



“Farang” and Thai Women in Michel Houellebecq’s Novel: *Plateforme* (Platform)

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Abstract

This article aims to study relationships between European men and Thai women characters in *Plateforme* (2001) written by French novelist Michel Houellebecq. This book triggers a controversial discussion about “sex tourism” and prostitution which is the largest section in the Thai episode. The first part of this study provides the definition and etymology of the term “Farang” which in this paper refers to European. Also, in the second part, this paper explores the depiction of Thai prostitute characters. In the last part, this article examines how relationships between European men and Thai women are described in Houellebecq’s novel through the lens of Orientalism. The results reveal that relationships between European men and Thai women characters can be divided into two groups: first, European male tourist and Thai female as a prostitute; second, relationships between European men and Thai women as couples. The matching couple between European men and Thai women can be explained by the preference of stereotypes projected on each party.

Keywords: Farang, European men, Thai women



บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างตัวละครชายชาวตะวันตกกับผู้หญิงไทยที่ปรากฏในนวนิยายเรื่อง *Plateforme* (2001) ของนักเขียนฝรั่งเศส มิเชล อุเอลแบ็ก เนื้อหาที่ปรากฏเกี่ยวกับการท่องเที่ยวทางเพศและการขายบริการในประเทศไทยก่อให้เกิดประเด็นถกเถียงในสังคม ในส่วนแรกของบทความนี้นำเสนอคำจำกัดความและรากศัพท์ของคำว่า “ฝรั่ง” ที่หมายถึงชาวตะวันตก ส่วนที่สองของบทความนำเสนอลักษณะตัวละครหญิงไทยที่ทำอาชีพขายบริการ และในส่วนที่สามของบทความนี้จะพิจารณาลักษณะความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างผู้ชายชาวตะวันตกและผู้หญิงไทยที่นำเสนอในงานของ อุเอลแบ็ก ผ่านการมองแบบบูรพคดีนิยม ผลการศึกษาพบว่านวนิยายเรื่องนี้แสดงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างผู้ชายชาวตะวันตกกับผู้หญิงไทยไว้สองกลุ่ม คือ ชายชาวตะวันตกที่เป็นนักท่องเที่ยวกับผู้หญิงไทยที่ทำอาชีพขายบริการและกลุ่มที่สองคือชายชาวตะวันตกกับผู้หญิงไทยในฐานะที่เป็นสามีภรรยาหรือคู่รัก การจับคู่ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างผู้ชายชาวตะวันตกและผู้หญิงไทยสามารถอธิบายในแง่ของความชอบในภาพลักษณ์แบบเหมารวมของแต่ละฝ่าย

คำสำคัญ : ฝรั่ง ,ผู้ชายชาวตะวันตก ,ผู้หญิงไทย



Introduction

Plateforme (Platform), French novel written by Michel Houellebecq, was first released in 2001 by Flammarion and translated into English in 2003.¹ *Plateforme* immediately provoked a controversial discussion, especially in Thailand, because of its content on “sex tourism” and the explicitness of sex scenes. In order to understand this novel, we must first know about Michel Houellebecq’s life and his literary style of writing.

Michel Houellebecq was born on 26th February 1956 in Saint-Pierre, on the French island of Reunion. He grew up with his grandparents after the separation of his parents when he was five years old. Later, Houellebecq went to Paris for his studies. In 1978, he graduated from “Institut national agronomique Paris-Grignon” with a degree in agronomy. He enrolled in the section of film at “École nationale supérieure Louis-Lumière”. However, later in 1981, he decided to quit the program. After graduating, Houellebecq worked in agronomy. Hence, many novels contain his work’s experiences. Then, Houellebecq became a novelist when his very first novel titled *Extension du domaine de la lutte* was released in 1994. Houellebecq nowadays is an internationally well-known French author. His eight novels are translated in many languages and some of them became best-sellers. Houellebecq also wrote a poem, essays and a film. In 2010, his fifth novel *La carte et le territoire (The Map and The Territory)* won the Prix Goncourt, a prestigious literary prize in France. Recurring themes in Houellebecq’s novels are loneliness, desolation, depression, sex, prostitution, travel, Capitalism and Islamism. Moreover, most of his main characters can be seen as a misanthrope middle-aged men obsessed with alcohol and cigarettes. For readers, Houellebecq is quite a particular and controversial author.

