

Abstract

Among the brightest literary lights of her generation, Ninotchka Rosca, now 75 and long based in New York, continues to draw attention and admiration for both her writing and her activism. The author of at least two celebrated novels, several collections of short stories, and books of nonfiction, Rosca looks back on a childhood steeped in books and reading, on her literary influences, and on her many and continuing advocacies. This lively conversation with prizewinning novelist and literature professor Clarissa Militante was culled from a longer interview conducted over Zoom for the UPICW's Akdang Buhay project in 2022.)

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THE TOUCHER OF BOOKS:

An Interview with Ninotchka Rosca

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(Editor's Note: Among the brightest literary lights of her generation, Ninotchka Rosca, now seventy-five and long based in New York, continues to draw attention and admiration for both her writing and her activism. The author of at least two celebrated novels, several collections of short stories, and books of nonfiction, Rosca looks back on a childhood steeped in books and reading, on her literary influences, and on her many and continuing advocacies. This lively conversation with prizewinning novelist and literature professor Clarissa Militante was culled from a longer interview conducted over Zoom for the Akdang Buhay project of the University of the Philippines Institute of Creative Writing in 2022.)

Clarissa: How would you want Filipinos to remember you or know you, especially the young ones?

Ninotchka: I'm a storyteller, mainly, and also an organizer of women in particular, women from all walks of life. I've been doing this for about thirty years, and I've worked with women who are domestic workers, sex trade survivors, nurses, healthcare workers, and so on. Occasionally, I have had to work with some very rich people, which is always a burden because you have to look like them.

C: So what's the story behind your name?

N: "Ninotchka" was taken from the film *Ninotchka* starring Greta Garbo. It was kind of fascinating, because many years later when I got to the United States, I found out that the character Ninotchka was based on the character of Alexandra Kolontai, the woman who convinced Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin to declare March 8th as International Working Women's Day. I was fascinated by that, so I started reading Kolontai, and she had very advanced ideas. An American friend of mine went to this small village in Cuba, and the father brought in this little girl and said, "This is Ninotchka." And my friend said, Oh, the name from Tolstoy? And the father said, No, from a great Filipina writer. I couldn't believe it!

C: Imagine! Your namesake, named after you!

N: In Cuba, wow. My friend kept laughing.

C: You've written about the stories of your generation in Endgame and in your novel. You've chronicled the dark period under Martial Law. It seems that it's not the past anymore, or that the past has caught up with us again in the present. So as part of that generation who fought, who sacrificed their lives as you've said in your book, and who were imprisoned, tortured, just like yourself, and went into exile—how do you feel about this happening again? Is the past coming back to us or have the Marcoses never left?

N: There are two things we should look at. One is how we separated the struggle against the Marcoses and Martial Law from a general struggle against authoritarianism. That's one. And second, we should look at the way we have framed the human rights struggle. We tend to raise a ruckus about human rights that are violated, rights that are specific to only a certain category of people, like freedom of the press, and the human rights of activists under the antiterror law.

But we have to be aware of the all-encompassing human rights as provided for in the United Nations Convention. One is the right to health, which is now affecting the whole population. And in the light of the Pharmally scandal, this is a crime against humanity. It might be difficult to push that kind of perspective, but we in the international women's movement worked for ten years to get the International Criminal Court to accept rape as a war crime. The right to security, the right to a job, the right to education—these are huge, encompassing, comprehensive rights.

And there is a third problem. People really hate me for saying this, but if you look at the struggle, from beginning to end—to now, it's not ended yet—it would seem like it has been fought between the poor and the middle class on this side, and the poor and the middle class on that side. Between the very poor embedded in the armed forces of the Philippines and the very poor embedded in the People's Army on this side. For the warlords, the landlords, the bureaucrat capitalists, the cronies—all of these historical events we have gone through were like momentary inconveniences; not a single one suffered any damage.

We were the ones who were damaged. Some of us had to run away, some of us went to prison, some of us were tortured, some of us were killed, some of us had to abandon our lives and go into guerilla war. But if you do not touch that sector, that ruling class, you reinforce the authoritarian idea that those who are at the apex of society, those with power and privilege, are untouchable. Not to be a war freak, but yes, be a war freak.

C: What kind of war, what kind of struggle or political action should we wage?

N: Authoritarianism, I use that in a very broad word—very broad sense. Authoritarianism includes the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship, but it is only a part of it. Authoritarianism is looking at the way our own social and political organizations are set up, that heirarchical sense that, you know, we're all down and here and these few people are on top give us directions and we're not supposed to ask questions, to be able to contribute, to critique, and so on. And that's from the church to the school, everything. Our advocacy groups, a great many are like that. This is what you should do, this is how you should look at things. Authoritarianism is a culture that is created for us. We don't create it. That's the distinction, that's the first one.

