**Japan Through Western Eyes in** *Stupeur et Tremblements* **by Amélie Nothomb: Interpretation Prevailing Over Translation**

**Introduction**

Amélie Nothomb’s 1999 novel *Stupeur et Tremblements* (*Fear and Trembling*)[[1]](#footnote-2) depicts the misadventures, misunderstandings, and misgivings experienced by a Belgian professional in a large, modern Japanese workplace. This book is most often read as a satirical critique of Japanese society in general and more specifically the corporate world of Japan, aimed at exposing its oppressive and misogynist hierarchical system (Chira, 2001; Narjout, 2004; Sylvester, 2016). Another popular reading is of the novel as a representation of a clash of cultures, suggesting the impossibility of cultural exchange (De Jallad, 2008; Koma, 2009; Mahy, 2010). Within the satirical framework, the novel is a story of power games and the subversion of power relations (Korzeniowska, 2003; Termite, 2003),[[2]](#footnote-3) addressing life and identity in the arena of Japanese commercial enterprise (Hărşan, 2014; Da Rocha Soares, 2012).[[3]](#footnote-4)

The novel recounts the story of the protagonist-narrator, Amélie. After finishing her studies in Europe, she returns to Japan, her country of birth as it happens, to work as a translator. Owing to her perfect knowledge of Japanese, acquired before she left Japan at the age of five, she is soon hired by the prestigious company Yumimoto[[4]](#footnote-5) on a one-year contract. However, her idealized vision of Japan turns out to be a far cry from reality as she is immediately confronted with the company’s rigid hierarchy. She starts out working as a translator for the company, but instead of climbing the corporate ladder she progressively slides down it, until she is finally placed as a “dame pipi” (restroom attendant) in the Yumimoto restroom. The novel relates the narrator’s downfall in the organizational hierarchy, from a low-ranking skilled professional to performing unskilled manual labour.

Read as a satire, the source of criticism lies, as Martine Guyot-Bender (2007) observes, in “the […] disjunction between the nostalgic image of Japan and the less desirable, buzzing corporate world [which] puts Amélie’s story, before it even begins, within a broad cultural context and foregrounds her failure at (re)integration into a culture she obviously idealizes” (p.372). Having spent the first five years of her life there, going back to work in Japan is the narrator’s life-long dream. The image she holds of Japan is that of an idyllic and pastoral haven, an image that is nourished by her happy childhood memories and one which, in turn, fosters her dream of returning there as an adult (*SET*, pp. 22, 25–26; *FAT*, pp, 13, 15–16). The Japan she returns to, however, is a modern, industrial and commercial country. This contemporary Japanese experience clashes with her two sources of comparison and reference; the first being the old, original image she has of Japan and the other being the West, in the broad sense of the term, as her culture of origin. This paradoxical relationship with Japan is symbolized in the narrator’s feelings towards her superior Fubuki Mori, a mix of fascination and attraction, rivalry and conflict. Fubuki in the novel is the embodiment of hierarchical Japan; however, she is also its victim (Ravet, 2006).

In this article I attempt to demonstrate that *SET* incessantly draws attention to the narrator’s Westernized outlook on Japanese culture, an outlook which, apparently, the narrator cannot escape. I argue that it is precisely the pronounced Western position of the narrator that eventually overrides any possibility of producing an “accurate” depiction of Japan. Always and indelibly perceived within the boundaries of Western culture, Japan in the novel is a stylized construct replete with references to Western concepts. Rather than delivering a representation of the real Japan, the text presents us with a depiction built on *Western* paradigms of perception and *literary* models of representation.

**Fiction in autobiography**

From the outset, the narrative presents itself as an autobiographical account. Indeed, the closeness between the author, Amélie Nothomb, and the narrator, who goes by the same name, can be observed in references to biographical information published about the author, notably the publication of the author’s first novel in Belgium in 1992, among others. It should be noted, however, that the question of the novel’s status as an autobiographical text has been the subject of scholarly discussion (Delangue, 2014; Leblanc, 2012; Hiramatsu Ireland, 2012; Jaccomard, 2003; Koma, 2009). Leaning on extra-literary materials garnered from Belgian archives, Hiramatsu Ireland (2012) makes the claim that Amélie’s biography as a native Japanese person is a fabrication, which he says calls into question the events recounted and renders them misleading. Furthermore, much attention has been given to the truth-value of the novel in its depiction of Japan (Jaccomard, 2003). Koma (2009) concludes that the Japan depicted in the novel is “Romanesque”, inaccurate and incredible, mostly since it reproduces predetermined clichés and stereotypes. Leblanc (2012), on the other hand, posits that Nothomb’s inclination is toward “literary exoticism” rather than an attempt to produce a “scientific ethnographic document” (p. 17), asking the question “after all, is it that important that all she recounts be true if the reader is captivated?” (pp. 45-46).[[5]](#footnote-6)

