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Narrative Discourse in Divakaruni's *The Love of a Good Man*: An Analysis

K. Abirami

Assistant Professor
Department of English
SRC, SASTRA University
Kumbakonam -612001.

Dr. S. Barathi

Assistant Professor
Department of English
SRC, SASTRA University
Kumbakonam-612001.

&

Dr. E. Koperundevi

Assistant Professor
Department of English
SASTRA University
Thanjavur-613401.

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Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a diaspora writer who has published a considerable number of short stories, novels, and poems. Her works in general highlights the Personal transformations both real and imagined which are brought out through the lives of men and women represented in the stories. Most of her stories also portray the man-woman relationship, their expectation, frustrated lives, etc. The present paper analyses the story “The Love of a Good Man” from the collection *The Unknown Errors of our Lives* through the perspectives of the narrative discourse of Gerard Genette. The present research article analyses the mood of the story, in which the character as a narrator telling the story, so it is autodiegetic using reported speech and fulfilling directive function. The story moves constantly from present to the past and back again to present. So it remains interpolated. The story remains intricately structured.

Keywords: Narrative, Genette, Interpolation, Focalization, Diaspora, Immigration

Introduction:

The Diasporic clan of writers expresses their unquenchable thirst to return to their native country and they capture in words the alienation they face in their own land after their return. Divakaruni is no exception. Her works overflow with immigrant sensibility, longing for the day of come back. This fine fragile feeling of intense pain and frustration could be brought out by analyzing the narrative style of the stories. In the story titled “The Love of a Good Man” from the anthology, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* spun on the intricate fabric of family, the family

members, their cultural variations, etc. Memory also plays a vital role in her stories as the characters move back and forth through their memory lane.

The narrator in "The Love of a Good Man" is Monisha, who lives in the US with her husband and son. She begins her narration with a brief introduction about her childhood. The story explores her feelings of being abandoned by her father. The frustration and yearning of a daughter for her father are interwoven with hatred for him. This could be traced through different incidents that she recollects in the US. The story is a narration of a day's events in which her father visits her family.

Gerard Genette's Narrative Typology:

Genette has developed four analytical categories mood, instance, level and time, each with its subcategories in his book *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*.

Narrative Mood: Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An essay in Method* defined Mood, as the distance between the narrator and the narrated text. The narrator has different options to make from the four subcategories. Sometimes he may shuffle the techniques, to achieve the required effect. The character's words may be totally integrated into the narration. The author can also change the mode of speech by using the strategies of indirect speech. When he quotes the speech verbatim it becomes reported speech.

In the present story, the writer uses Transposed Speech, wherein the character's words or actions are reported by the narrator. In the story under analysis, Monisha narrates the events of the story. Her conversation with her mother, her relatives, husband Dilip and her father's words are given verbatim by the author. The narrator's own thoughts are reported in narratized speech: "What does surprise me is the hate, welling up from someplace in me I didn't know was there" (Divakaruni 93).

Narrative Function: As for the second dimension of mood, namely function; the narrator's dominance could be identified through their narratives. The story begins with the following line: "WHEN I was growing up in Calcutta..." (Divakaruni 89) informs the reader of some past happening in the life of the narrator. The narrator here performs the ideological function. The narrator, Monisha controls the events in her life and she comments and directs the readers of the story.

Narrative Instance: In Genette's narrative discourse, the next category "Instance" has three sections. The first is 'the narrative voice', as to who is speaking. Though in all narratives it is the writer's perception that is ultimately responsible for the creation of interest to read. As he tries to influence the reader, technically in a narrative he does not make reference to himself. He is in a sense absent. It is heterodiegetic. If the narrator is present as a character, then the narration is termed homodiegetic or if he happens to be the protagonist, it is autodiegetic. The story "The love of a Good Man" falls under autodiegetic narration as Monisha is the prominent narrator.

