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## **Bridging Literary Worlds: Exploring English Language Classics in Assamese Children's Literature**

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### **Abstract:**

Translation plays a vital role in Children's literature, serving various purposes from introducing foreign texts to fostering cultural understanding and exchange. It opens up new possibilities and facilitates discussions on different socio-cultural aspects of both the original and target languages. During the translation process, a text often undergoes changes, sometimes acquiring a new identity, enhancing the target language community, or simply adding to the literary beauty of a particular language and its literature. Regardless of the source language, the significance of a translated text can vary based on the translator's approach, socio-cultural context, and the time period of the translation of the target language. This article gives an introductory overview on three selected English Language Classics *Alice in Wonderland*, *Frankenstein* and *Silas Marner*, translated into Assamese as Children's literature during the twentieth century. Furthermore, the article delves into the role and perspective of the translators during the translation of these three classics, evaluating whether they effectively conveyed the true essence and message of the novels while meeting the readers' needs.

**Keywords: Translation, Children's Literature, Assamese Children's Literature, Alice in Wonderland, Silas Marner, Frankenstein.**

In world literature, translated Children's Literature reflects a child's need for literary products in relation to that particular time period or social context alongside reflecting a particular historical and social event. While children's literature mostly reflects values, beliefs and cultural aspects of society, translated children's literature provides diverse range of perspectives and experiences of different culture around world. Moreover, translated children's literature presents different social and cultural aspects in age-appropriate manner, by narrowing down the complexity of the particular topic. While studying translation it is important to understand how the translation was made and what they serve afterwards. The purpose of translation could differ from each individual translation, which leads to having different appearances and values of every translated works. In his book *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* renowned scholar of translation studies, Venuti, delves into various aspects of translation. Notably, he introduces two fundamental approaches to translation: "Domestication" and "Foreignization". Ritta Oittinen further explained that "Foreignization generally refers to a method (or strategy) of translation whereby some significant trace of the original 'foreign' text is retained. Domestication, on the other hand, assimilates a text to the target culture and linguistic values" (Oittinen 74).

Simply, Domestication in translation prioritizes the socio-cultural context of the target language, and specific needs of the readers put into secondary consideration. In this type of translation, a particular text changes its appearance and completely blends with the culture of the target language. Considerably, in the translation of Pinocchio into Russian during the Soviet Period falls under such type of translation. As Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* entered the Soviet Union, the main character and protagonist Pinocchio became Buratino in Russian and the title of the story became *Zalatoi Klyuchik (Golden Key)* or *Priklyuchenia Buratino (Adventure of Buratino)*. Rather than remaining identical to the source text, the translation focused on blending along with the Russian culture. For translation, the leaders preferred texts which could contribute towards establishing Soviet ideology through literature and kept an eye on whether they could be manipulated. Due to this, popular children's classics like *Pinocchio*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Chippolino* and others completely became Soviet texts through translation. It was very difficult for new readers to identify whether they are original Soviet texts or translated texts.

On the other hand, in “Foreignization”, the translator gives importance to delivering the messages of the source text without any major changes. Such texts hold closer relation to the original work and represent the culture and message of the source text. Such types of texts help in the growth of literature in the target language and could inspire authors of the target language to write more with new ideas, but it doesn’t help much in representing the other contexts of the target language. But we cannot entirely assume that such translations lack any significance or fail to convey the social context in the target culture. Even though it shows just a glimpse of the social situation or need of that particular time period of the target language, the main aim of such translation is to introduce people to the text of other cultures. Simply, such literature mainly serves the primary aim of “building bridges” between two cultures through translation. The Assamese translation of *Alice in Wonderland* would fit in the second type of translation.

In Assamese Children’s literature, translation and adaptation from foreign texts play an important role in fulfilling the need for good quality children’s literature. During the twentieth century, some classics like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Animal Farm*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Mother*, *My Childhood of Maxim Gorky*, *Around the World in Eighty Days* and other popular world literature became part of Assamese Children’s Literature. Among the translations of those literary works, many were abstract translations, through which readers could see the reflection of the society of that particular time of both the source text and the target text. However, different types of translation can reflect different aspects of the society and culture. Also, style of translation and type of translation could vary depending on the translator, aim of the translation as well as the time period of the translation.

