CHAPTER I

Gender, Culture, Identity and Translation: Theoretical Issues

Literary translation as a form goes beyond the transfer of linguistic information, and it involves imaginative originality as much in the translation as in the source text. Translation has to deal with general issues of literalness, faithfulness, and originality and it becomes a metaphor of aesthetic transformation and re-creation. Jeremy Munday defines translation studies as:

the academic discipline related to the study of the theory and phenomena of translation. By its nature it is multilingual and also interdisciplinary, encompassing any language combinations, various branches of linguistics, comparative literature, communication studies, philosophy and a range of types of cultural studies including post-colonialism and postmodernism as well as sociology and historiography.

(Munday, 2001: 1).

This multidisciplinary nature of translation creates the scope for a discussion that can include diverse ideas and areas. In relation to the study carried out for the purpose of translating short fiction from Assamese into English, the areas highlighted here are related to the issues of gender, culture and identity. These key concepts are discussed in relation to the process of translation of the short stories written by Assamese women writers during a time when the political and social situation provided ample scope to reconsider the basic tenets related to these areas.

The debate on gender involves a lot of theoretical constructs with which we have to include the post-colonial aspects of theory for our argument. The study
of women’s writing and their language is an area gaining immense interest in the
critical field. An interesting study on women's language is done by Barbara
Godard and it unequivocally refers to the relationship between feminist theories
on language and translation. On the one hand, for Godard, feminist discourse is a
type of translation or transformation of the traditional, subdued discourse and it
also involves the displacement of the dominant male discourse. Godard believes,
by and large, that a new language is required to express the modern woman's
needs. On the other hand, translation could be a tool at the service of feminism,
since both women and translators have undertaken a similar struggle. They rebel
against a system that places them on a secondary level, considering them
sometimes as servants. (Godard 1980). Godard’s views are applicable to the
context of translating the stories from Assamese as the stories are representatives
of a less represented nexus of author, text and milieu. The task of the translators is
to work upon the original to “decenter” it. Godard recommends feminist
translators not to pursue equivalence but to encourage difference in their target-
language. It is always not necessary to differ from the original if the source text is
in itself a clear statement of feminist interests. The friction and likeness goes
together in the matter of translation. The act of translation offers the translator a
way to stimulate a different work in a different language and culture. The women
translators take gender as a new alliance around which a writing relationship is
created.

The emergence of the notion of ‘third world women’ has disturbed the
formation of the concept of a ‘homogenised other’ in the Western critical
discourse. The representation of these women as weak, poor and ignorant is
contrasted with the conception of Western women as entities having control over their choices. The act of translation of the texts by women belonging to the third world set up has been used here to create a space of visibility for these writings.

After gender, the issue in discussion involves the cultural turn in translation. Culture itself is a loaded term including diverse areas and concepts and translation activity is related to the matter of language in the first and foremost before engaging itself in the debates of cultural politics. The problem that arises in the process of translation is that one language cannot express the meanings of another; instead, there is a distinction between the meanings built in and the meanings that must be captured and communicated. In this sense, different languages prepare their speakers to think differently, i.e., direct their attention to different aspects of the environment. Translation is therefore not simply a matter of seeking other words with similar meaning but of finding appropriate ways of saying things in another language. Different languages, then, may use different linguistic forms. But these forms are only one of the aspects of the difference between the two language systems. Cultural meanings are intricately ingrained into the language. The creative writer's ability to capture and project them is of primary importance for, and should be reflected in, the translated work. Caught between the need to capture the local colour and the need to be understood by an audience outside the original cultural and linguistic situation, a translator must be aware of both cultures. One of the main goals of literary translation is to initiate the target-language reader into the sensibilities of the source-language culture.