In any case, it seems that the novel strives to stress a certain authenticity by specifying dates that serve as markers of accuracy and verisimilitude, or as coordinates of biographical orientation, for example the specific day Amélie joins Yumimoto and her last day in employment there (January 7, 1991). At one point in the narrative, Amélie Nothomb—the author—evenaddresses the reader directly to explain why she had chosen to bring certain materials from her real life experience into the novel (*SET* p. 159; *FAT* p. 112).[[6]](#footnote-7) Ultimately, the novel proves not to be a full-fledged autobiography but rather a work of autofiction, one in which, as Hélène Jaccomard (2003) notes, “the narrator’s position at once inside and outside the autobiographical pact allows her to remain uncommitted to truth telling”.(p. 20)

The depiction of Japan, for instance, is not always faithful to realistic representation and does not necessarily even strive to maintain plausibility. The occasional break with realism and the fusion of the real and the unreal is a recurrent style marker throughout Nothomb’s oeuvre, due to her propensity for stylized, excessive, intertextual and self-reflexive narration. Moreover, the satiric mode, which entails such narrative devices as exaggeration, caricature, irony, and hyperbole, further detracts from the novel’s realism for the sake of amplifying the comic effect.

The first scene in the novel depicts Amélie’s arrival at Yumimoto. On arrival she is forced to wait for her superior who is in a meeting. To occupy her time, Mister Saito gives Amélie an assignment: to compose a letter accepting Mister Johnson’s invitation to play golf. After numerous attempts which all fail to satisfy Mister Saito, she is forced to admit to herself that:

There was something ‘Fair duchess, I am dying of love for you’ about this whole exercise that demanded a certain amount of creative wit. I explored permutations of grammatical categories. What if ‘Adam Johnson’ were the verb, ‘next Sunday’ the subject, ‘playing golf’ the object, and ‘Mister Saito’ the adverb? ‘Next Sunday accepts with pleasure the invitation to go Adamjohnsoning a playing golf MisterSaitoingly.’ Take that, Aristotle! (*FAT*, pp. 4–5)[[7]](#footnote-8)

This paragraph encapsulates in a nutshell the various directions the novel takes. It foregrounds, at an early stage in the narrative, a reliance on Western paradigms of perception and frames of reference, as well as Western literary models. The paragraph introduces three references to key figures and masterpieces of Western culture. Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, from which she cites, a general allusion to Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem ‘Jabberwocky’ from *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There*, and the vocative expression directed at Aristotle. All three represent the frames of reference through which she grasps Japanese culture. These are preliminary markers and anticipatory clues to a tendency that will only amplify and become more prominent as the narrative progresses.

Before moving on, it is worth considering that the English translation cited above is not exactly the same as the original French. Many of the textual phenomena are either omitted or translated differently. The translator, Adriana Hunter, explained her choices as resulting from an editorial request to ‘Americanize’ the text to suit its North American readership as well as unnecessary editing.[[8]](#footnote-9) Thus, it could be said that the English version operates shifts that intensify even further the novel’s reliance on Western paradigms.

**The *West***

As a satire, the novel takes on “Japanese stiffness” (*FAT*, p. 6)[[9]](#footnote-10) as the main target of its criticism. The rigid hierarchy depicted therein is accentuated by deliberate acts of humiliation of inferiors by their superiors. Superiors give orders to their subordinates, putting no trust in their professionalism. Domination is the organizing principle that governs human relations between superiors and their subordinates, as well as between men and women. Individualism is unwelcome and regarded with suspicion, as are initiative, pragmatism, and practicality. By definition, foreigners are suspect; they are considered untrustworthy both intellectually and professionally. However, the foregrounding of the Western outlook demonstrates that fixed ideas, presuppositions, and suspicion, are not exclusively Japanese traits. Borrowing from the paragraph cited above, and for the sake of this discussion, I will henceforth refer to this Western outlook in general as “Aristotelian logic”, a term representing Western values and ideas, born out of ancient Greece. The narrator constantly looks for Aristotelian logic, specifically individualism and pluralism, where it clearly does not exist. Hence, her eye, enmeshed as it is in Western ideas, evidently distorts any strange phenomenon it encounters by magnifying and ridiculing it.

The term “West” is employed here as denoting a single entity in a clearly generalizing manner since this is the way it is introduced and dealt with in the novel. The narrator constantly shows the Japanese characters making blunt and bewildered comparisons between the “occidental” and “oriental” brain, with regard to competence, performance and behaviour, such as when Mister Omochi roars: “Be quiet. That disgusting sort of pragmatism is worthy of a Westerner” (*FAT*, p. 32).[[10]](#footnote-11) In what follows I will elaborate on some of the techniques employed to foreground the Western imagination.

**A parallel *Wonderland***

While the novel draws on several literary models of representation, the primary reference along the lines of which the narration seems to unfold has to be Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s* *Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* (first published in 1865). Rather than presenting the reader with a satire that attempts to depict the real Japan, insofar as that is possible, what we are faced with is a literary Japan based on the model of nonsense literature.[[11]](#footnote-12)

On the 8th of January in 1990 an elevator spat me out on the top floor of a towering Tokyo office building. An enormous bay window at the far end of the landing sucked me over with the irresistible force of a shattered porthole on an airplane. Far, very far below, I could see the city; it seemed so distant and unreal that suddenly I wasn’t sure I had ever even set foot there. (*FAT*, p. 1)[[12]](#footnote-13)

While Alice falls down the rabbit hole into a place where everything is strange and unfamiliar, Amélie takes the elevator up to experience the same sensations on the 44th floor of Yumimoto. Japan, or the premises of Yumimoto’s enterprise at least, is presented as a microcosm, detached from reality and constituting a laboratory for examining Japanese mores.