This paper aims to examine Houellebecq’s third novel titled *Plateforme*, published in the early 21st century. It is interesting to explore the Thai episode which is the largest section of this novel. The first line of *Plateforme* is: “Mon père est mort il y a un an” (“Father died last year”) which reminds the reader of the famous opening sentence: “*Aujourd’hui, maman est morte*” (“Mother died today”) of Albert Camus’s novel “*L’Étranger*” (*The Outsider*), released in 1942. Moreover, Bordeleau’s study found that Michel, the narrator and the main character in *Plateforme*, is similar to Sartre’s Roquentin and Camus’s Meursault, who behave like two “étrangers” in *La Nausée* (Nausea) and *L’Étranger* (*The Outsider*). Michel is characterized by an existential posture and an apparent indifference to the world. (Bordeleau, 2002, pp.11). In *Plateforme*, after the death of his father murdered by a Muslim radical, Michel Renault inherits a fortune and then comes to Thailand to join a package tour organized by *Nouvelles Frontières*, a well-known travel agency. At the age of 40, the protagonist becomes a government employee at the Ministry of culture. A misanthrope, Michel do not want to get married and he has no significant relationship except working relationships with some colleagues. He is obsessed with pornography. He is particularly keen on peepshow and attends shows after his work. The novel’s first part titled “*Tropic Thai*” (*Thai Tropic*) tells the story of Michel’s “sex tour” in Thailand. There he meets Valérie, a 28-year-

¹ All translations into English from French in this article by Frank Wynne (published by Knopf in 2003) unless otherwise noted.



old woman, who is a travel agent. Back to Paris in the second part of the novel entitled “*Avantage concurrentiel*” (*Competitive Advantage*), Michel and Valérie continue their relationship. This section contains explicit references to the sex industry in France for example “Club S&M” and the business idea of “Eldorado Aphrodite”. This business idea suggested by Michel to Valérie and her boss, Jean-Yves is a development of the existing “sex tourism” in Third world countries including in Southern Thai province of Krabi. The last chapter of the novel entitled “*Pattaya Beach*” is about the death of the protagonists. Valérie is killed in an Islamic terrorist attack and then Michel prepares to die at the end of the novel in Pattaya, Thailand.

Hence, *Plateforme* is worth studying for three main reasons. First, this novel on the subject of “sex tourism” has met a large editorial success. Second, the stories reinforce stereotypes about Thai women. Last but not least, the success of the author, Michel Houellebecq, and this novel which is translated in many languages and sold in many countries.

This study is divided into three parts. First, we begin with the definition and etymology of the term “Farang” which in this paper refer to European. Second, here in Houellebecq’s third novel: *Plateforme*, we focus on the depiction of Thai prostitute characters through the eyes of European sex tourist. In a last section, we would like to examine how relationships between “Farang” and Thai women are explored in *Plateforme*.

1. Definition and etymology of the term “Farang”

The term “Farang” in Thai language has many meanings. According to the official dictionary of Thai Words, there are three definitions of this term: a first definition is “a person of white race” and it refers to anything of/from the white race; a second definition, refers to Thai songs influenced by European melodies, techniques or instruments; the last definition is “guava”, a tropical fruit. (Royal Institute Dictionary, 2012)

In many literary works written by Westerners, authors use the word “Farang” which refers to Europeans. In French literature, the term “Farang” appeared for example in *Emmanuelle*, considered a classic twentieth-century erotic novel written by Marayat Bibidh or Marayat Krasesasin, a French novelist of Thai origin, under the pseudonym of Emmanuelle Arsan. *Emmanuelle* was released secretly for the first time in 1959, the story is about Emmanuelle, the 19-year-old wife of a French diplomat. The young and innocent Emmanuelle flies to join her husband in Bangkok. The term “Farang” refers indistinctly to all European peoples, just like children may stereotypically call all Asian peoples “Chinese” (Arsan, 1999, P.128). Hence, to understand this designation of European, it is important to understand the origin of the word “Farang” which



according to historical documents dates back to the Ayutthaya period.² Delouche's study found that the term "Farang" did not originate from the word "français" but from the Persian word "faranghi", translated in Siamese language as "farangkhi" (Delouche, 2006, pp. 85).

