



Amélie Nothomb's Writing of Japanese Female Images

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Abstract

Belgian writer Amélie Nothomb lived in Japan for five years, an experience that led her to regard herself as Japanese. After receiving higher education in Belgium, she found herself unable to integrate into Belgian society. Following graduation, she returned to Japan with longing and expectations, only to discover that she was equally alienated from Japanese society. In particular, Japan's harsh disciplinary norms imposed on women left her disoriented. The collapse of her "Japanese dream" thus became the source of inspiration for her literary creation. Nothomb has written a series of autobiographical novels in which she portrays her complex emotions toward Japan and shapes a number of vivid Japanese female figures. These representations not only outline the living conditions and social status of Japanese women, but also reveal Nothomb's feminist stance and, more profoundly, her quest for cultural identity within Japan as a "heterotopia."

Key words: Amélie Nothomb; Japanese female images; Heterotopia; Cultural identity

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1. INTRODUCTION

Amélie Nothomb (1967–), a Belgian Francophone novelist, is one of the most widely read contemporary writers in France. She has received several literary awards, including the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française, the Prix des Libraires, and the Prix Alain-Fournier, and many of her works have been adapted into films or plays and translated into more than thirty languages. Born in Japan in 1967, Nothomb spent the first five years of her life there. During this period, although she vaguely perceived her difference from the Japanese "other," what took root in her heart was an attachment to Japan. Later, she followed her father to live in other Asian countries such as China and Bangladesh.

At the age of seventeen, she returned to Belgium for higher education. At university, she felt out of place and unable to find a sense of belonging. Reflecting on this experience, she remarked: "*It was only then that I realized that 'Nothomb' was not an ordinary surname. It belonged to a right-wing, Catholic political family, part of the conservative class. Yet my university was left-wing, anti-religion, and everyone kept asking me: 'Why are you here? This is not your place.' That made me even lonelier. It made me feel even more strongly that I was not Belgian, not Western, but Japanese. As long as I could live in Japan, everything would be resolved.*" (Nothomb, 2012)

After graduating, Nothomb chose to return to Japan, only to discover that she could hardly integrate into Japanese society either. Her long-desired return thus became a disillusioning confrontation between the idealized Japan of memory and the real Japan of discipline and hierarchy. This tension is best understood through Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia," which denotes a counter-site reflecting, contesting, or inverting all other spaces. Her long-desired return thus became a disillusioning confrontation between the idealized Japan of memory and the real Japan of discipline and hierarchy.

This tension is best understood through Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia," which denotes a counter-site reflecting, contesting, or inverting all other spaces. As Foucault noted in *Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966), within a heterotopic space lies another mode of thought, one that signifies "the limits of our own thought, that is, the impossibility of thinking otherwise." Japan, for Nothomb, functions as such a heterotopia: an alluring mirror in which she recognizes both the projection and the impossibility of her own cultural identity.

Carrying with her early childhood memories of Japan, Nothomb had believed Japan to be her homeland. Yet upon her return, in this tangible heterotopic space, she was constantly confronted with her differences from the Japanese. Within this culturally distinct environment, so markedly divergent from Western society, she was compelled to re-examine the relationship between the "self" and the "other."

Ethnic difference caused her to feel excluded from Japanese society, while the rigid social norms imposed on women deeply unsettled her. Her nostalgic idealization of Japan thus collapsed. Unable to obtain cultural identity recognition either in Belgium or in Japan, Nothomb turned to writing as a way of probing her identity: "*This country [Belgium] should have granted me an identity, yet it gave me less of a sense of belonging than other countries. I realized that this arose from a profound identity crisis. To uncover the truth of this enigma, I began to write.*" (Savigneau & Nothomb, 2010: 4).

Through writing, Nothomb became not merely a passive recorder of cultural dislocation but an active creator of meaning. Her narratives transform alienation into authorship: the act of writing itself becomes an assertion of selfhood against the instability of belonging. In many of her autobiographical novels, Nothomb devotes extensive attention to the living conditions of Japanese women. The complex and contradictory female figures she depicts reflect her own struggles with cultural identity within Japan as a heterotopic space. These figures are not merely observed; they are consciously constructed—narrative agents through which Nothomb negotiates her identity crisis and articulates her feminist stance.

