"Translated People" and the Receiving Culture: Filipino Caregivers in Israeli Literature

RACHEL WEISSBROD
BAR ILAN UNIVERSITY, ISRAEL

Introduction

The concept of "translated people" originated in Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*: "The word "translation" comes, etymologically, from the Latin for "bearing across'. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men" (16). Immigrants, labor migrants and others who maneuver between their native countries and host societies, become objects of debate concerning the scope and goals of Translation Studies. Positively viewed, it finds its place in the new emerging field of "Cultural Translation" developed by Cheyfitz (1991), Niranjana (1992) and Bhabha (1994), among others. Research conducted in this framework addresses translation in a metaphorical way (or metaphorically and non-metaphorically, as in the case of Niranjana). Translation is regarded as the transformation that people, nations and ethnic groups undergo when they encounter each other, particularly in a situation of domination or asymmetrical power relations. However, the concepts of "translated people" and "cultural translation" have also stirred criticism because of the possible threat to traditional Translation Studies. One of the prominent opponents of the new trend, Harish Trivedi, apprehends that the disappearance of Translation Studies as a discipline—which deals with interlingual transfer—will lead to the emergence of a monolingual, monocultural world:

> […] one may suggest that there is an urgent need perhaps to protect and preserve some little space in this postcolonial-postmodernist world, where newness constantly enters through cultural translation, for some old and old-fashioned literary translation. For, if such bilingual bicultural ground is eroded away, we shall sooner than later end up with a wholly translated, monolingual, monocultural, monolithic world. […] Rather than help us encounter and experience other cultures, translation would have been assimilated in just one monolingual global culture. (7)

The worries expressed by Trivedi deserve a thorough discussion beyond the scope of this article. The line of thought that I suggest in continuation of Rushdie's words is somewhat different: if, as Rushdie claims, there are translated men, then there must be a translating culture and a translation process as well. And if the use of the term "translation" is indeed relevant in this context, it should be possible to address the above-mentioned phenomena with the help of theories developed in the framework of Translation Studies. The present article is triggered by the possibility of gaining new insights into migration as a major human experience in today's world by applying to it translation theories. Migration will be addressed through its literary representation. However, in principle, and given the tightening relations between Translation Studies and sociology (see e.g., Wolf & Fukari, 2007; Angelelli, 2014), one can think of a more sociologically oriented research approach.

The theoretical framework I will use is George Steiner's depiction of the translation process in his essay "The Hermeneutic Motion" (1975). The title derives from *hermeneia*, "Aristotle's term for discourse which signifies because it interprets" (303). Steiner's essay is chosen primarily because the concepts he uses to describe the translation process, such as trust and aggression, can easily be applied to human relations. Additionally, his approach is flexible and dynamic. The process he depicts can be realized in more that one way, not the least, in philosophical reasoning. Steiner goes beyond what he describes as the "sterile triadic model which has dominated the history and theory" of translation (303). In his view,

"the perennial distinction between literalism, paraphrase and free imitation, turns out to be wholly contingent. It has no precision or philosophic basis" (303).[1] Rather than offering a static mapping of translational approaches, Steiner combines them into a four-stage process comprised of (1) trust, (2) aggression toward the source, (3) aggression by the source, and (4) the restoration of balance. Translators can stop at stage 2 or 3, but an ideal translation strives to reach stage 4.

The case study to which I shall apply Steiner's ideas consists of literary works by two prominent Israeli writers: the novella *Ha-gever shel Brigitta* [*Brigitta's man*] by Savyon Liebrecht (2000),[2] and the collection of stories *Ba'a ve-halkha* [*She came and went*] by Dalia Ravikovitch (2005). Liebrecht's novella and six of Ravikovitch's short stories[3] deal with the relations between Israelis and Filipino caregivers—the "translated people" in this case study. The historical background against which these literary works were created is an Israeli reality since the 1990s. Following global trends and due to the deterioration of relations with Palestine—previously the main source of non-Israeli manpower—Israel started to import workers from other parts of the world. A correlation was created between the workers' country of origin and their occupations. Migrants from the Philippines, who continue to have a large share in this labor force, are often employed as caregivers. The foreign worker population in Israel currently includes large numbers of Chinese, Romanian, and Turkish workers in construction, Thais in agriculture, and Filipinos in care giving. Workers from Bolivia, Colombia, Egypt, Ghana, Jordan, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, the Ukraine, and Uruguay are also employed in a variety of other industries (Drori 9).

