

# Challenges and Strategies for Intercultural Communication: A Case Study on National and Gender Stereotypes in Postmodern Women Literature

**Abstract.** The paper is targeted to study stereotypes as fixed overgeneralized ideas about a certain cluster of people, that are inherent in every society. It was essential to appraise the influence of national and gender stereotypes on intercultural communication between ethnically or culturally diverse people. The authors applied comparative literature analysis and sociocultural interpretation of the texts of the novels to explore how national and gender stereotypes are reflected in literature, which is actually one of the forms of sociocultural discourse presentation. The both pieces of women's literature under review describe a conflict between Western and Eastern outlooks. It was found out that the stereotypes emerging in the mass consciousness, can potentially impede intercultural relations, inadequately showing the representatives of ethnically or culturally diverse group. However, transformation of stereotypical patterns of one culture to the foreign one results in fruitful intercultural communication and enables people to adopt to the life in a foreign society.

**Keywords:** gender stereotype; intercultural communication; national stereotype; sociocultural discourse; women literature.

## Introduction

In the beginning of 2022 the state of emergency imposed millions of citizens' fleeing from their homeland to save their lives. Many students, mostly female, left for abroad, but continued their studies in the university online. Since young women's entering a new social environment demanded maintaining contacts and relations with the natives of a new country, learning their language and culture, attempts to understand their mentality, academicians arranged a special course of trainings, which was designed to facilitate intercultural communication of students in a foreign country.

Intercultural communication involves, beside the command of a language, the knowledge of psychology, material and spiritual culture of another nation, nevertheless the failures in intercultural interaction can happen because of the striking differences in the worldviews of culturally diverse people, which are mostly embodied in their stereotypes (Fomenko et al., 2020). Being predominately cultivated in mass consciousness and represented in its multifaceted forms, such as mass media, namely literature, television, cinema, social networks, etc., various stereotypes should be traced and analyzed to evaluate their impact in modern society (Butyrina, 2008). In this point literature is of a special interest, as it is a "comprehensive content linking art, in particular the art of words," that reflects the tendencies of the modern world. It enables a person to express his/her own position, ideas, aspirations, expectations and dreams. Literature indisputably influences on the life of society and contributes into the recognition of the sociocultural discourse of all those changes that the postmodern society cannot avoid (Zubenko, Sytnykova, 2020).

The paper is targeted to investigate challenges and strategies for efficient intercultural communication, which were revealed in the course of trainings by its participants through analyzing national and gender stereotypes in the novels "Fear and Trembling" by Amelie Nothomb and "Good News from the Aral Sea" by Irena Karpa. The objectives of the articles are to analyze and interpret the texts of the novels to explore the national and gender stereotypes and the ways they impact intercultural communication.

## 1. Theoretical Framework

Amelie Nothomb's novel *Fear and Trembling* is an autobiographical work. She wrote the book in 1999, devoting it to one year of her life in Japan and working for Yumimoto Corporation. Irena Karpa's novel *Good News from the Aral Sea* was published in 2019, it is also mostly autobiographical and contains true stories of real women (Tkhoruk, 2019). Both novels were written by women authors and present women as the protagonists, so they are reviewed as the pieces of women's literature. The

peculiarities of women's literature are distinguished by two approaches to determining its specificity. The first one is based on the assumption that the peculiarity of women's prose is defined by the specific women's experience, which is expressed by the author at the level of issues, themes and ideological direction of the work (Kryvoruchko et al., 2021). Proponents of the second approach tend to see the specifics of women's prose in the special sound of the female voice in the text, i.e., at the level of writing (Michalska-Bracha, 2018).

A significant place in the novels *Fear and Trembling* by Amelie Nothomb and *Good News from the Aral Sea* by Irena Karpa is given to gender issues, so it is logical to analyze the notion of "gender stereotypes". Moreover, regarding a number of different parameters (in particular, the concept of female or male personality, "feminine" or "masculine" style of writing, stipulation of female or male experience, the predominance of a certain type of imagery, etc.), the gender identity of literary creativity is defined as well (Holmes, 2016).

