# *Mrs. Murakami's Garden*: an Intertextual 'Japanese' Fictional World by Mario Bellatín.

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**Abstract**

Mexican-Peruvian writer Mario Bellatín's novella *Mrs. Murakami's Garden* (El jardín de la señora Murakami) is constructed using a number of implicit literary and historical references from Japanese culture. Through the use of fictional explanatory footnotes, the invention of extravagant local customs, and an ambiguous final Addendum, its referential coherence is gradually undermined by the text's implicit author. As a result, the reader's cognitive schemas to contextualize the plot are dismantled. There is a prevalent motif underlying such creative intertextual practices: East-West relations or the westernization of Japan, for which Tanizaki Junichirô's novels and essays are used in this novella. In addition, names of characters and aspects of their personalities and biographies connect it with the Japanese literary modern tradition. Data from the lives and from novels by Dazai Osamu, Kawabata Yasunari, Mishima Yukio, as well as classics such as Ihara Saikaku and *Genji Monogatari* are also recycled by Bellatín to consciously create a personalized 'Japanese' fictional world that ends up opening itself to multiple interpretations, and shares connections with the Latin American debate between tradition and modernity.

**Keywords:**

Intertextuality, Metanarrative, Fictional worlds, Mario Bellatín, El jardín de la señora Murakami

*Mrs. Murakami's Garden*[1), published in 2000, is the first of a series of books and short stories written by Mario Bellatín[2) in the context of Japanese culture and society. Other

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1) Original title in Spanish: *El jardín de la señora Murakami*.

2) Mario Bellatín (México, 1960) lived in Peru and Mexico and studied cinema in Cuba. His first short novel *Salón de belleza* (1994) made him well-known in Latin America. In 2000, he was awarded with the Xavier Villaurrutia *Mexican* literary award for *Flores*. He has published to date more than 30 books. Apart from his writing, Bellatín has made experimental theater and owns a creative writing school, called The Dynamic School of Writers (Escuela Dinámica de Escritores).

titles by the same author are *Nagaoka Shiki: a Nose of Fiction*[3] (2001), *Mishima's Ilustrated Biography*[4] (2009), *Black Ball*[5] (2013), and *The Intern Notary Murasaki Shikibu*[6] (2009). They all constitute a series in the sense that they share many characters and recurring motifs in their plots. In the case of *Mrs. Murakami's Garden*, the novella is presented *in media res*, showing Mrs. Murakami watch the destruction of her garden after her husband's death. The third-person narration, which makes use of free indirect speech, repeatedly goes back in time, explaining most of her young and adult life. The text is composed by short fragments structured in three chapters, plus a metanarrative Addendum with 24 short items at the end of the book.

Izu, Mrs. Murakami's maiden name, was an art student who went to visit Mr. Murakami's art collection in order to write an article for an art magazine directed by Mizoguchi Aori[7], a member of the *Unyielding Reformists* group. The article, very critical of Mr. Murakami's knowledge about art, provokes discredit for the latter and his group of the *Radical Conservatives*. In spite of that, Mr. Murakami courts and insists on marrying Izu, as long as she renounces her family name.

The references to Japan in the novella start with the use of Japanese names for most of its characters[8]. The choice of these names is embedded in an extensive intertextual process that structures the text. To begin with, the title and the two main characters, Mr. and Mrs. Murakami, are common last names in Japan. However, in the West –for whom Bellatín's novels are mainly written, whether for a community of readers in Spanish or in English– it clearly creates a connection with Murakami Haruki, the world renowned Japanese author who, through his novels, introduced Western culture in Japanese contexts. Another subtle reference to Japanese literature is that of Kawabata Yasunari: as stated before, Mrs. Murakami's maiden name is Izu. Kawabata's short story "The Izu Dancer"[9] (1926) accounts

3) Original title in Spanish: *Nagaoka Shiki: una nariz de ficción*.

4) Original title in Spanish: *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima*.

5) Original title in Spanish: *Bola negra*.

6) Original title in Spanish: *El pasante de notario Murasaki Shikibu*.

7) In this article it is used the Japanese convention of writing in first place the last name and then the first name when mentioning Japanese names.