Israeli literature responded to the growing dependence on foreign workers and pondered upon the impact that these "servants of globalization", as named by R. Salazar Parreñas, made on individuals, families, and the receiving culture at large. The literary works under discussion are part of this trend. When read in the light of Steiner's ideas, one can discern in them the four stages of the process of translation at two levels: plot and language. At the level of plot, the various stages can be detected in events, some of which are of a symbolic nature. In *Brigitta's man*, the first stage—

trust—is established by giving the keys of the house to the Filipina caregiver. At the linguistic level, the stages are created by the choice of words and the use of metaphors. For example, words taken from the semantic field of aggression (such as the Hebrew equivalents of "fury", "revenge", and "hunting") help to establish Steiner's second and third stages of aggression toward the source and by the source.

Before delving into translation processes, it should be noted that the two literary works are quite different from each other. *Brigitta's man* is a full-fledged novella in which one can find all four stages although they do not appear in a linear order. *She came and went* is a collection of shorts stories. As mentioned, the Filipina caregiver appears in six of them. One cannot apply the four-stage process to each story, or even to the entire group. Accordingly, I shall focus on the novella and refer to the stories when possible.

The First Stage: Trust

According to Steiner, translation starts with trust. It cannot take place unless the translator, or translating culture, trusts the "other". Trust entails risk (perhaps the "other" is not what we think s/he is). Moreover, it is never final and absolute but constantly under test. In Steiner's words: "There is initiative trust, an investment of belief, underwritten by previous experience but epistemologically exposed and psychologically hazardous… But the trust can never be final" (296).

In the literary works under discussion, trust is manifested, first of all, by the very decision to let a stranger enter the house and share in the life of the family. However, as in Steiner's scheme, it is neither final nor absolute. In Liebrecht's *Brigitta's man*, Brigitta is a caregiver from the Philippines who is invited by the narrator, a middle-aged woman, to take care of her elderly father. The father is temporarily in a wheelchair after an operation. The house is strictly ruled by the narrator's mother, a domineering woman who is suspicious of the stranger and resents the whole idea of hiring a foreign worker.

Manifested by letting in Brigitta despite reservations, trust is constantly at risk. Immediately after her arrival in Israel, Brigitta

goes to visit her sister in Tel Aviv and does not come back as expected. This makes the narrator wonder if she has been cheated into buying a plane ticket and taking care of necessary bureaucratic arrangements while all the while Brigitta has plans of her own and does not intend to stay with the family. Eventually Brigitta returns but the seeds of mistrust have been sown. Similar incidents keep occurring. One has to do with a brand-new candy-box that suddenly disappears. Brigitta explains that she had to get rid of it because it was swarming with worms—but is she telling the truth? Another serious incident concerns a gold bracelet that disappears and reappears, leaving several questions to be asked: Did Brigitta try to steal it, or did she just put in in a safe place as she claims? A recurrent mention of the keys of the house (the narrator and her mother wonder if it was a mistake to give them to Brigitta) supports this theme.

A similar ambiguity can be discerned in Ravikovitch's story "*Shira*" ["Poetry"]. The protagonist, a woman named Dinah, lives with her paralyzed wheelchair-bound mother. On the day described in the story, she finds her mother sitting on the wheelchair with her face turned to the wall. When she demands an explanation, the Filipina caregiver tells her: I thought that she would like to look at Matisse's pictures on the wall. The reader as well as the narrator does not know for sure if this is true, or is this a case of abuse? Is the caregiver lying? Has she betrayed the trust given her? The story neither affirms nor disperses the suspicion.

Unlike Steiner's first stage, trust in the works under discussion does not have the upper hand, and moreover, its absence is not exclusive to the relations between the host society and the "other". In *Brigitta's man*, an atmosphere of mistrust dominates the entire novella. It is at the core of minor events such as the protagonist's phone call to the taxi driver who fails to take Brigitta back home from her sister's house. The man gives an excuse—but is he to be trusted? Mistrust also characterizes more significant events. For example, the father insists that Brigitta help him wash himself even though he is getting better each day. Is this sexual harassment? Do they collaborate behind the mother's back? In this case, the suspicions raised threaten to tear the family apart, as eventually they do.

The Second and Third Stages: Aggression toward and by the Source

Steiner's second and third stages involve violence: violence against the "other" and then by the "other". In his words, "after trust comes aggression; …the density of hostile or seductive 'otherness' is dissipated" (297-8). However, the translator, as an individual, and the target culture as a whole, are themselves under threat: "The import…is not made in or into a vacuum; …the act of importation can potentially dislocate or relocate the whole of the native structure" (298-9).

