

39.

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVE DISCOURSE IN 'THE FORGOTTEN CHILDREN' BY CHITRA B. DIVAKARUNI  
ALA GERARD GENETTE**

**K. Abirami**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Srinivasa Ramanujan Centre,  
SASTRA Deemed to be University, Kumbakonam -612001.

&

**Dr. B. Krishnamurthy**

Formerly Head, Dept. of English, SASTRA Deemed to be University, Kumbakonam-612001.

***Abstract :** The paper focuses on the effect of the narrative strategies handled by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her short story 'The Forgotten Children' from the collection, 'The Unknown Errors of our Lives'. The collection has nine stories revolving around the life of immigrants and also people who gets dislocated in India and present their hurdles and struggles. The paper focuses on the narrative theories spelled out by Gerard Genette, a French structuralist. Genette has given tools to make a comprehensive analysis of novels, short stories and any other narrative. The analyses reveals the effective handling of the past events narrated in the story by a nameless narrator.*

***Keywords :** Errors, Divakaruni, Forgotten Children , Genette, Immigrant*

**Introduction**

The Forgotten Children is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story of a sister and a brother who has to live their happy and contended only in fantasies. The story revolves around a father, mother and their two children. The story is focalized through the sister, who narrates their childhood days. So, it is auto diegetic narration by the sister. The sister's name as well as the brother's name is not mentioned in the story as the children face because of irresponsible parents is universal. The story reveals the tough childhood they had with their quarrelsome, drunken father and their voiceless mother.

The opening lines 'Through the years of my childhood, when there wasn't much to hold on to, I had a fantasy.'(145) conveys that the story occurred at some point of time from the present moment. It is Analeptic and reaches to the point of their childhood. The opening paragraph describes the tough time, the children had with their drunken father. The children had to hide them from their father when he comes home drunk. The brother would cuddle himself against his sister and it is difficult to tell the two apart.

The story has many *pauses*. The narration stops and a past time are described in detail by the narrator. Their family moved a lot because their father lost one job after another because of his belligerent nature. But he managed to find another job as he was a skilled machinist but always on a lower remuneration.

The difficulties the children faced are summarized. The children were the ones most affected as they had to change their school often. They missed their previous lessons in school because they didn't have books and so couldn't answer in the class. They became almost invisible, sat in a corner of the canteen during lunch and ate their

rolled brown ruti packed in old newspaper. They longed when they saw the starched uniform, packed sandwiches of the other children. They always had a feeling that they were being talked about and felt ashamed for a bruised thigh. They doubted whether their classmates would have known about their mother asking for credit from the subji wallah, or their father being helped to home from a toddy shop, last pay day. They learned to arrange their hair to conceal a scar and they had to leave behind a lot of their favorites- a book of fairy tales, a stray yellow dog they used to feed, a mango tree perfect for climbing and a few friendships formed.

The sister thought of her brother and herself as 'We'. He was indispensable and followed her always in silence. The sister had never thought that her brother had a different opinion about their life. Parental hostility had thrown them together as the only consolation.

She talks about different episodes in their life which happened during their childhood. She recollects an incident that happened when she was eleven and he was eight. The family moved to Duligarh in Assam, a sagging oil town and the people there were not friendly. The municipal office had put up a model poster all over town displaying a model family to insist on family planning. One of those posters was pasted at the back wall of the school. The girl is used to looking at that poster all afternoons till her neck ached.

The poster is again described using pause. The poster had a picture of a smiling young couple holding their hands and a boy and a girl playing tag around them. 'We Two, Our Two' were the statement written in the poster. The girl had a question as the family in the poster was similar to hers but she and her brother were not happy. The poster remained a fantasy for her.

Then she describes of the watching of the poster in the afternoons. The girl stood watching it until the sky changed to dull yellow. Her brother tugged at her arm in exasperation when he became hungry. He asked 'Why do you waste your time staring at that silly picture?'. His interest was to pluck guava from the trees on the edge of the road.

There follows another description of the after effects of watching that poster. They missed their bus and had to walk to their home in the scorching heat, clothes sticking to the skin, books becoming heavier. When they walked through the bazaar, the girl had a question in her mind whether they would be identified as the children of the lady who came in the evening moving among the dull scaled fish and shriveled beans. The girl thought that they would be compared with the family in the poster.

Next is the description of their house in Assam, an old British bungalow which the children loved. The sister says that it was the first real house that they lived so far. It was a long, low structure built for some forgotten purpose outside town. The house was far from everything, her father had to bike to the factory and her mother felt lonely but she didn't complain. The flakes of falling plaster coated everything like giant dandruff. The windows did not shut properly and the malevolent -looking insects with burnished strings wandered in at their will. The roof of the house leaked and when it rained they had to make their way around strategically placed buckets.

But for the children the house was a perfect one, in the wooden porch they played marbles and enjoyed their hot water bath in the claw footed bathtubs. The spear shaped grills at the windows gave a feeling that they were living in a medieval fortress. Then she describes the servant's quarters which was a small cottage set far back into the bamboo grove that grew behind the house. It was first discovered by the children. The mother requested her husband to rent it out to some factory watchman but nothing happened. The children prayed god for it to stay empty so that they could play.

