

# The Construction of American Identity of Filipino Immigrants in *America Is in the Heart*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper traces the identity constructing process of Carlos Bulosan, the protagonist of the autobiographical novel *America Is in the Heart*. From his adherence to farming culture to his pursuit of democracy and freedom, he obtained cultural identity. From fighting for the interests of Filipino workers to working with Communists for materialistic workers, he gained ethnic identity. From the psychological orientation of Filipino immigrants' striving for American citizenship, he won national identity. When these three identities were obtained at the same time, he completed the identity construction.

**Keywords:** Identity construction, Filipino immigrants, *America Is in the Heart*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*America Is in the Heart: A Personal History* (hereinafter referred to as *America Is in the Heart*) by Carlos Bulosan (1913-1956) is a representative literary work describing Filipino immigrants in the United States. It is an autobiographical novel, published in 1946 and praised as one of the 50 most important works in the United States. It also attracted the attention of scholars at home and abroad. Later Filipino writer Elaine Castillo, the author of *America Is not the Heart*, said that "I know well that I'm one of Bulosan's many children." [1] In *America Is in the Heart*, the protagonist obtains the process of American identity construction of Filipino immigrants from the first person perspective.

Filipino immigrants in the United States are one of the fastest growing groups. By the 1980s, one in four Asian Americans had their ancestral home in the Philippines [2]. The Philippines has become one of the most important source countries for American immigrants. Thus the study on the identity and identity construction of Filipino immigrants in the United States has reference significance for the study of the living conditions of ethnic minorities in the United States.

From 1906 to 1934, about 120,000 to 150,000 Filipinos arrived in the United States. Since the Philippines was a colony of the United States at that time, the Filipino immigration movement to the United States was considered as internal immigration. With great demand for labors in the west frontiers, American government encouraged the Filipino farmers to work in the farms in the west. But in the United States, Filipino immigrants were nationals but not citizens [3]. The protagonist in *America Is in the Heart* is a member of a group of Filipino immigrants who came to the United States in the early 1930s and began a difficult journey of

American identity construction. Filipino immigrants were marginal ethnic groups in the United States. They are different from the mainstream society of the United States in terms of race and culture. Therefore, in the process of identity construction, they need to complete three types of identity: ethnic identity, cultural identity and national identity.

## 2. CULTURAL IDENTITY: FROM THE PERSISTENCE OF FARMING CULTURE TO THE PURSUIT OF DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM

Cultural identity helps Filipino immigrants adhere to their cultural customs in American Western society. The United States is a country with western political culture as the mainstream. Although all Americans except local Indians are foreign immigrants in a certain sense, during the American War of Independence and even for a long time after the Civil War, American immigrants were basically white Europeans. The social system and cultural beliefs that the United States has been using are based on the western political and cultural system. The Oriental political and cultural system of the Filipinos is not accepted by the mainstream American people. How Filipino immigrants stick to their culture and customs in American society is very important for their foothold in American society.

At the beginning of *America Is in the Heart*, Bulosan describes the cruel exploitation and oppression of Philippine farmers by colonialism and the landlord class. Thousands of Filipino farmers like the hero's father lost their land. In the Philippines, the national culture is deeply rooted in the agricultural tradition, and the people's life is also rooted in the land. Losing the land

means losing the identity of the country and the root of the national culture.

In his childhood, Bulosan witnessed the hegemonic bullying of American colonialism on Filipino farmers. His father lost the land on which the family's living depended. Post-colonialism believes that land is a symbol of agricultural culture [4]. As a result, he lost his cultural identity and became an exploited historical other. At this time, he has become a marginal person in the national society. He lives in a white dominated world and accepts the tangible violence and invisible spiritual separation of the white colonists. He began to forget his national identity, so the historical memory was broken, and finally chose to flee the motherland.

Then, with a longing for freedom and equality in the United States, Bulosan embarked on the ocean journey. But he was greeted by white people's naked racism. White women saw him basking on the deck and scolded angrily, "Look at those half taken savages from the Philippines." [5](98) Their words also foreshadowed a series of humiliations and verbal attacks that Bulosan would encounter in the United States: these monkeys, these bastards, and sex maniacs. When he first arrived in the United States, he was cheated into being penniless. Unable to pay the rent, he and his companions were sold to coolies at the price of five dollars. Along the way, he saw the persecution and abuse of Filipinos by the white, and he also experienced physical violence and spiritual insult. Bulosan began to realize that the equality he yearned for did not belong to Filipino immigrants.

However, the help of some white women such as Alice and Eileen gave him resistance, so the strong culture of the colonists was shaken, and the weak culture of the colonists grew through continuous negotiation and difficult interaction. Since then, Bulosan has realized his expectations for the United States, showing the germination of self-identity demands, which makes the cultural differences of racial discrimination turn to democratic and equal cultural consultation. Under the guidance of Alice and Irene, after reading the National Biography of the Philippines, he retraced the roots of agriculture in his home country. Through contact with his compatriots, he regained the historical memory and people's ties of his home country, so as to restore the severed historical memory. Therefore, the change of reading ideas made him clearly aware of the plight of ethnic minorities in the United States, but the resistance spirit of ethnic minorities and the reconnection with the memory of his home country gave him hope to reshape the history of American democracy.