Just like Alice, Amélie faces a world whose rules she does not grasp, even though she understands the language and speaks it fluently. And just like the *Alice* books, Nothomb’s novel is crammed with what seem to be logical absurdities, things that clash with common sense, that make no sense, or even border on non-sense. In this world, everything is bizarre, nothing is expected. Yumimoto is a business turned upside down: ultimately, Amélie does not do the work she was hired to do, she gets paid for doing nothing, she does not get fired, and she does not resign despite being subjected to repeated humiliation. Incidentally, critics grapple with the question of why Amélie does not resign from Yumimoto, and Jennings (2010) argues that in not wanting to bring shame on herself by not keeping her job, Amélie holds onto her Japanese identity, as this is a perfect example of Japanese reasoning.

Similarly to *Alice’s Adventures in* *Wonderland*, where fantasy penetrates reality, the characters in *SET* tend toward the outlandish and grotesque. Many of them are qualified by an exaggerated trait, and some even inflate and deflate periodically, according to their position as those who shout or those who are shouted at. Fubuki is in one instance “at least five feet ten, a height few Japanese men achieved […] ravishingly svelte and graceful” (*FAT*, p. 6).[[13]](#footnote-14) However, after being publicly reprimanded, “I saw Fubuki’s body yield. She had always held herself erect, a monument of pride [now] her legs gave out. She slumped into her chair […] hunched over” (*FAT*, pp. 85–86).[[14]](#footnote-15) Throughout the text, characters are continually evoked by their designated qualifiers. Mister Omochi, for example, is frequently referred to as “l’obèse” (“the Obese One”) and is even compared to an ogre (*SET*, p. 181) although the latter term does not appear in the English translation. He is also “le Diable” (*SET*, p. 92) (or “the Devil”, *FAT*, p. 64), as opposed to Mister Haneda, who is “Dieu” (*SET*, p. 181) (or “God”, *FAT*, p. 128). And as Jennings (2010) remarks, a text with characters that are identified as an ogre, an angel (Mister Tenshi) and God cannot be deemed realistic by any stretch.

Much like Alice, Amélie’s disposition is one of constant bewilderment. In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* Alice experiences her new surroundings as “a very curious thing” (*Alice*, p. 104), whereas Amélie’s wonderland is amazing: “That moment that I accepted Fubuki’s assignment, I entered into another dimension—a universe of pure derision” (*FAT*, p. 96).[[15]](#footnote-16) And the inhabitants of this strange land are likewise astonished by her. Alice’s strangeness is directly mentioned by the Gryphon: “you *are* a simpleton” [emphasis in the original] (*Alice*, p. 127), and by the Duchess: “you don’t know much […] and that’s a fact” (*Alice*, p. 83). Likewise, Amélie’s Japanese colleagues address her in negatively critical terms, but their words seem to carry more spite: “Either you are a traitor or you’re a half-wit. There’s no third option” (*FAT*, p. 47).[[16]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, it is no wonder that Amélie is befuddled, for she is forced to deal with rules that are constantly changing. For instance, after serving tea and conversing with delegates from another company, she is reprimanded for addressing them in Japanese. She is also ordered to forget the language and, since she was hired as a translator in the first place, the overall scene is nothing short of a mad tea party.

As a representation of modern Japan, Yumimoto is a hierarchical enterprise in which one is constantly at risk of being metaphorically beheaded by one’s superior, an atmosphere reminiscent of the Queen’s domain in *Alice’s Adventures*: “The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small. ‘Off with his head!’ she said, without even looking round” (*Alice*, pp. 113–114). It is a place of chaos and frustration where any sense of stability or normality has been tossed out the window. Or, as the narrator concludes: “No one knows what ‘eccentric’ means until they’ve met a Japanese eccentric. I slept under the trash in the offices of a major corporation. So what. Japan is a country that knows the meaning of ‘losing it’” (*FAT*, pp. 62–63).[[17]](#footnote-18)

**Western paradigms of perception**

Throughout the text, several devices are employed to bring into relief the Western frame of reference. The first of these is the *namedropping* of key Western figures and concepts. Replete with such evocations, hardly a page goes by without a name or a direct citation making an appearance. They serve the narrator as explanatory tools, concepts through which she gauges things or makes sense of them via comparison, identification or irony. Even the title of the novel itself is a direct reference to Kierkegaard’s tract *Fear and Trembling*, and other examples abound.

