the accounting problems that Amélie was struggling with in vain for a whole month (p. 67, 82). Consequently, this character appears as a synthesis of several ethnotypical pictures traditionally attached to the image of Japan.

In the world of order and constraint of the Japanese company, Amélie, the narrator, is the very principle of confusion. The role assigned to her is that of a Charlie Chaplin lost in deadly serious situations: she is the grain of sand which hinders the movement of the cogged wheels. She is an exasperating clown, like the “Guignol” character scoffing at the “gendarme” in the French Guignol theatre. She is the incarnation of a bothering force that upsets the life in the mortiferous universe of the company and even that of Japanese culture. Confronted with the tense deceiving “smiles” of her interlocutors, Amélie keeps an inner “laugh” which, for the reader, intends to ridicule her executioners.

I glanced at the contents of what I was photocopying. They were the rules of the golf club of which Mister Saito was a member. I started to laugh. (22 [33])\(^10\)

In the mornings, while the subway was carrying me toward Yumimoto headquarters, I already felt like laughing at what lay ahead for me on that day. (96 [127])

Amélie symbolizes also the “good, nice and stupid human race” (p. 119)

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\(^9\) This refers to the common translation of the proverb *Deru kugi wa utareru*. This proverb inspired the title of a book which is now a classics among the studies about Japan in France: *Le Clou qui dépasse* (L’Hénoret, 1993). In the media, the expression is frequently used when relating to descriptions or analytical studies, concerning what is commonly called “groupism” of the Japanese society.

\(^10\) As for these long quotations, I refer to Adriana Hunter’s translation, *Fear and Trembling*, 2004. I put the page number in the France Loisirs edition in square brackets.
whose behaviour full of common sense and good will reveals the gaps, as well as the perversity and brutality of her hosting milieu. Finally, she becomes someone who represents Western values: these are values, such as reason, measure and compassion, all of which are far from being questioned. Instead, these values are confirmed, as they become obvious and natural when coming into contact with the Japanese culture. Axiological modalities are therefore recurrent in her speech. These axiological modalities generate words such as absurd, bizarre, extravagant, incongruous, laughable, referring to Japanese manners, whereas anything logical or natural belongs to the narrator’s side and to her culture:

Quitting would have been the most logical thing. And yet I could not quite resign myself to this idea. To Western eyes, there would have been nothing ignominious in this; to Japanese eyes, it meant losing face. (p. 12 [21])

By one of those bizarre quirks of which Japanese culture offers abundant examples, those who have no right to dream bear names that solicit dreaming, such as « Fubuki ». (p. 73 [97])

There are several associates in addition to the few principal protagonists, whose symbolic roles remain significant. Tenshi, a salaryman like the others, commits the error to take pity on Amélie’s fate, entrusting her with a job that she deserves more, which causes him to suffer “incredibly insulting” humiliation (p. 42) and some reprimands until he goes back where he belongs. This anecdote feeds the theme of violence, a major stereotype in the modern representations of Japan, the red thread that can be followed all through the novel. It is meant to illustrate the hierarchical customs of Japan and the power, which the different structural systems hold (the company, the society and the cultural system) in comparison to naturally intelligent initiatives. For the most part, this anecdote introduces a theory concerned with speech, an aspect that separates Japan from Western habits founded on natural reasoning and on the primacy of logos: in Japan one does not speak about problems. “If you talk about them, there is a serious risk the situation will get worse” (p. 50).

Haneda, the President of the company, another secondary character, is a sort of an unreal creature: his voice is “beautiful and unreasonably delicate.” He is Yumimoto’s “God,” he has “extreme” kindness and his office is “immense and bright.” However, Haneda’s kindness does not work: he has been told about Amélie’s humiliations but he cannot do much about them. He just utters a few comforting words when she leaves the company. His
coexistence with the assistant (Omochi) is a paradox, one more in a country where they abound: “In the Yumimoto company, God was the president, and the vice-president was the Devil” (p. 86.)

Most of the moral positivity that Amelie discovers in the company comes from Haneda and Tenshi. However, this kindness is a marginal kindness and has been stamped with the seal of the most perfect powerlessness. There is a clear lesson which can be learnt here: the mechanism does not allow any humaneness whatsoever, whether it comes from violent disapproval or from gravitational force.