The cottage was dim and cool even in the hot afternoons because of the huge tree with large round leaves like upturned palms. It was covered with spider webs and the children found a trap door that matched exactly like the wooden flooring. The children were happy to know of it even though they didn't use it. They pulled a cot to over it and brought a sheet from the house to cover up the cot. After they returned from school, they lay in the cot and the sister told stories to her brother.

The cottage made the sister to tell about the fantasy. The fantasy is a meta diegetic narration. It is given in present tense and it is a scene as the story time corresponds to the narrative time. In this fantasy too their parents move again in a three wheeler loaded with bundles and boxes. But the sister and the brother are left behind. But the mother has an instinct about the children and she looks around before gets into the three wheeler. They want the mother to stay with them but they know that it could not happen. They let her go with their father. They continue to live in the servant's quarter, she cooks and cleans and teaches the brother whatever she learned at school. The brother would go fishing and they sell some of it to buy rice, salt and shoes. Then, they will begin to look like the children in the family poster. Above all, they need not live in fear. And one day, they are covered with snow while they sleep and they sleep forever side by side.

The story then navigates to the place where the narrator left the story earlier,. The author summarizes their naughtiness in the servant's quarter, They take things from the house and store them there. When the mother discussed this with Lakshmi aunty, she said that they are the actions of the spirit of a man who hanged himself from the living room lafters. She advises to burn mustard seed in an iron pot while chanting the name of Lord Rama.

The author used iterative narration when it is about their father. His entire career is summarized in a paragraph. In the latest job, their father had foul of the foreman. At each of his jobs he found someone to hate. He was a free spirit and never liked to be ordered. In the previous employment, he gashed an overseer's arm with a broken bottle and the police had taken him away for a while. Then they would pack again, 'looking up railway timetables, deciding what to leave behind'. Their conversation is given in simultaneous narration. Their father is muttering curses at the foreman and drinking from a bottle. This happening was a usual and at this time, mother would rub his arm to soothe him and plead him to ask for transfer as the children have only now begun to settle down. Moreover, he is not any younger to find another job.

These actions of the mother and father happened so many times so it is iterative. Sometimes he would agree and other times he would beat her up. They would think about the fantasy in which their father was dead. Followed by this is a

meta diegetic narration of their mother's village with emerald coconut trees. She had eloped with their father and shut the doors of her ancestral house forever.

The father, when he was in a happy mood, was very active and spent nice time with the family. He sings and plays with them and was very affectionate to their mother. Once, the sister happened to wake in the middle of the night and overheard their parents expressing love for each other cordially and she was also taken by them with love.

Because of the troubles at work place for the father they are moving again. When they came back from school, the black trunk was open with some of their clothes already in. The narrator felt like crying. The actions and feelings of the mother and the daughter are given in simultaneous narration. The mother was emptying the kitchen and said that they were leaving the next day. Her face had new wounds and they did not ask why. The children too went and packed. When she offered to help him to pack her brothers things he asked her not to touch his belongings. When she woke in the morning, he was gone.

The father's yelling is given in present tense 'Where is He?(160). The mother's pleading for her daughters innocence is summarized and the father left to find her brother. Mother relaxed and asked her where he was. She promised that she would not let her father beat her again. This is also an iterative as she had promised so many times but could not do anything against her husband.

They finally found the brother inside the trap door in the servant's quarter. Their mother carried him all the way back to the house and he too was convinced. The mother smashed bananas with rice and milk which was his favorite dish. When they were about to eat, the food halfway to their mouths they heard their father coming.

The father's anger and what happened afterwards is given in simultaneous narration. The father beat him with his belt. Mother tried to save but only in vain. She too is beaten and also the sister, and in a moment her brother was fleeing into the dark, past the porch into the bamboo grove. The sister saw him and the glowing fireflies and she thought that that being forgotten is the best thing. She cried and she did not know whether it was out of happiness or regret for him. She remembered her brother as a patch of dwindling white as the bamboos shivered close.

## **Conclusion**

The narrative uses many pauses which enables the writer to provide short descriptions. Divakaruni summarizes their childhood and their relocation in various places in Assam, their longing and their fantasies in a non linear narrative form. True to the title of the book, the choices of husband by the narrator's mother are the first 'unknown error' from which other errors emanate. Her willing acceptance of his brutality unquestioningly is the other error. The boy's fleeing is to true happiness or to sufferings of a different kind is left open ended. The narrator's sticking to her family may equally be an unknown error, as there is no guarantee of happiness. With a father always inclined to his own personal feelings with no consideration for his children they remain forgotten children.

**References:**

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Unknown Errors of our Lives*, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 1995.
- Frederick Luis Aldama. "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*." The Free Library. 2002 University of Oklahoma 14 Jun. 2017 <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Chitra+Banerjee+Divakaruni%3a+The+Unknown+Errors+of+Our+Lives.-a086170514>
- <http://www.chitradivakaruni.com/books/unknown-errors-of-our-lives/>

