CHAPTER V

Politics of Translation

Writing does not happen in a vacuum, it happens in a context and the process of translating texts from one cultural system into another is not a neutral, innocent, transparent activity. Translation is instead a highly charged, transgressive activity, and the politics of translation and translating deserve much greater attention than has been paid in the past.

Susan Bassnett

Translation is not an innocent activity of transferring a text from one language code to another. This is a process that involves more than mere transfer of meaning and a lot of theoretical debate has been going on regarding the position of the translation studies. Translation touches upon political and cultural dimensions that concern not only the translations of languages but of cultural contexts between different countries, cultures, and political systems. Since the question of translation has become a politically and culturally crucial question, one can argue that translation can be regarded as a central metaphor for some of the most pressing tasks confronting us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Translation points at how different languages, different cultures, different political contexts, can be put together in such a way as to provide for mutual intelligibility but without having at the same time to sacrifice difference in the interest of a blind assimilation. Translation, in this sense, is about the creation of new cultural and political maps, the establishment of shared territories and the development of an area which is borderless and can encompass writings from any part of the world. It is about the right to be different, where homogenization would mean an offence,
and the right to be equal, where the dwelling upon difference would be synonymous with oppression or with the prevalence of power politics.

In the post-colonial context translation again assumes a new dimension. According to Tejaswini Niranjana this context of translation creates the space for a lot of debate:

...the problematic of translation becomes a significant site for raising questions of representation, power, and historicity. The context is one of contesting and contested stories attempting to account for, to recount, the asymmetry and inequality of relations between peoples, races and languages.

(Niranjana, 1992: 1, emphasis as in the original)

Her argument on the construction of the colonial ‘subject’ has translation as a mode that takes shape through the practice of power and knowledge. This practice has positioned translation in a place where a lot of factors like culture, identity, location, gender and political situation can influence translation.

In this study of translation politics based on the primary work of translating short fiction by Assamese women writers into English the theoretical issues have influenced the process and has enriched the work which is meant to cater to a reading public which is unaware of the situation of the production of the source language text.

English as the linguistic register of post-colonialism makes the English language translations as the points of determining the visibility of the writer from multilingual ex-colonies like India to the West as well as the readers within the country. It is at this crucial juncture that post-colonial translation as a radical practice comes into being and helps in creating the desired political statement
which has become quite urgent for the languages like Assamese. The indigenous writing practice existing in this region has a great story to tell about its people and places. With the focus on women writing in the Assamese language a long historical and political perspective can be created.

Meenakshi Mukherjee ((2000) in her discussions on translation observes that translations has always been a vital part of Indian literary culture even when the word ‘translation’ or any of its Indian language equivalents - anuvad, tarjuma, bhasantar or vivartanam -were not in use. The important point to note is that such anuvad, tarjuma or bhasantar almost never drew attention to its own status creating a notion of seamless narratives that are a part of an entire body of writing from a culture. However, what was evidently a plus point in the indigenous tradition can take on an entirely different political implication when translations occur in the powered relation that exist between any Indian language English in a colonial and post-colonial context. The current translation theory which has seen an inclusion of the feminist debates influencing the translation activity has guided the way of translation practice.

Mukherjee also informs that a tradition of translation from one Indian language into another existed long since and without the mediation of English the writing within the country could circulate. But for a greater cultural exchange English becomes the necessary tool to communicate, though at times the debate can be raised that it is surrender to the language of the coloniser. The translation politics that has been a part of this study is to bring visibility to the female subject. This visibility needs the help of a language that has a wide range of readers.
The visibility question brings the process of publication in discussion and in India, Sahitya Akademy is playing a vital role in translating the representative or best works of regional literatures in India into English. This attempt is not sufficient as the selection of the best work of a literature are mostly gender specific and there is no selection based on particular issues like the power of translation in bringing out debates on gender, identity, cultural identity etc. towards the late eighties the publishing company Kali For Women (1984) took up the task of dealing exclusively with women's writing and great numbers of writing by women got published creating a revolution in feminist/women’s studies in India. This effort helped the feminist scholars who have used translation as a means of new discovery of forgotten and neglected women writers from regional literatures and has led to enquiries into women’s contribution in history, politics and literature. However, in spite of the mass of translation activities that are going on a lot of the goals of translation is yet to be achieved as compared to the western translation discourse. The theoretical support for the actual work of translation and the emergence of a theory and methodology of translation is yet to develop fully. The academic discourse has to take up translation projects with publishing houses so that using contemporary translation theory the practice can be turned into a radical cultural-political one.

