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

**Abstract**

Amélie Nothomb’s 1999 novel *Stupeur et Tremblements* portrays the misadventures, misunderstandings, and misgivings experienced by a Belgian professional in a large, modern Japanese workplace. This book is often read as an autobiographical account of the author’s Japanese experience and a satirical critique of Japanese society. I argue that, while the narrator is unable to perform the duty for which she was hired, as a translator, she acts as an interpreter of Japanese mores. Always and indelibly perceived within the boundaries of Western culture in the novel, Japan becomes a stylized construct replete with references to Western concepts. My article sheds light on how this construct takes shape in the text by focusing on the narrative techniques that foreground the narrator’s immersion in Western culture, including allusions to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, paraphrasing and injecting meaning, namedropping key Western figures and concepts, and using the eye as a recurring motif and metaphor.

Keywords:

Amélie Nothomb, Stupeur et Tremblements, Fear and Trembling, Japan, Western culture, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, 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, aiming to expose its oppressive and misogynist hierarchical system (Chira, 2001; Narjout, 2004; Sylvester, 2016). Another popular reading of the novel is 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, Nothomb unfolds a story of power games and the subversion of power relations (Korzeniowska, 2003; Termite, 2003), addressing life and identity in the arena of Japanese commercial enterprise (Hărşan, 2014; Da Rocha Soares, 2012).[[2]](#footnote-3)

The novel recounts the story of the protagonist-narrator, Amélie. After finishing her studies in Europe, she returns to Japan, her country of birth, 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 Yumimoto company on a one-year contract. Amélie soon discovers that her idealized vision of Japan is a far cry from reality as she is immediately confronted with the company’s rigid hierarchy. Instead of climbing the corporate ladder from her initial position as a translator, she slides progressively down the ranks until she is finally appointed as a *dame pipi* – an attendant in the Yumimoto restroom. From low-ranking but skilled professional work, the narrator ends up demoted to unskilled manual labour.

Read as a satire, the source of the novel’s 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. Her happy childhood memories foster an image of Japan as an idyllic, pastoral haven (*SET*, pp. 22, 25–26; *FAT*, pp, 13, 15–16). The Japan to which she returns, however, is a modern, industrial and commercial country. This contemporary Japanese experience clashes with her two sources of comparison and reference: her childhood vision of Japan, and the perception of the country in the West, in the broad sense of the term, as her culture of origin. The result is a paradoxical relationship with Japan, which is symbolized in the narrator’s feelings towards her superior Fubuki Mori: a mix of fascination and attraction, rivalry and conflict. Fubuki 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, one which the narrator apparently 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 is a stylized construct in the novel, replete with references to Western concepts. Rather than delivering a representation of the real Japan, the text presents us with a depiction built on Westernparadigms of perception and literarymodels of representation.

**Fiction in autobiography**

From the outset, the narrative presents itself as an autobiographical account. Indeed, the parallels between Amélie Nothomb and her namesake narrator are made evident via references to well-known biographical information about the author, notably the publication of the author’s first novel in Belgium in 1992.

 It should be noted, however, that the question of the novel’s autobiographical status has been the subject of scholarly debate (Delangue, 2014; Leblanc, 2012; Hiramatsu Ireland, 2012; Jaccomard, 2003; Koma, 2009). Leaning on extra-literary materials from Belgian archives, Hiramatsu Ireland (2012) points out that the narrator Amélie’s representative as a Japanese native is a fabrication that calls into question the events recounted. Nevertheless, it seems that the novel aims to achieve a certain authenticity by specifying dates that serve as markers of biographical accuracy, for example, the specific day Amélie joins Yumimoto and her last day in employment there (7 January 1991). At one point, Amélie evenaddresses the reader directly to explain why she has chosen to bring certain materials from her real-life experience into the novel (*SET* p. 159; *FAT* p. 112). Ultimately, the novel is not a full-fledged autobiography but a work of autofiction, one in which, as 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).

Japan is also not always realistically represented, and Nothomb does not necessarily even appear to strive to achieve plausibility. Koma (2009) concludes that the Japan depicted in the novel is “*romanesque*,” inaccurate, and incredible, largely because it reproduces clichés and stereotypes. Leblanc (2012), on the other hand, posits that Nothomb aims for “literary exoticism” rather than a “scientific, ethnographic document” (p. 17) and asks: “after all, is it that important that all she recounts be true if the reader is captivated?” (pp. 45–46).[[3]](#footnote-5) Breaks with realism and fusion of the real and the unreal are recurrent features of Nothomb’s oeuvre, known for its stylized, excessive, intertextual, and self-reflexive narration. Moreover, the satiric mode, which entails such narrative devices as exaggeration, caricature, irony, and hyperbole, further diminishes the novel’s realism for the sake of amplifying the comic effect.

