

# The Character Identity Writing in the Filipino's American Novel "TWICE BLESSED"

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**Abstract.** The novel "TWICE BLESSED" by Filipino-American novelist Ninotchka Rosca starts the writing of Philippine history through historical events such as the country's presidential election. The author, through the identity writing about the main characters in the Philippine President candidate group, lets the readers understand the different identities of the presidential election activists, that is to say, to understand what kinds of people do what kinds of things in the Philippines, what kind of Filipinos will lead the Philippine people to pursue the path of national development, so as to stimulate the readers' national memory and thinking about the history of the Philippines. The novel presents a grand and colorful picture of the Philippine history, revealing the author's worries and hopes for the fate of the country and nation between the lines.

**Keywords:** *TWICE BLESSED, Philippines, identity writing*

## 1. Introduction

"TWICE BLESSED" is an excellent novel by the Filipino-American novelist Ninotchka Rosca. Born in the Philippines in 1946, she is a renowned novelist, journalist, feminist and human rights activist. She moved to the United States after being imprisoned for political reasons during the Marcos dictatorship and forced into exile in Hawaii. The novel is set during the reign of former Philippine President Marcos from 1965 to 1986. 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 novel, which was written in 1990.

This novel mainly tells the story of the Basbas brother and sister, born in a warlord clan, who lead their campaign team to win the presidency by any means they can find, regardless of morality and justice. There are four main figures in the campaign group, and they have succeeded in winning the presidency. Through the identity writing of the four characters, the author tells us what kind of Filipinos are running for the President, and it is these people that will lead the Philippine people pursue the road to national development.

## 2. The Identity Writing in Novels

People live in a world that values identity. The importance of identity lies not only in the fact that it is an idea in theory, but also in the fact that it is a competing fact in contemporary political life. In cultural studies, identity in English is derived from old French *identite* and later Latin *identitas*, which are influenced by the essence and existence of later Latin *essentitas*. It is made up of the root of same, *idem*, which is similar to the Sanskrit word *idam*. Therefore, the basic meaning of identity is: the same quality or state of being in matter, composition, quality and attribute; Absolute or essential identity, and sameness or oneness of a person or thing in any situation or at any time; A person or thing is itself and not any other state or fact. (Murray et al., 1989) So the readers of this novel *TWICE BLESSED*, through the identity writing of the specific characters, can learn the identity features of the main characters who are running for the President, which include their gender, class, family background, political status, economic status, and other social relations. These identities are stamped in their every word and deed with their own brand that cannot be hidden or discarded. If there is a correspondence between identity and class, then politics can change and reverse the identity and the corresponding power relationship. (Zhang, 2018) In this novel *TWICE BLESSED*, the unremitting efforts on the political path of the main characters in the presidential campaign group have brought about great changes in their respective identities, and at the same

time they have gained powerful power to change the fate of others. The identity writing in the novel is the key to the interpretation of the novel. By grasping the identity characteristics of the characters in the novel, readers can grasp the characteristics of their words and deeds, as well as the motives behind them and the social background factors, which can lay a solid foundation for grasping the theme of the whole novel.

### **3. Identity Writing in the Presidential Campaign**

The four main figures in the Basbas group who are running for the President are Hector, Katerina, Armand and Teresa. In this election, Katerina was in charge of outreach, Hector was in charge of official communications, Armando was in charge of specific campaign issues such as the construction of the Rizal Park stage, and Teresa was the twin's childhood friend and confidant, the campaign strategist (Rosca, 1992: 10). The identity writing of these main characters is interwoven with the narrative of the whole novel, and the clarification of the identity background of these characters is also more helpful for readers to grasp what kind of Filipinos were thinking of and doing what in the social and historical conditions at that time.