The western critical discourse on translation is in general agreement over the fact that translation studies has been given new dimension by the feminist translators and they have the aim to make their voice heard through translation. The position of the translator is always flaunted to make their voice heard in the public sphere. In the context of the Assamese short stories chosen for translation,
the politics involves a different parameter. The short stories by the women writers chosen for translation are not the mainstream writings in Assamese language itself. These stories are mostly published in the periodicals and special issues brought out by the newspapers. The voices of these women do not form a part of the central discourse and there is a lack of effort to anthologise them according to their specificity.

The stories that are published in the periodicals and the special issues do not attract the desired attention from their readers. Sometimes they go into oblivion along with the old issues of the periodicals. So the need to put these stories into a place of access is always there. At the same time the stories taken for my translation were published in monthly magazines like “Prantik” and “Goriyoshi” which has a readership that do not include the majority of the readers, specially the women who are represented in these stories. They fail to reach the target audience as these magazines are mostly read by a learned readership and do not include the readers who confine themselves to the reading of popular women’s magazines only. The ‘Asam Lekhika Sanstha’- the Assamese women writers’ collective has taken up the task seriously and has published two volumes of collections of short stories written by women. The stories used in my translation process do not figure in this list as well. These are the stories that have been anthologised in the individual story collections of the particular authors and one story is collected in a general collection of short stories by different writers from Assam, not specifically women.

Here the translator’s position becomes visible as the choice is made by the translator and the way they are translated depends on the translator again. This
fact does not lead to any distortion of the texts or facts. Instead, these translations, which are done with the aim of carrying them to a larger reading public, can serve the purpose of selecting stories on the basis of certain issues to be projected as the components of translation.

In one of the commentaries published in a monthly magazine, the short story writer Manorama Das Medhi, the writer of two of the stories used for my translations, expresses her concern over the problem of finding a place in the established monthly magazines. She reiterates:

Whether the present situation is due to the reluctance of the new generation to write short stories or the established magazines are not giving any chance to the upcoming writers, I am not sure. I also had to wait for a long time to find a place in the pages of a magazine, from 1968 to 1991.

(Katha Guwahati, 2005, Vol. 11: 32; translation mine)

This proclamation by one of the finest writers of the Assamese short story clearly brings the real picture to view. This lack of representation haunts the Assamese women writers in their source language and their voice reaches even fewer numbers of people as the reading public do not seem to pay attention to these writings.

In the theoretical discourse the writings by women have not yet created a place of repute. This bias has been felt by the women writers and in the preface to the collection of short stories by women writers, editor Daisy Kalita reflects on the situation and quotes the reference of an article written by Trailokya Goswami in 1984 on the development of Assamese short story, where the discussion on women writers is given just the space of a sentence, not even a paragraph. The
situation has changed in the twenty first century, yet the news of Phul Goswami receiving Katha Award for her story *Sahajatri*, did not find place in the magazine where it was first published. The situation is still grim in the production and reception of the short stories by Assamese women writers. In that situation, the selection of the stories from Assamese for translation has a lot of political implications. The stories represent particular historical moments, the situations created in the aftermath of the political situation of Assam and the cultural identity that they represent, which is ready to be transferred to another background with the help of the English language.

The next aspect that is obviously critical for translator, publisher, and commentator is the audience for whom it is written. Quite apart from the matter of linguistic usage, the audience will also determine the cultural location of the translation. What aspects of the text are stressed in translation, what is explained, how much is added: all this will depend on the translator's assumptions about the reader's knowledge of the source culture. Given the role of translation in India today, it might be appropriate for the postcolonial translator to address Indian audiences exclusively, in a move to claim both source text and target text, and the translation as well as the target language, as Indian; to centre the translation, culturally and geographically, in India. When the concern is for the Western readers, the work becomes a carrying forward a text from a distant culture into the target culture, often ignoring the political implications of the act. But the same translation that does not prevent it from gaining popularity in India. Two aspects of the translator's identity are relevant here. As has often been pointed out, a familiarity with, sympathy for, the source language is essential and the knowledge
of the culture and historical perspective adds to conceptual power of the translation.