My claim here is that in the situation under discussion, the second stage (aggression toward the source) and the third stage (aggression by the source) coalesce rather than occur in a linear order, as in Steiner's scheme. Moreover, certain occurrences cannot be clearly categorized. The "other" is at one and the same time the victim and the agent of aggression. This can be illustrated by Ravikovitch's story "*Shraga Rinati*" which is named after one of the characters. The story depicts a family that resembles the one described in the above-mentioned story "Poetry": a woman named Dorit lives with her wheelchair-bound mother and a Filipina caregiver. Dorit thinks that the caregiver neglects her mother, but she is too weak and passive to deal with the problem. This is in accord with Steiner's observation that when the native structure is weak and unstable, it cannot cope successfully with the foreign import. Unlike the reader who receives information from the third-person narrator, Dorit does not know what bothers the caregiver: she has been sexually harassed by Shraga Rinati, a pervert who spends his time peeping through windows and trying to catch a glimpse of couples in the act of making love. The caregiver considers going to the police, but her friends convince her to give up this idea—a police investigation may lead to some of them who are illegal workers and thus under threat of expulsion. The story clearly links the caregiver's distress and the neglect of her patient. In this complex situation, both parties seem to be the aggressors.

A similar ambiguity can be discerned in *Brigitta's man*. On the one hand, the narrator's mother treats Brigitta like a slave, making

her clean and scrub the house from morning to evening instead of making her take walks with the father (the association to Cinderella is unescapable). On the other hand, Brigitta, in her sweet and seemingly innocent manner, gradually pushes the mother aside, and manifests her victory by choosing her own chores rather than obeying instructions. Joining forces with the father and taking advantage of the couple's mutual alienation and the cracks in their marriage, she eventually makes the mother feel like a stranger in her own home. Even the narrator, who is responsible for inviting Brigitta to the house, feels threatened, not just because Brigitta symbolically moves into her old room, but also because she seems to have taken her place in her father's heart:

> I tried to clarify to myself if, underneath the grudge and disappointment, I am also a little jealous of Brigitta. Not easily I had to admit that she threatens to rob from me the only thing I have never doubted that I owned: my father's absolute, self-understood, blind devotion to me. (Liebrecht 37; my translation)

In this case, too, aggression is linked with sexual harassment. When Brigitta first arrives at her employers' home and unpacks her suitcase, the narrator observes her father gazing at the little pile of underwear on the bed: "Light and very plain cotton underwear, some spotted with tiny flowers, and beside them tiny bras like girls' first bras. He was drawn to the sight, leaning forward in his chair like a curious boy, suckling with his eyes the Filipina's underwear and bras" (17; my translation).

Observing this, the embarrassed narrator stands with her back to her father so as to hide "his gaze from my mother and the underwear from his eyes" (17; my translation). This is the first sign of her father's sexual attraction to the young caregiver. Later, when Brigitta is nowhere to be found, the narrator finds her father in her room. The doors of the closet are open, and he is passionately feeling the "thin cloth" of one of her dresses (22). These episodes can be interpreted symbolically in relation to Steiner's scheme. Steiner describes the second stage of translation in terms of invasion or penetration. At this stage, translators cope with the

otherness of the source by forcing their way into it, "leaving the shell smashed and the vital layers stripped" (Steiner 298). The father's behavior in Liebrecht's novella, too, can be described as an invasion: if Brigitta's body is (still?) inaccessible, he makes do with gazing at her underwear and feeling her dresses. It should be noted that the sexual dimension of the second stage is part of Steiner's scheme. Not only do his words evoke sexual intercourse but he also explicitly juxtaposes "the cognate acts of erotic and of intellectual possession" (Steiner 298).[4]

The theme of sexual harassment is further developed when the narrator finds out that her father and Brigitta use to lock themselves up in the bathroom although the father is perfectly capable of washing himself. In a private discussion with the narrator, Brigitta hints that she expects to be compensated for the special services she provides. Is she thus the victim of aggression, or is she threatening to ruin the family by taking advantage of its weakness and instability? Again, the novella does not provide an explicit answer.[5]

The indiscernibility of the second and third stages distance these literary works from Steiner's scheme. At the same time, however, it makes them echo Derrida's ideas on hospitality. According to Derrida, hospitality entails an antinomy. On the one hand, what he refers to as the absolute ethic law of hospitality—which is beyond local laws established by an individual or a political authority—requires that the host shares his house and all his belongings with the foreigner who seeks work or shelter. On the other hand, one can only be a host so long as one's position as "master of the house" is retained (Derrida 5). Hospitality in the sense of obeying the above-mentioned ethic law entails the risk of turning one from a host into a hostage. In *Brigitta's man* and some of Ravikovitch's stories, the dangers of hospitality (see also Still, 2010) become a reality: the caregiver becomes mistress of the house, replacing, although temporarily, both mother and daughter.