#### **3.1 The Identity Writing About the Presidential Candidate Hector and His Twin Sister Katerina**

The twins, Hector and Katerina, were born into a poor family in the Montelibano-Basbas clan. Their parents died and they were placed in foster care with their uncle in the clan, where they had to do housework in exchange for a dependent life. Katerina was given over to the head of the house as a parlor maid, and Hector went to work as a handyman for his uncles and cousins. He polished their shoes and belts; When they finished riding, they bought them coke and cocoa, and sometimes the little guys would knuckle him mischievously on the head, and the women with long fingernails would pinch his ass. His uncle liked to whip him with a belt as an exercise. Well, they were a little nicer to the twins than to the servants, but they were still servants. True enough, they also needed to starve for hours, because Aunt Dona Perfidia was so strict about her family's budget that she kept a count of beans in her lunchbox. (Rosca, 1992:52-53) Many years ago, when Katerina was attending a girls' school, she was elected queen of the lantern and borrowed a pair of shoes from cousin Matrimonia, which it occurred to her later that her cousin had spitefully chose out of the closet of more than fifty pairs of shoes. They were very old shoes, with soles that had been changed many times, perhaps with the cheapest glue, perhaps without glue at all, with hard floor wax, the oil coating on the chicken soup, or mashed rice. As she danced the queen's waltz to her heart's content, the soles of her shoes fell off, perhaps because of the damp of December, and to the tune of 'the blue Danube' the sound of 'tap-tap-tap' was heard. Then her partner, the only heir of the sugar baron, blushed and looked down at his buckle; the suppressed giggles in the darkened ballroom gave way to laughter. Katerina made the wrong move, tripped and fell heavily on her partner, who was on his tiptoe, lost his balance and landed on his butt. (Rosca, 1992: 12) Remember once, twin brother and sister at the same time in the morning woke up, each one to grope for the other person's hand, so the day's first reaction is to keep fingers, or the palms together to form the appearance of the steeple against the damp in the grey room, which was to the outer of the kitchen, for Aunt Dona Perfidia's convenience to order them to work. (Rosca, 1992: 70) The common suffering and humiliation in the twins' poor childhood created an extraordinary relationship beyond kinship between them and formed their avaricious and vengeful character in their adulthood.

Hector went to military school at the age of 15, but when World War II broke out, he disappeared. Four months after Japan's surrender, he showed up at the gate of the clan plantation with two more servants and two crates of gold and silver, like a single man who had waged a war against the imperial Japanese army and returned victorious. When he left the military academy, he became very wealthy. He bought and sold food in the war and famine towns, collecting only gold, silver and precious stones. (Rosca, 1992: 26) Having lived through poverty, Hector showed his shrewdness by grabbing his first bucket of gold. His uncle was to take possession of the jewels in exchange for sending him to law school and giving him a small sum of money to start a law firm after graduation.

He then forged an alliance with his sister and, with the help of money from the Armand family, secured the post of defense minister in Garcia's government. The position allowed them to carry out a secret and illegal gold mining operation. The mine was located in the back hills of Montelibano plantation, something Hector had known since he was a child. This mine was not a rich mine, and was not suitable for commercial exploitation, but it was suitable for small-scale artificial exploitation, from which a small fortune could be made. Later in the novel, the readers can learn that Hector often has nightmares while waiting for rescue during the rest of his life after a plane crash on a visiting trip, which refers to the vicious crimes of these two periods of primitive accumulation of wealth. The wealth of the first bucket of gold is from his selling out the military school students' escape plan to the Japanese garrison and getting the Japanese pass; a second accumulation of wealth was made by deceiving recruited southern Muslim laborers into working for them, during which they thought they were in the service of jihad. The soldiers guarding the mine, pitting themselves against each other on behalf of the Muslim brothers, attacked the administration and killed half a dozen of its officers before being lured aboard a broken ship and sunk; All the more than three hundred soldiers sank into the rough sea, only a dozen of them survived covered in wounds. This is also the reason why Hector is ashamed of the Muslim soldiers in the south and does not want to go to the Muslim areas in the south. Hector's avarice and ruthlessness are evident in his coming-of-age story.

“Wealth didn't bring automatic immunity from what she dreaded the most, Katerina Basbas Gloriosa was discovering. Hitherto, she'd considered public humiliation to be poverty's natural by-product, but having been snubbed, flatly and thoroughly, in a succession of three cities and five towns, she understood that powerlessness was equal to being poor in the archipelago. (Rosca, 1992: 95)”. The rich and beautiful islands of the Philippines do not lack for wealth: coral and pearls in the sea, gold and silver and forests in the mountains, grain, sugar and coconuts in the plains, and mountains of accumulated wealth from the China-Acapulco-Spain trade and Manila-Hawaii-San Francisco trade through the ages. However, this wealth is hidden in the hands of the private sector and the church. Ms. Katerina has been salivating. Her mission in this life is to open up those folk treasures. This is a vivid description of Katerina's voracious character, and her appetite is no less than Hector's.

