**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 as a satirical critique of Japanese society. I argue that, while the narrator is unable to perform the duty for which she was hired as 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 several narrative techniques which 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-3) 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, the novel is 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-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, 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. However, her idealized vision of Japan turns out to be a far cry from the 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 made a *dame pipi* (restroom attendant) in the company. The novel relates the narrator’s descent down the organizational hierarchy from low-ranking but skilled professional worl to 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). Since spending the first five years of her life there, going back to work in Japan has been the narrator’s life-long dream. The image she has 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 is the original image she has of Japan; the second is 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 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 the narrator, who goes by the same name, are evident in references to biographical information published about the author, notably the publication of the author’s first novel in Belgium in 1992.

However, 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) claims that Amélie’s being a native Japanese person is a fabrication that calls into question the events recounted.

Much attention has also been given to the veracity of the novel’s depiction of Japan (Jaccomard, 2003). 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)

In any case, it seems that the novel aims to achieve a certain authenticity by specifying dates that serve as markers of accuracy and verisimilitude or coordinates of biographical orientation. An example is the day Amélie joins Yumimoto and her last day in employment there (January 7, 1991). At one point, Amélie Nothomb, in authorial voice, 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). 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 as author does not necessarily even appear to strive to achieve plausibility. Breaks with realism and fusion of the real and the unreal are recurrent features of Nothomb’s oeuvre, due to her predilection 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. 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 succinctly 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. It introduces three key references of Western culture: a quotation from Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, an allusion to Lewis Carroll’s ‘Jabberwocky’ and one to Aristotle. All three are the frames of reference through which she interprets Japanese culture. These are preliminary indicators 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.[[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 foreground 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 literary Japan based on the model of nonsense literature.

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).[[8]](#footnote-10)

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. The premises of Yumimoto’s enterprise 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 crammed 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. 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.

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 given an exaggerated trait, with some even inflating and deflating periodically, for example, according to whether they are shouting or being shouted at. Fubuki is, on one occasion, described as “at least five feet ten, a height few Japanese men achieved […] ravishingly svelte and graceful” (*FAT*, p. 6).[[9]](#footnote-11) 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).[[10]](#footnote-12) 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). And, as Jennings (2010) remarks, a text with characters that are various 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).[[11]](#footnote-13) Likewise, the inhabitants of this strange land are astonished by her. Alice’s strangeness is directly mentioned 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 address her in negative terms, 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).[[12]](#footnote-14)

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 little short of a mad hatter’s 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). 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).[[13]](#footnote-15)

**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 Umimoto’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 employs Western names as points of comparison, based on the collective knowledge of the West: Cleopatra when alluding to Fubuki’s beautiful nose (*FAT*, p. 6); Sisyphus, for describing the ordeal of her accounting tasks (*FAT*, p. 54), and Messiah for conveying to us her perception of her superior boss (*FAT*, p. 23).

Likewise, the comparisons the narrator sometimes makes demonstrate how she invokes cultural emblems from Western literature and film in order to interpret her observations. Examples of this include: “I started looking at each new number with as much astonishment as Robinson Crusoe spying a footprint in the sand” (*FAT*, p. 51)[[14]](#footnote-16) and “He grabbed me the way King Kong did Fay Wray and dragged me out into the corridor” (*FAT*, p. 107).[[15]](#footnote-17)

The narrator also uses idiomatic expressions to clarify and encapsulate her points that stem from Western history and philosophy. Examples include: “Road to Canossa” (*FAT*, p. 178); “Casus Belli” (*FAT*, p. 127), “Memento Mori” (*FAT*, p. 108). The narrator also filters them through notions acquired from readings of 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).[[16]](#footnote-18) Another is when she evokes André Maurois to guide her in specifically professional contexts: “I remembered a line from André Maurois: ‘don’t speak too ill of yourself. People will believe you’” (*FAT*, p. 128).[[17]](#footnote-19)

In addition, references to Christianity are prominent 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 frequently, 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),[[18]](#footnote-20) “We looked at each other in amazement. My dumbfoundedness was understandable” (*FAT,* p. 63)[[19]](#footnote-21) or “She looked at me in astonishment” (*FAT,* p. 78).[[20]](#footnote-22)

*Stupeur*, then, becomes a *leitmotif* in the novel, repeatedly evoking Amélie’s suspicion of Japanese culture from the outset, 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 trumps the meaning observable in the collocation *Stupeur et Tremblements* of 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, then, in a perpetual internal conflict in the novel. However, *stupeur* characterises the narrator’s attitude to her experience overall.

The perplexed narrator displays bewilderment on other occasions. 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),[[21]](#footnote-23) in another as being taken “by surprise” (*FAT*, p. 118)[[22]](#footnote-24) and, in yet another, stating: “Once my disbelief had subsided, I felt a strange sense of relief” (*FAT*, p. 94).[[23]](#footnote-25) Sometimes the dumbfounded gaze converges, reflecting mutual disbelief.