The Fourth Stage: Balance

According to Steiner, "The a-prioristic movement of trust puts us off balance"; we are now in a state of disequilibrium (300). The fourth stage is the restoration of balance: "Genuine translation will, therefore, seek to equalize" (302). Steiner regards this stage as the peak of the process: "The enactment of reciprocity in order to restore balance is the crux of the métier and morals of translation" (300). Based on Hegel and Heidegger, he notes that "being must engage other being in order to achieve self-definition" (301). A successful process ends when both source and receiver are altered, an alteration which—in its best—is an "exchange without loss" (302). In both literary works, this is not how the process ends. In Steiner's terminology, the process of translation is not a successful one when it ends before the completion of the fourth stage.

In *Brigitta's man*, the offended mother leaves home and Brigitta takes her place as lady of the house, and perhaps as a lover as well, but only for a short while. The father who misses his wife, and perhaps is frightened by his own behavior, asks his daughter, the narrator, to find Brigitta a new job and a new home. Brigitta leaves, and the mother returns. This is not the kind of balance sought by Steiner because the "other" is excluded. The exclusion of the "other" is highlighted by the narrative point of view. In *Brigitta's man*, the point of view is that of the Israeli first-person narrator. The "other" embodied by the Filipina caregiver remains strange and aloof. Approximating Steiner's translator who "knows what he does not know" (392), Liebrecht's narrator frankly admits: "I have no idea how her head works" (66; my translation). Metaphors of hunting which, as mentioned earlier, play a part in constructing the aggression stages, also indicate that the "other" remains remote and withdrawn. In the beginning of the novella, Brigitta turns her eyes from "the hunter's eyes of my mother" (18; my translation). Toward the story's end, when the narrator and her father visit Brigitta in her new home, the narrator tries "to capture her eyes" but fails (63; my translation). If the eyes are the mirror of the soul, as the saying goes, then Brigitta's soul remains hidden and unknown.

In *She came and went*, the third-person narrator usually sticks to the point of view of the Israeli protagonists. In five out of the six stories under discussion, the Filipina caregiver has one and the same name—Rubbie, although each Rubbie is employed by a different family. This creates the impression that Rubbie is a formulaic name, used by people who are not interested in the true name or identity of the person concerned. As in *Brigitta's man*, the Israeli woman in the story "Poetry" admits that she does not know what goes on in Rubbie's heart, all the more so because the poems that she writes in poor English are no more than romantic clichés and do not seem to have any relevance to her real life and emotions. An attempt to guess what Rubbie thinks, in another story "*Ha-kayits ha-Indiani shel Tkuma*" ("Tkuma's Indian Summer;" *Tkuma* is a proper name meaning "resurrection"), leads to one of the many absurdities that fill the stories. When her patient suddenly gets up from the wheelchair and walks, Rubbie is shocked because no one has ever heard of a paralyzed woman, after a stroke, suddenly stands up as if she were "a pioneer in *Gdud ha-Avoda*" (81). The latter name, literally meaning "Work Battalion," refers to a socialist work group in mandatory Palestine. A landmark in the history of Zionism, it is highly unlikely that Rubbie, a Filipino worker, would know this. That being the case, it is a somewhat humorous way to admit that Rubbie's mind remains a riddle. In such a situation, the "other" can hardly take part in a harmonious relationship.

She came and went differs from *Brigitta's man* in that there is no cure even for the Israeli characters. At the end of the stories, Dinah, Dorit[6] and other characters experience loneliness and despair, undisguised by the occassionally cynical tone of the narrator. The ending of "Tkuma's Indian Summer" well represents this mood: "Even when it seems that things were better, they were not" (Rabikovitch 83; my translation). This can be linked to the author's biography. Ravikovitch suffered from depression for many years, and when she passed away in 2005, her death was at first interpreted as a suicide. Her emotional situation probably did not encourage any restoration of balance in her literary work.