8) The only exception is Udo Steiner, architect and friend of Mr. Murakami's, who designs traditional Japanese houses with one room intended for suicide.

9) Original title in Japanese: 伊豆の踊子 (Izu no Odoriko).

for that name. There is also a more explicit line in the novel referring to Kawabata and his actual biographical data:

> "The restaurant was frequented by people who belonged to the artistic and intellectual world. There is a sad story about the day when it was visited by the Nobel Prize winner. At that time, he was an aged man with a small and skinny body…This happened a few days before he would open the gas tap to kill himself." [10)]
>
> (Bellatín, 2000: 149-150)

Another intertextual coincidence in Bellatín's novella in relation with Kawabata's is the reference to *go*, the game of which Mrs. Murakami and her mother are very fond. This probably refers to Kawabata's novel *The Master of Go*[11)], first published in 1954. Finally, and more related to the plot, Kawabata's metaphor of women as objects made of ceramic, as passive stimulus that provoke sensations in the male characters, parallels Bellatín's novel in the portrayal of Mr. Murakami as an art dealer that marries Izu, receiving her as a wife without a family name[12)], *tabula rasa*, as if she were another object that he could collect.

There are other coincidences among Bellatín's characters names and Japanese authors and their own characters: for example, Shikibu, Mr. Murakami's old maid, relates to *The Tale of Genji*[13)], by Murasaki Shikibu. Occasionally, intertextual references are less obvious: Izu's art professor at the time of her being a university student is Matsuei Kenzo, who has a sexual relationship with another male character and is presented in the narration in this fashion: "he had a heavy-set body as if in his free time he would hanged around the *shojibos*[14)] in the neighborhood or he would exercise with gym equipment." [15)] (Bellatín, 2000: 140) The description brings to mind obvious associations with Mishima Yukio. In addition, another one of Bellatín's books is *Mishima's Ilustrated Biography*, which includes photographs from Bellatín's everyday life.

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10）My translation from Spanish.

11）Original title in Japanese: 名人 (Meijin). This novel by Kawabata is based on an actual *go* game that took place in 1938.

12）In the story, Bellatín's narrator invents a so-called "Formotón Asaí" clause to develop this idea.

13）Original title in Japanese: 源氏物語 (Genji Monogatari). There are also characters with this name, Shikibu, in Bellatín's short novels *Black Ball* (2013) and in *The Intern Notary Murasaki Shikibu* (2009).

14）An invented word by Bellatín's narrator. In the context, it seems to apply to sport club or gym.

15）My translation from Spanish.

In *Mrs. Murakami's Garden*, Dazai Ozamu (sic)[16] is mentioned twice: the first time, when Tutzío, Izu's second suitor explains to her that Dazai is the only genuine writer of the century. This statement makes Izu buy his novels, although she thinks of them as sad stories. Later on, with Izu supporting the academic group of the Unyielding Reformists, she confesses not being fond of Dazai's example of extreme modern culture. These opinions from Bellatín's characters become metatextual comments that start confronting different ideologies in the same story. This is clearly portrayed through the polarization of the two opposing sides in the academic and artistic world of the story, already mentioned above: the Radical Conservatives vs. Unyielding Reformists. That opposition represents a constant motif in the story; and Izu's indecision about her belonging to one or the other group is also a metaphor for the porous relationship between tradition and modernity in Japan. In the text, this confrontation is presented in the following words:

> "The Radical Conservatives had held power since the foundation of the college, and in their theoretical approaches, they aimed at protecting an atavistic past, allowing neither the inclusion of foreign ideas nor more present methods to take care of the country's artistic heritage." [17]
>
> (Bellatín, 2000: 141)

Characters seem to keep clear positions about this dual situation, but there are some changes: Izu, in spite of belonging to the Unyielding Reformists, betrays them by informing the university's electoral council of the group's illegalities. And after marrying Mr. Murakami, she asks him to let her have a traditional Japanese garden in the house. On the other hand, Mr. Murakami apparently changes his esthetical tastes: after Izu's article, he sells his art collection and realigns his life style towards Western standards, starting with the construction of a modern-style house. On other occasions, there are examples of an eclectic mixture of both currents. This idea can be reinforced in the description of the magazine offices, which is the Unyielding Reformists group's headquarters: "From the walls hanged reproductions of traditional paintings and modern art." [18] (Bellatín, 2000: 145) The critic Rebecca Tsurumi also mentions the literary use of clothes to stress the cultural duality in the story:

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16) Osamu is mistakenly written with a "z" instead of an "s".