The notion of the "stereotype" can be distinguished as a fixed, overgeneralized belief about a particular group or class of people (McLeod, 2015). The term itself was introduced to define the prevailing prejudice against the event or its evaluation, which united certain strata according to the same perception of reality. The mechanisms for the formation of stereotypes are based on a person's tendency to perceive an unfamiliar situation through his/her own cultural background. As a form and means of seeing the world, stereotypes embody a complex worldview, which consists of certain cognitive and evaluation modes, specific forms of perception and behavior that are imposed on their carrier by the mass consciousness (Zagorodnova, 2018).

A stereotype is a way of identification and understanding an object or situation without making one's own decisions, responsibility and opinion, but in fact an intertextual reference to archaic, mostly atavistic stamps. The hidden attitude of the psyche is to believe and accept before knowing and testing it from one's own experience (Suprun et al., 2022).

Discrepancies in stereotypes in the sociocultural discourse are accompanied by conflicts between conservative stereotypes and modern moods of certain segments of the population, between generations, between people of different countries and nationalities, between men and women. Such stereotypes are also manifested at the level of individual behavioral reactions, which leads to neurotization of an individual and society as a whole. (Jenifer, Raman, 2015; Gut et al., 2017).

## 2. Methodology

The participants of the course of intercultural trainings

### Questions

The comparative analysis of literary texts was aimed to find out contradictions and typological coincidences (analogies) within the literary sources, belonging to different time-frames, languages and cultural traditions. The study of stereotypes, forms of explicit and implicit content, cultural influences, interliterary perception, mediation functions of literary tools involved the application of general scientific methods, such as deduction and induction, and more specific methods of dialectical reflection and systematic analysis.

The method of text interpretation enabled the study of the stereotypes as cultural concepts, that have not only linguistic expression, but also ethno-cultural specificity. It is essential, as despite their nature, stereotypes reflect the society to which the author belongs, not only in the images of a particular culture, but also a particular language. Thus, works of art created by representatives of a particular culture become sources of information about national concepts and the specifics of verbalization of universal concepts, taking into account the "exit" to the geopolitical, ethno-psychological, historical and gender aspects that are outside the literary work (Valuyskaya, 2017).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. National Stereotypes

Most participants of trainings admitted that both novels presented a predictable situation, where a foreigner, who was unable to complain with social and cultural standards being very different from her/his own, **played the major part**.

The plot of the novel *Fear and Trembling* by Amelie Nothomb was based on the relationship between two main characters, – Belgian Amelie and Japanese Fubuki Mori. The female characters were in opposition of Western and Eastern cultures (European and Japanese), which was reflected in the contrast of traditions, social laws and features of individual self-consciousness (Oberhuber, 2004).

Initially the Belgian Amelie was sincerely fascinated by the the Japanese culture, traditions and way of life. However, having come to work for the company, the young girl faced a strict system and rules extremely different from the European ones. She found it very hard to get used to the situation. The main character made many mistakes because she wanted to assimilate, to become a “*real Japanese*”. When she wanted to play a role a traditional Japanese woman during a tea ceremony, it got the boss back up, as the “white woman” did not have to speak Japanese. It was difficult for Amelie to understand why her command of the language, being an admission condition, caused the conflict: “*Perhaps the Japanese brain is capable of forcing itself to forget a language. The Western brain doesn't have that facility*” (Nothomb, 2001, p. 2).