The first scene in the novel depicts Amélie’s arrival at Yumimoto. 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).[[4]](#footnote-6)

This paragraph encapsulates the various directions the novel takes. It foregrounds, at an early stage in the narrative, a reliance on Western paradigms of perception, frames of reference, and literary models. Within its short span, the narrator manages to introduce three key Western cultural references: a quotation from Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, an allusion to Lewis Carroll’s ‘Jabberwocky,’ and the mention of Aristotle. All three are frames of reference through which she views Japanese culture. These are preliminary indicators of 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 deviates somewhat from 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.[[5]](#footnote-7) Thus, it could be said that the English version contains shifts that even further intensify the novel’s reliance on Western paradigms.

**The *West***

The main satirical target of the novel is “Japanese stiffness” (*FAT*, p. 6).[[6]](#footnote-8) The rigid hierarchy depicted in the novel is accentuated by deliberate acts of humiliation of inferiors by their superiors. Superiors give orders to their subordinates, placing 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 and 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. I will henceforth refer to this Western outlook in general as “Aristotelian logic,” a term representing Western values and ideas born in Ancient Greece. The narrator constantly looks for Aristotelian logic, specifically individualism and pluralism, where it clearly does not exist. Hence, her eye, couched as it is in Western ideas, evidently distorts any strange phenomenon it encounters by magnifying and ridiculing it.

The term “West” is employed here to denote a single entity in a clearly generalizing manner, since this is the way it is introduced and dealt with in the novel. The narrator repeatedly shows Japanese characters making blunt and bewildered comparisons between the “Occidental” and “Oriental” brain with regard to competence, performance, and behaviour. For example, Mister Omochi roars at one point: “Be quiet. That disgusting sort of pragmatism is worthy of a Westerner” (*FAT*, p. 32).[[7]](#footnote-9) In what follows, I will elaborate on some of the techniques employed to emphasize the filtering effect of the Western imagination.

**A parallel *Wonderland***

While the novel draws on several literary models of representation, the primary one, along the lines of which the narration seems to unfold, is Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s* *Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Rather than presenting the reader with a satire that attempts to depict the real Japan, what we are faced with is a fictional Japan constructed based on the model of nonsense literature. 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 the Yumimoto headquarters:

On 8 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).

Yumimoto is presented as a microcosm of Japan, detached from reality and constituting a laboratory for examining Japanese mores. Just like Alice, Amélie experiences a world the rules of which she does not grasp, even though she understands the language and speaks it fluently. And just like the *Alice* books, Nothomb’s novel is packed with what seem to be logical absurdities, clashes with common sense, and actual nonsense. In this world, everything is bizarre; nothing is predictable. Yumimoto is a business turned upside down: ultimately, Amélie does not do the work she was hired to do and gets paid for doing nothing; nor does she get fired or resign, despite being subjected to repeated humiliations. Critics grapple with the question of why Amélie does not resign from Yumimoto. 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.

As in *Alice’s Adventures in* *Wonderland*, where fantasy penetrates reality, the characters in *SET* tend toward the outlandish and grotesque. Many of them are identified by an exaggerated trait; some even expand and contract periodically. For instance, Fubuki is, on one occasion, described as being “at least five feet ten, a height few Japanese men achieved […] ravishingly svelte and graceful” (*FAT*, p. 6). 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). 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 even compared to an ogre (*SET*, p. 181). He is also “le Diable” (“the Devil”) (*SET*, p. 92), while Mister Haneda is “Dieu” (“God”) (*SET*, p. 181). As Jennings (2010) remarks, a text with characters that are variously labelled an ogre, an angel (Mister Tenshi), and God cannot be deemed realistic by any stretch.

Much like Alice, Amélie’s predominant feeling is one of constant bewilderment. In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice experiences her new surroundings as “a very curious thing” (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). Likewise, the inhabitants of this strange land are astonished by her. Alice’s strangeness is interpreted as feeblemindedness by the Gryphon: “you *are* a simpleton” [emphasis in the original] (p. 127), and by the Duchess: “you don’t know much […], and that’s a fact” (p. 83). Likewise, Amélie’s Japanese colleagues assume that she is not very bright, but their words seem more spiteful: “Either you are a traitor, or you’re a half-wit. There’s no third option” (*FAT*, p. 47).

However, 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, given that she was initially hired as a translator, the overall scenario is not far removed from a mad hatter’s tea party.