These attest to the systems of thought through which Amélie comprehends her Japanese experience, and the paradigms of meaning that she leans on when observing her human environment. The narrator at times uses adjectives with ancient Greek roots, such as in describing Umimoto’s import-export catalog as “titanic” (*FAT*, p. 8), the numbers she calculates for her employee as a thing of “Pythagorean beauty” (*FAT*, p. 50) or her boss’s serenity as “Olympian” (*FAT*, p. 128). . The narrator also employs Western names as points of reference for comparison, building on the collective knowledge of the West: Cleopatra, for describing Fubuki’s beautiful nose (*FAT*, p. 6), Sisyphus, for describing the ordeal of her accounting tasks (*FAT*, p. 54), or Messiah, for conveying to us her perception of her superior boss (*FAT*, p. 23). Likewise, similes are utilized and demonstrate how, in order to interpret her observations, she invokes cultural emblems from literature and film, for example: “I started looking at each new number with as much astonishment as Robinson Crusoe spying a footprint in the sand” (*FAT*, p. 51).[[18]](#footnote-19) Or, “He grabbed me the way King Kong did Fay Wray and dragged me out into the corridor” (*FAT*, p. 107).[[19]](#footnote-20) The narrator also plays on expressions, employing idiomatic lexical units that clarify and neatly encapsulate the points she wants to make: “Road to Canossa” (*FAT*, p. 178), “Casus Belli” (*FAT*, p. 127), “Memento Mori” (*FAT*, p. 108) are all expressions stemming from Western history and philosophy. And, finally, the narrator filters them through notions acquired by readings of philosophy and literature: Nietzsche is evoked when she reflects on her deplorable job: “People with menial jobs conjure up what Nietzsche calls a background world […] their mental Eden is as seductive as their job is repugnant” (*FAT*, p. 113–114).[[20]](#footnote-21) And she recalls André Maurois for guidance in specific professional contexts: “I remembered a line from André Maurois: ‘don’t speak too ill of yourself. People will believe you’” (*FAT*, p. 128).[[21]](#footnote-22) In addition, the semantic field of Christianity is especially present in the novel. The lexemes appear as comparisons on occasion, as well as reference words and adjectives: Christ, devil, martyr, Eden, the Tower of Babel, Carmelite, Pontius Pilate, Easter, Gehenna and the sacrificial lamb, among others.

***Stupeur* as experience**

Another frequently employed device in the novel is the narrator’s use of qualifiers to describe her experience, words that shape our assessment of scenes and dialogues. These qualifiers constantly emphasize, on the one hand, the extent to which Amélie’s experiences boggle the logic of her Western mind while on the other hand showing that her conduct makes no sense to her Japanese colleagues. The predominant qualifiers used here are the words *stupeur*, its synonym *stupéfaction*, and their semantic counterparts which recur profusely, both as verbs and as nouns: ébérluér (*SET*, p. 42), perplexité (*SET,* p. 156), étonner (*SET,* pp. 163, 176), surprise (*SET*, p. 175), and ahurir (*SET* p. 190). In the English translation we find similar expressions conveying bewilderment, astonishment, and incredulity, which are all linguistic applications of the specific semantic choice: “This always earned me a disbelieving eye” (*FAT*, p. 17),[[22]](#footnote-23) “We looked at each other in amazement. My dumbfoundedness was understandable” (*FAT,* p. 63)[[23]](#footnote-24) or “She looked at me in astonishment” (*FAT,* p. 78).[[24]](#footnote-25)

*Stupeur*, then, becomes a leitmotif in the novel, reasserting Amélie’s position as suspicious of Japanese culture from the outset, an outsider observing this strange world where, to her amazement, all laws seem to be inverted. The denotation of *stupeur* as bewilderment thus trumps the meaning of the collocation *Stupeur et Tremblements*, which gives the book its title and is presented in the narrative as the required bearing one must adopt when facing the Japanese emperor, a marker of hierarchy and authority. Interestingly, though, the term is also mentioned in the Bible (*Philippians* 2:12) and, as mentioned earlier, it is the title of a philosophical work by Kierkegaard (published in 1843). These three connotations collide, then, in a perpetual internal conflict in the novel. But “*stupeur*” is ultimately the narrator’s position toward her overall experience.

Sometimes the Japanese figures experience bewilderment, as in when the narrator states “He stared at me” (*FAT*, p. 33)[[25]](#footnote-26) or “The forty members of the office watched […] in stupefied silence” (*FAT*, p. 42).[[26]](#footnote-27) Other instances of bewilderment are displayed by the perplexed narrator, for instance when she is “still frozen in stupor when the answer to my question was delivered to me” (*FAT*, p. 64)[[27]](#footnote-28), taken “by surprise” (*FAT*, p. 118)[[28]](#footnote-29) or when “Once my disbelief had subsided, I felt a strange sense of relief” (*FAT*, p. 94).[[29]](#footnote-30) Sometimes the dumbfounded gaze converges, reflecting mutual disbelief. From either direction, the result is always a visceral reaction outwardly displayed. Mostly associated with a befuddled gaze, the trigger is always the conduct of one side which in turn resists comprehension by the other. Hence, assert as she may her desire to reintegrate into her beloved Japan, these qualifiers serve to maintain a distance between Amélie’s object of observation and herself. Her interlocutors, in turn, are likewise perplexed by her conduct and attitude. There is suspicion on both sides: the Japanese regard her as a stranger, one inferior to them, and both parties make myriad comparisons between East and West, making sure that never the twain shall meet.