In many of her autobiographical novels, Nothomb devotes extensive attention to the living conditions of Japanese women. The complex and contradictory female figures she depicts reflect her own struggles with cultural identity within Japan as a heterotopic space. For Nothomb, it is precisely through her encounter with Japanese women—the "other"—that she comes to better understand the "self." Her works, including *Métaphysique des tubes* (*The Character of Rain*), *Stupeur et Tremblements* (*Fear and Trembling*), *Ni d'Eve ni d'Adam*, and *La nostalgie heureuse* (*The Happy Nostalgia*), construct various images of Japanese women. These autobiographical novels demonstrate that as Nothomb matured, her perception

of Japanese women evolved, reflecting her ongoing awareness of the differences between the "self" and the "other."

Scholarly research on Nothomb, both in China and abroad, has paid significant attention to issues of cultural identity. Chinese scholars often analyze her marginal characters from a postcolonial perspective, thereby exploring her identity issues. For example, Sun Wenhui's study *Searching for the Self between East and West: A Postcolonial Reading of Amélie Nothomb's Cultural Identity* and Li Xiaojuan's *Culture and Gender Identity: A Study of Amélie Nothomb's Identity Consciousness* combine postcolonial and feminist theories, situating Nothomb alongside other minority female writers in the West to highlight her parallel fate in the East. Western scholars, meanwhile, focus more on the notion of *altérité* (otherness) in her works. Notable studies include Susan Bainbrigge's *Identité, altérité et intertextualité dans l'écriture de Neel Doff, Dominique Rolin, Jacqueline Harpman et Amélie Nothomb* and Mark Lee's *L'étranger chez Amélie Nothomb*.

This paper argues that the female figures Nothomb portrays are closely tied to her own construction of cultural identity. While depicting the struggles of Japanese women, she simultaneously asserts her feminist stance and continually searches for her own sense of self. Situated within the Foucauldian framework of heterotopia, Japan in Nothomb's writing functions as a mirror space that simultaneously reflects and distorts her identity. The representations of Japanese women thus become not only depictions of the "other" but also narrative instruments through which Nothomb negotiates her position within this heterotopian space. The following analysis will therefore explore how the images of Japanese women in Nothomb's works intersect with her process of self-identity construction and how Japan, as a heterotopia, enables her to articulate this complex negotiation between belonging and estrangement.

2. CHILDHOOD MEMORIES: THE DUAL IMAGE OF THE NANNIES AND NOTHOMB'S IDENTITY CONFUSION

In her autobiographical novel *Métaphysique des tubes*, Amélie Nothomb recounts her childhood experiences in Japan. Until the age of five, she lived with her family in Kobe, where two nannies, Mrs. Nishio and Miss Kashima, played important roles in her daily life. These two women had markedly different personalities: Mrs. Nishio, whom Nothomb perceived as a "maternal figure," doted on her and deepened her attachment to Japan, while Miss Kashima, a former member of the old Japanese aristocracy whose family had declined after World War II, harbored resentment toward Westerners. Her hostility left the young Nothomb confused. Together, these two

Japanese women left a lasting impression: the nurturing Mrs. Nishio made the child long to become Japanese and be accepted as her daughter, while the hostility of Miss Kashima made Nothomb realize that skin color alone was an insurmountable barrier. This was Nothomb's first vague awareness, within Japan as a "heterotopia," of her identity confusion.

2.1 Mrs. Nishio's Affection and the Internalization of Nothomb's "Japanese Identity"

Willis (1990) observes that "as women, we trace our history back through our mothers; to restore the spiritual activities of female ancestors is a vital task, for to know ourselves we must know our mothers' names" (p. 6). Nothomb, in a similar way, looks back to her "Japanese mother" in order to revisit her childhood in Japan. In *Métaphysique des tubes*, she devotes much attention to Mrs. Nishio, depicting her as a loving, maternal figure. On one level, this image stems from her fond childhood memories of daily life with Nishio; on another, it represents her idealized, utopian projection of Japan as a homeland.

To young Nothomb, Mrs. Nishio was like a mother: "She was extremely kind, even to the point of spoiling me" (Nothomb, 2002, p. 13). She indulged the child in every detail of daily life—Nothomb recalls: "In the morning, when I came into the kitchen, Nishio would sit at my level and give me whatever I asked for. If I wanted to eat from her bowl, which often happened because I preferred her food, she gave it all to me. She would wait until I had finished before eating herself—unless I was generous enough to leave her some" (Nothomb, 2002, p. 75).

By contrast, her biological mother receives little attention in her narratives and often appears inattentive or neglectful—failing to notice when young Amélie nearly drowned, or leaving her to sleep unsupervised in the attic. It was not her mother but Mrs. Nishio who answered the child's questions about death when her grandmother passed away. From this maternal care, Nothomb longed to be Nishio's daughter, to be eternally cherished: "I quickly made my choice: between parents who treated me like anyone else, and a nanny who worshipped me like a goddess, there was no hesitation. I wanted to become Japanese" (Nothomb, 2002, p. 17).