As a microcosm 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). Similarly, Yumimoto is a place of chaos and frustration where any sense of stability or normality has been tossed out the window. 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).

**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. Hardly a page goes by without such a reference. 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 is a direct allusion to Kierkegaard’s *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 environment. The narrator sometimes uses adjectives with roots in Ancient Greek, such as in describing Yumimoto’s import-export catalogue as “titanic” (*FAT*, p. 8), the numbers she calculates for her employee as a thing of “Pythagorean beauty” (*FAT*, p. 50) and her boss’s serenity as “Olympian” (*FAT*, p. 128). The narrator also alludes to well-known icons of Western culture as points of comparison: Cleopatra when alluding to Fubuki’s beautiful nose (*FAT*, p. 6); Sisyphus, to describe the ordeal of her accounting tasks (*FAT*, p. 54), and “Messiah” to convey her perception of her superior boss (*FAT*, p. 23). Other emblems from Western popular culture are likewise evoked: “I started looking at each new number with as much astonishment as Robinson Crusoe spying a footprint in the sand” (*FAT*, p. 51); “He grabbed me the way King Kong did Fay Wray and dragged me out into the corridor” (*FAT*, p. 107).

The narrator also systematically employs idiomatic expressions stemming from Western history and philosophy to clarify and encapsulate her points. Examples include: “Road to Canossa” (*FAT*, p. 178), “Casus Belli” (*FAT*, p. 127), and “Memento Mori” (*FAT*, p. 108). She filters her Japanese experience through notions acquired from reading Western philosophy and literature. For example, when she reflects on her deplorable job, she says: “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). On another occasion, she evokes André Maurois as a guide for one’s professional conduct: “I remembered a line from André Maurois: ‘don’t speak too ill of yourself. People will believe you’” (*FAT*, p. 128).

The Judeo-Christian world is especially prominent in the novel. Lexemes from the world of Western religion appear as comparisons, reference words, and adjectives, including Christ, devil, martyr, Eden, the Tower of Babel, Carmelite, Pontius Pilate, Easter, Gehenna and the sacrificial lamb, among others.

***Stupeur* as experience**

Another device employed in the novel is the narrator’s frequent use of the word *stupeur*, its derivative *stupéfaction*, and other semantically related terms which recur regularly, 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). 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. 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),[[8]](#footnote-20) “We looked at each other in amazement. My dumbfoundedness was understandable” (*FAT,* p. 63);[[9]](#footnote-21) “She looked at me in astonishment” (*FAT,* p. 78).[[10]](#footnote-22)

*Stupeur*, then, becomes a leitmotif in the novel, repeatedly evoking Amélie’s suspicion of Japanese culture, from the outset, and her position as an outsider observing a strange world where, to her amazement, all laws seem to be inverted. The sense of *stupeur* as “bewilderment” thus seems to trump its denotation as “fear,” which one might deduce from the title. It is presented in the narrative as the required bearing one must adopt when facing the Japanese emperor, a signifier of hierarchy and authority. The term also appears 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 allusions collide in a perpetual internal conflict in the novel; however, it is *stupeur* as bafflement that characterises the narrator’s attitude to her experience overall. For example, she describes herself at one point as “still frozen in stupor when the answer to my question was delivered to me” (*FAT*, p. 64),[[11]](#footnote-23) at another as being taken “by surprise” (*FAT*, p. 118)[[12]](#footnote-24) and, at yet another, she states: “Once my disbelief had subsided, I felt a strange sense of relief” (*FAT*, p. 94).[[13]](#footnote-25) The Japanese characters also experience bewilderment: “The forty members of the office watched […] in stupefied silence” (*FAT*, p. 42).[[14]](#footnote-27)

Whichever character is bewildered, the result is always a visceral reaction, most often outwardly displayed through a befuddled gaze. The trigger is always the conduct of one, which defies the comprehension of the other. Assert as she may her desire to reintegrate into her beloved Japan, the frequent recourse to the lexical field of *stupeur* serves to create distance between those Amélie observes and herself. Her interlocutors are, likewise, perplexed by her conduct and attitudes. There is consequent suspicion on both sides: the Japanese regard her as a stranger and an inferior, and both she and they cannot seem to stop making cultural comparisons between East and West, which fuel their mutual unease and prevent them from ultimately understanding each other.