**Meaning in the eye of the beholder**

The Western vantage point is also foregrounded through the use of the eye as a discourse marker and as a narrative strategy in depicting Japan. Occurring prolifically throughout the text, the eye encompasses several layers of meaning. Some are literal, such as when Amélie lowers her eyes in conversation as a cultural gesture signifying humility and performed in compliance with Japanese customs. Some are figurative or metaphorical; the recurrent image of the eye in various linguistic contexts reminds us that we are seeing this world through the eye of the beholder who is relating her observations to the reader. Hence, the eye here represents the subjectivity of the act of assigning meaning; the eye is a synecdoche for the idiosyncratic vantage point of the protagonist-narrator. Interestingly, Guyot-Bender (2005) notes that Amélie is never described physically; the only part of her anatomy with which the reader is familiar is her eye. More than merely an organ of vision, the eye represents the faculty of observation and perception, of appreciation and judgment, of perspective and opinion. It emphasizes the protagonist’s constant gaze at Japanese culture through the eyes of a Westerner, a gaze that leaves her frequently dumbfounded.[[30]](#footnote-31)

Some linguistic constructions contain expressions based on dead metaphors: ‘‘To Western eyes, there would have been nothing ignominious in this, to Japanese eyes, it meant losing face” (*FAT*, p. 12)[[31]](#footnote-32) Here the “Western eye” signifies an observational stance. But others are of productive figurative language: “She walked toward me with Hiroshima in her right eye and Nagasaki in her left” (*FAT*, p. 89).[[32]](#footnote-33) In this context the eye is used in a metaphor for Fubuki’s wrath.

The Western gaze in SET is not to be confused with orientalism. If orientalism is perceived as a meta system which governs and regulates all that may be imagined about the Orient, this is not the case here. Amélie is not an ignorant product of institutionalized and degraded knowledge about Japan, and she does not possess an exalted self-image of her provenance; therefore, she does not assert the positional superiority of the West over the inferior East. She does, however, express herself through Western discourse, from which she cannot escape, to her detriment.

In contradiction to this, Chris Reyns-Chikuma claims that *SET* is an anti-Japanese pamphlet verging on racism, a text that assumes a Nipponophobic ideology by disseminating stereotypes about Japan. He claims, therefore, that the novel should be read as part of the orientalist tradition, following in the footsteps of such texts as *Tintin in the Congo* (Hergé, 1931).[[33]](#footnote-34) However, I argue that the narrative devices used in the novel actually foreground the narrator’s awareness of her inability to escape preconceived frames of mind, whereas the orientalist is unaware of his bias.

**Paraphrasing and injection of meaning**

Despite the claim to truthfulness, the accuracy of the dialogues related in the text is undermined by an unreliable narrator, who, as we have already seen, is prone to interpretation rather than . Their artifice is further accentuated by the fact that, even though the majority of the dialogues are spoken by Japanese people, they too correspond to Western paradigms through which Japan is (pre)conceived. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to treat these dialogues as paraphrases and rewordings rather than veritable quotations or otherwise verbatim transmissions. As Shirley Ann Jordan (2003) maintains, Nothombian dialogues play a central role in Nothomb’s oeuvre and they are principally designed to “generate entertaining and intellectually impressive confrontations” (p. 95). With this aim in mind, Jordan explains, the “truth” of Nothombian dialogue is often interrupted by borrowings from literary sources or interlocutors who are portrayed as being “larger than life, with fantastic or almost mythical dimensions” (p. 96).

The dialogues in *SET* therefore constitute a locus for the narrator to inject meaning that manifestly does not originate with the interlocutors. This process is evident in the scene where Fubuki is reproached by her superior Mister Omochi (p. 22). The narrator provides a foreword to the transmission of the dialogue: “Si j’avais dû être l’interprête simultanée du discours de monsieur Omochi, voici ce que j’aurais traduit” (*SET*, p.120).[[34]](#footnote-35) What follows is Amélie’s account of Mister Omochi telling Fubuki off, not for anything that actually happened, but for what could have happened. The whole scene is related by the narrator as a sexual assault.[[35]](#footnote-36) She specifically employs, in the French original, the form of the *conditionnel passé*, which is a putative form, not an affirmative one. It is markedly an interpretation of the reality of things, one that is clearly based on Western sensibilities, hence its gender-consciousness and critical attitude towards the phallocentric order with its ensuing power imbalance. The introductory sentence, as well as the grammatical structure, undermine the accuracy of the dialogue while reinforcing its status as a paraphrase.

**The grave** **crime of individualism and other Western practices**

If we were to narrow down the causes for Amélie’s downfall to their point of origin, according to the argument of this article, it is her inability to escape her Western mind-set. This idea is epitomized in a particular scene which features a dialogue between Amélie and her superior, Miss Fubuki Mori. The context is, very briefly, as follows: Amélie seizes the chance to perform a task given to her by a manager who is not her direct superior. She performs the task superbly, but in order to avoid retribution for the major offense of taking initiative, they both agree to conceal the fact that Amélie is the one who performed the job. Nevertheless, Mister Omochi, a higher-level superior, summons her, tells her off, and warns her never to do such a thing again. Once Amélie finds out that it was Miss Mori who had denounced her, she decides to confront her:

I started quietly and soberly.

‘I thought we were friends. I don’t understand.’