Mrs. Nishio's stories and songs further deepened this bond. Often recounting her wartime experiences or folk tales filled with violence and resilience, Nishio shared her grief through storytelling. Scholars note that the stereotypical representation of "Oriental women" in Western feminist discourse often reduces them to submissive or backward figures (Xiao, 2013, p. 131). Yet Nothomb's portrayal of Nishio resists such stereotypes: she is remembered as both tender and enduring, embodying Nothomb's yearning for a Japanese identity. In later autobiographical novels, Nothomb explicitly calls her "my Japanese mother" (*Biographie de la faim*, 2006,

p. 79) and recalls their emotional reunion in *La nostalgie heureuse* (2013). These narratives underscore how Nothomb projected onto Nishio a maternal ideal, through which she sustained her longing for Japan.

2.2 Miss Kashima's Hostility and Nothomb's Self-Doubt about "Japanese Identity"

In *Métaphysique des tubes*, the image of Miss Kashima stands in sharp contrast to that of Mrs. Nishio. "Mrs. Nishio was young, gentle, and kind; she was not beautiful and came from the poor, common class. Miss Kashima, however, was about fifty, and her beauty was as aristocratic as her background: her face was lovely, but her gaze toward us was always disdainful. She belonged to the old Japanese nobility, whose status was abolished by the Americans in 1945. She had been a princess for over thirty years, and in a single night lost both her title and her wealth" (Nothomb, 2002, p. 16). Because her title was abolished and her privileges taken away, Miss Kashima believed "all Westerners were responsible for her downfall, and she hated them all" (Nothomb, 2002, p. 16).

As a result, her interactions with the Nothomb family were filled with resentment. Amélie recalls: "When my mother asked Miss Kashima to do this or that, she sighed and let out a groan, as if to say: 'Who do you think you are?'" (Nothomb, 2002, p. 16). As a child longing to become Japanese, Nothomb was bewildered to realize, through Miss Kashima's words and attitudes, that racial differences marked a clear boundary between herself and the Japanese. Despite her best efforts to win Kashima's approval—smiling, picking flowers, dressing up in kimono—nothing could soften the nanny's disdain. Eventually, young Amélie admitted: "I realized my abilities were limited" (Nothomb, 2002, p. 19).

One telling incident was when Nothomb fell into a pond while feeding fish. Miss Kashima discovered her but did not intervene: "This time, I really saw it: Miss Kashima was smiling at me—at last, she smiled at me! Then she slowly walked away from the pond. I was on the edge of death. I knew very clearly that Miss Kashima would not call anyone to save me. I guessed right" (Nothomb, 2002, p. 41).

Critics have noted that in much of Western literature, women from the "Third World" are often depicted as stereotypical figures, such as maids or caretakers whose existence is defined by service to others (Xiao, 2013, p. 131). In contrast, Miss Kashima embodies an image that defies this stereotype: proud, cold, and resentful. Her hostility not only reveals Nothomb's frustration at her inability to bridge the cultural gap but also symbolizes Japan's difficulty in coming to terms with its defeat in World War II.

Nothomb gradually realized that her white appearance itself constituted an obstacle to being recognized as

Japanese. As Wang (2015) observes, “racial distinctions are first and foremost expressed through physical features determined by natural attributes; thus, the very concept of race is directly tied to the characteristics of the body” (p. 91). This vague awareness of racial difference also made young Amélie fear exclusion in kindergarten: “At four, I went to a school on a hill. I was the only white child, so I always worried that one day this difference would bring me misfortune. And it did happen: one day, all the children stripped off my clothes on the playground to see if I was white all over” (Robert & Nothomb, 2018, p. 104).

Miss Kashima's rejection became Nothomb's first painful encounter with the tension between “self” and “other,” and it planted the seeds of doubt about her imagined “Japanese identity.”

3. THE DISCIPLINED IMAGES OF WOMEN IN HETEROTOPIAN JAPAN: NOTHOMB'S JOURNEY TOWARD FEMINIST SELF-RECOGNITION

Nothomb spent five years of her childhood in Japan, later followed her father across other Asian countries, and at the age of seventeen returned to Belgium for university. After graduation, she decided to live again in Japan. Her novel *Stupeur et Tremblements* (*Fear and Trembling*) recounts her experiences working in a Japanese corporation. In this work, Nothomb devotes considerable attention to the rigidly patriarchal structures of Japanese society and the constraints imposed on women. By then, she had distanced herself from the “Japanese identity” she once embraced. Through the character of Miss Fubuki, she depicts the struggles of women in the 1970s Japanese workplace, illustrating the disciplinary forces they endured. Educated in the West, Nothomb found it impossible to accept these conditions, realizing that the psychological and cultural systems of the “self” and the “other” diverged sharply. She gradually came to the conclusion that, “My destiny might not be to become a Japanese woman” (Nothomb, 2018, p. 34).