The inability to acknowledge the two cultural worlds was an indirect reason for the conflict between Amelie and her boss Fubuki Mori. This revealed the author's concept of national stereotype – Fubuki disrespected Amelie because she was a foreigner, not perceiving her apart from her own chauvinistic prejudices. And Amelie assessed both Fubuki's life and the whole of the Japanese society, based on the European worldview. The psychological conflict representing the whole confrontation of different worlds “*moves*” the plot of the novel: it was because of Fubuki's negative attitude towards her subordinate, that Amelie, the secretary, becomes a “*toilet cleaner*” and was subjected to humiliations. Amelie evoked both sympathy and respect, because even as she descended the career ladder, she retained her national dignity and inner strength (Bakaeva, 2015)

Irena Karpa's novel *Good News from the Aral Sea* is dedicated to *Filles de l'est* (French) – girls from the East. This phrase is used in France to refer to all women from Eastern Europe – Ukrainian, Polish, Slovak, Czech (Karpa, 2019, p. 141). This expression is rather pejorative and derogatory: when the French say “*Girls from the East*”, they immediately imagine either an “*elite escort service girl*”, or a house cleaner or a bride via the Internet. But the stories of four Ukrainian immigrants did not fit this stereotype at all. The former *Femen* (a real feministic extremist organization) activist Masha found political asylum in Paris, and the former teacher Rita got a prestigious job and financial independence. After leaving the University of Vienna, Bohdana hid from her parents in this city and looked for new impressions. The musician Chloe fled to France, hiding from justice.

Irena Karpa's heroines tried to integrate into the authentic life of the French, attending bohemian parties and family dinners, visiting squatters, getting acquainted with Muslim immigrants and French aristocrats. They voluntarily avoided tourist sights and tried to stay away from the Ukrainian community of the French capital. Like the Nothomb's heroine, at first, they were greatly impressed by the culture of the country where they found themselves: “*Masha truly wanted to be a real Parisian. She also eagerly posted baguettes, cups of coffee on the terrace, hats, vegetable stalls in the market and rabbits on the lawn near the Invalids*” (Karpa, 2019, p. 45). But eventually they realized that the glossy facade of bright life hid the contempt for immigrants: “*The French, who suddenly fell ill with Ukrainophilia after the Maidan, ... rarely refused to eat or drink for free and often considered a rich friend with an awkward accent to be a “mon client russe” (French, My Russian client) – never mind whether he or she was Croat, Georgian or Ukrainian*” (Karpa, 2019, p. 81). They often came across unveiled aggression – “*Here we, the legitimate French have nowhere to work – shouted bistro-pasha, and you, Eastern European emigrants, try to scramble ahead!*” (Karpa, 2019, p. 121). They permanently felt separated from the French society remaining only foreigners from an unreliable country.

Yet gradually, after experiencing a series of trials and disappointments, depression and confusion, and wishing “... *that at least for a moment all the walls of the pretentious Parisian cafes were covered with swans from Alchevsk carpets*” (Karpa, 2019, p. 434); the main characters of the book achieved national self-identification and self-esteem, though keeping some hint of self-irony. The author used the technique of allusion, comparing the most famous Ukrainian dish, Borsch, and Madeleine cake from Marcel Proust's works, as triggers that evoke nostalgia, childhood memories, national self-awareness

(Smith, 2016): “*Borsch. Ukrainian Madeleine cake*” (Karpa, 2019, p. 378). Ukrainian immigrants realized that they “... *would never be like them [the French], even if ... found a French job and paid taxes properly*” (Karpa, 2019, p. 433). However, each of them found ways to earn for decent living, get social connections, won appraisal in the society, based on their personal and professional qualities by making the French overcome their own ethnic stereotypes.

The insights of the trainings’ participants concerning challenges in intercultural communication and strategies to confront them, described in the novels are generalized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Ethnic issues in a foreign society**

N	Challenge	Strategy	
1.	Inability of immigrants to complaint with social and cultural standards	Notomb’s novel	<b>Assimilation.</b> The admiration for the foreign culture, the attempt to assimilate into it, to become a part of it.
		Karpa’s novel	<b>Integration.</b> The fascination with the foreign culture is coming along with own national self-identification and self-esteem.
2.	Local people’s chauvinistic prejudices, contempt for immigrants	Notomb’s novel	<b>Opposition.</b> Assessment of the way of life and the whole of the Japanese society, based on the European worldview.
		Karpa’s novel	<b>Empathy.</b> Attempts to understand position, grounds and worldview of the culturally diverse people.