2. Depiction of Thai prostitute characters in Houellebecq's novel: *Plateforme*

Plateforme is one of the novels chosen in my PhD. thesis on the subject of the representation of Thai women in French novels in the 20th and 21st centuries. Most of French novels about Thailand, as shown within the corpus, are stories that refer to the sex industry and involve Thai female prostitute character. Lines's study found that "the English-language fiction on the subject of prostitution in Thailand is dominated by male authors who are either actual or former sex tourists, or expatriates who have spent long periods living and working in Thailand. Most focus on the relationship between a prostitute and a *farang* (foreigner), usually a Westerner from a developed country such as the US [...]" (Lines, 2015, pp.87).

In this section, we shall focus on biographies and personalities of Thai women character particularly Thai prostitutes in the novel *Plateforme*. Michel, the narrator and main protagonist, visited Thai prostitutes when he came to visit Thailand on a group holiday. Chapters that take place in Thailand provide explicit depiction of two young Thai women who work as prostitutes:

"Une douzaine de filles, derrière la vitre, tournèrent la tête dans ma direction ; certaines avec un sourire aguicheur, d'autres non. J'étais le seul client. Malgré la petite taille de l'établissement, les filles portaient des macarons numérotés. Mon choix se porta rapidement sur le numéro 7 : d'abord parce qu'elle était mignonne, ensuite parce qu'elle n'avait pas l'air de prêter une attention démesurée au programme de télévision, ni d'être plongée dans une conversation passionnante avec sa voisine. Effectivement, à l'appel de son nom, elle se leva avec une satisfaction visible [...] Elle s'appelait Oôn, enfin c'est ce que j'ai compris, et elle venait du nord du pays - un petit village près de Chiang Mai. Elle avait dix-neuf ans." ("Behind a glass screen, a dozen girls turned toward to me. Some smiled alluringly, others didn't. I was the only customer. Despite the fact that the place was small, the girls wore numbered tags. I quickly chose number 7, firstly because she was cute, also because she wasn't engrossed in the program on the television or deep in conversation with her neighbor. Indeed, when her name was called, she stood up with evident satisfaction [...] Her name was Oôn, at least was what I heard, and she was from the north somewhere, a little village near Chiang Mai. She was nineteen.") (Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 52-53; 2003, pp.33)

² Capital of Siamese Kingdom from 1350 to 1767. During the 16th century, The Portuguese was the first European to make contact with Siam.



“Je lui donnai trois mille bahts, ce qui, d’après mon souvenir, était un bon prix. À sa réaction je vis que oui, effectivement, c’était un bon prix. « Krôp khun khât ! » fit-elle avec un grand sourire en joignant les mains à la hauteur de son front.” (“I gave her three thousand baht, which, as far as I remembered, was a good price. From her reaction I could tell that, yes, it was a good price. “Krôp khun khât!” she said with a big smile, bringing her hands together in front of her forehead.”) (Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 54; 2003, pp.34)

And

“C’est absolument honteux que des gros beaufs puissent venir profiter impunément de la misère de ces filles. Il faut savoir qu’elles viennent toutes des provinces du Nord ou du Nord-Est, les régions les plus pauvres du pays.” (“It’s absolutely shameful that fat assholes can just come over here and take advantage of these girls’ poverty with impunity. Of course, you know they all come from the north and the northeast, the poorest regions of the whole country.”) (Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 78; 2003, pp.51)