Conclusion

The starting-point of this article was Salman Rushdie's description of migrants as "translated men". If one can speak of "translated men" as he does, there must be a translating culture and a translation process as well. In order to examine the possibility of viewing migration as translation, I analyzed this standpoint through George Steiner's ideas about the translation process, which are easily applicable to human relations. This led to the discovery of similarities as well as dissimilarities, the main dissimilarity being the fusion and indeterminacy of the various stages identified by Steiner. The literary works under study here serve as a test case and constitute only a small segment of Israeli cuture, and not necessarily its representation. The stories ultimately are about Israel and Israelis more than about the caregivers from the Philippines. Coming from a different culture, the latter remains distant, aloof, and one is never sure if they are the objects of aggression or its agents. Despite this vagueness, one cannot escape the impression that the process of translation as depicted in these literary works is a failed one. In Steiner's words, "where the native matrix is disoriented or immature, the importation will not enrich… After a time, the native organism will react, endeavouring to neutralize or expel the foreign body" (299). It is not impossible, however, that other literary works, or other media such as cinema, or a sociologically oriented research[7] can lead to a moderation of this conclusion.

Notes

[1] Two authors mentioned by Steiner who proposed such a "triadic model" are Dryden (1992/1697) who distinguished between metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation; and Nabokov (1964) who differentiated between paraphrastic, lexical and literal translation.

[2] The first part of the novella was translated into English by Evan Fallenberg. See: http://www.jewishfiction.net/index.php/publisher/articleview/frmArticleID/83 (Accessed 26 February 2016)

[3] The stories are: "*Shira*" ["Poetry"], "*Yad smol im sha'on*" ["Left hand with a watch"], "*SARS*", "*Ha-kayits ha-Indiani shel Tkuma*" ["*Tkuma'*s Indian summer"], "*Dorit me'ira paneyha la-kha'yim*" ["Dorit is pleased with life"], "*Shraga Rinati*".

[4] For a critique of Steiner's metaphorical language from a feminist point of view see Chamberlain, 1992.

[5] Liebrecht's depiction of the caregiver's sexual harassment is not detached from reality. According to a report by Idit Lebovitch, coordinator of caregiving workers, "Many caregivers fall victim to sexual harassment and abuse by their employers and their families"; See: https://www.facebook.com/notes/kav-laoved-migrant-caregivers/danger-at-home-caregivers-and-sexual-offenses-at-workhome/446327312114182 (Accessed 26 February 2016.) The novella differs from real life in that the situation is ambiguous.

[6] Protagonists' proper names starting with D support the impression that the author, Dalia Ravikovitch, inserted autobiographical elements into the stories.

[7] A more optimistic depiction of the relations between the Israeli family and the Filipina caregiver can be observed in the film *Jellyfish* (Geffen and Keret, 2007) in which Joy, the caregiver, succeeds in making peace – though temporarily - between an elderly woman and her alienated daughter. The film also shows how the attitude of the elderly lady towards the caregiver changes from resentment to sympathy and understanding. A real-life success story concerns Rose Fostanes, a caregiver from the Philippines, who won the first prize in a popular Israeli music contest in 2014, and received a special permission to work as a singer in Israel. See: http://www.jta.org/2014/01/20/arts-entertainment/new-visa-for-filipina-caregiver-allows-her-to-work-in-israel-as-singer (Accessed 26 February 2016); this, however, is not necessarily a real sign of assimilation, and obviously not a representative story of Filipino caregivers in Israel.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Liebrecht, S. *Ha-gever shel Brigitta* [*Brigitta's man*]. In *Nashim mi-tokh catalog* [*Mail order women*]. In Hebrew. Jerusalem: Keter, 2000, 11-68.

Ravikovitch, D. *Ba'a ve-halkha* [*She came and went*]. In Hebrew. Tel Aviv: Modan, 2005.

Secondary Sources

Angelelli, C.V., ed. *The Sociological Turn in Translation and Interpreting Studies*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2014.

Bhabha, H.K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Cheyfitz, E. *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

Derrida, J. *Of Hospitality*. Trans, R. Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.

Drori, I. *Foreign Workers in Israel: Global Perspectives*. Albany: State U of New York Press, 2009.

Dryden, J. "On translation." 1697. In R. Schulte & J. Biguenet (eds), *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, 17-31. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Nabokov, V. Foreword to his translation of *Eugene Onegin*. New York: Bollingen, 1964, vii-xii.

Niranjana, T. *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1992.

Rushdie, S. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books, 1991.

Salazar Parreñas, R. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Miigration, and Domestic Work*. Redwood, CA: Stanford UP, 2001.

Steiner, G. "The Hermeneutic Motion." In *After Babel*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975, 296-413.

Still, J. *Derrida and Hospitality: Theory and Practice*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010.

Trivedi, H. "Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation." In P. St-Pierre & P.C. Kar (eds), *Translation: Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2007, 277-287.

Wolf, M., & Fukari, A., eds. *Constructing a Sociology of Translation*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2007.