It can be seen that Bulosan neither positioned the cultural identity as the pure traditional culture of the United States, nor as the national culture under the original colonial hegemony, but positioned the culture at the edge and boundary of the contact between the

Filipino national culture and the mainstream culture of the United States, and formed a new hybrid identity. Bulosan took the pen in his hand as his weapon of struggle. At first, he wrote letters and poems just to vent his feelings. Later, he gradually felt the power of words from his works, "I could fight the world now with my mind, not merely with my hands. My weapon could not be taken away from me any more." [5](224) He believed that making the Filipinos aware of the democratic history could help create their identity as an America. He began creating a flexible educational system for Filipino laborers in California.

### **3. ETHNIC IDENTITY: FROM FILIPINO WORKERS TO COMMUNISTS**

Ethnic identity responds to the question of who Filipino immigrants are. They are not Anglo whites. They compare themselves with others, find the same people as themselves, and distinguish the same people from those who are different from themselves to determine who they are. That is the reason in order to obtain ethnic identity, associations are mainly established according to the country of origin.

When Filipino immigrants realized that they were excluded by the mainstream society of the United States, they began to consciously save energy by the Philippine Labor Union. They unite the oppressed Filipino people to strive for higher wages and fairer treatment. However, due to the lack of theoretical guidance and the sabotage of white Helen disguised as the commander of the labor movement, the Philippine Labor Movement suffered a devastating blow. But at that time, the labor movement in the United States was also in full swing, and the oppressed workers of different ethnic groups joined the Communist movement. Therefore, when the movement for Philippine citizenship broke down, the protagonist and his brothers Macario and Jose transformed the Philippine Patriotic Front into an independent unit of the Communist Party and joined the second stage of the Communist movement. The hero will draw inspiration and courage from the Communist theory to resist the chaos and complete futility in my own life. "I felt something growing inside me again. That was the same thing for each of them that happened me: their common faith in the working man." [5](311) I was slowing becoming a part of their thoughts and hopes. The protagonist and workers of different ethnic groups sat together, listening and discussing eagerly. They are the common enemy of fascism. He realized that it is absolutely necessary to acquire the Filipinos with the state of the nation, and the advance of democracy was related to the working man's struggle for better waters and living conditions, including that of the Filipinos.

After the Filipino immigrants came into contact with the Communist thought, they found that the spirit of workers' resistance to oppression had something in

common with the spirit of resistance to colonialism in the agricultural tradition of their home country, and combined the American workers' movement with the anti colonialism struggle of the Philippines. After contacting the socialists, he found that the workers of all countries have common trust in the working people and need to establish a broader united front. Ethnic minorities no longer bind their culture and identity to a specific region. It's about connecting and working together. The narrowness of nationalism has risen to the union of oppressed workers in all countries. The American dream is no longer a personal ideal, not a national mission, but a goal for which thousands of oppressed American minorities work together.

In Chapter 46, Chinese, Mexicans and Filipinos gather under a roof, Mexican girls distribute gifts, Chinese farmers bring rice, Mexican men bring wine, share the joy of celebration and rights movement, and sincere laughter fills the whole house. This is fraternity given to the brotherhood of proletarian workers. The workers' movement and enlightenment education linked everyone together and fought for the same goal. Filipino immigrants finally began to play their role on the turbulent historical stage. "This was the one and only common thread that bound UNS together, white and black and brown, in America." [5](312) Ethnic identity makes the protagonist feel happy and no longer feel lonely and helpless. From the kind of love of the proletariat, the protagonist draws hope and strength from the configuration of his labor and relationships He started workers school and taught history of the repressed to the pea pickers, fishers, sugarbeet workers and make them understand the full significance of fighting for freedom and identity. He went from town to town, forming worker's classes and working in the fields By learning from them, "I was rediscovering myself in their lives." [5](313)

#### **4. NATIONAL IDENTITY: IMMIGRANTS FROM THE PHILIPPINES TO AMERICAN CITIZENS**

National identity helps Filipino immigrants clarify their national responsibilities and rights, and dispel public doubts about their identity. "Are they Americans?" "Are they friends or enemies?" Because Filipino immigrants come to the United States for a short time, and most people maintain close contact with their country of origin and pay high attention to the development of the Philippines, the American public, including Filipino immigrants, do not know what they should be loyal to and who they are.

On December 10, 1898, the United States obtained the Philippine Islands from Spain through the Treaty of Paris, opening a new era for this Islander country. Through this treaty, Filipinos were granted a meaningless "national" status. The real meaning of this

word should be that Filipinos, as island residents under the rule of the United States, enjoy the same rights and protected status as Americans, and can naturally return to American nationality. However, in fact, from 1898 to 1934, before the adoption of the Tydings-Mcduffie Act, the Philippine Independence Act, the sovereignty and legally protected national status of Filipinos have been excluded from the U.S. Constitution, let alone guaranteed.