Let us mention among the extras Amelie’s father, who makes a short appearance in the last pages (p. 153-154). Even though he is not a qualitative character, we still learn that he is an important diplomat. Informed of his daughter’s humiliations, and knowing that her internship is taking place in the restrooms of the Yumimoto company, he gives her the order not to reveal anything, as:

He [my father] was concerned that nothing should threaten the good relations between Belgium and Japan. I was therefore not even remotely to suggest that any Yumimoto employee had mistreated me. (p. 117 [154])

If the reader knows her previous novels or simply has been briefed by the media, he/ she is able make the link with Patrick Nothomb, Ambassador of Belgium in Japan\textsuperscript{11} at the time when the story is told. This character is not symbolic in any sense. To put things in a strictly dramatic way, he only provides plausibility to the action, since his intervention explains why Amélie, who endures the most incredible public insults, leaves the company at the end of her contract even without complaining. In fact, even this plausibility is quite relative — is it really likely that an international Japanese company employs the daughter of the Belgium Ambassador to clean its restrooms and this happens for a seven months time? – and can only be based on an \textit{a priori} judgement, such as: Japan is made of a fabulous society, where the unusual and the grotesque are a part of everyday life.

\textsuperscript{11} Patrick Nothomb was the Consul General of Belgium in Osaka from 1968 to 1972, and then Ambassador from 1988 to 1997.
The system of the novel themes

There are a number of themes in *Fear and Trembling*, which have already been seen in other works by Nothomb, starting with the theme of cruelty which makes its way into relationships between individuals. This theme even blossoms, as the novel takes place in Asia: *Fear and Trembling* is a kind of descent into the torture garden\(^\text{12}\) because of the frequency of metaphors related to persecution: sadic, sadism, cruelty, executioner, torturer, victim, pain, torture, prison, to send to the galleys, punishment, punish, gehinnam, hell, Calvary, crucified, Sisyphus, etc. This cruelty is sometimes eroticized, especially when it comes from Fubuki, whose vexations Amélie receives with adoration. The situation invites her to make a comparison with the *Furyo*, Oshima’s movie:

> I was completely overwhelmed by the film, especially by the scenes depicting the fraught interaction between the two heroes […] Of course, there were huge differences, but I did feel like a prisoner of war, and my torturer was at least as beautiful as Ryuichi Sakamoto was handsome. (p. 199 [143-144])

There is a kind of naturalness in the way the pictures of violence and seduction associated with certain representations of Japan get entangled in the author’s fantasies. Amélie points out that her childhood dream was to “become a martyr” (p. 75). The Japanese company, and on a larger scale, Japan, appears to be a country of suffering, an ideal place for such sadomasochist calling. The personal theme (the obsession of a heroine who is constantly taken for the author) and the cultural theme (the inherent cruelty embedded in the behavioural patterns of the country) are closely linked.

This matches perfectly this type of excessive hyperbolic writing tainted with exaggeration. The terms overloaded with high strung expressions abound: *Incredibly insulting, absurd humiliations, despicable decision, abominable sight, horrible sentences, grotesque proof of my submission* all along with, *poignant beauty, magnificent human being, exceptional elegance, insane delicacy*, etc. This glossary corresponds to the representation of a universe without measure, of a culture split into two extremes, negativity and positivity, where anything human, rational and reasonable has a difficult time to find its place. The following buildup, concerning Japanese women’s fate

\(^{12}\) Octave Mirbeau’s novel *The Torture garden* (1899) takes place in China. He makes use of the stereotype of oriental cruelty that also applies to Japan. About these images of cruelty, which echo all the way to *Fear and Trembling*, see Dominguez & Détrie, 2005.
“when it so happens that they are beautiful” (as the text tells us), testifies this contrast of extremes:

Beauty that had resisted so many physical and mental corsets, so many constraints, crushing denials, absurd restrictions, dogmas, heartbreaks, such sadism and asphyxiation, and such conspiracies of silence and humiliation — that sort of beauty is a miracle of heroic survival. (p. 65 [87])

This writing, which points to the unbelievable, to the extraordinary and to what goes beyond understanding, is not the only domain where outrageouslyness thrives. In Fear and Trembling, just like in other novels, Amélie Nothomb maintains the unusual, the jokes or the bizarre. For example, there is the nocturnal scene where Amelie dances naked on the office desks of the Yumimoto company. She eventually falls asleep under the contents of the waste bins in front of her appalled colleagues. Or even her final meeting in Fubuki’s office where, going one step further in the Japanese ways and rituals of auto-humiliation, she gets her torturer to reach orgasm. Moreover, Fear and Trembling reminds us of the literary topos of, for example, the candid Usbek (in the Lettres Persanes), when his questions or behaviour cause the irrationality of his universe to explode. However, these literary entries did not tempt the critics, and they finally ended up being sealed off, giving place to a strictly documentary reading of the novel. However, this discharge of fiction was not without its consequences in the commentaries about the Japanese society, which followed in the news and on the radio after the novel was published.