**Meaning in the eye of the beholder**

The Western vantage point is also emphasized through the use of the “eye” as a repeated and sustained image in the narrative on Japan. These allusions to eyes are multi-layered in nature. Some are references to actual eyes, such as when Amélie lowers hers in conversation, as a gesture signifying humility in accordance with Japanese custom. Other references are figurative. The recurrent image of the eye, within various linguistic contexts, reminds us that we are seeing this world through the eye of a beholder, a narrator who is relating her observations to the reader. The eye symbolises the subjectivity of assigned meaning and a synecdoche that highlights the idiosyncratic vantage point of the protagonist-narrator. 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 is symbolic of the faculty of observation and perception, of appreciation and judgment, of perspective and opinion. It emphasizes that the protagonist’s habitual gaze upon Japanese culture is through the eyes of a Westerner, a gaze that leaves her frequently dumbfounded. Some of these allusions are contained in familiar expressions or dead metaphors, for example: ‘‘To Western eyes, there would have been nothing ignominious in this, to Japanese eyes, it meant losing face” (*FAT*, p. 12). But others are of products of figurative language: “She walked toward me with Hiroshima in her right eye and Nagasaki in her left” (*FAT*, p. 89).[[15]](#footnote-32) In this context, the eye is used metaphorically to express Fubuki’s wrath.

The Western gaze in *SET* is not to be confused with orientalism. If orientalism is a meta-system which regulates all that may be imagined about the Orient, this is not the case here. Amélie is not an ignorant product of institutionalized, second-hand knowledge about Japan. She does not possess an exalted idea of her provenance, nor does she consciously or unconsciously assert the superiority of West over East. She does, however, express herself through Western discourse, from which she cannot escape, to her detriment. In contrast with readings of the novel as racist (Chris Reyns-Chikuma, 2003), I contend 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 their 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 shall see presently, is prone to interpretation rather than objective reporting. The artifice of the dialogues is betrayed by the fact that, even though most of them are spoken by Japanese people, they are also inhabited by the Western paradigms through which Japan is (pre)conceived. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to treat these dialogues as paraphrases and rewordings rather than verbatim quotations. Jordan (2003) notes that Nothomb’s dialogues are centrally important to her works and are principally designed to “generate entertaining and intellectually impressive confrontations” (p. 95). Given this aim, Jordan explains, the “truth” of Nothomb’s dialogues is often disrupted by borrowings from literary sources and/or interlocutors portrayed as “larger than life, with fantastic or almost mythical dimensions” (p. 96).

The dialogues in *SET*, therefore, illustrate how the narrator injects 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 preamble to the dialogue: “Si j’avais dû être l’interprête simultanée du discours de monsieur Omochi, voici ce que j’aurais traduit” (*SET*, p.120).[[16]](#footnote-33) What follows is Amélie’s account of Mister Omochi telling Fubuki off, not for anything that actually took place, but for what could have happened. The whole scene is related by the narrator as a sexual assault.[[17]](#footnote-34) She specifically employs, in the French original, the form of the *conditionnel passé*, which is a putative, not affirmative form. It is markedly an interpretation of the reality, one clearly based on Western sensibilities, hence its gender-consciousness and critical attitude towards the phallocentric order with its concomitant power imbalance. The prefatory sentence and the grammatical structures within the dialogue both serve to undermine its accuracy while reinforcing the sense of it being a narrator’s paraphrase.

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

If we narrow down the cause of Amélie’s downfall to its point of origin, it is her inability to escape her Western mindset. This is evidenced in one 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 the initiative, they both agree to conceal the fact that Amélie is the one who did the job. Nevertheless, Mister Omochi, a higher-level superior, summons her and remonstrates with her, warning her never to do such a thing again. Once Amélie finds out that it was Miss Mori who 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)

This is a clear instance of incompatible culturally inculcated values pitted against each other. The infrastructure of Western practices underlying Amélie’s behavior, and their clash with Japanese practices, is shown to wreak havoc in her professional life. In this particular instance, these are the practices 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 tools for repairing relationships, clearing the air, and avoiding lingering grudges or hard feelings. Sociologist Eva Illouz (2008) states 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 mindset that Amélie feels the urge to speak to her superior: “I must speak to Fubuki. Otherwise I’ll never forgive myself” (*FAT*, p. 35). And this is not the first time that Amélie talks to Fubuki for a similar reason; near the beginning of the novel, she says that she: “I poured my heart out” (*FAT*, p. 14). However, this is decidedly not how the Japanese go about things, especially when the interlocutor is one’s superior, something demonstrated to the narrator in several scenes. For Fubuki, and in Japanese working culture generally, one’s competence counts less than one’s rank. Fubuki respects those who climb up the clearly established ladder in a transparent manner, whereas Amélie tries to clandestinely sneak up the back stairs in a way that challenges the established order. This is unacceptable in Japanese power relations. While Amélie thinks in terms of efficacy and practicality, Fubuki believes that she has no right to exploit a back door, however practical and efficient the outcome may be.