Source: Authors own conception.

### 3.2. Gender Stereotypes

All participants acknowledged that a significant place in both is given to gender issues, regarding the socio-gender characteristics of sex with its inherent features of lifestyle, actions, plans, aspirations, etc., that stipulate not only individual features of men and women, but also determines the relationships between them.

Taking place in a male-dominated environment, the contradiction between two women, Amelie and Fubuki Mori, opens up **gender stereotypes issues**. Amelie represented a Western person who took up habits of thoughts keeping the established traditions of the Western world, which had cultivated the trend of emancipation. Immersed in the daily life of another country, its way of living, peculiarities of mentality, the main character was surprised to discover differences in attitudes towards women, prohibitions, inviolable moral rules (Saunier, 2015). She was horrified by the position of women in the Japanese society: “*Do not hope for joy, your pleasure will hurt you. Do not hope for love, it is not worth it, you will be loved for what you seem, not for what you really are. < . . > Hope you work. Given your gender, you have little chance of reaching the heights, but hope to serve your company. Work will bring you money, and it will not give you any pleasure, but it may attach more importance in case of your marriage – because you are not so stupid as to think that you can be chosen for your real value*” (Nothomb, 2001, p. 111).

Playing on the contrast of European and Japanese women’s self-consciousness, Amelie Nothomb also resorted to subversion. The writer deliberately took Fubuki’s image beyond the stereotype she described. The author portrays Fubuki as a woman who had achieved incredible professional success, but in order to realize her goals in a completely patriarchal and far from feminizing society, she had to take on some masculine functions and put her career above family values, which was completely unusual for Japanese women. The cult of men in Japan implied a meager role of women in decision-making, and therefore women were not entrusted with responsible work and did not assume freedom of thought (Rámila Diaz, 2012). Giving more space in her novel to the responsibilities of Japanese women than to rights, the author criticized in some ways the severity of the Japanese society: “*If you’re not married by the time you’re twenty-five, you’ll have a 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 mention the existence of a single*

body-hair, you're repulsive; if a boy kisses you on the cheek in public, you're a whore; if you enjoy eating, you're a pig; if you take pleasure in sleeping, you're no better than a cow and so on" (Nothomb, 2001, p. 111).

Similar patriarchal demands on women, though in an openly sarcastic way, are presented as traditionally Ukrainian ones in I. Karpa's novel: "Faithful and devoted working women can successfully cope both with the work and the household. Because if you do only one thing in Ukraine, you are considered to be incompetent, stupid or lazy. We need to keep up with everything. To crown it all, you should take care of your husband. Children – of course. But a Man is your leading star and the greatest value" (Karpa, 2019, p. 50).

None of the heroines wanted to fit this stereotype. Bohdana, who announced this idea, rebelled against her pre-arranged role of a "woman-guardian of the family hearth", feeling its falsity and hidden humiliation. She broke ties with her wealthy family, which imposed this position on her. For some time, Rita had been playing a traditional Ukrainian female role, living with an abusing husband, that led her to a loss of self-esteem and total frustration in life (Krupka, 2021). Chloe was in a way an androgynous character; her description emphasized the masculine traits of personality and appearance that resulted in her marginalized position in the traditional Ukrainian society. Masha actively defended women's rights by participating in Femen, an organization known for its extreme performances. Thus, it was concluded that the author used the technique of subversion – games with a stereotype – on the gender representation of her heroines.