The twentieth century, more precisely the post-independent years, witnessed major growth and development in Assamese children’s literature. But on various platforms, authors and critics highlighted two major issues “the inadequacy in quality literature for children” and “the lack of interest among the authors towards this genre” in Assamese children’s Literature. Although, close observation shows the availability of story books, folktale books and poems for children in Assamese, but there was a visible dearth of novels and other fictional works particularly written for children. In contrast, the available number

of translated novels of that time presents a very different picture of the circumstances. This picture leads to giving a vague idea or a hypothesis that during this period translated texts became an option to fill up this gap of not being able to produce fictional texts and novels for children. However, scholarly discussions as well as critical and theoretical analyses on Assamese Children's Literature remain scarce. The focus of discussions in Assamese children's literature is only limited to the names and numbers of texts written for children. This leads to an unclear road to studying and comprehending the challenges and obstacles in producing Children's literature in Assamese. Notably, translations played a significant role by occupying a huge area in Assamese children's literature, contributing directly and indirectly to its growth. This article intends to give an introductory overview on three selected English Language Classics *Alice in Wonderland*, *Frankenstein* and *Silas Marner*, translated into Assamese as Children's literature during the twentieth century. This article intends to examine and gather insights into various aspects of these translations. Additionally, it aims to ascertain whether translators effectively conveyed the authentic essence of the original texts while considering the readers' need for urgency.

Considerably, the origin of Assamese children's literature can be traced back to a significant extent to translated and adapted texts from Sanskrit literature. Initially, Assamese children's literature revolved around stories derived from *Puranas*, *Akhyanas*, and *Mahakavyas*, as well as narratives showcasing the supernatural abilities of Lord Krishna and other divine characters. However, it was not until the arrival of missionaries that a shift occurred in this area. Towards the end of the late nineteenth century, the involvement of missionaries helped establish Assamese children's literature as a distinct genre. Consequently, a multitude of new stories and age-appropriate texts emerged, both written and translated, catering to the literary needs of children during that era. Resulting, acceptance of translated foreign texts in Assamese children's literature. The introduction of English literature by missionaries had already familiarized Assamese people with translated works. Alongside, the British colonization played an important role in popularizing English literature all over India; therefore compared to literature in other languages, English literature become readily accessible in India. Along with time, translation of English

literature into Indian regional languages became very popular. In Assam, a similar impact was evident, serving as a significant factor for the inclusion of numerous English language texts in school and college curricula, followed by subsequent translations into Assamese.

As mentioned above, this article aims to discuss the Assamese translations of three renowned classics *Alice in Wonderland*, *Silas Marner* and *Frankenstein*. Each of these works holds their own significant importance in world literature. The first text, *Alice in Wonderland* authored by Lewis Carroll, was originally published in 1865. *Alice in Wonderland* is a widely known and beloved children's classic. It is known as the most popular children's book not only in England but also across the globe, transcending age groups. Given its widespread acclaim, the book has been translated into numerous languages, adapted into movies, staged as theatrical performances, and even transformed into ballet productions throughout the years. In 1963, Prabina Saikia accomplished the task of translating this remarkable work into Assamese, giving rise to the Assamese version titled "*Ajan Desat Alice*."

Anthropomorphism is a very important part of children's literature. Fantasy and imagination can effortlessly attract the curious minds of children. Anthropomorphism gives life to inanimate things or makes the animals talk and behave like humans; thus, it easily attracts children's attention. Therefore, despite certain critics dismissing *Alice in Wonderland* as children's book due to its satirical values, presence of anthropomorphic themes secured its place in Children's literature. Assamese Children's Literature, extensively filled with folktales, cannot detach itself from anthropomorphism either. As *Alice in Wonderland* incorporates anthropomorphic elements as well as theme of imagination and fantasy, its road towards Assamese Children's Literature could be described as a "smooth path". Instead of the values and social context; the translation emphasizes the approach in the storyline, anthropomorphic characters and the purpose of introducing Assamese young readers with a popular classic. The main protagonist Alice is a seven years old girl, curious about her surroundings, provides an opportunity for young readers to envision themselves in her place. Simultaneously, other characters such as "the white rabbit", the enigmatic "Cheshire cat", the mystical "Magical mushroom", the queen's

servant “the Gryphon”, the “friendly turtle” and others creates a magical world, further comforting the young readers.

The preface of *Ajan Desat Alice* helps to understand the approach of the translator towards the original story of *Alice in Wonderland*. In this preface, Prabina Saikia, the translator, expresses her deep fascination with the story after reading it for the first time. She believes that the story embodies and showcases the immense power of a child's curiosity and imagination. For Saikia, it was a profound loss to think that she had been missing out on something truly beautiful. During the process of translation, Saikia admits to having “a fear of losing the essence of the original text”(Saikia 217). This fear compelled her to focus solely on faithfully conveying the original message without making any significant alterations to the story. As a result, *Ajan Desat Alice* by Prabina Saikia can be considered a "Faithful Translation" of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Essentially, readers have the opportunity to re-experience the same text in a different language, thus enabling them to delve into the story from a fresh perspective.