Amélie adheres to the Western ideology of individualism in according a superior value to independence, self-reliance, self-fulfilment, and the idea that the individual and her needs should always triumph over societal values.[[18]](#footnote-38) Yumimoto’s Japan, perceived through the narrator’s Western eyes, judges individualism negatively as egotism and/or recklessness. At Yumimoto, the individual is of lesser importance than the organization, which counts above everything else. 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). 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).

It is due to the ideology of individualism that Amélie is relentlessly and irresistibly destructive to the social order at Yumimoto, to such an extent that she challenges societal boundaries to absurd extremes and provokes egregious reactions. Because the people around her do not share her outlook, what she experiences is a continual collapse of meaning.

**Translation vs. interpretation**

The protagonist and narrator of *SET* is a translator. Unable to actually engage in the activity she was hired to perform, Amélie turns to novel writing instead. It turns out that her stay with Yumimoto is a formative experience in her becoming a writer:

I left the Yumimoto Corporation, never to return again.

A few days later, I went back to Europe.

On 14 January 1991, I started writing a novel.

[…] in 1992, my first novel was published. (*FAT*, p. 132)

This change of vocation, from translator to author, makes us view Amélie’s behavior through a different lens. Amélie is, in fact, a *reader* of Japanese culture. She never engages in the practice of transferring the meaning encoded in one symbolic system into another, be it lexical or cultural, not because she cannot but because she assumes, from the very start, the role of interpreter, in the literary sense of the word. To interpret is to construct meaning, specifically in the light of individual belief, judgment, or circumstance. It is circumscribed by presuppositions that shape understanding. Moreover, when it comes to interpretation, one must always raise the question of the interpretive community to which 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 italics]. (p. 171)

Interpretive communities consist of readers who have internalized certain structures of understanding and respond to the texts they read through those structures. In interpretation, the individual interpreter’s stance is more prominent and important. Interpretation always involves judgments, expectations, and conclusions on the part of the interpreter. Fish (1995) teaches us that reading is not a two-stage process where we first understand things and then judge them. Interpretation always shapes meaning. “The reader’s response is not to meaning, it *is* meaning” (p. 3). Indeed, the narrator was never a translator, both inside and outside of the diegesis. Within *SET*, broadening 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 particular interpretive community that holds Western, preconceived frames of mind.

**Conclusion**

On the surface, *SET*’s main narrative satirizes the Japanese suspicion of strangers and mocks their biased, superficial, and rigid attitude. However, when we look deeper, we find that it is the narrator-protagonist’s Western habits of thought 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 both enmeshed with the dogmas of Western discourse and replete with imagery redolent of a Western masterpiece – Lewis Carroll’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,[[19]](#footnote-42) Japan ultimately seems to her to be a nonsensical 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 own cultural discourses for our sense of self and our interpretations of culture and reality.

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Other readings include that of Hélène Jaccomard (2003), who sees *SET* as recounting the birth of an author, and Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2003), who considers Amélie’s unrequited love for Fubuki as the novel’s focal point. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
4. “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-6)
5. 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-7)
6. “la raideur nippone” (*SET*, p. 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
7. “Taisez-vous. Ce pragmatisme odieux est digne d’un Occidental” (*SET*, p. 48). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
8. “Ce qui me valait à chaque fois un regard *stupéfait*” (*SET*, p. 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
9. “Nous nous regardâmes l’un l’autre avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 90). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
10. “Elle me regarda avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p.109). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
11. “J’étais toujours figée de stupeur quand me fut apportée la réponse” (*SET*, p. 91). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
12. “Je ne pus m’empêcher de relever la tête pour la regarder avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 167). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
13. “La stupéfaction passée, la première chose que je ressenti fut un soulagement étrange” (*SET*, p. 132). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
14. “Les quarante membres du bureau géant le regardèrent avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 62). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
15. “Elle marcha vers moi, avec Hiroshima *dans l’oeil droit* et Nagasaki *dans l’oeil gauche*” (*SET*, p. 125). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
16. This sentence, along with the entire passage containing it, was omitted from the English translation. It should more accurately read (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-33)
17. See Sylvester and Gascoigne (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
18. See Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
19. From the point of view of translation studies, Peter Cowley (2011) contends that the protagonist Amélie is incompetent as a translator, not because of her language skills but because of her cultural ineptitude (p. 276). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)