During the step by step process of pursuing the power throne by the twin brother and sister, their status has undergone earth-shaking changes. They can enjoy the infinite glory, while feeling a kind of spiritual torture. Katerina likes the white walls so she doesn't have to think about the hardships of the past. She wants to totally discard the past and present a new self. But she could not accept the complete abandonment of the past. There is a painful sense of separation. In the course of their meteoric rise, the twins move from home to home six times. (Rosca, 1992: 50-51) Each time the house is becoming bigger and more luxurious, but each time their moving has brought Katerina pain, because they inevitably have to give up some accumulated things, to adapt to some new miscellaneous things and some emotional separation. What she needs is her own space, a little quiet room, out of sight. "But why, she asked herself, an ache knotting itself in her head, did space grow smaller and smaller over time; why did space itself press in upon her even as the demarcations of what the Basbas twins owned and controlled expanded continually, geometrically? She would have to think about this, find the time to pursue the thought before it was lost the way all her thoughts were lost in everyday details. (Rosca, 1992: 71)" In fact, the answer has appeared in her own answer, because her greed for wealth and power has occupied her heart, her mind has been unable to hold these beautiful feelings such as family and friendship. In order to achieve their power goals, they have to pretend to be some other kind of identity, but once they get used to it, they lose their real selves, and this separation from the real self is painful in itself.

In addition to the dark side of the twins' character, there is also a more positive side. Hector once said, "Fear is what you have to think of. It is the single most powerful constant among the people of this archipelago. We are raised to fear everything. Fate, gods, the elements of nature, authority, even joy. We must separate the fear from ourselves. Let others fear, but we must never be afraid. (Rosca, 1992: 62-63)" This is a powerful voice that has the air of a leader. With his great courage Hector

should be able to lead the people of the Philippines to pursue a new path of development. During his presidential campaign, he has also delivered a series of nation-founding plans: the need to restore peace and order to the Philippines; he will lead a new liberation movement; restoring traditional values; universities should be bastions of independent thought, and the task of students is to study and prepare for future employment. (Rosca, 1992: 176) In the current situation of the Philippine people's cognitive thinking level and the turbulent social order, Hector's identity image as patriarch, idol and protector could give people a great sense of security and lay a good mass foundation for him to win the presidential election. In the process of waiting for rescue after the crash of his visiting plane, he makes a balance between life and death and power and wealth. He is willing to exchange all his wealth for the chance to survive. In order to survive, he is willing to give up all the pleasures, willing to live an ascetic monastic life, because he is the true son of the Philippines, he knows that survival comes at a price. He may not even enjoy beating his opponents. This narrative of the novel shows that there is always a corner in the heart of the greedy and evil person for conscience; people will die, their words are also good, and the instinct to survive lets him learn to compromise, learn to maintain a harmonious relationship with other forces in the society.

Katerina's personality also shows a positive side. The status of Filipino women is very low and their activities are confined to the family, having children to carry on the family line and doing housework to keep the family running. Educated in the west culture, Ms. Katerina is not afraid to speak her mind, get involved in politics and campaign. During her time away from home, she studies the social reality of the Philippines extensively. She finds a job by herself, pursues love freely, experiences the life of ordinary people, and participates in the cockfighting activities that men love to play, and even buys the winning cockfights and stewed and eat them for the energy of cockfights. When his brother Hector's survival was uncertain, "Katerina was to be rudely reminded that women didn't go around stepping on male toes, especially not on male politician toes, not even out of pique and though compelled by a tragic pride. (Rosca, 1992: 152)" But she decides to eliminate all obstacles, resolutely steps into the front stage to participate in the presidential campaign. Katerina's strong performance is also a clarion call for the awareness of Philippine women.

### **3.2 Identity Writing About Armand**

Armand was the sole heir to the Gloriosa family, an iron and wood magnate. When the marriage between the Basbas and the Gloriosa was first mentioned, Armand was a melancholy bachelor, approaching middle age. He has yet to recover from four years of turmoil in the Philippine society caused by the anarchy of the Japanese occupation. His father was dead, the social order was completely out of order, and the familiar life was over. All this gave Armand freedom he had never dreamed of. The national and provincial governments have disappeared, the parish priests have disappeared, the high society has disappeared, and even the gossip and moral guardians have disappeared. All sectors of social management were shut down, and survival became the primary objective and the greatest benefit. He had expected some sort of government to emerge over time, but the continuing conflict between the Japanese garrison and the communist-led guerrilla forces supported by the American army's far eastern forces made anarchy inevitable. (Rosca, 1992: 147) From the author's description, the reader can find some of Armand's character traits: he has no sense of independence and is not ready for the death of his father and the disappearance of the government. He even thought that after a while of chaos there would be a new government to settle things down and get back to normal life.

In those turbulent times, Armand also unconsciously became involved in this just cause. His family began to support the guerrillas, providing them with necessary supplies and even allowing them to execute Japanese prisoners in his backyard. The various military forces moved freely over his property, and his noble dignity and glory disappeared. His confidence was greatly damaged, for he was used to being respected and to giving orders. People who are used to giving the commands can't adapt to extreme freedom, because their freedom is also restricted by others. Thus, Armand had no one to command and no self-control. He ate, drank, played and did nothing.