Cultural transfer is a complex phenomenon. It requires a multi-layered approach with the author's relationship to his/her subject matter and with the
author's relationship to his/her reader. These should be reflected in a good translation. The translator must pass on this special cultural quality from one language to another. Most translations are intended to serve as a substitute for the original, making it available to people who cannot read the language in which it was written. This imposes a heavy responsibility on the translator. Awareness of history is an essential requirement for the translator of a work coming from an alien culture. Thorough knowledge of a foreign language, its vocabulary, and grammar is not sufficient to make one competent as a translator. One should be familiar with one's own culture and be aware of the source-language culture before attempting to build any bridge between them.

When the reality of the subject matter being represented is not familiar to the audience, the translation stumbles and becomes difficult to read. The translator would have to consider whether similar or parallel language resources exist in the literary subculture of the target language. In translations of a culture rich in literature, the question of relevance to the projected audience is more significant to the translator than to the original author. A translator has to look for equivalents in terms of relevance in the target language and exercise discretion by substituting rather than translating certain elements in a work. Even with all the apparent cultural hurdles, a translator can create equivalence by the judicious use of resources.

Translation is an intellectual activity that will continue to thrive, deriving inspiration from fiction in the source language and passing on such inspiration, or at least appreciation, to target-language readers. As Goethe observes, there are two principles of translation-- the translator can bring the work of a foreign author as a
true picture or can use the original material to create a work of his/her own choice according to the target language audience’s specifications. The risk in such an approach lies in the fact that the original should not be lost in this process. While dealing with translation as a vehicle for transferring culture, the main objective is to make those cultural specifications available to a greater number of readers. The attempt in translating the stories thus involves special concern towards the cultural specificities of the Assamese background and how through them the culture specific issues can transferred to create a reading public of these texts.

Next the concept of identity is approached in the discussion related to the translation process where gendered identity, cultural identity and the question of location figures in a strong way. The process to use the challenge of translation in both its metaphorical and literal acceptations in order to explore the concept of identity and its manifestations in cultural, artistic and literary production, specifically, but not exclusively, in postcolonial societies involves a lot of deliberation as the area is full of upheavals. The changing nature of identity in its local and global manifestations is examined as well as the manner in which an identity may be “translated” for the consumption of a specific market. To what extent can translation and the adaptation that it implies furnish access to a foreign culture is a question that is addressed in the explorations on identity and its relation to translation. The big question here is whether it is possible to attempt to transcend cultural barriers through translation and/or adaptation, whether the translator’s agenda be literary, political, ethical or even metaphysical? When we attempt to transfer meaning from one medium or language to another there are challenges and pitfalls facing the cultural interpreter or “translator”. In an era of
globalisation of culture the possibility of a homogenised identity replacing local specificity is also there to stay influencing the marketing strategy. These areas are the main causes of concern in the discussion of the identity debate and identity question is addressed to seek a philosophy of translation for the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Identity itself is a paradoxical term and it is always related to the ‘individual’ who carries the influence and the specificity of a certain culture. The approach to form an identity through the act of translation is a critical exercise as identity is actually a production of the influences and the cultural practices. In the process of translation of the texts by women writers an approach has been made to create a space for the less represented voices to form a distinct identity to be recognised by the postcolonial discourse. This process also involves the writer, her characters and when translation enters the scene, the role is multiplied by the translator, the target language and the receiving audience. Stuart Hall in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” rightly mentions that:

Of course the ‘I’ who writes here must also be thought of as, itself, ‘enunciated’. We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context’, positioned.

(Rutherford, ed., 1990: 222)

This positioning in a particular space makes identity debates interesting and brings in a new dimension at all times. The burden of history is unshakeable while forming any identity. When the identity is concerned with women writers and their way of voicing it, the need to be ‘enunciated’ is greater as it can create a moment in history. This exploration of the ‘I’ that is the writer and her subject is
taken up seriously to locate the identity politics against the socio-political concerns of Assam in the post eighties scenario.