17) My translation from Spanish.

18) My translation from Spanish.

> "Bellatin adds other visual and tactile elements such as the colors, fabrics, and fashions worn by his characters to provide keen insight into the attitudes about the competing forces of tradition and modernity."
>
> (Tsurumi, 2012: 140)

In another reference to Japanese literature, Bellatín makes use of Mori Ôgai's biographical data. Mori lived in Germany and had a love affair there. Similarly, Bellatín's Mr. Murakami also lived in Germany in his youth and had to leave the country for love matters. Most of the references to Japanese canonical literature presented to the moment in relation with *Mrs. Murakami's garden* are related to authors who somehow represent a hybrid or sophisticated amalgam of both cultures, as literary critic Kato Shuichi (1997: 260) presents Mori Ogai's works. However, the most important intertextual work in Bellatín's novella is connected with Tanizaki Junichirô's fictional and non-fictional work. For example, there are five explicit occasions when he is mentioned in *Mrs. Murakami's garden*, using *In Praise of Shadows*[19] (1933) to raise the question of traditional Japan versus the modern West. In the first instance, the narrator quotes Tanizaki's thought that electric energy would destroy the authenticity of the Japanese houses (Bellatín, 2000: 160). In the second, Izu thinks about Tanizaki's ideas about uncovered electric bulbs (Bellatín, 2000: 166). The third one explains that Tanizaki's book becomes key for Izu's change from an Unyielding Reformist supporter to a Radical Conservative one: "That treatise became, for a long time, Izu's bedside book. In fact, it was the only one that her husband allowed her to take from her art studio library after the wedding." [20] (Bellatín, 2000: 168) Thus, *In Praise of Shadows* seems to be the changing agent for her towards tradition. When Izu's relationship with her husband worsens, she stops reading Tanizaki's books (Bellatín, 2000: 168). Mrs. Murakami is, in a sense, a metaphor for Japan's alternating attraction towards or distancing from Westernization. There is a final allusion to *In Praise of Shadows*, in the Addendum, where the narrator confesses that it is difficult to understand clearly the real nature of Izu's interest in Tanizaki's book (Bellatín, 2000: 184).

Tanizaki's novels and their plots seemed to have inspired Bellatín for his. For example, Mr. Murakami's use of naked photos of Izu to blackmail into marry him is similar

19）Original title in Japanese: 陰影礼賛 (Inei Raisan).

20）My translation from Spanish.

with *Quicksand*[21] (1930) and *The Makioka Sisters*[22] (1948). In Tanizaki's novels, the blackmailer receives money; in the case of Mr. Murakami, he marries –collects– Izu. In addition, in the mentioned two novels by Tanizaki there is a social scandal with repercussion in the media. In *Mrs. Murakami's Garden*, we find a sordid affair about Mr. Murakami being involved in an illegal sale of school girls' used underwear. He finally escapes legal issues thanks to his political influences, which can be understood as a universal criticism of corruption, reflecting Bellatín's own perception of Latin American. As the author expresses himself:

> "In my texts, many times there is not a recognizable reality, but I am there. So is Latin America, because through my writings you can see my experiences and, thus, the hybrid person that I am. I can't write in a different way."[23]
>
> (Plaza, 2007: 113)

In a different interview, Bellatín explains that for Izu's characterization he thought of the subaltern status of women in Latin America (Tsurumi, 2012: 230). López-Calvo reflects upon the universality of Bellatín's Japanese stories and concludes that they deal with the orientalization of Japan, but also with the orientalization that Europeans and North Americans made of Latin America:

> "But even if Bellatín symbolically tries to place his novel within a tradition of Japanese writing, the place of enunciation of his novel is still Latin America, a factor that contributes to raising questions about possible Orientalist dynamics in its depiction of an Eastern culture with which he has limited familiarity and that he perhaps considers culturally inaccessible."
>
> (López-Calvo, 2013: 344)

A final intertextual reference to Tanizaki's work is made through a character called Etsuko, with whom Mr. Murakami allegedly keeps an extramarital relationship. Already at the beginning of the novella a dying Mr. Murakami "spent his last days in a constant delirium tremens during which he asked out loud to see again Etsuko, Izu's former maid, and her

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21) Original title in Japanese: 卍 (Manji).