The Ukrainian protagonists from Karpa's novel, on the other hand, living in France enthusiastically discovered the worldview of the French women, their ability to respect and appreciate their own identity: *A French woman who wants to be beautiful or even just spend free time reading a book, facing the need to cook new dishes for her sweetheart ... makes the reservation in a restaurant under her name but on his credit card. As far as a Ukrainian woman, estimating that her sweetheart can get sick with heartburn eating in a restaurant, and she is inspired spinning a million plates in the kitchen – downloads a new cooking app and happily claps her hands: "Trap! I am so happy!"* (Karpa, 2019, p. 312)

They highly evaluated the desire of French women for freedom and independence including financial one: "... the idea of becoming again financially dependent on her husband caused her panic" (Karpa, 2019, p. 442); their ability not to hang on other people's opinions, not to be ashamed of her potential, age or appearance: "The French call it 'to be or not to be phat' – and for those who are not phat, it does not matter how much clothes cost" (Karpa, 2019, p. 288). Finally, they integrated into the French society, finding their place and not trying to return home "... because there are no such chimneys, no beautiful elderly ladies, or even such self-confident women" (Karpa, 2019, p. 124). So, there can be traced the transformation of certain patterns of their culture to the foreign one, despite the fact that in a foreign society completely different domestic stereotypes dominate. Furthermore, being able to transform own stereotypes, they managed to adopt to the life in a foreign society (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020).

Text interpretation of the novels concerning gender challenges and strategies of their solvation, performed in the course of trainings, resulted in the Table 2.

**Table 2. Gender issues in a foreign society**

N	Challenge	Strategy	
1.	Misogynistic conflict in the society with a masculine culture	Notomb's novel	<b>Subversion.</b> Taking on some masculine functions to confront a meager role of women; open criticism
2.	Emancipated views on the position of women in the French society	Karpa's novel	<b>Transformation</b> of certain patterns of their culture to the foreign one to break stereotypes and go beyond their limits

Source: Authors own conception.

#### 4. Discussion

Exploring the role of mass media, as a form of the mass consciousness, it was found out that it performs a significant impact on the perception of the new reality, putting in people's heads certain stereotypes about the cultural characteristics of a country, to which a person migrates; or a nation,

whose language a person begins or continues to learn (Bilotserkovets et al., 2021). So, it would be wrong to observe the concept of “stereotype” only in a negative sense. Thus, being aware of the traditions and customs of another culture, a person can easily and much faster adapt to a new language environment. She/he will be free from misconceptions about the rules of conduct in a broad sense in an unfamiliar society, will not try to transfer own stereotypical standards of perception to the environment (McLeod, 2015).

Regarding the role of national or ethnic stereotypes in intercultural communication, researchers emphasized that peculiarities of the categorization cognitive process of culturally diverse people enabled the reconstruction of the ways how people perceived themselves and others (Gut et al., 2017). National stereotypes are mostly superficial, because they often point out the insignificant features of national or ethnic clusters. Auto stereotypes as apprehensions, evaluations and judgments of a nationally homogeneous group about itself are positive as a rule. They emerge in contrast to hetero stereotypes, which can be both positive or/and negative, conditionally on the experience of historical interaction between ethnic or national groups (Fomenko et al., 2020). Negative ethnic stereotypes impede understanding in cross-cultural communication and provoke interethnic conflicts because of the following factors: prevailing stereotyped persuasions are “assumed as being true even if they are false; gradually adopted stereotyped beliefs are resulted in their reinforcement and may affect the stereotyped people’s behavior as a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Fomenko et al., 2020). Racial and ethnic stereotypes belong to the category of stereotypes that discriminate against members of national, racial or ethnic minorities, singling out the following four stages of portraying racial and ethnic minorities in the mass media: non-recognition, ridicule, regulation, respect. Non-recognition characterizes the complete exclusion of racial and ethnic minorities from television and the press. Ridicule means the glorification of the dominant group of their own image by humiliating and stereotyping minorities, portraying them as incompetent or uneducated. Regulation is depicting minorities, who appear as defenders of the existing order (for example, police, detectives, spies). Respect features giving national and racial minorities the full range of roles (both positive and negative) inherent in most heroes (Butyrina, 2008; Jenifer, Raman, 2015).