‘What don’t you understand?’

‘Are you going to deny that you denounced me?’

‘I haven’t denied anything. I followed the rules.’

‘Are the rules more important to you than friendship?’

‘“Friendship” is a strong word. I’d prefer “good relationship between colleagues.”’

She proffered this expression with ingenuous, affable calm.

‘I see. Do you think our relationship will continue to be good, after what you’ve done?’

‘If you apologize, I won’t bear you a grudge.’

‘You’ve got a good sense of humour, Fubuki.’

‘You’re behaving as if you’re the injured party, when you’ve actually done something very wrong.’ (*FAT*, pp. 35–36)[[36]](#footnote-37)

This is a clear instance of a culture clash wherein incompatible, culturally inculcated values find themselves pitted against each other, but more importantly, it is the infrastructure of Western practices underlying Amélie’s behavior which wreaks havoc in her professional life. In this particular instance—the practice of open conversation and emotional frankness.

Western culture advocates affective discourse, giving priority to interpersonal interactions, encouraging people to voice their feelings and to converse openly and sincerely with the aim of “talking things out”. The West champions the idea that self-knowledge leads to self-improvement. Talking through things and speaking openly are therefore common practices, tools for repairing relationships, clearing the air and avoiding lingering grudges or hard feelings. Sociologist Eva Illouz (2008) stresses that:

‘communication’ has become an essential part of the ethical substance of men and women inside the corporation […]. The model of ‘communication’ aims at providing linguistic and emotional techniques to reconcile diverging imperatives: namely to assert and express the self, yet cooperate with others; to understand others’ motives, yet manipulate oneself and others to reach desired goals; and to be self-controlled, yet personable and accessible. Communication is thus an ‘ethical substance’ in which it is impossible to separate self-interest from attention to others, language being essentially the main technique through which the two are to be presumably reconciled. (p. 89)

It is because of this Western mind-set that Amélie feels the urge and urgency to speak with her superior: “I must speak to Fubuki. Otherwise I’ll never forgive myself” (*FAT*, p. 35).[[37]](#footnote-38) And this is not the first time that Amélie summons Fubuki for the very same reason; a similar occurrence happens at the beginning of the novel: “I poured my heart out” (*FAT*, p. 14).[[38]](#footnote-39) However, this is definitely not how the Japanese go about things, especially when the summoned person is superior to the summoner— a fact demonstrated in several scenes witnessed by the narrator. For Fubuki and, ostensibly, for the rest of the Japanese working world, one’s proficiency and competence count less than one’s rank in the organization. Fubuki respects those who climb up the clearly established ladder of hierarchy in a transparent manner; whereas Amélie tries to clandestinely sneak in through the back stairs, thus inverting the proper order. This is unacceptable in terms of the Japanese formula of power relations. While Amélie thinks in terms of efficacy and practicality, Fubuki’s point of view is that she has no right to exploit a back door, as practical and efficient as the result may be.

The Western discourse to which Amélie adheres is that of individualism, and by that I mean individualism as ideology, in the sense of according superior value to independence, self-reliance, self-fulfillment, and the idea that the individual and her needs will always triumph over societal ideals and values and supersede them.[[39]](#footnote-40) Yumimoto’s Japan, perceived through the narrator’s Western eyes, views individualism pejoratively, either as egotism or as recklessness. At Yumimoto, the individual is of lesser importance; it is the group or the organization that counts above all. As Fubuki puts it: “Your despicable behavior is typical of Westerners. You put your personal vanity ahead of the interests of the company” (*FAT*, p. 46).[[40]](#footnote-41) Mister Omochi’s rebuke demonstrates this concept perfectly: “The content was incredibly insulting. My companion in misfortune and I were called traitors, incompetents, snakes, deceitful, and—the height of injury—individualists” (*FAT*, p. 29).[[41]](#footnote-42)

It is due to the discourse of individualism that Amélie is relentlessly and irresistibly destructive to the social order at Yumimoto, to the extent that she ends up pushing societal boundaries to absurd extremes and provoking egregious reactions. Because the people around her do not share the same discourse, what she experiences is a continual collapse of meaning.[[42]](#footnote-43)

**Translation vs. interpretation**

The protagonist and narrator of *SET* is a translator. Unable to actually engage in the act of translation, even though as an employee of Yumimoto she was hired to perform the function of a translator, Amélie turns to writing instead. It turns out that her stay with Yumimoto is a formative experience that leads her to becoming a writer:

I left the Yumimoto Corporation, never to return again.

A few days later, I went back to Europe.

On January 14th, 1991, I started writing a novel.

[…] in 1992, my first novel was published. (*FAT*, p. 132)[[43]](#footnote-44)

This change of function and vocation, from translator to author, enables a shift in the terminology with which Amélie’s comportment can be understood. Amélie actually acted as a *reader* of Japanese culture. She is never actually seen to transfer, undisturbed, the meaning encoded in one symbolic system into another, be it lexical or cultural. Not because she cannot easily transfer text from one language to the other but because she assumes, from the very start, the role of interpreter, in the literary sense of the word, instead. To interpret is to construct meaning, specifically in the light of individual belief, judgment or circumstance. Interpretation is the act of explaining the meaning of something. It is a function of presupposed assumptions that govern and shape understanding.