In the process of my translation the issues of gender determining the text to be translated, the question of identity and the power of translation in forming that identity has been given an upper hand. The cultural components that the translation process stresses on again form a part of the activity. These aspects of influence regarding the translation into a language that can exert its power over the process, is invariably a political act. The attempt here is to voice the concerns of a time that has not found much coinage in the Indian as well as worldwide discourse. So the translations are done in such a way that the cultural meaning, the language specific aspects are not lost in the process of producing a homogenised translation. Rather the translation is done in a way as they come in the source language. For example the Assamese language uses short sentences and when they are translated the way they are, they appear as fragments in English. If we then try to bring the sentence to the standard English form, the essence seems to be lost. As the purpose of this translation activity as a political one requires to keep the structures, so that the reader reading the translation in English can make out that it is a translation.

This argument may look trivial but its effect is quite wide ranging. The post-colonial subject needs to make an assertion, at least through the language, to resist the temptation to be translated into English in such a way that the sense is lost forever. A few examples of the sentences taken randomly from the story Saga Of Love (Prem Gatha) by Monorama Das Medhi exhibits that problem:

First of all worldly love. Then the feeling of heavenly love.
Dried *Birina* grass broom.

A distorted enamel tub.

These sentences can be re-written in the correct form of English and a smooth translation can be achieved. The jarring pauses these kinds of sentences offer reminds a reader of reading a translation. And words like ‘Birina’ which is a small grassy plant has not been explained in the footnotes after the story. Only the word grass is added to it to specify. At several places the culture and language specific words are retained. Retaining words and expressions of the source language that have certain cultural specificities and providing a glossary is indispensable for 'foreignizing' a text and serve as a strategy that resists the temptations of fluency and transparency.

These problems encountered while translating the Assamese texts, the linguistic peculiarities, frequent presence of a present or a present continuous tense in narrative, is retained in the translation as it forms a part of the greater politics of translation. However, I have tried not tried to smoothen the rough edges altogether so that the reader of these short stories is able to experience that s/he is encountering a translated work. Specially while translating the texts by a woman writer, this retention of the sentence structure becomes necessary. The sentences sound perfect in the original and they are a part of the thought process of the female writer. So in this regard the linguistic, syntactical and cultural specificities are carefully preserved.

Tejaswini Niranjana recognizes that ‘translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism’ (1992: 173). The assertion is also on the translation that reinforces
control of the colonized. In initiating a practice of translation that is speculative, provisional, and interventionist, Niranjana, like Lawrence Venuti, who has offered criticism on translation, seeks to disrupt the Anglo-American tradition of domesticating translation. In *Siting Translations* she provides an illustration of her technique by offering one of her own translations of a *vacana*, a fragment of a spiritual text from twelfth-century South India, by comparing it to two previous renderings. Niranjana’s approach to translation is interesting because it is a postcolonial approach: she wants to overwrite the tradition of imperial British translation with postcolonial translations (as in her example: the two earlier translations, though done by Indians, are presumably in the colonial mode). His burden of colonial past should not be a part of a translation that has been targeted to cater to a reading public that has no previous experience of the political, historical or cultural milieu the particular translated text exhibits.

The translation process in the Indian context is a newly emerging filed when we look at the commercial side of it. Today in India, the translation of regional-language works into English is a booming business. Several publishers have inaugurated translation series in the past few years. One reason for this phenomenon is no doubt these publishers’ realization that a market exists for these translations: an increasing number of people in India read fiction in English today, and their desire to read fiction about India is growing; the new-found interest of Indian publishers in translated works is an economic interest. But on the part of Indian readers, there might be a deeper motivation as well. If they are turning to Indian books in English translation, it is a reaction to years, decades, centuries of reading about Britain and the West. It is a meaningful assertion of nationhood, a
post-independence nationalism that seeks to shake the status of the West as the prime source of knowledge through literature. Translation is now more than an economic activity: it is national awareness; it is the creation of a national literature. Through this process of translation the English-knowing readers in India, and abroad, is now capable of coming into contact with literature that is been produced in different parts of India to form a better understanding of the Indian context.

The Assamese texts written by women in the post eighties era has been chosen to establish a similar politics. More than the linguistic or cultural specificities of the language, the location specific and time specific agendas that had influenced the production of the stories formed the essential mark for their selection. The projection that has been aimed at is the questions of identity and gender that suffer as well as enrich itself in the process of translation. This kind of an activity is now going on world over, where translation has become a mode of putting across arguments. Homel and Simon (1988) in their discussion on the art and politics of translation makes a case of the Canadian translators who have understood their role as “being much more than purely literary” (1988:83). These translations have been considered as important components of ‘cultural mediation’. In the similar way the project of translating the Assamese short stories that reflect the turbulent eighties and nineties has been taken as a political statement where the women centered focus gives a dimension to the work.