22) Original title in Japanese: 細雪 (Sasameyuki).

23) My translation from Spanish.

breasts." [24] (Bellatín, 2000: 135) This relates to Tanizaki's *Diary of a Mad Old Man* [25] (1961), when also a supposedly dying old man requires her daughter-in-law Satsuko for sexual favors (Tanizaki, 1961: 924): "Satsu, Satsu, my dear, I called her whimpering like a child. Tears flowed from my eyes, my nose was wet with mucus, and spittle dropped from my mouth." [26] (Tanizaki, 1961: 924) Tanizaki's motif of an old man's sexual life plus the hierarchical relationships within a Japanese family become, through the Bellatinian's magnifying lens, a matter of class and economic relations between master and maid. In the first encounter between both characters, "Mr. Murakami behaved more friendly than usual. He would confess later that he had found many physical similarities between her and his late wife" [27] (Bellatín, 2000: 138), similar to Genji's attitude towards Murasaki the girl; and Jouji's towards Naomi in Tanizaki's *Naomi* [28] (1924), as updated versions of the myth of Pygmalion [29].

We need to be aware that despite all the references to Japanese names, toponyms and literary sources, the story doesn't take place in Japan. In chapter 2 it can be read:

> "At that time, Mr. Murakami still kept relations with Japan. More than once, the old maid told him about her remembrances of the past time. In those years, some family members used to travel to those islands. But Shikibu hadn't heard about them since the news about the bomb that had completely destroyed the country." [30]
>
> (Bellatín, 2000: 156)

The reader's cognitive schemas of a story contextualized in Japan, activated from a series of *headers* –all the elements related to Japanese culture, including characters' names, literary intertextual references, literary style, etc.–, as we have seen to the moment, are dismantled. Therefore, the reader perceives that the story happens in Japan but doesn't happen in

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24）My translation from Spanish.

25）Original title in Japanese: 瘋癲老人日記 (Fûten Rôjin Nikki).

26）My translation from the Japanese: "「颯チャン、颯チャン、颯チャンタラヨウ！」そういうッティルウチにウチニ子ハワアワアト泣き出した。眼カラハダラシナク涙が流し出シ，鼻カラハ水ッばなガ，ロカラハ涎ガダラダラと流シタ".

27）My translation from Spanish.

28）Original title in Japanese: 痴人の愛 (Chijin no Ai).

29）These intertextual relations among Tanizaki, *Genji Monogatari* and the myth of Pygmalion are discussed in more detail in Arrieta Domínguez (2012)

30）My translation from Spanish.

Japan. For post-structuralists such as Kristeva and Barthes, intertextuality means a similar thing: starting from the concepts of the subject's phenotext[31)] and genotext[32)]. Bellatin's elaboration of *Mrs. Murakami's Garden* starts from previous condensed texts that are replaced, becoming something that is and is not at the same time. However, for Genette (1982), it simply is a reorganization of textual elements in a new structure with a new system of themes, motifs, values, and quotations that follow a new set of narrative rules, based on Doležel's (1997: 69-94) idea of possible fictional worlds. From this perspective, Bellatín's possible fictional world in *Mrs. Murakami's Garden* shows some coincidences with the actual Japan, but keeps its own rules. For López-Calvo, in his study about *the death of the author* in Bellatín's Japanese writings, such *Japanese* context works towards the detachment of the author himself:

> "I believe that Bellatin's deliberate use of Japanese characters to distance himself, as an author, from his texts may also imply that he sees Japanese culture as one most extraneous to his own. In a way, perhaps these characters embody the author's Other."
>
> (López-Calvo, 2013: 341)