The second text, George Eliot's *Silas Marner* was published in 1861. This novel shows “the issues of materialism, morale and religion of the author's time” (Jauhari 16) through the story of linen weavers. Eliot himself addressed this novel as a realistic novel. As George Eliot wrote, “It came to me first of all, quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale, suggested by my recollection of having once, in early childhood, seen a linen-weaver with a bag on his back; but as my mind dwelt on the subject, I became inclined to a more realistic treatment.”(cited in Wiesenfarth 227). In the preface editor Edward L. Gulick wrote “few authors of fiction have been so well equipped with learning and philosophy as the author of *Silas Marner*. Consequently, though the plot is simple, and though the action and dialogue are of such interest as to carry the reader easily through the didactic passages, yet even these “short and simple annals of the poor” will yield greater returns of interest to the pupil if he understands how the story is related to the life and character and purpose of the author.”(Eliot *Preface*) Although the author did not specifically target a particular readership, *Silas Marner* became a popular novel among adult readers and is considered a significant work in Victorian literature. Also, it is often classified as "Domestic Fiction" or

a "British Classic," among other esteemed classics. In the context of Assam, the novel was initially included in the English literature syllabus at college level. In 1991, renowned translator Rama Borthakur translated it into Assamese. However, the preface of this translation indicates that Borthakur positioned the Assamese version as "a book for Children." Consequently, the Assamese translation of *Silas Marner* gained popularity primarily as a children's book rather than a novel addressing realistic social issues.

According to translator Rama Borthakur, his first encounter with *Silas Marner* was as part of his college syllabus for English Literature. However, upon revisiting the novel later, he found new meaning in it and was captivated by the story. This prompted him to select important incidents from the book and translate them into Assamese. (Borthakur 437) *Silas Marner* explores religious beliefs, disbelief, and human interactions within a small society, which resonates with Assamese readers due to the familiarity of such values and scenarios in their own society. While the novel carries strong social messages, it was not surprising that it became part of Assamese literature. However, transforming a novel with such messages into a text for children sparked discussion. Eliot never intended *Silas Marner* to be a children's book, as evident from its mature and powerful delivery of the story's messages. Yet, Borthakur mentioned in the preface that his translation was more of an "abstract translation" and it aimed the children as the target group of readers. The main difference between Eliot's *Silas Marner* and Assamese *Silas Marner* translation lies in the target readership. Use of simple language and avoidance of complex scenarios helped the translator to attain the aim of reaching out to the young group of readers. This approach resulted in a summarized presentation of the original text, with the translator primarily focusing on conveying the moral of the story. Consequently, some of Eliot's original style may have been lost, leaving readers curious about the original version and potentially encouraging them to explore world classics in the future. Moreover, Borthakur's individual style of expression can be perceived through this translation.

In Eliot's expression, readers witness a detailed description of Silas's thoughts, emotions, and hardships. However, in translator Borthakur's rendition, there is a lack of individual focus on Silas's emotions. Eliot took his time introducing Silas as a protagonist,

providing explanations of his livelihood and surroundings. Furthermore, Eliot introduces a society where weavers were present; giving readers some insight into the status a weaver would have in that society. In contrast, Borthakur's translation introduces readers directly to *Silas Marner* living in Raveloe. In Eliot's original text, we get to see detailed descriptions “In the days when the spinning-wheels hummed busily in the farmhouses- and even great ladies, clothed in silk and thread lace, had their toy spinning wheels of polished oak...”(Eliot 1), which help to set the scene. On the other hand, Borthakur's approach is much simpler, “*Silas Marner Ejon Tati*” (Silas Marner is a weaver) (Borthakur 438). This example illustrates how Borthakur aimed to present incidents in a more straightforward manner, catering to the understanding capacity of young readers. Another instance of this simplification is seen in the portrayal of Godfrey and Dunstan. Eliot's version provides a beautiful and mature narration of both characters, which might be complex for a child to grasp. In such cases, Borthakur summarized the descriptions and presented the characters in a way that a child could easily comprehend. During the translation process, Borthakur adopts a storytelling approach, making the Assamese version of *Silas Marner* captivating and appealing to children.