Sociocultural text analysis enabled authors to single out the typical stereotypes about women and femininity: objectification of the female body, infantilization, “glass ceiling”, the image of the “woman-guardian of the family hearth” (Holmes, 2016). The objectification of the female body points out an important fact of gender stereotypes, that women are often portrayed as young beauties, whose duty is to remain always young and attractive to please men. At the heart of this critical attitude is the idea that a woman should not allow herself to grow old. This is most evident in advertising – in the field of mass media with the most stereotypical gender images (Butyrina, 2008). Infantilization of women introduces the transmission of femininity as the manifestation of virginity, vulnerability, naivety. In this regard, women are always victims of violence. Having a “glass ceiling” on the way to career success is a phenomenon characterized by the difficulty of women to reach higher positions in their careers, which are usually occupied by men (Abbas et al., 2018). The image of the “woman-guardian of the family hearth” portrays women who dedicate their lives to their husbands and families, performing unpaid reproductive work (Chornodon et al., 2021).

The inferiority of women is often rooted in society’s worldview and cultural heritage, which is one of the fundamental pillars of the mentality. In different parts of the world, society’s attitude towards women is characterized by violence, devaluation and rejection of their own “I” due to the desire to be accepted by others; some other societies are marked by the acquisition of a crumb of rights and freedoms for long periods of time, which, in general, do not improve the situation (Alsanafi, Mohd Noor, 2019). Nevertheless, there are progressive trends in women’s literature in the traditionally patriarchal societies to portray women. The women-writers are striving to remove the social, cultural, and religious bonds that are imposed upon them by convictions and taboos of their own culture as the only comprehension of life and reality, as they “... *move away from a system that desires to control and mistakes its own viewpoints for the truth*” (Amin, 2021, p. 11). The women’s literature in Eastern Europe, namely in Ukraine is characterized by “*post-feminism*” as a young trend without clear programming (as opposed to feminism), based on a woman’s right to choose between a career or family or a combination of both, and a reluctance to subordinate her life to puritanical and misogynistic ideologies. It is a sociocultural

space in which women (especially the younger generation) perceive gender equality as something that is rightfully theirs (Dragojlovich, 2017; Revakovich, 2017).

Thus, national and gender stereotypes are inherent in any culture, because they are originated from this culture, and then influence the minds of people, hindering or helping to build interethnic contacts and fruitful intercultural communication.

## 5. Conclusions

The comparative analysis of literary texts under review proved that both Western and Eastern societies still have prejudices against foreigners and regard them being inferior to themselves, no matter their educational or economic level.

The stereotypes concerning women within Western and Eastern societies are completely different. While Western women are concerned about their independence and self-realization, the women, who live in the Eastern countries, are still bound to the traditional modes of thinking, though they are actually striving for changes. showed protagonists who sought their traditional gender stereotypes were transformed into the by means of fruitful intercultural communication.

In this sense, stereotypes influence on migrants' choice of adaptation strategies in the foreign cultural space. The novels under review describe the commonest strategies: integration (*Good News from the Aral Sea* by Irena Karpa) and assimilation (*Fear and Trembling* by Amelie Nothomb). Integration and assimilation both have been identified as a means of resolving the social identity crisis. Personal identity acquires signs of mature positivity when a migrant integrates into the foreign cultural space. If a migrant chooses an assimilation strategy, personal identity tends to approach a diffuse, "blurred" identity with uncertain life goals, low self-esteem, lack of inner integrity and coherence (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020; Blynova et al., 2020). The interpretation of the Amelie Nothomb's novel *Fear and Trembling* text revealed a misogynistic conflict in the society with a masculine culture. The writer presented a portrait of two women of the modern era, who were sheer representatives of the societies in which they grew up (emancipated or traditional), and remained faithful to their moral laws, even if they tried to resist them. None of them was able to overcome ethnic and gender stereotypes that doomed their intercultural contacts to failure.

And the object of Westernization is the mass consciousness of other countries, attitudes and stereotypes of the nations, that transform their own sociocultural background (Lavlinskiy, 2016).

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