When we talk about struggle, we should also talk about the creation of something. Because you cannot just struggle without creating something. These are twin processes. Destruction and creation, anabolism and catabolism—that kind of thing. How to balance these two so that we are not simply focused on destruction but also on creating the society we would like to see.

C: Haven't we done that after EDSA 1986, or after we brought down the Marcos government? Haven't we created anything new, that we seem to be in that position again with the Marcos comeback?

N: I think the greatest thing that we forgot post-1986 was the issue of justice and not holding people accountable. For instance, there was a report in 1986 that [Gringo] Honasan had five rape cases against him. He was never held responsible for those. Juan Ponce Enrile, who held him responsible? All the cronies? And then, of course, once the Marcoses had returned, there was this push to integrate them back into society instead of calling for a shunning. You know how the Amish will shun you if you have transgressed against the community? They will just shun you, refuse to talk to you. But instead, we have had people rubbing elbows and trying to social-climb using the Marcoses.

And now they have gamed the whole country with this wax statue for many decades. It's like, he's not decomposing, and people would go there and drop donations and pay entrance fees to look at a wax statue. This is fraud! This is deceit. But nobody has bothered to call them out for it. That's why I always refer to him, the father, as the wax statue, and the son as the son of the wax statue, to remind people that they were gamed, they were gamed for decades over such a minor stupid thing. Horrible.

C: You refer to culture as a big part of the problem, yes. It's that very . . . it's a very critical part of the problem and, of course, the solution as well. So how do we battle that when we speak of culture? It seems the most difficult to change, to overhaul. Where do we start dismantling these aspects of culture that we seem to never get out of?

N: The most fundamental unit, as we say, of any society is the family. We have to start there. And the most basic relationship in the family is the relationship between man and woman, and the parents and children. That's where we see the authoritarian seeds starting. I was exchanging notes with one of the survivors of the sex trade in the Philippines. I

think she leads the empowered women survivors collective—these are all women who came out of the sex trade.

And her story was that she was raped by her father when she was practically a girl, had a kid by her father. Was trafficked into prostitution. Terrible, the story, on and on, one stage . . . one layer of oppression and exploitation after another. I was waiting for the relief, the moment where she will . . . [where] all of these things would stop, and she would be vindicated and justice would be given to her. And the last thing is, I see her post something like, “*Bakit naman?*” It turns out she had been diagnosed with cancer. She had HIV, she had cancer. First she had HIV, she got COVID-19, and then suddenly, cancer.

The sadness of our lives. And it seems like the only way to get out of it is to leave the country. Go abroad. Although that too is a different kind of sadness. So, start with the family. And start with the basic relationship in society—gender relations. I’ve always said this time and again: No society can be fixed until the situation of women—of womankind—is fixed. Basically that. It’s simple yet so difficult.

C: Two questions, Ninotchka. First, has the women’s movement in the Philippines even made a dent in this struggle against patriarchy and in terms of lifting women out of this social, political, very cultural malaise? And two, I can’t help but ask, but would another woman president help?

N: There has been some, but they are what you might call quantitative changes. The leap we’re looking for has not happened, mainly because there is a tendency to look at women’s issues and the advocacy of women as secondary to many advocacies. That’s why we think of women as a political class; we will not be moved from that. When they say you have to advocate for this, you have to advocate; when we look at labor, we look at it from a woman’s point of view. When we look at the peasantry, we look at these issues from a woman’s point of view. At the height of the debate on RH, the reproductive health bill, somebody said, “The RH bill is not a priority for the peasantry.” I said, it depends! If you are a peasant woman whose uterus has inverted after having so many children, and you’re bleeding from Cubao to Tarlac, what do you think is the principal issue? When the RH bill debate took place, I was really furious at these middle-class people pretending to speak for the peasantry. I was like, don’t tell me what they think. Go ask them yourselves, and ask the women peasants.

C: *To segue to the role of writing by women, women's literature, and what you've written yourself, Twice Blessed, seem really timeless because of what's happening in our country. So do you think this should be the continuing role of fiction, of literature, of writers—to chronicle history, to be political in writing? Would this help?*

N: I don't think writers can help to not be political. Can we do that? Everything is political. Politics determines our way of life. But to say that politics drives me to write is wrong also. There was a psychological study around the question of why writers write. And they came to the conclusion that writers write because they cannot help it. I am driven by the story. The integrity of the story is a very, very major concern for me. I don't ask, "For whom is this story?" Stuff like that, I don't have.

