CHAPTER III

Cultural Turn in Translation

The “cultural turn” in translation studies has begun the process of examining the ways in which translation is nourished by - and contributes to - the dynamics of cultural representation.

- Sherry Simon

Translation has been accepted as the process through which cultures can travel. The relation of culture and translation is a contemporary one compared to the age old history of translation. The cultural transference that translation can generate has created a lot of interest in the critical discourse on translation. Translation as an act of communication between two cultures serves the purpose of enriching the source as well as the target language and culture. The cultural representation made by translation has enhanced cross-cultural communication. In this particular work, the cultural turn in translation has been examined with the help of the translations of Assamese short stories. The criterion on which the selection has been made refers to the concepts of identity and the gender sensitivity of the writers in depicting the violence of the troubled eighties. Yet it does not stop us from establishing the idea that cultures get transferred in the process of translation, even if the texts are not specifically chosen to represent only culture specific ideas and concepts.

Gideon Toury’s seminal essay “The Nature and Role of Norms in Translation” in Lawrence Venuti’s The Translation Studies Reader proclaims translation as a norm governed activity and comments that:
Translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions.

(Toury 2000: 200).

As this statement implies, translators are permanently faced with the problem of how to treat the cultural aspects implicit in a source text and of finding the most appropriate technique of successfully conveying these aspects in the target language. These problems may vary in scope depending on the cultural and linguistic gap between the two languages concerned.

The cultural implications for translation may take several forms ranging from lexical content and syntax to ideologies and ways of life in a given culture. The translator also has to decide on the importance given to certain cultural aspects and to what extent it is necessary or desirable to translate them into the target language and culture. The aim of the source text has implications for translation as well as the intended readership for both the source and target text.

Considering the cultural implications for a translated text implies recognizing all of these problems and taking into account several possibilities before deciding on the solution which appears the most appropriate in each specific case.

The cultural identity of an area specific texts affect the ways the text is translated. Ideas, debates, issues- all these get translated and the emergence of the cultural studies as a separate discipline has helped in theorising these concepts of translation. Culture in this discussion has been used in a broad sense to include anthropological notions. Culture is not only understood as the advanced intellectual development of mankind but it refers to all socially conditioned aspects of human life. The idea of culture consists of all the components that an
individual has to accept in order to operate within that culture. Culture in itself an amalgamation of the people, their behaviour, cultural specificities and emotional components. So the concept of culture includes the body of knowledge and the material things that are a part of that particular culture.

In such a context the translation activity is examined to establish the link it has to the culture specific ideas that can give a new turn to the activity of translation. Before dealing with the practical examples of translation a clear definition of culture can be established. Instead of using the definitions of culture in general, Newmark’s definition which is concerned with language and translation, is used here. Newmark specifies culture as:

…the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression.


This aspect affirms the fact thus acknowledging that each language group has its own culturally specific features. He further clearly states that operationally he does “not regard language as a component or feature of culture” (Newmark 1988:95) in direct opposition to the view taken by another theorist, Vermeer, who states that “language is part of a culture” (1989:222). According to Newmark, Vermeer’s position would imply the impossibility to translate whereas for the latter, translating the source language into a suitable form in target language is part of the translator’s role in transcultural communication.

The notion of culture is essential to consider the implications for translation and, despite the differences in opinion as to whether language is part of culture or not, the two notions appear to be inseparable. Discussing the problems
of correspondence in translation, Nida puts equal importance on both linguistic and cultural differences between the source and the target language and concludes that

...differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure.

(Nida, 1964:130).

It is further explained that parallels in culture often provide a common understanding despite significant formal shifts in the translation. The cultural implications for translation are thus of significant importance as well as lexical concerns.

Lotman’s also proposes his theory in the following way:

...no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre, the structure of natural language.

