

# The Writing of Philippine Social History in the Filipino American Novel *TWICE BLESSED*

**Hong Shao**

*College of Foreign Studies, Guilin University of Electronic Technology, Guilin  
541004, Guangxi, China*

*\*Corresponding author e-mail: sh0321@guet.edu.cn*

**ABSTRACT.** *The Filipino-American novelist Ninotchka Rosca's novel "TWICE BLESSED" explores the social history of the Philippines through such historical events as the national presidential election. Through the writing of "big history" such as the Philippine presidential election and "small history" such as the words, deeds and daily activities of major figures, the author allows readers to experience the social and historical conditions of the Philippines between the 1960s and 1980s, so as to stimulate readers' national historical memory and relevant historical thinking of the Philippines. The novel presents a grand and colorful picture of Philippine history, in which the author's worries and hopes about the social and historical destiny of the Philippine nation are revealed between the lines.*

**KEYWORDS:** *TWICE BLESSED, Philippines, Social history writing*

## **1. Introduction**

The novel *TWICE BLESSED* is one of her excellent works by Filipino-American novelist Ninotchka Rosca. Born in the Philippines in 1946, she is a well-known novelist, journalist, feminist and human rights activist. She was imprisoned for political reasons during the Marcos dictatorship and then forced into exile in Hawaii, and finally she moved to the United States. The novel is set during the period when former President Marcos ruled the Philippines from 1965 to 1986. Former President Marcos came to power as an advocate of economic and social reform, a tenure that made him famous for corrupt crony capitalism and politically repressive authoritarianism. The discourse context created in the novel reflects the social background of this period. Ninotchka Rosca also won the 1993 American book award for this piece of work, which was written in 1990.

## **2. *TWICE BLESSED* and its strategy of history writing**

The novel is the story of the Basbas brother and sister who were born into the clan of warlords in the Philippines and tried to win the presidency by fair means or foul. During the more than 100 days between the day when they were declared the winners of the Philippine national presidential election and the day when they were sworn in as the President, they tried to suppress the old President through various illegal practices in order to ensure his safe taking office. Through a strategy of historical writing, the author gives readers a glimpse of the historical development of the Philippines in this relatively simple election story.

Wang Hui (2008) believes that the essence of "history" is the complete coupling between the original existence and the spirit of human subject, and is the double superposition of the process of space-time and humanistic discourse. "History" itself includes "big history" and "small history". The former records the political, economic and military events with the imperial elite as the core, while the latter records the activities of the common people, daily life, marginal events and figures. In literary works, the writing of "big history" and "small history" is integrated. The specific living environment of literary characters, namely "small environment", is highly unified with the surrounding social background and historical trend, namely "big environment". It is impossible for literary works to describe a highly abstract "big history" as historical books and political materials do. Instead, it must "see the big history" through the "small history" composed of countless details, events and characters in daily life. According to Marxist philosophy, the so-called daily life is all the living perceptual activities of the individual who constitutes the world, and is the microscopic basis of the whole social life. Compared with non-daily life such as society and country, daily life is an individual survival activity field with "individual" as the theme, family as the unit, and individual survival and development as the value goal (Wang Fuming, 2008). Marxist historical materialism holds that daily life is the premise and foundation for the occurrence, existence and development of the country, society and other non-daily life areas with macro totality, and is the real historical field of human society (Marx and Engels, 1995). The novel *TWICE BLESSED* is actually about the "big history" such as the national presidential election, but the author carries out "small history" narration through the daily activities of the main characters in the novel, so as to stimulate readers' national historical memory and relevant historical thinking. Next, the author discusses the historical conditions of the specific historical stage of the Philippines from the perspective of historical writing.

## **3. The writing of the social and historical situation of the Philippines from the 1960s to the 1980s**

The Philippines is a country with a large number of islands. After the Spanish colonial period, the American colonial period and the Japanese colonial period, it has formed a mixed political culture based on the patriarchal thought of family system and the foreign cultures (Chen Hongyu, 1980). Before the Spanish rule, the

Philippines had a loose social structure, and the tribes (Barangay) were independent and at war with each other. They did not form a strict social class system and could not build a strong and unified nation state. After independence, the Philippines adopted the constitution enacted under the auspices of the Americans, including the American-style two-party system, presidential system, parliamentary system and presidential election system, which show the strong influence of the American democratic political system in the Philippines. (Zhang Xiaoqian, 2014) The writing of this novel should be set in the period of constitutional democracy, more than 20 years before and after the dictatorship of Marcos.

