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Twice Blessed, by Rosca

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Twice Blessed. By Ninotchka Rosca. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992. Philippine edition by Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholastica's College and Gabriela, Inc. 269 pages.

Twice Blessed, Ninotchka Rosca's second novel, refers to the Basbas twins—Hector and Katerina—the former, the president-elect of a mythical democracy whose term is stalled by the disputes of an aging incumbent; the latter, a would-be First Lady whose *rigodon* in the halls of power begins with plans for the grandest presidential inauguration in the memory of the republic.

As respective bearers of the signs of the Sun and the resplendent Moon, the Basbas twins usher in the Age of Gemini. The double blessing that this novel bestows leaves none of the peaceable gift of spirits but rather, the sinister grin of the twins' fatal obsession with power as they slowly slouch toward the presidential lair of power.

Rosca's focus is on power, its ability to establish a sinister machinery that drives people to plot and scheme in order to protect their gains, to fulfill their utmost desire for control and totalitarian rule. Fittingly, the democratic election serves as Rosca's metaphor in exploring the machinery of power. The Basbas house sends out its goons to do a unique sortie—distributing paper bags containing guns, strings of Mikimoto pearls, Rolex gold (made in Taiwan!), and wads of cold election cash, otherwise petty to its secret financiers.

Twice Blessed confirms Rosca's well-honed gift for mythmaking. Her republic reveals the post-election quandary of winners and losers, turncoats and political surfers rushing to gain a post in the new order. Even the matrons of the high society, supposedly well-bred and very wealthy, still envy the First Lady's inaugural gown. Remembered events of the Marcos dictatorship—its colorful tales of the comedy of political manners—lend resonances to Rosca's narrative.

When Rosca finally delivers the blow, it is to expose how each imagined republic only reprises the hope of doomed beginnings, each inaugural senseless but for the grandstanding schemes of another presidential demigod set to enjoy his epicurean tour. Each president's new republic begins as the sweet, sentimental reprise in a dark symphony of oppression and anger where pomp and majesty mute the cries of the *res publica*.

The novel's pitch darkens successively to achieve a sinister effect. The discourse of power is imagined as a vicious creature whose long and slimy tentacles extend to devour whomever it desires. In her long tale of familial intrigues and rivalry, Rosca hints of an incestuous relationship. Hector and Katerina leave the Basbas ancestral house to atone for a shameful act. Katerina's daughter, Epee, confesses to fornicating with an uncle. Hector desires his sister while sleeping with prostitutes.

Power grows stronger as it rides the crest of sexual desire. But because one is ultimately naked and vulnerable in desire, even sexual fulfillment

becomes a calculated move. The Basbas clan directs its lineage by allowing incestuous affinities to breed furtive children and a mutant icon kept languishing in the mansion's basement, much like the Minotaur. The family ministers to its henchmen with dark, sensual service that will preserve this lineage.

Moreover, Hector uses his sexual prowess to charm Armand, his brother-in-law, into giving him attention and fealty. Sodomy becomes a potent form of sexual politics, assuring Hector of political patriarchy and security. The human body becomes the material and ultimate desiring machine in this power play.

Rosca's poetic vision does not hedge in implicating organized religion in this bid for power. She indicts religious patriarchy for its influential and self-gratifying role in the political arena. The emergent Sect of the Sacred Limb plays the role of kingmaker, anointing the fraternal dictatorship of Hector and Katerina Basbas. Yet its patriarch is not above attempting a convenient re-alliance with the old order when Hector's presidential inauguration is delayed.

Precarious and somehow sensitive to the material of this novel is the character of Teresa Tikloptuhod—friend to Katerina and brains of the Basbas political machinery. Rosca braves but a meager distance in suggesting that Teresa crosses the Basbas path merely as a matter of destiny.

By the novel's end, Teresa's character—the bored daughter of an ambitious governor in the North and later on, as henchwoman who plays a key role in the presidential campaign—suffers to bear the burdened image of the fatal woman. Rosca takes the penultimate step and nearly misses her errand when she hesitates to pronounce the inevitable masculinity of corruption.

In so many ways, *Twice Blessed* is a difficult, challenging novel. Its fictional design, revolving perspective, and its concern for the discourse of power make it a masterful novel, unburdened by the fad and pressure of contemporary invention. Reprising the familiar Rosca tone, it is a brave accomplishment which delivers a vision both political and politicized, at times stark and painfully unsparing, but deftly wrestles with the myths of history.

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