Narrative Time: Secondly, the question answered in the text is the time of narration. When does the telling occur with reference to the story? One of the ways would be a writer may tell subsequently what took place in the past; he may prophesy or dream of the future. The telling and the event may be simultaneous or a writer may make a collage of any two of them.

In the story under analysis, the writer moves between Simultaneous narration and Interpolated narration. When the narrator is talking to her husband on her father's visit and the conversation between Dilip and her father, her father was speaking slowly: "People do things, you know. They want something so badly; every minute feels like they're being held down underwater. Then years later they look back and can't believe they could ever have felt anything so strongly..." (Divakaruni 110). We have simultaneous narration. When she narrates about her meeting with Dilip in graduate school, and the conversation between Monisha and her mother, we have flashback. " 'What to do,' Mother said. 'Sometimes you have to forgive people.' 'Forgive! Forgive!' Next you'll be telling me you've forgiven my father for what he did.' 'I haven't' said my mother. 'But I keep trying; I have to, more for you and me than for him.'" (Divakaruni 113).

The writer also fused Interpolated narration in the story. Monisha travels in her thoughts from California to Calcutta and the narration becomes interpolated. When Monisha learns about her father's request to visit his grandson for his first birthday, the happenings of her life in Calcutta dominates her mind and she waves between her childhood, the days of abandonment are interpolated with her life in America. The past and present intricately mingle in the narration, in the following instances: One fine day, her husband attends the phone call, puts his hands in the mouthpiece of the phone and says "It's your father" (Divakaruni 93). Hate welling up in her, she reminds herself of the request, her father sent five years ago, to attend her wedding. She gave a strong, solid, sophisticated polite denial to his request which convinced her of the pent up anger of her teen years. Now, Dilip tells her that her father wishes to visit his grandson on his first birthday.

Her shaky hands makes her to drop the spoon with which she is feeding Bijoy and puts her cereal sticky hands over her ears and shouts 'No'. She sits in the kitchen floor and starts crying. 'And I cry as I haven't cried since the day at Nirmola crematorium when I watched mother's body burn'. (Divakaruni 94)

Dilip consoles her. She is under the impression that she has overcome the absence of her father but with a phone call again she feels ashamed. Dilip tried to convince her to agree to the visit of her father for the sake of their son but she became very angry and said "that wretch is dead" (96) and moved to sleep in another room.

Another saying which Monisha, the narrator reminds herself off is " . . . Anger is the great destroyer" (96). During the final years of life, her mother sensing that her life is going to end (which Monisha does not know) used to say it often. But after the death of her mother, she shouted at people at every opportunity she got. She believed that if her mother had more anger in

her she would not have let her father ruin her life as well as Monisha's. Her mother would be living now. After her mother's death, anger was her companion. She refused to live with her relatives. She applied to foreign universities and got a student visa. To buy her ticket, she sold all her mother's jewelry and silk saris except one. The sari which she kept was frayed and ivory coloured with a traditional red border. Her mother wore it every morning when she said her prayers. She thinks about her anger. "When I choose anger, did I have to pay a price?... Don't we all have to pay, no matter what we choose?" (98)

Dilip reminds her at dinner that he has to call her father back. She pushes her plate and insults him saying, "Once I met a man. I thought he was smart and sensitive. Caring. That was why I married him" (98). Dilip tries to convince her and tells her that she would regret her refusal one day. He says that Bijoy would like to see his grandfather and may love a photograph taken with him. In the meantime, blood snoozes out of her palm because of the glass break. She remembers again her mother's saying, "Bad luck follows glass breaking" (Divakaruni 99). Recurrently her memory moves the time lane back and forth.

Coming back to the present world where she faces a question from Dilip, she requests him not to talk about remembering. As a caring husband, he cleans the place, bandages her, and takes care of Bijoy. He also apologizes for talking about her father and requests her to sleep. She again thinks about the day when they learn that her father is not returning, she had thoughts about the actions of her mother.