The author describes Manila in the constitutional era, which is the center of the story. “and when she discovered, upon arrival in Manila, that rural warlords from all over the archipelago were building or had built their own forts in the city, she was gratified, she felt herself to be part of an insidious assault on the metropolis and its almost exclusive control of both history and modern times, with its airports and docks open to the world , its horizons bristling with buildings and neon, and its gallows-like electric posts which enabled residents to enjoy the most recent of conveniences. The assault was the more successful for its being unremarked, and she relished the secret belief that the city was losing its homogeneous character as a preserve of urban folks. Unfortunately, the pleasure did not last long; as the migration of the rich proceeded, so did that of the poor, and in both the central district and peripheries of the city, the mushroom-pale shanties of desperation sprouted with breathless fecundity. She began to feel she was dancing on grounds which cracked slowly and inexorably with seismic tremors occasioned by the weight of the human mass pressing in on the city. She had moments of rage when visions of massacres comforted her. Because that was politically unwise, she kept her disgust at the explosion of humanity about her a secret. (Rosca, 1992: 83)” From this vivid description, we can know that the Philippines at that time began to develop its social economy and build a lot of infrastructures. The open policy and development have brought about large-scale population migration, obvious gap between the rich and the poor in cities, and urban population explosion, which have laid a hidden danger for the bloodshed and turbulence due to social conflicts.

With a rising birth rate and a growing concentration of land in the hands of a small number of families, more and more Filipinos could not find work, so the export of Filipino domestic helpers became a profitable export project. Teresa's father, a provincial governor, saw the opportunity and invested in a domestic economics school. The graduates became famous at home and abroad and effectively exported the surplus human resources. (Rosca, 1992: 86) At that time, the Philippine islands belonged to the rich and powerful class. At that time, no one believed in the law and contracts could not be fulfilled. The real protection came from the rich and powerful. When the injured workers in the presidential inauguration stage collapse saw the appearance of the VIP Katerina, they shed tears of emotion. They did not hesitate to sign the disclaimer, trusting their lives to her promise, as was common in the Philippines at the time. (Rosca, 1992: 192) That is to say, there was no institutional guarantee in the Philippines at that time, and only the patriarch in the family clan existed in people's mind. Hearing the promise of the rich

and powerful Katerina, they felt secure and hopeful. As Katerina, the heroine of the novel, has said, “We have two countries in this country. (Rosca, 1992: 163)”, she thinks there are two competing forces in the Philippines. In the eyes of the reader, the Philippines also have layers of upper and lower classes. In a word, the society of the Philippines at that time presented a mixed and complicated situation of the rich and poor.

Malays have migrated from the Malay Peninsula and surrounding islands since the first millennium BC; and since the third century AD, Indians and Chinese have migrated to the Philippines. Indian immigrants have brought Buddhism, and Chinese immigrants have brought advanced farming, craftsmanship and Confucianism. These immigrants intermarried with each other and with the locals, making the Philippines a multi-ethnic country. Many Filipinos call themselves "complete hybrids". Although "hybrid" has a sense of self-mockery, but it is not an offensive name, but another name of multi-ethnic integration. "Hybrid" refers not only to the fusion of Asian ethnic groups, but also to the much broader integration of Asian, European and American cultures. They are Asians, and the blood of Malays, Chinese and other Asian ethnic groups flows through their veins. They were devout catholic people who have an American-style belief. (Gao Qiufu, 2011)

At that time, white people in the upper class in the Philippines tried to purify their white blood in order to continue their white genes, which was undoubtedly against the historical trend of development in the Philippines.

There are two wonderful narrations in the novel. “...Armand, the only son of the wood-and iron Gloriosas. This was no clan, only a singular family bearing the name, for unlike their Spanish friar progenitor, the Gloriosas were oddly and notoriously infertile. They had managed to keep the purity of their Caucasian blood intact for two hundred years, through the simple expedient of importing blond whores from Macau, introducing them to high society as the Duchess de La-de-da or the Marquesa de So-and So, locking them up in the ancestral plantation south of Manila, and breeding children as soon and as fast as possible. Unfortunately, after three children at the most—usually two girls and a boy—the women’s wombs would seem to be stoppered and there was nothing left to do but send them off with a sum of money to a quick divorce in Hong Kong. They were quickly forgotten, except in the family’s official genealogy, where they were listed with their fake titles. Every other generation, the Gloriosas married their first cousins, ensuring the consolidation of their genes and inheritance at one stroke. (Rosca, 1992: 21-22)” In order to ensure the pure blood relationship of the family, the Gloriosas did not hesitate to take the practice against human ethics, which was not in line with the law of natural development. And finally the Gloriosas family was bound to be eliminated by history.

Another narrative is about the inbred deformed children of the Montelibano-Basbas clan. “...the invalid looked like an albino frog, with stiff, spike eyelashes, no eyebrows, and absolutely no forehead, only the top of a bald skull sloping back an inch above the pale gray staring eyes, madre mia. It was the unfortunate result of who-knew-how-many generations of first-cousin couplings...(Rosca, 1992: 53)”

Later, it is described that the clan of Montelibano-Basbas took this inbred deformed child as the totem of the clan, bathing, changing clothes, burning incense and praying for him every day, so as to bless the prosperity and lasting peace of the clan (Rosca, 1992: 54).