These passages provide the portrait and biography of Oôn, a young 19-year-old girl from a little village near Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand. This Thai female character described above shows the characteristics of Thai prostitutes from the north: young and beautiful. Formoso’s study found that most of Thai prostitutes are between 18 and 24 years old, they come from rural areas and those from the north of Thailand are considered the most beautiful. About 70 percent of Thai prostitute come from the North followed by girls from the Northeast, the poorest region of Thailand. (Formoso, 2001, pp. 58)

“Avant de me déshabiller je rendis encore une fois hommage à Oôn, et à toutes les prostituées thaïes. Ce n’était pas un métier facile qu’elles faisaient, ces filles ; il ne devrait pas être si fréquent de tomber sur un brave garçon, doté d’un physique acceptable, et qui ne demandait honnêtement qu’à jouir de concert. [...] Babette et Léa, pensais-je, n’auraient pas été capables d’être des prostituées thaïes ; elles n’étaient pas dignes.” (“Before getting undressed, I once more paid homage to Oôn and to all Thai prostitutes. They didn’t have an easy job, those girls. They probably didn’t come across a good guy all that often, someone with an okay physique who was honestly looking for nothing more than mutual orgasm. [...] Babette and Léa could never have been Thai prostitutes, I thought, they weren’t worthy of it.”) (Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 57; 2003, pp. 36)



In this passage, we can see the characteristic of Thai prostitute and the comparison between Thai women and European women in term of the ability of sex.

“Dans le fond, derrière une vitre, une cinquantaine de filles étaient assises sur des gradins, avec leurs macarons numérotés [...] En plus je commençais à avoir envie de la 47, une petite Thaïe très mince, même un peu maigre, mais avec des lèvres épaisses, et l’air gentille ; elle portait une mini-jupe rouge et des bas noirs.” (“At the back, behind a glass screen, about fifty girls sat on terraced benches with their numbered tags [...] On the top of everything, I was starting to feel a surge of desire for number 47, a slim little Thai girl, almost too slim, but with full lips and a sweet demeanor; she was wearing a red miniskirt and black stocking.”) (Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 117-118; 2003, pp. 79)

“Robert leva les yeux vers elle, la considéra longuement. Vous avez bien choisi... conclut-il sombrement, elle a l’air salope. La fille sourit avec timidité.” (“Robert looked up at her, considered for a moment. Good choice he concluded soberly. There’s something slutty about her. The girl smiled shyly.”) (Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 121-122; 2003, pp. 82)

And

“J’ai appris qu’elle avait trente-deux ans. Elle n’aimait pas son travail, mais son mari était parti, la laissant avec deux enfants. « Bad man », dit-elle ; « Thaï men, bad men. » Je lui demandai si elle avait des amies parmi les autres filles. Pas tellement, répondait-elle ; la plupart des filles étaient jeunes et sans cervelle, elles dépensaient ce qu’elles gagnaient en vêtements et en parfums. Elle n’était pas comme ça, elle était sérieuse, elle mettait son argent à la banque. Dans quelques années elle pourrait arrêter, et retrouver vivre dans son village ; ses parents étaient âgés maintenant, ils avaient besoin d’aide. Au moment de partir, je lui donnai un pourboire de deux mille bahts ; c’était beaucoup trop. Elle prit les billets avec incrédulité, ma salua plusieurs fois, les mains jointes à la hauteur de la poitrine. « You good man », dit-elle.” (“I learned that she was thirty-two. She didn’t enjoy her work, but her husband had left her with two children. “Bad man,” she said, “Thai men, bad men.” I asked her if she had any friends among the other girls. Not really, she told me. Most of the girls were young and brainless, they spent everything they earned on clothes and perfume. She was not like that, she was serious, she put her money in the bank. In a couple of years, she would be able to give this up and back to live in the village where she grew up. Her parents were old now and they needed help. As I was leaving, I gave her a two-thousand-baht tip: it was ridiculous, it was far too much. She took money incredulously, and bowed



to me several times, her hands together in front of her chest. “You good man”, she said.”)
(Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 125-126; 2003, pp. 84-85)

The depiction of another Thai prostitute character called Sin, a 32-years-old, single mother with two children is provided in this passage. We can see more details about her physical characteristics, clothes and personal background. It is interesting to explore the description of Thai prostitute protagonists. Lines’s study under the title “Prostitution in Thailand: Representation in Fiction and Narrative Non-Fiction” explains that:

The non-fiction and fiction narratives also characterize Thai prostitutes with varying levels of accuracy and complexity. In the fiction, the female characters involved in prostitution tend to fall into one of two stereotypes: either the scheming, materialistic and manipulative *femme fatale* or the vulnerable and helpless Cinderella who is the victim of tragic circumstances and waiting to be rescued by a strong, rich male. Conversely, the female characters in the narrative non-fiction are more multidimensional, giving voice to a range of conflicting emotions, doubts and fears-humanizing insights that are not present in the fiction. (Ibid.,)

3. Relationships between European men and Thai women characters

While the above explained shows how Thai prostitutes are described by European men as sex tourists travelling in Thailand, we shall now present the relationships between European men as boyfriends or husbands of Thai women through minor characters in *Plateforme*. We would like you to see how relationships between *Farang* and Thai women are explored in the novel.

“Le lendemain je fis la connaissance d’Andreas, un Allemand qui était installé dans la région depuis une dizaine d’années. Il était traducteur [...] Il avait épousé une Thaïe rencontrée dans un salon de massage, et maintenant ils avaient deux enfants.” (“The following day I met Andreas, a German who had been living in the area for ten years. He was a translator [...] He had married a Thai girl whom he met in a massage parlor, and they now had two children.”) (Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 331; 2003, pp. 230)

“Il était accompagné d’une fille ravissante, originaire de Chiang Maï, qui s’appelait Kim. Il l’avait rencontrée le premier soir dans un bar *topless*, et depuis ils étaient ensemble ; il la couvait des yeux avec adoration. Je comprenais bien ce qui avait pu séduire ce grand garçon



un peu pataud dans cette créature délicate, d'une finesse presque irréelle ; je ne voyais pas comment il aurait pu trouver une fille pareille dans son pays. C'était une bénédiction, ces petites putes thaïes, me dis-je ; un don du ciel, pas moins. Kim parlait un peu français. Elle était déjà venue une fois à Paris, s'émerveilla Lionel ; sa sœur avait épousé un Français." ("He was accompanied by a ravishing girl from Chiang Mai whose name Kim. He had met her in a *topless* bar on the first night and they had been together ever since. I could easily see what this big, slightly clumsy boy saw in the fragile creature, so delicate she seemed almost unreal-he could never have found such a girl in his own country. They were a godsend, these little Thai whores, I thought; a gift from heaven, nothing less. Kim spoke a little French. She had been to France once, Lionel marveled. Her sister had married a Frenchman.") (Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 324; 2003, pp. 224-225)

And

"J'avais quand même des doutes sur cette fille : les Thaïes du Nord sont en général très belles, mais il arrive qu'elles en aient un peu trop conscience. Elles passent leur temps à se regarder dans la glace, pleinement conscientes que leur beauté constitue en elle-même un avantage économique décisif, et deviennent ainsi des êtres à la fois capricieux et inutiles. D'un autre côté, contrairement à une minette occidentale, Kim n'était pas en mesure de se rendre compte que Lionel était lui-même un blaireau. Les critères principaux de la beauté physique sont la jeunesse, l'absence de handicap et la conformité générale aux normes de l'espèce ; ils sont de toute évidence universels. Les critères annexes, imprécis et relatifs, étaient plus difficilement appréciables par une jeune fille issue d'une autre culture. Pour Lionel l'exotisme était un bon choix, c'était même probablement le seul." ("I did have some doubts about this girl. Thai girls from the north are usually very beautiful, but sometimes they're a bit too conscious of the fact. They spend their time staring at themselves in the mirror, keenly aware that their beauty become useless, capricious creatures. On the other hand, unlike some cool western chick, Kim was not in a position to realize that Lionel himself was a bore. The principal criteria for a physical beauty are youth, absence of handicaps, and a general conformity to the norms of the species; they are quite clearly universal. The ancillary criteria-vaguer and more relative- were more difficult for a young girl from a different culture to appreciate. For Lionel, the exotic was a wise choice, possibly even the only choice.") (Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 325; 2003, pp. 225)