The third text *Frankenstein* a science fiction novel written by Mary Shelley in 1818, holds a unique place in literary history. Shelley, only eighteen years old at the time, undertook the challenge of writing a horror story, resulting in a remarkable creation that has stood the test of time. Despite its young author, the novel incorporates gothic elements, sparking debates on whether it should be considered suitable for children. However, despite the controversies and doubts surrounding its categorization, *Frankenstein* has been embraced and cherished by children worldwide. Its enduring popularity, even after more than a century since its publication, solidifies its status as a beloved children's classic and a significant contribution to world literature. Renowned English author Brian Aldiss even proposed to consider it the “First true science-fiction story” (Aldiss 78) of all time, which highlights the pioneering role of *Frankenstein* in Children's literature. Its captivating themes and widespread appeal led to numerous translations into different languages around the globe. Furthermore, the story has been recreated in various adaptations, including film

adaptations that have captivated audiences throughout the years. Surprisingly there are two translated versions of *Frankenstein* available in Assamese. The first translation, by Dinesh Baishya, was published in 1987, while the second translation, translated by Suresh Sharma, was published in 1996.

Both Dinesh Baishya and Suresh Sharma, the translators of *Frankenstein*, have acknowledged the social requirements while translating the text. Dinesh Baishya states that he is just trying to arrive at an open recreation of the original, taking into account readers with lower comprehension abilities. However, he acknowledges that this simplified version of *Frankenstein* may lack the complexity and depth desired by more intellectually inclined readers (Baishya 215). Similarly, Suresh Sharma in the Preface of the story provides an explanation regarding his translation of *Frankenstein*. While Baishya succeeds in demonstrating his understanding of the story and its moral, delivering it effectively to his intended readers, this condensed version of *Frankenstein* may omit some of the beautiful descriptions found in the original text. Baishya opted for a storytelling approach in translating the book, whereas Shelley's work takes on a more narrative style from the perspective of the narrator. Baishya's translation omits the mention of Walton's letters to his sister, which narrate about Frankenstein. Instead, Baishya immerses readers directly into the story of Frankenstein, playing the role of the narrator himself. On the other hand, Sharma's translation does not exclude significant events in the same manner as Baishya did. Thus, Suresh Sharma's translated version of *Frankenstein* maintains a closer relationship with Shelley's original work. Rather than explicitly addressing the standard of his intended readers, Sharma simply states that his version is created for children and mentions the omission of certain parts from the original text to ensure simplicity.

The fact that there are two available versions of *Frankenstein* in Assamese indicates the widespread popularity and acceptance of this classic novel among young readers in the region. The presence of multiple translations also reflects the efforts made to make the story accessible to a broader audience and cater to varying reading preferences. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that comparing these two translations may not be fair or appropriate. Each version likely has its distinct focus and intention. One translation might

aim to retain the literary style and nuances of Mary Shelley's original work, while the other could prioritize simplifying the language and adapting the narrative to suit a younger audience. Consequently, their objectives and target readerships may differ significantly. In such cases, both translations can serve valuable purposes for different audiences. The more faithful and sophisticated translation may attract older readers and those seeking a more authentic experience, while the simplified version could be a wonderful entry point for younger or less experienced readers, allowing them to appreciate the essence of the story without feeling overwhelmed by complex language or themes. Ultimately, having multiple versions of *Frankenstein* available allows readers to choose the one that best aligns with their reading abilities and preferences, encouraging a broader engagement with literature and fostering a love for books among Assamese children.

As previously mentioned, each of the three classics holds different significance within their respective contexts, messages, and time periods of publication. *Alice in Wonderland* is widely recognized as a children's text, whereas *Silas Marner* and *Frankenstein* are comparatively less popular among young readers. *Silas Marner* was never considered a children's text initially, and *Frankenstein* garnered attention from children primarily due to the author's reputation. However, during the journey of translation into Assamese, all three classics easily captivated the attention of young readers. When reading the translated versions of these classics in Assamese, it becomes evident that the translators aimed to simplify the texts in comparison to their source counterparts. Among them, *Ajan Desat Alice* stands out as a complete and highly successful translation which successfully retains the essence of the original *Alice in Wonderland*. It provides young readers with a comparable experience to that of *Alice in Wonderland*, bridging the gap between them and a popular world classic without the need to tackle the challenges of reading in English at a young age. This translation serves as a bridge to a popular world classic, fostering an early appreciation of literature and opening doors to further exploration of world literature in the future. Similarly, the translation of *Silas Marner* plays the role of introducing young readers to a unique text while offering a glimpse into the world of literature. It serves as a thoughtful endeavor to guide them towards exploring popular world classics and cultivates