Filipino immigrants occupied the cheap labor market in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, but their income accounted for only two-thirds of the average income of white men. This is mainly because most of them have no special training and skills, and they have not integrated into the mainstream culture and the life of local people in the United States. They are a marginalized group of people. Moreover, the skin color of Easterners exacerbated the discrimination of whites against them. They were not allowed to become permanent settlers, let alone owners.

Filipino immigrants in the United States have been criticized and rejected by whites especially from 1929 to 1933, during the great economic crisis. In order to earn a living, Filipinos have to compete with other races. This has also exacerbated the conflict between white Americans and Filipinos. They often complain that Filipinos have taken away their women and jobs. For this reason, many hotels, restaurants and even swimming pools are marked with "Filipinos are not allowed." *America Is in the Heart* also describes the exclusion of Filipino immigrants. The new landlady threw out the Filipino tenants in order to make the apartment houses as respectable as possible. In the hotel room, when they are entertaining their honorable guest, a prominent educator and two police detectives broke into their room and pointed their gun to the Filipinos. To this violation, and humiliation, the guest asked, "Is there no way to make the American people respect us in the way we respect them?" [5](307)

Congress and state legislatures have stifled all bills that benefit Filipinos. As a group, they deprive Filipinos of their right to live as free persons in a country based on this principle. When they trusted to the recruiting offices and volunteered for service, they were refused, since they were classified as aliens in America. The protagonist was confused, because they came to the United States as immigrants being Americans too. They are Americans all who have toiled for America. Why can't they live with the same self-esteem and confidence as other Americans?

Filipino immigrants have not only been physically isolated, but also suffered serious discrimination in spirit. The oppression and discrimination of mainstream culture and dominant society make them feel the pain of deprivation and marginalization, the injustice of social status and the difficulty of social mobility. At first,

Bulosan believes that through labor and struggle, he would be accepted by the society and start a family in the United States. He was determined to buy a house in Los Angeles and become a real American. But after several years of hard work, he not only still couldn't eat enough, but also suffered great damage to his body. His knee was broken by white police and he also suffered from tuberculosis. The doctor judged that he would not live for five years. Since then, Bulosan began gambling and became violent: "I'll kill you, you white men." [5](163). He felt free and liberated by attacking whites. When he first came to the United States, he was deeply saddened to see the violence and depravity of his former legal compatriots. He begged "America, don't change me in America." [5](126). Zhang and Chen believe mimicry of the colonizer is an attempt to assimilate into the mainstream society [6]. But by this way, Bulosan did not get his way into the American culture, but then become a person he once despised.

It was reading and writing that provided him with spiritual food, but what changed the direction of his life was the joint struggle with the vast number of Filipino workers and the proletariat. He became the leader of the Filipino labor movement, their friction and violence of life in America make them aware of the necessity of uniting together. They held a conference of labor and social leaders. The meeting was successful. A resolution was sent to Washington asking for the inclusion of Filipinos as citizens. Copies of the resolutions were sent to all Filipino organizations for endorsement. This time, the Filipinos were all working together, even those who had opposed their fight for citizenship were co-operating. Finally, President Roosevelt signed a special proclamation giving Filipinos the right to join the armed forces of the United States, which is a sign of recognition of their citizenship. The American citizenship of Filipino immigrants was finally confirmed, and his friends joined the army one by one in the name of defending the United States. He also wrote for the construction of the identity of Filipino immigrants.

Through this series of identity negotiations, Bulosan finally reconciled with his past suffering. He experienced another change, but he did not choose to flee back to his home country, nor was he forcibly assimilated by the American hegemonic culture. Instead, he created his own voice in contradictions and conflicts and constantly constructed his new identity. He finally constructs a new identity with great faith in American that had sprung from all hopes and aspirations. For him, America is no longer an "alien country", but a land he was fighting for, but "like a huge heart unfolding, warming me with its glowing reality." [5](326)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In *America Is in the Heart*, Bulosan links the workers' movement of all ethnic groups in the United

States with Filipino immigrants' struggle against colonial invasion for many years, and sought the gap space belonging to ethnic minorities. This space is the ideal and inevitable state of ethnic minorities in the construction of identity.

For Bulosan, Filipino culture and American culture are inseparable parts of his life. The former is its root and the latter is his dream, so he accepted two identities to construct his American identity. These identities reflect the status of Filipino immigrants in the United States and the recognition of the people from different aspects. When their identity is exclusive, they will be in an awkward situation and the society will be turbulent; when the identity is compatible, they will better integrate with the mainstream society, and the society will be stable and harmonious. Therefore, only when these blue identities are obtained at the same time can Filipino immigrants really complete the transformation of identity, that is, from immigrants to real American citizens, thus completing the construction of Filipino immigrants' identity.

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