The term “post 80’s” used in the title of the thesis bears a place of importance as the political situation of the time was influenced by a lot of reasons creating the historical moments in the cultural and literary field of Assam along with the political concerns. Assam came into political prominence from the moment when in 1979 a mass rise against the illegal foreign immigrants took shape and pressurised the social and political situation of Assam. Along with the demand of repelling the immigrants, another demand of preventing the ‘outsiders’ from getting jobs in Assam formed a part of the Assam Agitation. The anti-foreigner movement witnessed an unprecedented participation of women and women’s participation influenced the geo-political as well as socio-economic conditions. But even after such strong participation in the movement Assam did not get many women in the position of power to voice the gender specific needs. At the same time Assam as a north-eastern state of India was always a little removed from the actual process of nation-building and the matter of Assam has posed a question of identity building in the postcolonial context. Assam was never considered a part of the nation building process in India and the long history of Assam since the six hundred years (1228 to 1826 A.D.) old rule of the Ahom Kings have actually started the process of ‘Assamese nation building’. During the British rule this process was protected and the symbols of Assamese national pride like the ideology of Lachit Borphukan were protected to keep the Assamese away from the Indian National Congress for the advantage point of the British. After independence the wings of this small nationalism was curtailed and this led to a
lot of dissatisfaction leading towards the trouble in 1979. According to the social observation of Abu Nasar Ahmed, the Assamese middle class in the situation of constraint found the Bengali speaking and other non-Assamese counterparts as their competitors. Ahmed observes:

> Certain constituent wings of the Asamiya middle class spearheaded the movement on the premises of hate nurtured in an atmosphere of economic stagnation and relative deprivation in which the state had been suffering for a considerable period.

(Ahmed, 2006: 6)

Though the movement spearheaded by the All Assam Students’ Union and later joined by a newly constituted All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) claimed that it was a peaceful Gandhian non-violent movement, the other side of violence came out almost at the same instant. The latent dissatisfaction rampant among all classes of the people found a voice through this movement which turned violent at times. Hiren Gohain in his *EPW* article blamed underdevelopment as the cause creating unemployment which ultimately resulted in the outburst in the form of the Assam movement. He blames the central government for not encouraging the productive forces in the north-eastern region and terms it as the cause of all the trouble which has made the region a threat to India.

The concern showed by the academic exercises in this regard had projected the problem in the greater Indian and world canvas. But the literature of the time has not found much space in the field of dominant discourse when we focus our attention to the writings by women during that period. The vibrant voices of women that are marginalised within the discussions of the Assamese language and
literature, has a long struggle to establish this as representations regarding identity, gender and women specific issues. The short fiction selected for translation is a small attempt at bringing out the voices to the view of the worldwide audience and more specifically to the greater Indian reading public and the western eye. During that attempt the issues of gender, culture and identity are chosen as the points around which the argument of translation is carried forward.

Nord (1997:1) conceives the idea that communication takes place through a medium and in situations that are limited in time and place. Each specific situation determines what and how people communicate, and it is changed by people communicating. Situations are not universal but are embedded in a cultural habitat, which in turn conditions the situation. Language is thus to be regarded as part of culture. And communication is conditioned by the constraints of the situation-in-culture. So translation as a form is a mode of cross-cultural communication. The complexity of translation, one of the most complex things in human history, lies in the multitude of and the delicate relationship among its relevant factors. Translation is never innocent. There is always a context in which translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed. The situation-in-culture has been given much emphasis. In translation, Gentzler says:

Subjects of a given culture communicate in translated messages primarily determined by local culture constraints. Inescapable infidelity is presumed as a condition of the process; translators do not work in ideal and abstract situations or desire to be innocent, but have vested literary and cultural interests of their own, and want their work to be accepted
within another culture. Thus they manipulate the source text to inform as well as conform with existing cultural constraints.

(Gentzler, 1993: 134)

Thus emerges an approach to translation that is descriptive, target-oriented, functional and systemic; and an interest in the norms and constraints that govern the production and reception of translation. According to Lefevere and Bassnett (1990), the study of translation practices has moved on from a formalist approach and turned instead to the larger issues of context, history and convention. Translation cannot be defined a priori, once and for all. What translation means has to be established in certain context. Contextualization of translation brings first culture and then politics and power into the picture.