an interest in world literature for the future. Meanwhile, the translations of *Frankenstein* present the opportunity to explore moral lessons through the medium of science fiction. It showcases its potential to impart valuable messages to young minds, challenging them to contemplate ethical dilemmas and the consequences of scientific advancements. The translations of classic literary works into Assamese stand as a remarkable achievement, particularly in their success in catering to young readers. These translated versions offer simplified renditions of the original texts, skillfully preserving the essence and core messages of the stories. The result is an approachable and engaging reading experience for the younger generation, opening doors to literary worlds that might have otherwise remained inaccessible due to language barriers.

When crafting a text for children, it is crucial to prioritize their psychological needs above all else. In this regard, all three translated texts successfully demonstrated the art of storytelling and captured the attention of young minds. These translations also exemplify that with proper techniques in translation, it is possible to reach various groups of readers without making significant changes to the storyline and characters. If we delve into the topic of language usage, all three translations would undoubtedly be acknowledged as successful endeavors. They can be effortlessly read by young readers while also providing the opportunity for adults to rediscover these texts in Assamese. Thus, these translations stand as a testament to the skillful adaptation that allows both young and mature audiences to engage with the stories without difficulty.

The translation of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Silas Marner*, and *Frankenstein* into Assamese undeniably integrated them into the realm of children's literature in the language. However, the translations skillfully ensured that the originality and esteemed status of these English classics remained intact throughout the process. The translated versions managed to preserve the essence of the source texts, faithfully carrying over their unique qualities, thematic richness, and literary brilliance into the Assamese renditions. One remarkable outcome of these translations was their role in bridging the literary divide between two worlds—the English literary tradition and the Assamese literary landscape. Through the translation process, these foreign classics found resonance and appeal among Assamese

readers, opening doors to new imaginative realms and inviting them to partake in the universal human experience conveyed in these stories. The translations created a cultural exchange, bringing the beauty of English literature closer to Assamese audiences, while simultaneously offering English-speaking readers an opportunity to explore and appreciate the literary treasures of Assam.

However, with the addition of foreign texts, some might question whether the originality and native essence of Assamese children's literature could be compromised. It is a legitimate concern, as the influence of translated works might overshadow or dilute the distinctive characteristics of the native literary tradition. Yet, viewed from a different perspective, the introduction of translated classics can be seen as a valuable source of novelty and enrichment. The presence of these foreign classics in Assamese children's literature brings new dimensions and fresh perspectives, enriching the literary landscape with diverse storytelling styles and themes. The translations can serve as springboards for literary discussions and inspire Assamese writers and storytellers to explore new narrative possibilities within their own cultural context.

In the long run, the translation of these classic works can stimulate the evolution and enhancement of Assamese children's literature. It can encourage local writers to experiment with various storytelling techniques and themes, drawing inspiration from both native and foreign sources. The process of adaptation can lead to the creation of hybrid literary styles that uniquely represent the cultural synthesis between Assam and the global literary community. Overall, the translation of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Silas Marner*, and *Frankenstein* into Assamese serves as a valuable contribution to the literary sphere. It showcases the power of translation in preserving the essence of renowned literary works while bridging cultural gaps and fostering cross-cultural exchange. While there might be concerns about maintaining the originality of native literature, the translations can also serve as catalysts for growth and enrichment within Assamese children's literature.

In Assamese children's literature, the focus is on creating captivating fantasy worlds for children, rather than promoting an ideology-centric approach like Soviet children's

literature. The primary objective is to present engaging stories through skilled storytelling, making the works suitable for both Assamese parents and children. The translators understand child psychology during the translation process, prioritizing the creation of easily accessible and simplified texts. While maintaining the essence of the source texts, they avoid overemphasizing the English literary aspect, ensuring that the translations resonate with the young audience.

In conclusion, the translations of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Silas Marner*, and *Frankenstein* into Assamese demonstrate their significance in children's literature. The adaptation process successfully connects diverse literary worlds, enriches Assamese children's literature, and encourages further exploration and improvement in the field. Understanding the specific needs and preferences of young readers is crucial in crafting captivating and relevant children's literature, transcending cultural barriers and fostering a love for reading from an early age. The translations stand as a testament to the power of literature in igniting young minds and opening doors to new worlds of imagination and knowledge.

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