In any case, it seems clear that the narrator induces in the reader the already commented idea that the world depicted in the story is and is not Japan. There are many other hints that lead the reader to question the real *Japaneseness* of the writing. We have, for example a number of invented outlandish customs, such as: having the tea while observing an accelerated process of a growing cherry tree (Bellatín, 2000: 182); putting into the fiancée's pocket bamboo canes during a festival celebration (Bellatín, 2000: 175); offering one's own navel to your fiancée as a wedding engagement (Bellatín, 2000: 148); a caterpillar hunt (Bellatín, 2000: 161); the apartment with a room designed for committing suicide (Bellatín, 2000: 167); in a funeral, the distribution to family and friends of the deceased person's bones (Bellatín, 2000: 147).

There are also plenty of fabricated and distorted footnotes relating to Japanese society and

31) Part of the text related to the linguistic structures of language, including the symbolic and the rational, giving a sensation of unity to the voice expressing a message.

32) Energy emerging from the unconsciousness, from the bodily impulses and rhythms, recognizable in narrative structures, and in mechanisms related with the phonemes.

culture. For example: a kimono is defined as a traditional dress designed and made mainly by women (Bellatín, 2000: 136); the Obi is a belt whose size is taken from the sculptures of the Shinto goddesses (Bellatín, 2000: 136); a *saikokú* [33] is a maid, lady-in-waiting, housekeeper (Bellatín, 2000: 138); there is a confusion about Japanese history timeline when mentioning together the Meiji (1868-1912) and the Kamakura (1185-1333) eras; an invented monk and prophet called Magetsu is said to have died many times (Bellatín, 2000: 142); and words such as *sudares*, *tutsomoro* o *jiru-matsubae* (Bellatín, 2000: 156) are also invented by the narrator and used in the context of Japanese meals.

The use of footnotes in the text is considered by Genette (1987: 11) as paratextual peritext, due to the fact that they are elements located inside and outside the text at the same time, and guide the reader towards a specific reception and interpretation of the text. At the beginning, the existence of footnotes gives the book the appearance of an academic and referential document. However, the amount of incoherent or inaccurate content in the footnotes forces the reader to create new cognitive schemes that structure and explain the fictional world in the book. If we also consider the previous information about the story not happening in Japan, it can be stated that the semiotic channels (Doležel, 1997: 83) connecting Bellatín's narrative to the real world are alternatively opened and closed. Bellatín himself explains his own intentions in an interview:

> "I don't want people to believe that is true or false. Not even in the other book, Mrs. Murakami's Garden, am I interested in their believing it is Japan. Well, yeah, that they believe and then realize that is not because the text itself has the elements that deconstruct that and tell you, 'Hey, don't be stupid. This is not Japan. All these footnotes are made up'."
>
> (Hind, 2007: 198)

Riffaterre (1983) rejects the mimetic referentiality of texts. Instead, he advocates semiotic consistency: once the Japanese context is not valid anymore to explain the story, the reader must understand the apparent ambiguity of the text in terms of inversion, conversion or

33) Invented word by Bellatín. In Japanese the only word which is phonetically similar, 催告 , means "notification". It is possible that Bellatín adapted it from a Japanese writer's name, Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693, the writer of the *Floating World*). Another word phonetically close in Japanese is 鎖国 (sakoku), meaning reclusion –literally "country in chains"–, which refers to the period in Japanese history when the country closed to the outside world from 1639 to 1854.

juxtaposition of the Japanese normative discourse, which is formed by historical, cultural, or literary references. This approach would allow understanding the intertextual transformation in a text with a semiotic coherency and which applies to Bellatín's idea of creating a self-sustainable literary universe: "My intention was not to create a book, but to invent a whole literary tradition. Not only wanted I to achieve the feat of inventing it, but also to insert myself inside that tradition." [34] (Tsurumi, 2012: 228) In this sense, Cote Botero (2014: 93-95) compares Bellatín's whole literary work with the tradition of serialized novels from the 19th century, similar to Balzac's *The Human Comedy*.