The second time I went to China, Mao Zedong was still alive, and we went to Yen-an. And you know, I practically memorized the *Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art*. So I was there, and the guide tells me, this is the spot where Chairman Mao delivered those talks, this spot here. I felt like bowing. There was a wall with these pictures of him delivering the lecture, and these were the twenty-six writers who attended the forum. I asked the guide, "Did any of these writers ever become really great writers? Are they known, well known in the whole of China, any one of them?" She hesitated, and then she said, "No." I said, that's it! Kaput! I am never going to listen to any external person who tells me what to write, how to write, and for whom to write.

C: *But would you say . . . can we seek truth in fiction? Can we look at novels as some sort of go-to when we want answers about life, about politics, history, about the different aspects of society?*

N: Yes, of course. Someone said at one point, you don't politicize the work, you politicize the writer. So there's no kind of imposition on the work. But there is a kind of demand on the writer to be responsible, to be accountable to the general society. My reading fare when I was starting as an activist included a lot of fiction.

To understand for instance the fascist regime, you go to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. And to understand how difficult it is to struggle against a fascist regime, you read the novel *Seven Red Sundays* [by Ramon Jose Sender]. There are so many things you can get from fiction, and the added bonus is you immerse yourself in the experience of others and don't just try to impose all of these political maxims on your own experience.

Instead, you broaden this, and you understand that this is the human condition. When we speak of the human condition, it is not your life alone. It is not your mission alone, as a writer. But it's larger than that. Do I make sense?

C: Yes, definitely. In fact, what I'm picking up as well is that a part of the commitment—a big part of the commitment—of the writer is also to what you can call, perhaps, to language, to the elements of literature, to really write and produce good work in terms of style and not just about being political in the content but a commitment to literature itself; to the genre, to create, produce not only good but great literature. But outside of writing, because with you having really devoted most of your life producing not just great literary works and great articles, essays, nonfiction but also to your . . . to the women's movement, to your activism—are they coequal?

N: If I do not write, I just go insane. As that study said, a writer has to write. Like a hen, whether with a rooster or not, the hen will lay an egg. That's why we have these unfertilized eggs. They can't help it. And so the thing is—and this is a principal contradiction in my life—how to balance the two. Because writing is isolated work, whereas being an activist is highly socialized work, you work with groups etc. But sometimes the two will meet.

C: You're very active in social media. Has this new technology made a difference at all, whether in the positive or negative sense, in your activism or in the general sense of political activism now?

N: There are some advantages, some benefits because the outreach is huge. Compared to, if you hold a picket, a rally, and so on—unless you're capable of amassing a million people. That's a great advantage.

On the other hand, the disadvantage is that it's so easy also to spread falsehoods and lies. And it's so easy to use this to mind-massage people as we saw in 2016. I was like, how can people believe this, how can people believe this! The NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) declared Duterte the best mayor in the solar system—how can people believe this? And all these memes like, "The Pope said," my god. And also the absolute consciencelessness of deliberately doing this to our people. And in pushing them into a world that is not real, into a fantasy, that kind of thing.

C: How about in terms of organizing, you're reaching a lot more people now, I think, compared to before we had social media. I think you have more followers—

do you have more followers from the Philippines? Because I see people liking, reacting, asking for your thoughts. So, the reach for your political activism has also expanded, and this technology has made a difference.

N: Yeah, I think there are about 27,000 on my page now.

C: Oh my god! . . . Since we've been talking about politics, about your writing, if it's all right with you, can we talk about your family? Was there someone in the family, or experience within the family, that influenced you as a writer?

N: I grew up in a very strange family where the primary relationship was between the elders. Not between elders and children; the children were seen, not heard. Very traditional. On the one hand, very traditional, and on the other hand very nontraditional. Because the women were very intelligent—went to college, UP, this contradiction in the family. But mostly, I was raised by the household help. I was somewhat alienated from the authoritarian elders. I taught myself how to read and how to write before I was five. Because I could only be seen and not heard, I thought maybe I could put down my thoughts on paper.

At one point, I overheard my *yaya* talking to one of the *kasambahay*—they're called *kasambahay* now—about me. And she said something like, "That kid was born old." And I quite agreed. My older sister who was in college, UP, had this bookcase full of books. We had a fabulous—a fabulous—library. Fabulous! You know, leatherbound. But they were for prestige, nobody goddamn read the books except me. Well, she goes, "Don't touch the books." As soon as she was gone, because she stayed at the dorm in UP, I was like "touch, touch, touch." So I climbed the bookcase and took down the thickest book I could find and that was Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and started reading, and I think I was never the same ever after.