Hector married his sister to Armand and came to stay with him for six days. He trained Armand into a light, strong, good-looking successor to the Gloriosa family. He swore a blood oath with Hector and became an integral part of the Basbas group. After the alliance, he experienced a complete love and affection that were unimaginable. But one thing he found out that night was that he belonged to Hector, forever. That night was the end of his orphan status. Hector accepted him. (Rosca, 1992: 184) Armand's compliancy to Hector also reflects Armand's weak personality as the subject of leadership, which also reflects Hector's natural patriarchy.

After Hector's plane disappeared, Armand showed a more mature side. Armand constantly reminded Teresa and Katerina that he had gotten rid of his grief and idleness, breaking free from the fainting pain and getting back to work, listing dos and don'ts. He also told his wife Katerina that she needed to improve in three or four areas. (Rosca, 1992: 189) At the critical time in the campaign, he also encouraged Teresa to embrace responsibility and her mission, saying that she was the only helper the Basbas could count on, that she had given her great courage and confidence, and that she had given a great deal of momentum to the campaign. Former South African President Nelson Mandela once said, what matters in life is not that we are alive, but that we can make a difference in the lives of others. Armand made Teresa confident and brave, and this encouraging behavior showed that Armand had become more mature and more capable of leadership.

### **3.3 Identity Writing About Teresa**

Teresa, the daughter of the governor of a province in the northern Philippines, was 24 when she first met Katerina. She had completed a girls' school and was the most learned member of her clan. A good deal of learning was no good, and no one came to ask for marriage, because she was notoriously stubborn, and frankly, she was too ugly. Her skin was dark, and she was skinny and clumsy, not to mention her flat nose and squinting eyes. Nor was it much of a drawback for the aspiring young of the thriving tobacco garlic clan. Five or six mistresses were enough to satisfy any man's desire for a beautiful woman. But there is also doubt about Teresa's sexual orientation, with a scandal faintly rumored when she attended a girls' high school. (Rosca, 1992: 13-14) Obviously, Teresa is an unconventional female figure, who is in no hurry to marry, hosting parties for her father in the family and accompanying him to the ribbon-cutting ceremony, nicknamed "black beauty" by local media. Her father judges her too cold-blooded. If she were a man, she would be a patriarch.

When Teresa was at a girls' school, she failed traditional lessons like how to walk, sit, talk, and manage maids and workers. But math, geometry, trigonometry and algebra were so good that students and teachers wondered if she was a real woman. Teresa, who is interested in western culture and knowledge, has obviously acquired western logical thinking mode and shown her intelligence. Therefore, she has a different perspective and thinking level from other people in terms of problems. Her father also asks her to help him deal with mysterious women like Katerina.

Teresa may be the brain of the Basbas campaign group, playing a crucial role in the campaign and the inaugural process. She is held in high esteem by Hector and Katerina at the same time. But who can guarantee her future? How many emperors in history exiled or killed their old officials early in order to prevent them from rebelling. She wants to keep video evidence of Hector's campaign fraud, which she could use as a bargaining chip in the future political market, so that the money would be enough to support her and her lover to flee to distant countries, but eventually she gives up. She is reluctant to leave her country, which shows her strong homesickness. Can a government official with a strong homesickness do more for the new government? In fact, Teresa's identity has the author's own shadow. Although in the United States, the author is always concerned about the development of the motherland, while revealing the author's beautiful expectations for the Philippines. Teresa admits that her life has been enriched since she joins the Basbas family. When it comes to choosing a boring life or a life that does something wrong, she clearly chooses the latter. For women, the latter means big business. But Teresa is already reflecting on whether she should have helped. She feels guilty, which shows that there is still a conscience in her heart. She and Armand are the people in the author's mind who can bring new hope to the Philippines because their

remaining conscience can motivate them to do something practical for the Philippines. Like Katerina, Teresa can also be a representative of the awakening of Philippine women's consciousness, because her anti-tradition, self-reliance and enterprising sense of identity can win more social and political power for Philippine women.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the novel, the status of the hero and heroine twin brother and sister Hector and Katerina has undergone a great change. They will not be able to peacefully deal with the huge promotion of political power status, but will use their newly acquired political identity to grab endless material rewards. For this reason, the author hides a huge worry between the lines, that is, the new President cannot lead the people to pursue the right path of national development impartially. The author still has great hope for Armand and Teresa, because they were born in noble or official families, who don't share the twin brother and sister's painful experiences and accordingly have better psychological states. They have become insiders from the outsiders of national politics and have even become the people who can decide the destiny of a nation, so their learning and vision will also play a significant role in the development of a country. The author also uses a lot of ink to write about the identities of these two characters. Readers can also see from the process of their identity changes that their continuous growth and maturity on the political road may bring new atmosphere to the Philippines.

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