Fear and Trembling stirred up some ideas already taken for granted by the French media, notably in the early 90’s. This period corresponds to the second Amélie Nothomb’s stay in Japan followed by her return to Belgium and her debut as a writer. We also find:

- the question of “groupism,” especially in the employee’s dedication to do duty in the company;
- the theme of feudal male chauvinist Japan;
- allusions to the sense of honour inherited from Bushido and transposed into the frame of the company where it becomes an alienating force;
- the description of work as a priority (the sacrifice of family life, alcoholism and suicide, counterbalancing economical success);
- the theme of the secret (here, in the frame of the Japanese company), kept for reasons, more cultural than technical; and the theme of scorn towards foreigners;
• scenes depicting behaviors that swing from extreme brutality to a kind of politeness soaked in conspicuous gallantry;
• the nostalgic mention of Old Japan, of its villages, its scrolls, which were replaced by a monstrous and aggressive modernity, as in Tokyo, etc.

In the novel, all these stereotypes are what is sometimes referred to as “first degree stereotypes,” stereotypes which are normally “part of the speech and do not carry any critical intention whatsoever” (Dufays, 1994: 235). They are a basis for the consistency of characters and events. In the narration, they ensure the naturalness of the links. If a French reader takes for granted Fubuki’s sadistic determination or Omori’s outbursts, it is largely because s/he already has an apriorism, vis-à-vis Japan and sees a particular affinity in the Japanese history and Japanese culture with the practice of violence (Honoré, 1994):

The delivery explained much about Japanese history. I would have been capable of anything to stop the hideous screaming — invade Manchuria, persecute millions of chinese, commit suicide for the emperor, hurl my airplane into an american battleship, perhaps even work for two Yumimoto Corporations. (p. 29 [42])

Each of the above-mentioned stereotyped themes deserves a thorough explanation. I would like to briefly underline the particular importance of these two themes: the condition of women in Japan and the distaste for foreigners.

The condition of a Japanese woman, as the narrator calls her, referring to Japanese women in general, inspires many passages. One of them is particularly spectacular by its size (it covers 12 pages in the French edition), also taking the author’s style of enunciation into consideration. The passage starts with a description, which includes reported speech mixed with direct speech:

Society conspires against her [the Japanese woman] from her earliest infancy. Her brain is steadily filled with plaster until it sets : « If you’re not married by the time you are twenty-five, you’ll have good reason to be ashamed » ; « if you laugh, you won’t look dignified » ; « if your face betrays your feelings, you’ll look coarse » ; if you mentioned the existence of a single body-hair, you’re repulsive » ; « if a boy kisses you on a cheek in public, you’re a whore » ; « if you enjoy eating, you’re a pig »… (p. 66 [87-88])

Then the indefinite third person pronoun, which accounts for enunciation, is even taken away. The quotation marks disappear and the passage becomes a prosopopoeia, a rhetorical device which allows an abstraction to speak. This is how the novel supposedly gives us the access to the discourse
of Values in the Japanese society, a sort of tremendous superego, which defines the condition of women in this country:

It is your duty to marry [...] Your husband will not love you [...] At two in the morning an exhaustive — and often drunk — man will collapse in a heap onto the conjugal bed, which he will leave at six o’clock without a word [...] Your duty is to make sacrifices for others. But do not let yourself think that your sacrifices will make those for whom you make them happy. Those sacrifices will only allow them not to be ashamed of you. You have no hope of either being happy or making others happy. [...] Your Gehenna, your living hell, is absurd. That means there is no way out.

« Ah ! But there is one ! [...] You have the right to commit suicide. Suicide is a very honorable act. » (p. 68-71 [90-93])

One may notice that the only novelty in this speech is on the level of the writing style (way of enunciation, grandiloquence). However, from a referential point of view, the content is connected to very trivial propositions, about the lack of family life, the importance of shame or suicidal behaviour. In short, Fear and Trembling represents a constellation of clichés, all incorporated into a narrative framework.