The narrator now comes to her present life and observes Dilip and Bijoy playing crocodile. Watching them, she understands why Dilip is in favour of her father's visit. It is not for her father but it is the fatherhood he supports. She declares at the moment that her father can come and stay for a night, a week after Bijoy's birthday. Dilip could not believe it. Later she thinks why she had changed her mind and imagines that she too would be reminded of her childhood play with her father. But instantly she realizes her hatred for her father leaving her. She thought of the reason for his leaving so many times yet she could not find it. "I could say I did it for Dilip, but I suspect there is more to it. Did watching my husband and son at play remind me of a time when my father and I, too, had done the same?" (Divakaruni 101).

Focalization: The third sub-category of Instance is Focalization -- the narrative perspective through whom the readers perceive the story. Zero Focalization is the narration by a third person and he is better informed than characters. In internal focalization, the story is presented through a character. However, the focalized cannot present the thoughts and feelings of others. In external focalization, the character narrator acts as a lens. He can present only what he perceives from the outside.

"The Love of a Good Man" is perceived through the eyes of the narrator, Monisha. She could portray the thoughts and feelings of herself but not about her mother. The narrator describes the relationship between herself and her mother which was unlike any other parent-child

relationship. They talked about anything under the earth- her college professors, new movie, the rising price of Ilish fish but they rarely spoke about what they really thought. She says, “We buried our hurts inside our bodies like shrapnel” (Divakaruni 90). Her mother protected Monisha like the glassware, forever from falling. When her mother confirmed that he is not coming back, she sent the chinaware which he had bought to the nearby orphanage not destroyed it as Monisha expected to be.

On hearing her father’s confession, Monisha became furious and excused herself saying that she was going to bed. She could not forgive her father who had taken away her mother’s life, “...precious and fragile as this silk I am wearing, and ripped it apart. And now he wanted the easy solace of confession”. She had listened to her father saying “...except regret” (Divakaruni 111).

Narrative Level: Genette’s third category is narrative level. Various reading effects result from shifts in narrative level, traditionally known as embedding. Within the main plot, the author can insert other short embedded narratives, told by other narrators from other narrative perspectives. This is a rather common technique that adds diversity to the narrative act and increases the complexity of the narrative (“Gennete narratology”).

This story offers meta- diegetic narrations of many episodes from the life of the narrator, Monisha and also becomes Metalepsis, as the narrative levels are breached because of the story shift from the narrators’ present life in California to her life in Calcutta. The memory of her childhood days is captured through the following words “And I would be back with her at one of the engagement ceremonies ...” (Divakaruni 89). The narrator, Monisha talks about the loss and embarrassment she faced as a teenager due to the loss of her father. Her friends wore European makeup and some of them with elder brothers whistled Beatles tunes which she could not familiarize with because of the absence of a man/ father. Though she longed to shout into her mother’s face “How the hell would you know . . .” (Divakaruni 90) but she had never done it.

After two years of her mother’s death, Monisha confronted Dr. Biswas who informed that her mother’s lungs are affected by cancer in the same year when her father left them for a new life in America. Her mother kept it as a secret from her. She feels that her mother’s saying proved itself ironically in her mother’s life: “. . . the loss of love, even if it’s not a good man’s can kill you”(Divakaruni 91). Now in America, she remembers the words of her mother: “The stars are the eyes of the dead”(Divakaruni 92). She says that she would remember these words when she spends happy time with her husband after putting their son in his crib. Further, she narrates about her meeting with Dilip in graduate school, a time when she decided not to marry anyone even though she had affairs.

Later, she describes the connotations of jasmine as a flower for the newlyweds and her mother had planted it all over the garden and she used to braid it in her hair when she was with her father. The narrator says that she ordered jasmine garland for the funeral of her mother even

though it is an inappropriate gesture. When Dilip and Monisha bought this house, she was stubborn that the jasmine vines should go. Later when she went to destroy them she could not do it and believed that her mother is watching over her and happy about the plant.