C: And you were at what age during that time? You were very young.

N: I think between six and seven. I was being interviewed once on Dutch Radio or TV, and I said, you know, I read this book, and I feel like I have been jousting with windmills all my life, you know, from that book. But the values of fighting evil, fighting monsters, you get that and you're very young.

And the second instance was when the *kasambahays* of the neighborhood found out I could read and write. This was my great pleasure in my childhood. They would buy Filipino comics, the *Tagalog Klasiks* comics, and they would make me read the text because they

couldn't read them, they couldn't read the bubbles. They would all sit behind me and look at the comic frame by frame as I was reading the text. Then they would buy *Bulaklak* and *Liwayway* and make me read the stories aloud to them.

C: Where was this?

N: In Manila! They would all sit there, and it would be in the afternoon because the employers were having siesta. And then the wind would be whistling, the sun shining, and the birds singing, and I would be reading these fabulous stories in Tagalog. So I came—and then they would pay me, five centavos each of them! I had no cash flow problem as a kid; I had so much money, good god! But I came to the wrong conclusion: that reading and writing can make you money. Wrong conclusion!

C: So what will come next from Ninotchka Rosca? I've been reading about this manuscript that you promised to release.

N: I got very traumatized with publishing, you know. Yes, with books. My last book experience was not very nice. I'm not talking about my work but cowriting. So, it was extremely traumatic for me. You know, just to sign the contract is like—people don't understand how fragile writers sometimes are. But anyway, it's called *Elemental in Exile*. It is a retelling of the Makiling myth.

C: Just the language itself is a journey and not always a . . . it's complex.

N: I had one summer when I read all of the Russian literature I could lay my hands on. I would go into this reading frenzy. The whole of Russian literature, and then at one point, all of Rabindranath Tagore. I would be seized by this—what would you call that . . . when you indulge, splurge.

C: So it's like a message, to writers, especially to young writers now, that you cannot really be a good writer if you don't read many works of fiction or poetry, whatever genre you're in.

N: When I first came across Thomas Mann—*Death in Venice*, I was very young then—I learned so much from that short story, in terms of technique, device, etc. Then I came across [Franz] Kafka. You know the precision of language, the precision of description, things you learn from reading. I'm very heavily influenced by German writers by the way, much more than French. I say that because—

C: And Russian, too?

N: And Russian. But all my friends then at UP were into French symbolism and all that. I was very heavily into German literature. Somebody at one point asked me who my favorite writer was when I was in the States, and I said Thomas Mann. And he said, "That is a very heavy favorite, you know, for somebody who comes from the Philippines." And I'm like, what do you think we are, lightweight? You know they insult you in various ways. But, Thomas Mann if you want to learn techniques—ah! Devices, you know, he has all of them.

C: Any final message both to activists—feminist activists—and writers as well?

N: We need so many stories about people whose stories are not being told. We need many, many stories about women. We need many, many, many stories about fisherfolk. We don't have that, considering that we are an archipelago. Where is the water in literature? We need many, many stories about so many sectors. We need to start putting together the disparate threads of our narratives, of our historical narrative.

I think I spoke about this before, where you have the predominion era, the indigenous peoples. And then you have the Spanish occupation stories, the American occupation, then the Japanese occupation. We have to put this whole thing together to solidify, consolidate our sense of who we are. There are forces in denial about this. Yes, we are children of colonialism, we must learn to accept that. And understand how our culture can be both good and bad. But my thing is, hey, just keep writing.

I have three people in my head. I have the political commissar, argues with me about anything political I write. I have a literary critic who criticizes every literary piece I write. And I have the poor writer who has to try to keep these two voices quiet. When I write, those two are silenced. I will let the critic speak after—only after. And then after the literary critic is done, I will allow the political commissar to, "Hey! [points] This one and that one." So keep writing, the criticism will come after, the correct politics you can always create after, but the stories, they remain the fundamental concern of the writer and always the integrity of the story. If a peasant gets killed in the struggle, let him be killed. Do not suddenly invest him with superpowers.

C: I get that.

N: I will tell you something that critics do not understand.

C: Please, yes.

N: The main character in my literary works is Time. Always, Time, with a capital T, Time.

C: Now I know how to teach your novel! Thank you for that.

N: Namaste!