(Lotman, 1978:211-32)

Bassnett (1980: 13-14) underlines the importance of this double consideration when translating by stating that language is “the heart within the body of culture,” the survival of both aspects being interdependent. Linguistic notions of transferring meaning are seen as being only part of the translation process; “a whole set of extra-linguistic criteria” must also be considered. As Bassnett further points out, “the translator must tackle the source language text in such a way that the target language version will correspond to the source language version.”
... To attempt to impose the value system of the SL culture onto the TL culture is dangerous ground”

(Bassnett, 1980:23)

Thus, when translating, it is important to consider not only the lexical impact on the reader in target language, but also the manner in which cultural aspects may be perceived and make translating decisions accordingly. Language and culture may thus be seen as being closely related and both aspects must be considered for translation. When considering the translation of cultural words and notions, Newmark proposes two opposing methods: transference and componential analysis (Newmark, 1988:96). As Newmark mentions, transference gives “local colour,” keeping cultural names and concepts. Although placing the emphasis on culture, meaningful to initiated readers, he claims this method may cause problems for the general readership and limit the comprehension of certain aspects. The importance of the translation process in communication leads Newmark to propose componential analysis which he describes as being “the most accurate translation procedure, which excludes the culture and highlights the message” (Newmark, 1988:96).

Nida’s definitions of formal and dynamic equivalence (Nida, 2000:129) may also be seen to apply when considering cultural implications for translation. According to Nida, a “gloss translation” mostly typifies formal equivalence where form and content are reproduced as faithfully as possible and the target language reader is able to “understand as much as he can of the customs, manner of thought, and means of expression” of the source language context (Nida, 2000:129). Contrasting with this idea, dynamic equivalence “tries to relate the receptor to modes of behaviour relevant within the context of his own culture”
without insisting that he “understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context”.

A question that needs to be asked when considering a text for translation is for whom the original text was destined and whether this readership corresponds to the potential target reader. In Coulthard’s (1992) deliberations on reader and language, he highlights the importance of defining the ideal reader for whom the author “attributes knowledge of certain facts, memory of certain experiences ... plus certain opinions, preferences and prejudices and a certain level of linguistic competence.”

When considering such aspects, it should not be forgotten that the extent to which the author may be influenced by such notions is dependent on his own sense of belonging to a specific socio-cultural group.

Once the ideal source readership has been determined, considerations must be made concerning the target reader and text. Coulthard states:

The translator’s first and major difficulty ... is the construction of a new ideal reader who, even if he has the same academic, professional and intellectual level as the original reader, will have significantly different textual expectations and cultural knowledge

(Coulthard, 1992:12).

The historical and cultural facts are unlikely to be known in detail along with the specific cultural situations described in a text. Furthermore, despite considering the level of linguistic competence to be roughly equal for the source and target reader, certain differences may possibly be noted in response to the use of culturally specific lexis which must be considered when translating. Although certain opinions, preferences and prejudices may be instinctively transposed by
the target text reader who may liken them to his/her own experience, it must be remembered that these do not match the social situation and experience of the source text reader. Therefore, the core social and cultural aspects remain problematic when considering the cultural implications for translation.

The problems when translating such a text are therefore not only of a purely lexical character but also of an equally fundamental nature - the understanding of a social, economic, political and cultural context as well as connotative aspects of a more semantic character. As with all texts of foreign literature, historical, political and other such cultural references are always of a certain importance and the target text reader is unlikely to have a full understanding of such notions. When considering the cultural implications for translation, the extent to which it is necessary for the translator to explain or complete such an information gap should be taken into account; on the basis of conclusions reached concerning the ideal target text reader, the translator should decide how much may be left for the reader to simply infer.

Taking these last points into consideration, different elements will be discussed in relation to their cultural implications for translation. The importance of the cultural elements in deciding the process of translation has been considered in the translation of the stories in this work to establish a translation politics as well. Cultural implications for translation may be classed essentially as material culture, and as gestures and habits although other cultural terms are also present. These aspects may be translated in different ways according to their role in the text and the aims for the target text reader. Newmark also states the relevance of componential analysis in translation.
…as a flexible but orderly method of bridging the numerous lexical gaps, both linguistic and cultural, between one language and another.

(Newmark, 1988:123).

The possible lack of cultural knowledge of the target text reader implies translating in a way so as to clearly convey notions which may otherwise go unnoticed.

A variety of different approaches have been examined in relation to the cultural implications for translation. It is necessary to examine these approaches bearing in mind the inevitability of translation loss when the text is, as here, culture bound. Considering the nature of the text and the similarities between the ideal source text and target text reader, an important aspect is to determine how much missing background information should be provided by the translator using these methods. It has been recognised that in order to preserve specific cultural references certain additions need to be brought to the target text.