This passage provides an insight on European-Thai couples. Andreas, a German man who lives in Krabi, married to Thai girl whom he met in a massage parlor. Likewise, Lionel, a French man, meet his Thai girlfriend called Kim, who came from Chiang Mai, in a topless bar. Kim's



sister also married a French man. We can also see that Thai women characters as a girlfriend or wife of European men are all involved in “sex tourism”. Said’s notion of “Orientalism”, the Western attitudes toward the East, imply exoticism. Kim, Thai woman is exotic to the eyes of Lionel, a European man. For him, the exotism is the only reason why he chose this Thai woman.

“Qu’est-ce que les Thaïes ont de plus que les Occidentales ? [...] Il y a un article là-dessus, une sorte de publi-reportage... ; je lui tendis le *Phuket Weekly*. Find your longlife companion... Well educated Thaï ladies, c’est ça ? - Oui, plus loin il y a une interview. Cham Sawanasee, souriant, coutume noir et cravate sombre, répondait aux dix questions qu’on était en droit de se poser (“*Ten questions you could ask*”) sur le fonctionnement de l’agence *Heart to Heart*, qu’il dirigeait. There seems to be, notait Mr Sawanasee, a near-perfect match between the Western men, who are unappreciated and get no respect in their own countries, and the Thai women, who would be happy to find someone who simply does his job and hopes to come home to a pleasant family life after work. Most Western women do not want such a boring husband.” (“What have Thai girls got that western women don’t? [...] There’s an article in English about it in here, sort of an advertorial; I handed her the copy of *Phuket Weekly*. Find your longlife companion... Well educated Thaï ladies, that one? Yes a bit further on there’s an interview. Cham Sawanasee, smiling, black suit and dark tie, answered the “Ten Questions You Cloud Ask” on the working of the Heart to Heart agency, which he managed.”) (Houellebecq, 2001, pp.132; 2003, pp. 89)

“Ce qu’il disait était vrai : il y a beaucoup d’hommes qui ont peur des femmes modernes, parce qu’ils veulent juste une gentille épouse qui tiennent leur ménage et s’occupe de leurs enfants. Ça n’a pas disparu, en fait, mais c’est devenu impossible en Occident d’avouer ce genre de désirs ; c’est pour ça qu’ils épousent les Asiatiques.” (“What he said was true: a lot of men are afraid of modern women, because all they want is a nice little wife to look after the house and take care of the kids. That sort of thing hasn’t disappeared really, it’s just that in the west it’s become impossible to express such a desire. That’s why they marry Asian girls.”) (Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 152; 2003, pp. 103)

And

“Tu pourrais parfaitement épouser une Thaïe : elles sont jolies, gentilles, elles font bien l’amour ; il y en a même qui parlent un peu français.” (“You could easily marry a Thai girl.



They're pretty, gentle, good in bed. Some of them even speak a bit of French.”)
(Houellebecq, 2001, pp. 337; 2003, pp. 234)

These passages provide the reason of matching between European men and Thai or Asian women. Their relationships can be explained by the attractive of stereotypes on each party.

4. Conclusion

Plateforme, novel first published in 2001, by French author Michel Houellebecq shows the story about “sex tourism” and prostitution which is the large section set in Thailand. The explicitness of many sex scenes in *Plateforme* immediately triggers a controversial discussion. Moreover, the novel reinforces stereotypes about Thai women. The depiction of Thai women characters is described by European men as sex tourists travelling in Thailand. As we can see, *Plateforme* provides the example of relationships between “Farang” (European men) and Thai women characters. Relationships between European and Thai women can be divided into two groups. First, relationships between European sex tourists and Thai women working as a prostitute; second, relationships between European men as a boyfriend or husband of Thai women who also used to be involved in “sex tourism”. Through the lens of “Orientalism”, Thai women are exotic to the eyes of European men. The matching couple between European men and Thai women can be explained by the preference of stereotypes projected on each party.

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