Her corporate experience thus led her to abandon the possibility of claiming a Japanese cultural identity. For Nothomb, Japan could no longer be a homeland; it was instead a heterotopia, a space of estrangement where her idealized memories confronted harsh realities. In this heterotopic space, her childhood vision of Japan as a utopia dissolved in the face of an oppressive, hierarchical system where women were strictly disciplined. The harshness of Japanese women's living conditions struck Nothomb deeply, evoking her sympathy but also reinforcing her sense of distance. It was precisely through these disciplined images of women that she began to re-examine and redefine her own identity.

3.1 The Disciplined Female Body and Nothomb's Separation from “Japanese Identity”

In *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Benedict (2011) characterized Japanese society as a “shame culture,” in which individuals were strictly judged by the fulfillment of social obligations. “To know shame is the foundation of virtue” (p. 200). For women, who were doubly burdened by patriarchal expectations, these social codes were particularly severe.

In *Stupeur et Tremblements*, Nothomb writes: “Every aspect of Japanese women's lives, no matter how hidden or trivial, had to conform to orders—let alone the major events from which they could not escape” (Nothomb, 1999, pp. 95–96). Women's bodies, in dress and gesture, were tightly regulated by social convention. For instance, Nothomb describes her supervisor Miss Fubuki as tall and strikingly beautiful, yet restricted by rigid corporate dress codes: “Her beauty stunned me, but her hairstyle was a disappointment. It was pulled back severely, like an official statement: ‘I am a woman of authority’” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 79).

Even in private settings, similar rules prevailed. In *Ni d'Eve ni d'Adam*, when Nothomb met her Japanese boyfriend's parents during the summer, she wore a short skirt without stockings. His mother scolded her: “Here, when a girl wears such a short skirt, she must wear stockings—especially if her legs are as white as yours” (Nothomb, 2009, p. 132). This remark left Nothomb astonished.

More broadly, Japanese women were subject to a series of bodily disciplines: “Are you hungry? Eat less—you have an obligation to remain slim. Not to please strangers on the street, but because gaining weight is shameful. ... You must remain beautiful, though your beauty brings no joy. Looking in the mirror, you feel only fear of losing it. ... You must marry, preferably before twenty-five; that is your expiration date. ... You must have children” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 96).

As Wolferen (2020) notes in *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, Japanese soap operas consistently reinforce such codes: “Happy endings always followed unwritten rules: work, marriage, childbirth, caring for aging parents and in-laws—these marked the proper stages of women's lives, with almost no exceptions” (p. 278). Because women's bodies were seen as ultimately belonging to the family, their opportunities for professional advancement were severely limited. At the opening of *Stupeur et Tremblements*, Nothomb explains the company hierarchy: “Mr. Haneda was Mr. Omochi's superior; Mr. Omochi was Mr. Saito's superior; Mr. Saito was Miss Fubuki's superior; Miss Fubuki was my superior. And I, I was no one's superior” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 7). Among this chain of superiors, only Fubuki was a woman, and even she barely ranked above the inexperienced newcomer.

Nothomb concluded: “In Japan, women may place their hopes in work. But given their gender, promotion is almost impossible. They can serve the company, and they can earn money, but they should not expect joy from work. At most, work gives them something to boast about, so that when they marry, they are not so foolish as to think someone loves them for their inner essence” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 56).

Through these observations, Nothomb filled her narrative with sympathy for Japanese women. Yet such sympathy also underscored her distance: she could never fully inhabit their lives. As Xiao (2013) explains, although gender inequality is universal, the degree and nature of women’s oppression vary across cultural and historical contexts (p. 108). Nothomb, shaped by Western education, found herself unable to claim a Japanese identity through the women she observed. The gap between “self” and “other” had become irreconcilable.

3.2 The Disciplined Female Spirit and Nothomb’s Detachment from “Japanese Identity”

In *Stupeur et Tremblements*, Nothomb remarks: “Japanese women must be above reproach, for the simple reason that this is the very least that is expected of them. Being beyond reproach brings them nothing—except the absence of reproach. It is neither a source of pride nor a pleasure” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 95). When discipline is internalized into the very spirit of Japanese women, they voluntarily conform to the rules.