The story is explained as the translation of found documents; however, it is a problematic and erroneous one, starting from the title, which is wrongly translated from a supposedly original *Oto no-Murakami monogatari* [35], as it is written under the title in Spanish. In addition, the use in Spanish of "señor" y "señora", which is Mr. and Mrs., makes the narrative unnatural, and the reader is aware of the fact that it derives from a literal translation, in this case from the Japanese *san*. Something similar happens with "maestra Takagashi", which in English would be an unnatural "Teacher Takagashi", which obviously comes from the Japanese expression Takagashi *sensei*.

The final surprise for the reader is the Addendum, included at the end of the narrative. It contains 24 items, explaining metatextually the construction of the plot. In some, the narrator wonders how the story would have been had he put more emphasis on one character or the other. In the same way, Doležel (1997: 80) explains the unlimited possibilities of fictional worlds. Information about ellipsis in the plot and unnecessary data are provided, as if reflecting about the literary versus the real world, where the nuances of everyday life never become subject of a book. The Addendum also comments the opposition tradition/modernity when it is stated that "they had thought about decorating the magazine's office with plastic-made flowers, although following the traditional artisan techniques of the 3rd century," [36] (Bellatín, 2000: 185) to end up talking about Venetia's Bienal Art Exhibition.

34) My translation from Spanish.

35) "Husband" is 夫 (otto) in Japanese. Even if we overlook that orthographic detail, the literal translation would be "The story of husband Murakami". However, the title is translated as "Mrs. Murakami's garden".

36) My translation from Spanish.

The item number 20 in the Addendum gives information about the emperor making Teacher Takagashi from the Radical Conservatives the national adviser for arts, alluding to the success of that faction and the defeat of the Reformists. This can be extrapolated to the Peruvian academic world of the 60's, so reticent to theoretical and aesthetical changes. Or possibly even to the literary world of the 90's, when Bellatín started to write experimental literature:

> "When I started to write more personal things, doing my own writing and not repeating old schemas, I saw the reaction: Great! How experimental! How Kafkaesque! How *nouveau roman*! At the beginning I thought that it was a compliment, but no, they were saying exactly the opposite. It was a hidden insult, and what they meant was that my literature wasn't going to be taken seriously, and I was not going to be part of Canon because the parameters were different." [37)]
>
> (Plaza, 2007: 112)

The last item in the Addendum, number 24, suggests a conclusion for the story revealing that Mrs. Murakami's house and garden are eventually converted into a public park. It also clarifies Mr. Murakami's motivations: "The beauty of the place is based on a husband's revenge against his wife" [38)], what entices the reader to reinterpret the whole story from the new information in the Addendum.

## Conclusion

In Mario Bellatin's *El jardín de la señora Murakami* (2000), the reader is initially guided through a fictional Japanese cultural world to later experience an estrangement towards the presented context. This is achieved through the following mechanisms:

1. Intertextual practices with direct or veiled allusions to Japanese writers and classics. In the case of Tanizaki's *Quicksand*, *The Makioka Sisters*, *Diary of a Mad Old Man* and *Naomi*, the intertextual relationship becomes hypertextual: their plots are used and re-elaborated through transformations, always resulting in a development of the binary opposition East-West.

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37) My translation from Spanish.

38) My translation from Spanish.

2. The enumeration of outlandish and exotic customs invented by Bellatín, as well as the footnotes with distorted explanations of Japanese culture and society, entices the reader to suspend the consolidation of cognitive schemas that contextualized the story in real Japan. A state of uncertainty about *Mrs. Murakami's Garden's* fictional possible world is induced at the same time that the plot develops a self-contained story.

3. The final Addendum is to be considered a metanarrative and ironic epilogue which intends to provide some keys to interpret *Mrs. Murakami's Garden's* composition, forming itself part of the novel. It also develops sub-plots, covers some ellipsis, and elaborates about the different possible denouements of the story. In addition, the Addendum confirms the reader's suspicion about the artificiality of the *orientalized* Japanese references in the book.

The lack of referentiality and the parodic enterprise with those invented customs turn the story into a universal fable which is eventually identified with the Latin America to which Bellatín belongs, and which focuses on the idea of tradition vs. modernity as conflicting forces but with blurred and permeable boundaries.

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