The noise of the toy ambulance with which her son and her father play, reminds her of the last day of her mother's life where she called for an ambulance, which got caught in the middle of a riot. Monisha admits "... I had forgot Or perhaps, self-absorbed as children alone can be, I had never really believed that my mother had an existence of her own before I was born" (Divakaruni 112). She then talks about the suggestions of relatives on what they have to do. Monisha hated all those advice asking them to write to her father and beg him to come back, apply for a green card, etc. "How could you let him go?" she'd say. "Now what's going to happen to you two? He hasn't been sending money either, has he?" Or Monisha should write a letter begging him to come back, or at least to arrange for your green cards." (Divakaruni 113) All these small narratives occur in the story at different stages of narration and so it becomes metalepsis.

Narrative Time: The final category of Genette's method is narrative time. It helps to analyze the relation between the narration and story in terms of time. Several choices are available to writers in order to achieve specific results. The sequence of events in the story may be arranged to produce the desired effect. The author can present the events in a chronological order or he may present them out of order and flashback (Analepsis) or flash forth (Prolepsis) - recollect past events at a point of time, or signal the development that is likely to happen in the near future. ("Narratology").

The technique used in this story "The Love of a Good Man" is Analepsis, merging of past and present in a beautiful combination which would give clarity to the readers and also keep them informed of what happened earlier in the story before her father left her which would give a better understanding of what is happening in the present, his visit of Bijoy, his grandson. The story narrates the arrival of the father of the protagonist to spend a day in her house. But the writer prepares the readers with a concrete background by telling through the narrator about her childhood life, her meeting with Dilip, telling about her mother and then the day of the arrival comes. Even in the crucial day of her father's visit, Monisha's mind swings forth and back between her memories of her mother in the past and with her father in the present.

At the moment when her father is at her doorstep, she realizes that it is her most dreaded and longed moment. She imagines that her father looked just the same as he was on the day he left them. Her mother cried and pleaded with him but she could not stop him. He carried only a small suitcase and he stepped into the taxi. She imagines that she let her father in and slams the door on his face "In the dream my father asks if he can come in. Certainly, I say, smiling graciously. Dangerously. He doesn't notice. When he steps forward I slam the door - thwack of wood on flesh, crack of bone- in his face." (Divakaruni 105). But, in reality, Dilip opens the door and she notices that her father's appearance has changed a lot.

The writers accelerate or slow down a section of a story to create desired changes in the minds of their readers. Here too the story pauses when it happens in the US and the writer summarizes the events that happened in the narrator's early life. The writer pauses for descriptions, for eg. when Monisha talks about her private moments with her husband, the narrative is descriptive. "Dilip's arm is cool against mine, and smooth as eucalyptus wood. The sprinklers come on, we hear invisible arcs of spray rising and falling, moving in predetermined rhythms across the garden... "If she were really looking down on us, my mother would be pleased to see that over the years I've come to accept much of what she tried to teach me. That saying, for example, about a good man's love"(Divakaruni 92).

The writer also leaves certain things unsaid about the story to leave room for readers' participation and for their imagination. Here, whether she had forgiven her father or not is an ellipsis. The frequency of the occurrence of events also creates some effect in the readers. The narrator talks about her mother and father frequently which establish the theme of the story. The events are singulative and they are not repeated.

Conclusion:

Divakaruni's picture of Monisha's pain and her transformation is revealed through this analysis. The narrative analysis brings out the theme of the story- capturing the dilemma of a daughter deserted by her father and the pain that has arisen out of the death of her mother who could have been a pillar of support and ability to adapt herself in a foreign environment with a drive and vigour. These are brought out clearly through the analysis. The narrative analysis further reveals the elements of feeling at one point and detached in another, a delicate consciousness- is represented well by the mastery of the narrative techniques of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Divakaruni has employed these elements in her presentation of Monisha's experience. The present study highlights the alienation of Monisha, the protagonist from her father, her rootlessness, and her readjustment towards her father when he comes to visit her grandson in America, and finally the assimilation of her father. Thus the short story analyzed through application of Genette's narrative theory brings Chitra Banerjee's expertise in the medium of narrative.

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