Although the upper class is constantly trying to purify the family bloodlines, the fact is that in the long history of its family reproduction, there may be some foreign bloodlines, which is the historical reflection of the development of the diverse ethnic groups in the Philippines. Armand's Gloriosa family also has Chinese ancestry, which happened to his many-times-removed grandfather who had an affair with the daughter of a Chinese merchant and was given the key to a Celestial's treasure box. This bit of Armand's eastern lineage has long been a great secret, because if revealed, the many-times-removed grandfather would be punished by the inquisition. (Rosca, 1992: 23) Certain practices of individual families cannot change the history of multi-ethnic integration and development in the Philippines. Those families violate the laws of natural development and will eventually be eliminated by social history.

The Philippines in the constitutional era, including the capital Manila, developed in a difficult situation and gradually moved towards true independence. As the heroine Katerina discovered, "She was surprised to discover that the city itself seemed to have entered the same miraculous stage of liberation, raising itself like a green sprout from the rubble of the war and sniffing at the sun and sea air, from which the odor of scorched aircraft and exploded ships was slowly fading." With the trauma of war, the Philippines emerged from the historical colonial mountains and gradually explored the path of freedom suitable for the development of the Philippine nation.

#### **4. The author's worries and hopes about the social and historical fate of the Philippines**

The "TWICE BLESSED" refers to the Basbas twins, Hector, the president-elect, and Katerina, the future first lady. But the President's term was extended by a dispute with his predecessor. Their symbols, the sun and moon, herald the beginning of the Gemini era in the Philippines. But the "TWICE BLESSED" presented in this novel does not bring us any other kind of happiness. On the contrary, it brings us a double sense of oppression as the power-hungry twin brother and sister approach the house of power. "TWICE BLESSED" has become double oppression.

The author is extremely worried about the Gemini government. Power in the hands of the twins has become a sinister machine, driving people to plot to protect vested interests, to satisfy their extreme desire for power and totalitarian rule. The author's historical account of the election dissects the menacing machine of state power, in which the Basbas bribed all sides to achieve their positions of power by sending their henchmen to hand out money bags, pearl necklaces, gold Rolex watches made in Taiwan, etc. After the election, the period before the inauguration of the President becomes a period of competition among winners, losers, political players and other forces, all of which compete to occupy a favorable position in the

new era. The history of the Philippines seems to be in an endless loop: one former President is out of power, another new President is embarking on a journey of corruption and pleasure with renewed hope. Each new President took office under a complicated mask of suppressed anger, but the pomp and solemnity of the inauguration masked the shouts and resentments of the new republic.

The author uses dark brushwork to construct the sinister power discourse of the novel. It is obvious to the reader that the author has constructed the twin's desire for power into a monster, which devours everything it wants with its long tentacles, or destroys them which it does not want. The author expresses great concern about the corruption of all kinds of power and doubts whether such leaders can bring hopes for the development of the Philippine nation.

On the winning group's side, Hector is unquestionably the king of Kings, the core, and the rightful President. His personal appeal in the winning group is undoubtedly the greatest. In the novel, the twin brother and sister cannot tell the unclear relationship between them, and sister Katerina for his brother's admiration and love is overtly expressed. Hector's attraction to Armand has made him become Hector's confidant and loyal henchman and also Hector's brother-in-law and an indispensable pawn. For Teresa, Hector is also charming and binding, and her important position in the group comes from her loyalty and obedience to Hector, efficiency and intelligence. Hector is surrounded by religious forces and military forces, all of which are attracted by Hector's human charm and united with him to fight for his life. All these signs indicate the trend of patriarchal family rule in the new Philippine government. The author is undoubtedly worried that the new Philippine government cannot get out of the mire of traditional Philippine politics and bring new atmosphere to the Philippine nation.

To the author's relief, the new Philippine government offers new hope. At a time of great misfortune and difficulty for the president-elect, the Basbas group did not compromise with the old ruling forces. Whatever the process is, it is the arrival of a new leader of the young, western-educated party that may make a difference to the Philippines. At the end of the novel, the author shows that there are some people with conscience and morality in the new Philippine leadership. They are Teresa and Armand. Teresa, in particular, accidentally embarked on the political path of the Basbas family, becoming Katerina's best friend and the brain of the Basbas family political machine. She is undoubtedly the winner in life. But she was fed up with the hypocrisy of the corrupt political model, unable to withstand the extraordinary political pressure, even want to expose the new President's illegal and false election behavior. Although she gave up in the end, she is undoubtedly a Filipino with some democratic ideas and conscience. She gives the author hope that Filipinos like her can do something for the Filipino nation in the new Philippine government and bring new life to the Philippines.

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