This phenomenon corresponds to Foucault’s (1993) theory of disciplinary power: “When one knows that every gesture is exposed to the gaze of others, the restrictive judgment of power takes effect, for the individual inscribes the relations of power within the depth of his consciousness through self-restraint. ... Man plays a double role—both controller and controlled” (pp. 202–203). In Nothomb’s narrative, Japanese women not only discipline themselves but also attempt to discipline others.

One episode highlights this: after Nothomb prepared a report on Belgian butter for another department, her supervisor Miss Fubuki denounced her for working outside her duties, leading to her demotion. Nothomb was baffled, believing Fubuki to be her ally. Yet Fubuki explained: “I am twenty-nine, and you are only twenty-two. I got this position last year, after years of struggle. And you—you wanted to get the same rank in just a few weeks?” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 56). Fubuki, herself constrained by a patriarchal system that limited women’s promotion, had internalized those constraints to the extent that she enforced them on others.

Although diligent and irreproachable in her work, Fubuki was still unmarried at twenty-nine, and thus anxious about her future. In Japanese society, “If a woman is not married by twenty-five, it is a shameful

thing” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 93). Nothomb observed how Fubuki behaved nervously around single men of equal or higher rank, suddenly adopting an exaggerated femininity. Nothomb ironically called this “Miss Fubuki’s mating ritual” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 106). Through such satire, she revealed both her sympathy and her criticism of the contradictions Japanese women endured.

As Nothomb notes: “The rules for women are contradictory. Working selflessly to avoid reproach often leads to being unmarried at twenty-five—and that, too, brings reproach. The cruelty of the system lies precisely in its contradictions: obeying the rules means violating them” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 104). She lamented Fubuki’s situation and longed to whisper to her: “A lifetime of being single would be infinitely better than marrying that petty man. Why should you feel ashamed of not marrying him? You are noble and magnificent, the masterpiece of this world; they are all beneath you” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 107).

Realizing the extent to which Japanese women endured both bodily and spiritual discipline, Nothomb came to regard their survival as a form of heroism: “Beauty, subjected to so many bodily and spiritual constraints—restrictions, oppression, absurd dreams, dogmas, suffocation, sadness, abuse, silence, and humiliation—becomes a miracle of heroism. ... Among women worldwide, Japanese women’s lot is not the worst, but if they deserve admiration, it is because they do not kill themselves” (Nothomb, 1999, p. 93).

Thus, as she confronted the disciplined reality of Japanese women, Nothomb could no longer cling to her earlier longing to “become Japanese” (Nothomb, 2002, p. 17). Instead, she clearly recognized that “My destiny might not be to become a Japanese woman” (Robert & Nothomb, 2018, p. 34).

CONCLUSION

Drawing upon her Japanese experiences, Amélie Nothomb created a series of vivid female figures, through which she fundamentally explored her own cultural identity. Having lived in Japan both as a child and later as an adult, her perspective evolved from the early desire to become Japanese to the later realization that “my destiny might not be to become a Japanese woman” (Robert & Nothomb, 2018, p. 34). Japan thus emerges not as a nostalgic homeland but as a heterotopian mirror—one that both reflects and distorts her image of self.

As a child, the maternal care of Mrs. Nishio once inspired in her the wish to be Japanese, while the hostility of Miss Kashima made her dimly aware that racial difference would prevent her acceptance. Later, her corporate experiences upon returning to Japan—

particularly her relationship with Miss Fubuki—revealed to her the severe bodily and spiritual discipline imposed on women within Japanese society. Such experiences underscored the impossibility of living like Japanese women and forced her to confront the contradictions between the “self” and the “other.”

From a theoretical standpoint, Japan as a heterotopia operates as both a site of fascination and estrangement. Within this “other space,” Nothomb confronts the limits of cultural translation and the illusions of identification. Her works do not merely describe Japanese women; they rewrite them as metaphors of her own struggle for self-definition.

In emphasizing these representations, this study highlights Nothomb's authorial agency: her depictions of Japanese femininity are deliberate acts of narrative construction, through which she reclaims autonomy over her fragmented identity. The intertwining of similarity and difference plunged her into cultural confusion, but it also enabled her to transform alienation into art. Her childhood memories of Japan, which had sustained her utopian longing for a homeland, ultimately proved to be an illusion.

Nothomb's portrayals of Japanese women thus serve as both a feminist critique and a personal exploration of identity. Through the lens of heterotopia, these female figures function as reflective surfaces—each image refracting a facet of the self that Nothomb continually rewrites. They represent her attempt to navigate the heterotopic space of Japan and constitute, in essence, an elegy for the unattainable Japanese identity she once desired.

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