Sometimes, the Japanese characters also experience bewilderment. For example, the narrator states at one point: “He stared at me” (*FAT*, p. 33).[[24]](#footnote-26) Another example is: “The forty members of the office watched […] in stupefied silence” (*FAT*, p. 42).[[25]](#footnote-27)

Whichever character is bewildered, the result is always a visceral reaction outwardly displayed, mostly through a befuddled gaze. The trigger is always the conduct of one which defies the comprehension by the other. Assert however much she may her desire to reintegrate into her beloved Japan, these qualifiers serve to evince a distance between whom or what 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 make many cultural comparisons between East and West that fuels their mutual unease and means they will not ultimately understand each other.

**Meaning as in the eye of the beholder**

The Western vantage point is also foregrounded 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 that complies with Japanese customs. 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 assigning 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 allusion to the eye is allusion to 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.

Sometimes, these allusions are expressed through familiar, “dead” expressions: ‘‘To Western eyes, there would have been nothing ignominious in this, to Japanese eyes, it meant losing face” (*FAT*, p. 12).[[26]](#footnote-31) Here the “Western eye” signifies an observational stance. Others, however, are within distinctly figurative expressions that are not “dead”: “She walked toward me with Hiroshima in her right eye and Nagasaki in her left” (*FAT*, p. 89).[[27]](#footnote-32) In this context the eye is used figuratively to denote 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 and degraded knowledge about Japan, and she does not possess an exalted self-image of her provenance and does not, therefore, assert the superiority of the West over the East. She does, however, express herself through Western discourse, from which she cannot escape, to her detriment. By 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 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 . The artifice of the dialogues is further evinced by the fact that, even though the 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 notes that Nothomb’s dialogues are centrally important to her works and are principally designed to “generate entertaining and intellectually impressive confrontations” (2003, 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).[[28]](#footnote-33) What follows is Amélie’s account of Mister Omochi telling Fubuki off, not for anything that actually happened, but for what could have. The whole scene is related by the narrator as a sexual assault.[[29]](#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 to 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 evinced 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 performed 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)[[30]](#footnote-35)

This is a clear instance of incompatible, culturally inculcated values 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, it is her 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 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).[[31]](#footnote-36) 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).[[32]](#footnote-37) However, this is decidedly not how the Japanese go about things, especially when the person 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’s 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.[[33]](#footnote-38) Yumimoto’s Japan, perceived through the narrator’s Western eyes, views 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).[[34]](#footnote-39) 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).[[35]](#footnote-40)

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 that, even though hired for that prurpose, 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 January 14th, 1991, I started writing a novel.

[…] in 1992, my first novel was published. (*FAT*, p. 132)[[36]](#footnote-41)

This change of vocation, from translator to author, enables a shift in the terminology with which Amélie’s comportment can be understood. Amélie in fact was a reader of Japanese culture. She is never observed transferring, 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 circumscribed by presuppositions that shape understanding. Moreover, when it comes to interpretation, one must always raise the question of which interpretive community the interpreter belongs to, 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 within 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,[[37]](#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.[[38]](#footnote-43)

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1. Amélie Nothomb, *Stupeur et Tremblements* (Paris:Paris: Albin Michel, 1999). Hereafter *SET*. For the English translation, I will be referencing Amélie Nothomb, *Fear and Trembling,* trans. by Adriana Hunter (London: Faber and Faber, London 2002). Hereafter *FAT*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
2. Hélène Jaccomard (2003) suggests other readings and sees *SET* as recounting the birth of an author, while Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2003) views the focal point as Amélie’s unrequited love for Fubuki. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
3. Author’s 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. “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-10)
9. “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-11)
10. “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-12)
11. “j’entrai dans une dimension autre de l’existence: l’univers de la dérision pure et simple” (*SET*, p. 135). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
12. “vous êtes soit une traîtresse, soit une démurée : il n’y a pas de troisième possibilité” (*SET*, p. 68). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
13. “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-15)
14. “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-16)
15. “Il m’attrapa comme King Kong s’empare de la blondinette et m’entraîna à l’extérieur” (*SET*, p. 151). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
16. “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-18)
17. “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-19)
18. “Ce qui me valait à chaque fois un regard *stupéfait*” (*SET*, p. 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
19. “Nous nous regardâmes l’un l’autre avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 90). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
20. “Elle me regarda avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p.109). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
21. “J’étais toujours figée de stupeur quand me fut apportée la réponse” (*SET*, p. 91). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
22. “Je ne pus m’empêcher de relever la tête pour la regarder avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 167). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
23. “La stupéfaction passée, la première chose que je ressenti fut un soulagement étrange” (*SET*, p. 132). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
24. “Il me regarda avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 49). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
25. “Les quarante membres du bureau géant le regardèrent avec stupéfaction” (*SET*, p. 62). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
26. “*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-31)
27. “Elle marcha vers moi, avec Hiroshima *dans l’oeil droit* et Nagasaki *dans l’oeil gauche*” (*SET*, p. 125). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
28. 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)
29. See Sylvester and Gascoigne (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
30. 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-35)
31. “Il faut que je parle à Fubuki. Sinon, j’en aurai une rage de dents” (*SET*, p. 53). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
32. “Je vidai mon cœur” (*SET*, p. 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
33. See Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
34. “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-39)
35. “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-40)
36. [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-41)
37. 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 her cultural ineptitude (p. 276). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
38. “La programmation collective de l’esprit qui distingue les membres d’un groupe ou d’une catégorie de personnes par rapport à une autre’. Greet Hofstede cited in De Jallad, *Les Interactions Culturelles*, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)