As for the figure of the foreigner, it appears in the novel under the exclusive form of the Western world in a holistic, as well as an antagonistic way. Amelie Nothomb’s novel is a variation of the alarming title chosen for the French edition of Endymion Wilkinson’s book Le Japon face à l’Occident13. When the author mentions Japanese characters, the terms West and Western are systematically denigrated.

Be quiet. That disgusting sort of pragmatism is worthy of a Westerner. (p. 32 [45])

Your despicable behavior is typical of Westerners. (p. 46 [62])

This hatred for the West takes a racist bent when uttered from the mouth of the Japanese characters. The biological stigma appears under different guises. For one, the colour-categorization: the substantive Western is crossed out and replaced by white (“She is white, she knows the customs of the Whites,” p. 102). Secondly, the theme of the mediocrity of performance is linked to the Western brain, which Fubuki calls “Inferiority of the common Western brain” (p. 157). Finally, physical impurity is mentioned:

13 The title is incomplete on the cover of this edition; the full title appears inside, p. 5: Le Japon face à l’Occident – Image et réalité. The French expression face à strongly evokes the idea of hostile confrontation.
« Don’t whites realize that they smell like corpses? 
« If we could only get them to realize how badly they stink, we’d have a fantastic market for really efficient deodorants in the West! »
« We might help them smell a bit better, but we can’t stop them sweating. They’re made like that. »

They were ecstatically happy. (p. 80 [105])

As for Amélie, she undergoes a series of humiliating rituals where she has to demean herself, not only as a person, but also as someone who represents the West, which is seen as filtered through the sieve of xenophobia or through the filter of racism which the novel attributes to the Japanese.

Forgive my Western indignity. We did something wrong, yes. That doesn’t mean there isn’t some gain to be made from our mistake. (p. 32 [46])

« Why do you think you lack these capabilities? »
« Because the Western brain is inferior to the Japanese brain ». (p. 119 [157])

In the early 90’s, the French media echoed the differentialist theories developed in Japan on the functioning of the brain. Amélie Nothomb blends these theories into racist statements and exhibits them as a dominant discourse in the framework of the Yumimoto company, as well as Japan in general. In this respect, the protagonist does not limit herself to telling the reader about her mishaps but undertakes to depict a picture of the Japanese mentality, going from the Japanese company back into the culture itself. The novel intends to give us a lesson in ethnology.

Aspects of the ethnological discourse

A certain amount of formal features link Fear and Trembling to a didactic novel. For example, on a enunciative level, we notice that two instances coexist: the speech of the protagonist, as the incidents occur in the novel, and the retrospective speech of the narrator after several years have elapsed. As a protagonist, Amélie behaves in such a way that later Amélie as a narrator can be describes as clumsy. The wanderings of Amélie-the-protagonist

14 “They have a mental functioning other than ours.” This thesis has been developed by the Japanese themselves, especially by Tadanobu Tsunoda, the professor at the University of Medicine of Tokyo in his book entitled The Japanese Brain. The book is not based on an acceptable objective foundation by the community of scientists.” (Dynasteurs, “Les Japonais trichent-ils?”, March 1990).
become a kind of a little lecture on ethnology, offered to the reader by Amélie-the-narrator. A pedagogical coming and going is established between the anecdote and its analysis a posteriori:

Mister Saito summoned me to his office. I was treated to a well-deserved telling-off. I had committed the crime of showing initiative. (p. 18 [28])

The informative parenthesis may stretch to a whole chapter, describing the society in the case of prosopopeia mentioned above. In order not to let the insertion of the didactic content of the narrative interfere with the readability of the novel, the author does not leave the unveiling function only in the hands of the narrator. As described in the case of Tenshi, various protagonists explain to Amélie the customs and the moral system of Japan in a more or less friendly manner.

Numerous enunciative comments fill the same heuristic function. Amélie accompanies her interlocutors’ statements with brief unspoken comments, which hint at showing the reader significant characteristics of specific utterances of single words or expressions on the cultural level:

« There is always a means of obeying. That’s what Western brains need to understand »

Now, we are getting to it, I thought. (p. 12 [20])

My companion in misfortune and I were called traitors, incompetents, snakes, deceitful, and — the height of injury — individualists. (p. 29 [42])

To conclude, the ethnological discourse manifests itself in the form of generalization. This generic feature is not relative to the world of business or to capitalistic management; it is systematically linked to the Japanese culture. The process saturates the text through the expressions like the Japanese, Japanese men, a Japanese, the Japanese women, in Japan. These expressions often occur after telling an anecdote or describing a cultural behaviour pattern, and the movement of the text then carries the reader from the specific level to generic considerations. All of Amélie’s protagonists undergo ethnological or sociological analysis which is culturally inspired:

Not only was he giving me a chance, he was leaving me carte blanche, which is exceptional in Japan. (p. 25 [37])

Anyone else in my situation would have quit. But not if they were Japanese […] Cleaning bathrooms was not deemed honorable in the eyes of the Japanese, but it was less dishonorable than losing face. (p. 94 [124])

We could also mention many more author’s methods of generaliza-
tion. But in the domain of intercultural representations, generalization is linked to stereotyping and this stereotyping creates an effect of authority. Any statement about culture is all the more acceptable if it is doxic. Stereotypes create transparency with reality, guide the reader’s interpretation and offer a basis for argumentation. The saturation of the narrative texture through platitudes serves as the main tool for didactic ethos in *Fear and Trembling*.

**Conclusion**

Amélie Nothomb’s insistence (and also the insistence arising from the media, which would be the object of another type of analysis) to guarantee the factual exactness of her novel seems to be a natural consequence of the pseudo-ethnologic genre which has been briefly described; this genre carries over onto the whole of Japan, what is extraordinary, surprising and is a condensation of caricatures in the fictional work. Presented as a narrative of a personal experience founded on objective facts, *Fear and Trembling* is, however, the exact opposite of this: it is a product of a crystallized collective imagination around personal fantasies of the author. The author’s success nevertheless is due largely to this ambiguous position, which allows the reader to consume the interest of the document and the strangeness of the story simultaneously. This way, the emotional impact of the work is increased, for is there anything more capturing than mythical beings projected into everyday life? With a content which is highly characteristic of alarming or hostile representations of Japan, in the early 90’s, *Fear and Trembling* attests a special status about Japan in the French imagination at the turn of the century: it remains the country of

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15 For example, the use of the adjectives Nippon or Japanese with non-classifying nouns here: “She was slim and full of grace, in other words, utterly beautiful, despite the fact that she had to sacrifice herself to her Japanese stiffness” (p.13). For more of these kinds of approaches, see Magri, 1995, pp. 122-123.
radical “otherness”\(^\text{16}\), which can still give rise to Loti’s fantastical reveries and Psalmanazar’s fables\(^\text{17}\).

### References


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\(^{16}\) The foundation of this representation of an unsurpassable “otherness” in *Fear and Trembling* is in part of a racial nature. Even though Amélie Nothomb does not use the word *yellow* when talking about the Japanese and the people of this region, she refers to herself, in the book itself and in various interviews, as *white*, and presents her novel as being “the narrative of a failed attempt to socially and racially integrate” (France Info, October 28, 1999).

\(^{17}\) Adventurous and mythomaniac, Psalmanazar is the author of *Historical and Geographical Description of the Formosa Island* (1704). He claimed to be Japanese, then Formosan and furnished his contemporaries with extravagant stories about these regions. About the contemporary vitality of this kind of anecdotes, see Honoré, 2009.
Abstract

*Fear and Trembling*, the best-seller written by the Belgian novelist Amelie Nothomb has strongly impressed the French readers, who interpreted it as a realistic report of the author’s experience. The fictional substance was then blurred and a purely documentary interpretation prevailed, which conforms to the stereotyped representation of the Japanese society.

This paper deals with this passage from fiction to documentary, concerning Japan. *Fear and Trembling* belongs to a long fictional tradition of representing foreign cultures, that we can call *pseudo-ethnological*, and which is characterized by a number of formal features. But we cannot separate this novel from the social and historical background in which it was published: it is quite emblematical representations of Japan in France at the end of the 20th century. It brings together its narrative thread of most stereotypes on Japan and relies on them to attribute to its object the strangeness and caricature, which in fact belongs to the fantasmatic universe of its author.

*Amelie Nothomb romanas Fear and Trembling (Baimė ir drebulyss): japonų etnotipas grožinėje literatūroje*

*Santrauka*

Romanas *Fear and Trembling*, belgų rašytojos Amelie Nothomb bestseleris, itin sužavėjo skaitytojus Prancūzijoje, kurie romaną laiko realiu autorės išgyvenimų atpasakojimu. Sukurtos detalės netenka prasmės, ir daugelis interpretuoja tik dokumentinius faktus, kurie atitinka stereotipinės japonų visuomenės bruožus.