The actual act of translation and its relation to culture can now be looked at to establish the fact that translation definitely has to emphasise on the cultural specificity of a text. The first problem that arose in the translation process of the stories is the translation of the titles. The story Roudrasnan by Manorama Das Medhi has a title that that creates a resistance in the translation. The title have been translated as “The Terrible Sunbath” yet the word ‘terrible’ is not enough to carry the meaning of ‘Roudrasnan’. The story is located in the culture and time which clearly indicates the meaning conveyed by the title of the story in the original text. But the loss of meaning happens as in the story, the boy who hides behind a Borkapor for warmth is killed violently to crush the hopes of an entire family.
The sense of death conveyed by the title has the cultural and historical implication. The time of the story, the idea carried forward by the story, everything finds a culmination in the title of the story. So a mere note cannot specify its meaning and that is why the title is left like that for the reader to understand the meaning after reading the story.

Another title that did not translate smoothly is the tile of the story Written by Arupa Patangia Kalita—Ketiyaba Numali Edin. Here Numali is a proper name and the meaning of the name is the youngest child(girl) in a family. The translation “Sometimes on a Day Numali” does bring out the meaning of an arbitrary day in the life of Numali, but the sense of her name cannot be denoted in the title itself. So a note has been added to explain the meaning of the name to justify the translation of the title.

The choice of the translator here plays a part in the meaning creation where a word is culture specific. The cultural implication of a beloved youngest daughter is lost in the translation of the title. No amount of note can create that meaning and it has to be left at that for the target language reader, who can make their own judgment of the title and the meaning of it.

The cultural specificities again pose a problem in translating the title of Anuradha Sharma Pujari’s story Atmasamarpan. The story is about a man who, after being a member of the militant group, surrenders and joins the mainstream life and tries to establish himself as a family man. The circumstances do not allow him to lead a peaceful life and the end comes when he goes against the comrades of the armed struggle and complains against them. His act of rejecting the society for not accepting his surrender and return to normal life at the end makes him
restless. His final act is more of a ‘Renunciation’ than surrender. That is why the title is retained as ‘renunciation’, though the target text reader may not immediately form an idea about the story from the title itself. This loss in translation is compensated in the body of the story which clearly brings out the sense without trouble.

The cultural transference is a debatable issue and depending upon the source and the target cultures, the translations has to be done. The short stories from Assamese translated to English, do not have a fixed target reader. The reading public from other regions of India seem to be more easy targets as the cultural milieu is similar than any reader from the western countries. But the English translation has to serve any kind of reader and the target of the translation into English should keep this in mind. So in the translation of “Sometimes on a Day Numali” from the title itself ambiguities sets in. The story is loaded with a lot of culture specific tales and words that create problem in the process of translation.

From the beginning of the story Numali is shown as a character embedded in the Assamese culture with her character weaving the web of cultural speciality.

Waking up at early dawn and moving the shuttle at her loom Numali’s wrist ached. Keeping the shuttle on the half done design of crimson thread she massaged her fingers. She looked bewitched at the replica of a Sarai being prominent over the white Gamocha. This Bihu her brothers will be surprised looking at the Gamocha woven by her. They always tease her as hopeless, ignorant, inefficient, but now they will see. She has woven patterns on her
Gamocha from a design book brought by her sister-in-law from town and has not copied patterns from Gamochas woven by others.

Flying her shuttles rapidly she completed the flowery pattern and started to adjust the beam of her loom. [p.114]

The character of Numali sitting on the loom weaving Gamochas (which cannot be translated as a cotton towels due to the cultural value it has for the Assamese society), is a picture of any common girl in a rural household in Assam. The preparation for Bihu, the most coveted celebration for the Assamese people, marks this weaving of Gamochas as a gift for the loved ones. The situation denoted by those lines actually has the scope of a new story to be told on the customs and practices of the Assamese people and if notes are given at the end, another story will emerge out of that. So the culture specific words like Gamocha, Sarai and Bihu are retained as it is.

The story translated for a general target reader who may belong to any part of the world, retains several words and expressions of the culture specific background to leave it to the reader to accept it as a translation from a different cultural background.