Moreover, when it comes to interpretation, one must always raise the question to which interpretive community the interpreter belongs, since this community sets the interpreter’s initial predilections. For Stanley Fish (1995),

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, *these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read* rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around [my emphasis]. (p. 171)

Interpretive communities consist of readers who have internalized structures of understanding and respond to the texts they read through them. In interpretation, the interpreter’s stance is given more prominence and importance. Interpretation always involves judgments, expectations, and conclusions on the part of the interpreter. Fish (1995) teaches us that reading is not a two-stage situation, first grasping things and judging them afterwards. Interpretation always shapes meaning. “The reader’s response is not to meaning, it *is* meaning” (p. 3). Indeed, the narrator was never a translator, within and outside the diegesis. Within *SET*, and expanding the scope of the term interpretive communities from reading literature to reading cultural texts in general, Amélie is an interpreter of Japan, a member of a specific interpretive community that holds preconceived Western frames of mind.

**Conclusion**

On the surface, *SET*’s main narrative satirizes the Japanese suspicion of strangers, while mocking their biased, superficial and rigid attitude. However, when we look deeper, we find that it is the narrator-protagonist’s Western thought habits that cause her to filter all her observations and experiences through a Western prism and to convey them to the reader not as they are, but as she interprets them. *SET*’s storytelling is either enmeshed in dogmas of Western discourse or overlaid with imagery reminiscent of a Western masterpiece, Lewis Carrol’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. In effect, Amélie’s adventures in Japan take on the form of a satire that is shown to be fragile, a “limited-liability” satire at most. Even though the narrator claims to have a profound understanding and appreciation of Japan, is fluent in the language and aspires to assimilate its culture,[[44]](#footnote-45) ultimately Japan seems to be a nonsense world. Due to Amélie’s constant search for Aristotelian logic, as a framework of reasoning representative of Western thought, which does not exist in the East, she finds absurdities everywhere. Nothomb’s novel insists that we recognize how dependent we are on our respective cultural discourses for our sense of self and our interpretations of culture and reality.[[45]](#footnote-46)

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1. Amélie Nothomb, *Stupeur et Tremblements* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999). Hereafter *SET*. For the English translation, I will be referencing Amélie Nothomb, *Fear and Trembling,* trans. by Adriana Hunter (Faber and Faber, London 2002). Hereafter *FAT*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. According to Termite (2003), all of Nothomb’s novels share an attitude of counterculture and sabotage (p. 154). Other readings have been suggested by Hélène Jaccomard (2003) who sees SET as recounting the birth of an author, and Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2003) who views the focal point as being Amélie’s unrequited love for Fubuki. The company’s name is a fictional one; its etymological selection is explained by the narrator (*SET* p. 13; *FAT* p. 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. “après tout, est-ce si important que tout ce qu’elle raconte soit vrai si le lecteur est captivé ?” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Nothomb’s novel *Ni d'Ève ni d'Adam* (2007), entitled *Tokyo Fiancé* in the English translation, recounts an alternative narrative of her escapades outside Yumimoto at the same period of time. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. “Il y avait à cet exercice un côté : « Belle marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d’amour » qui ne manquait pas de sel. J’explorais des catégories grammaticales en mutation : « Et si Adam Johnson devenait le verbe, dimanche prochain le sujet, jouer au golf le complément et monsieur Saito l’adverbe ? Dimanche prochain accepte avec joie de venir Adamjohnsonner un jouer au golf monsieurSaitoment ». Et pan dans l’oeil d’Aristote!” (*SET*, p. 12) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. In her words: “One of the frustrations of this particular commission was that my work was quite heavily edited and Americanized and I was offered no power of veto” (Hunter, 2003, p. 174). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. “la raideur nippone” (*SET*, p. 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. “Taisez-vous. Ce pragmatism odieux est digne d’un Occidental” (*SET*, p. 48). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. For more on the rich intertextual infrastructure of Nothomb’s novels, see Susan Bainbrigge (2003), pp. 114–123. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. “Le 8 Janvier 1990, l’ascenseur me cracha au dernier étage de l’immeuble Yumimoto. La fenêtre, au bout du hall, m’aspira comme l’eût fait le hublot brisé d’un avion. Loin, très loin, il y avait la ville – si loin que je doutais d’y avoir jamais mis les pieds” (*SET*, p. 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. “Mori mesurait au moins un mètre quatre-vingts, taille que peu d’hommes japonais atteignent. Elle était svelte et gracieuse à ravir” (*SET*, p. 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. “Je vis ployer le corps de ma supérieure […] ses jambes l’abandonnèrent comme celles d’une amante éreintée: elle tomba assise sur sa chaise […] à présent, Fubuki était pliée en deux” (*SET*, pp. 119–120). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. “j’entrai dans une dimension autre de l’existence: l’univers de la dérision pure et simple” (*SET*, p. 135). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. “vous êtes soit une traîtresse, soit une démurée : il n’y a pas de troisième possibilité” (*SET*, p. 68). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. “On ne sait ce qu’est excentrique si l’on n’a pas rencontré un excentrique nippon. J’avais dormi sous les ordures ? On en avait vu d’autres. Le Japon est un pays qui sait ce que « craquer » veut dire” (*SET*, p. 89). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. “J’ai commençai par regarder chaque nouveau nombre avec autant d’étonnement que Robinson rencontrant un indigène de ce territoire inconnu” (*SET*, p. 74). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. “Il m’attrapa comme King Kong s’empare de la blondinette et m’entraîna à l’extérieur” (*SET*, p. 151). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. “Il est typique des êtres qui exercent un métier lamentable de se composer ce que Nietzsche appelle un arrière-monde […] leur éden mental est d’autant plus beau que leur tâche est vile” (*SET,* p. 160). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. “Ce constat me rappela le mot *d’André Maurois*: « ne dites pas trop de mal de vous-même: on vous croirait »” (*SET,* p. 180). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. “Ce qui me valait à chaque fois un regard *stupéfait*” (*SET*, p. 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. “Nous nous regardâmes l’un l’autre avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 90). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. “Elle me regarda avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p.109). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. “Il me regarda avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 49). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. “Les quarante membres du bureau géant le regardèrent avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 62). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. “J’étais toujours figée de stupeur quand me fut apportée la réponse” (*SET*, p. 91). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. “Je ne pus m’empêcher de relever la tête pour la regarder avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 167). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. “La stupéfaction passée, la première chose que je ressenti fut un soulagement étrange” (*SET*, p. 132). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. It is also the eye of a (future) author, able to create a world and control it. This reading gives prominence to the narrative of the protagonist’s initiation as a writer, which coincides with the double ending of the novel. As expounded by Marinella Termite (2003), the first ending brings to a close the narrative of Amélie’s Yumimoto trial, while the second one, following immediately thereafter, narrates the publication of her first book. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. “*aux yeux d’un occidental*, ça n’eût rien eu d’infamant; *aux yeux d’un Japonais*, c’eût été perdre la face” (*SET*, p. 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. “Elle marcha vers moi, avec Hiroshima *dans l’oeil droit* et Nagasaki *dans l’oeil gauche*” (*SET*, p. 125). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. The two allusions he points out within *SET* are to the imperialist, colonial novel *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe (1719) and to director Nagisa Oshima's 1983 film *Merry Christmans, Mister Laurence*, with its racist depiction of “Japs”. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. This sentence, along with the entire passage containing it, was omitted from the English translation. It reads (my translation): “If I had had to be the simultaneous interpreter for Mister Omochi’s speech, this is what I would have translated.” [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. See analyses by Sylvester and Gascoigne in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Susan Bainbrigge and Jeanette den Toonder (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Je commençai d’une voix douce et posée:

    * Je pensais que nous étions amies. Je ne comprends pas.
    * Que ne comprenez-vous pas?
    * Allez-vous nier que vous m’avez dénoncée?
    * Je n’ai rien à nier. J’ai appliqué le règlement.
    * Le règlement est-il plus important pour vous que l’amitié?
    * Amitié est un grand mot. Je dirais plutôt ‘bonnes relations entre collègues’.

    Elle proférait ces phrases horribles avec une calme ingénue et affable.

    * Je vois. Pensez-vous que nos relations vont continuer à être bonnes, suites à votre attitude?
    * Si vous vous excusez, je n’aurai pas de rancune.
    * Vous ne manquez pas d’humour, Fubuki.
    * C’est extraordinaire. Vous vous conduisez comme si vous étiez l’offensée alors que vous avez commis une faute grave. *SET*, pp. 53–54)

    [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. “Il faut que je parle à Fubuki. Sinon, j’en aurai une rage de dents” (*SET*, p. 53). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. “Je vidai mon coeur” (*SET*, p. 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. See Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. “vous vous conduisez aussi bassement comme les autres Occidentaux: vous placez votre vanité personnelle plus haut que les intérêts de la compagnie” (*SET*, pp. 66–67). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. “le fond était incroyablement insultant. Mon compagnon d’infortune et moi nous fîmes traiter de tous les noms: nous étions des traîtres, des nullités, des serpents, des fourbes et – sommet de l’injure – des individualistes” (*SET*, p. 44). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Some readings of the novel attribute the provocations in which the narrator-protagonist engages to her unique subversive traits. Claire Nodot (2006) claims that Amélie demonstrates incomprehension of borders, both personal and institutional, and that because she refuses to accept the rules she finds herself exiled from the main body of the corporation to its margins. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. [J]e quittai l’immeuble Yumimoto. On ne m’y revit jamais.

    Quelques jours plus tard, je retournai en Europe.

    Le14 Janvier 1991, je commençai à écrire un manuscrit dont le titre était *Hygiène de L’assassin.*

    […] En 1992, mon premier roman fut publié. (*SET*, p. 186) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. From the point of view of translation studies, Peter Cowley (2011) contends that Amélie the protagonist is incompetent as a translator not because of her language skills but because of her cultural ineptitude (p. 276). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. “La programmation collective de l’esprit qui distingue les membres d’un groupe ou d’une catégorie de personnes par rapport à une autr*e*’. Greet Hofstede cited in De Jallad, *Les Interactions Culturelles*, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)