The story of Numali, her plight towards the end of the story makes the writer refer to a folktale which is integral to the Assamese culture. The folk tales collected as “Burhi Aiir Sadhu” (Grandmother’s tales) is an essential part of the growing up process of any child from Assam. So, After death, Numali assumes the persona of one of the characters from these tales-Tejimola, which is not denoted in the short story explictely. Tejimola, after her death becomes a flower, a plant and sings out the tale of her owe and returns to life at the end as if in a
magic tale. This folk-tale forms the closing part of the short story where Numali, after her death, spreads over everything and her identity assumes a non-ending entity.

Numali creeped along the wall as a water gourd plant, if you approach it, she will start weeping: “Do not extend your hand, do not pluck the gourd, wherefrom you old women are coming.”

Numali bloomed as a flower by the common water tank of the village –

“Do not extend your hands, do not pluck flowers, wherefrom you boatman are coming.” [p.139-140]

She will remain sobbing and waiting in the village in the guise of a citron plant, a creeper gourd, a lotus flower. One day some one will come and tell her, “If you are Numali, then take this betel nut chewed by me.” She will chew it and be transformed into a Shalika (a bird like myna). She will be told again – “If you have love within you, if you are the Numali, then wear this Gamocha and you will be transformed into a human.” Numali will be a woman. She has a bosom full of love, she will be waiting to become a woman once again.

This tale cannot be added to the original in translation and the task of the translator is to leave it to the target audience to accept it as a story of Numali with some culture specific anecdotes attached to it.

The reference to the Grandmother’s Tales are made again in the story “The Fellow Traveler” by Phul Goswami. The protagonist after the death of his mother
is quite lonely and observes the movements of the ants, which used symbolically to explain the central idea of the story.

The row of ants is no longer here. They might resume their journey by another route. Observing minutely I saw a tiny ant is running helter skelter. Might it be in search of its companions. He might have lost his way. Staying like that for sometime I put before it my index finger. Climbing up he moved impatiently over my hands. Picking up one of the books from the row of books on my table I left it on the book. Moving a little longer he became quiet. [p.188]

The observation of the ants’s movement and bringing the stray one to a safe position, the character of Dhan reflects on the situation. After some moments, he reminds the ant and looks at it. The ant is in the lap of comfort:

I looked at my mother. She is no more. The leaves of the coconut are burning and the fire is coming out of the hearth. Gulping a pitcherful of water I reclined on my bed. Oh! the ant! Instantly I sat up. He has been sleeping on the book. I touched it. Showing the sign of life he went back to sleep like the baby lying on its mother’s lap. Just under its body is written – “Grandmother’s Tales”. [p.188]

Against the tormented mental situation of Dhan, the ant is sleeping peacefully on the book which is a copy of the “Grandmother’s Tales.” The cultural implications of these tales cannot be translated with a note on this book of
tales. But a reader reading the stories together can definitely see the importance the tales have in the lives of the people and how this famous collection of the bedtime stories bring mental peace to generations of its Assamese readers.

In all the stories, the gender specific words are abundantly used and they are kept as it is in the translations, for the purpose of not making a generalized translation for the benefit of any target reader, who will never realize the cultural specificities if this is done in the translations.

Words like *Gamocha, Bihu, Sarai, sakhi*, names of flowers, birds, fishes and many other culture specific words are abundantly used in the stories. There is linguistic equivalent of these words in English and that can be used easily. The reason for retaining them is dependant on bringing out the sense that these stories are not from an western background and they belong to a different culture altogether. At the same time the meaning of certain words like the word “Borkapor” used in the story “A Terrible Sunbath” cannot be conveyed by the note given at the end as “A hand-woven coarse cotton cloth large in size, worn as a shawl.” The cloth is symbolic of the warmth that can protect someone from the chilling experience of life, rather that just the cold. Even under that borkapor, Son could not hide himself and save himself, and falls prey to the violence of the time, rather than the moving train on the railway track.

The multilayered cultural transference actually brings out the dimension of translation that involves the issues of cultural turn in translation. The source language text should never try to impose itself on the cultural specificities of the target language text. That is why some ambiguities, some untranslated words and expressions do not render a loss in the source text. On the other hand if the source
text translates itself to the cultural specialties of the target language, the loss is immense. When women specific texts are translated, the care should be taken not to homogenize the translated version. This is like the loss of identity in the process of transfer from one cultural code to another. The debate on identity and culture opens another area for discussion where identity debates influence the translation process and the cultural identity forms a part of that discussion in the next chapter.