

Embodied Survival and Narrative Restraint a Comparative Study of Mahasweta Devi's Dhouli and Toni Morrison's Recitatif

B. P. Logeshwari¹, Dr. B. R. Veeramani²

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of Languages, Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology, (Deemed to be University), Vallam, Thanjavur – 613403, Tamil Nadu, India

²Corresponding Author Professor and Research Advisor, Department of Languages, Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology, (Deemed to be University), Vallam, Thanjavur – 613403, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract—Most literary studies of survival focus on the inner life, thoughts, moral contemplation, and emotions. But Mahasweta Devi's Dhouli and Toni Morrison's Recitatif break this pattern. This study adopts a comparative close reading approach to examine both texts. These narratives depict survival without the need for a clear resolution or psychological explanation. This article offers a comparative analysis of both works, emphasizing how survival is shaped through repetition, bodily experience, and restricted access to inner voice. Using a comparative and close reading approach, this study focuses more on the representation of lived experience, silence and narrative structure rather than thematic generalization. In Devi's Dhouli life is represented by effort, physical labour, routine and endurance. The narrative focuses on the character's actions and circumstances rather than her inner feelings and thoughts. In Recitatif, survival appears through narrative gaps, silences, and uncertain memories. It does not provide any clear conclusion or moral closure. Additionally, the analysis highlights how narrative restraint serves as a purposeful artistic technique to represent marginalized experiences. By comparing both texts, the study redirects the focus from theme to narrative techniques. It contends that both texts show survival as something that goes on without explanation or conclusion. This approach enables us to understand how literary form can represent lives that are still ongoing and unresolved.

Index Terms—Comparative Narrative Analysis, Embodied Survival, Narrative Restraint, Silence and Gaps, Non-Closure.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literary depictions of survival are frequently anchored on the expectation of interior revelation: the belief that survival may be narratively comprehended through consciousness, memory, or ethical reflection. However, some works defy this notion, presenting life not as an inwardly delineate phenomenon but as a state maintained by bodily endurance, repetition, and narrative restraint. In such works, survival is neither interpreted nor redeemed; it merely persists, often devoid of psychological insight or narrative closure. The rejection of interior transparency challenges prevailing realist standards that prioritize character depth, emotional buildout, and cathartic resolution as indicators of narrative prominence.

Toni Morrison's Recitatif and Mahasweta Devi's Dhouli are two text that epitomize an arduous storytelling style. Despite being written in different literary and cultural milieus, both stories accentuate the materiality of life and the recurrence of lived experiences while creating lives that develop without constant access to interior voice. Devi's writings have primarily been scrutinized through the prisms of social critique, marginalization, and political struggle. Sudeshna Saha Roy notes that Dhouli has often been interpreted by the intersecting lenses of caste, class, and gender, wherein the protagonist's body acts as a locus of socio-political writing rather than narrative structure. Similarly, systems of oppression are frequently given

precedence over issues of narrative style in feminist and ideological readings of Devi's short fiction.

Research on *Recitatif* has progressed along a comparable trajectory. Many critics have focused on reader participation and racial ambiguity, deciphering the book largely as an intrusion into racial presuppositions. According to Somparna Bose, for example, *Recitatif* is a narrative that “challenges readers' racial *parti pris* and invigorates their active participation”, placing the work amid discussions of identity and interpretive ambiguity. While such approaches have produced insightful result, they also have a tendency to niche narrative technique under theme interpretation.

By closely examining Dhouli and *Recitatif* in comparison, this article suggests a change in strategic emphasis from thematic assortment to narrative form. It investigates how survival is narratively perpetuated by embodiment, repetition, and the methodical withholding of interior voice, instead of viewing survival as an ethical claim or ideological stance. The study contends that survival operates as a narrative condition, emphasizing the texts' resistance to psychological transparency and narrative closure rather than presenting a definitive meaning.

This study uses a form-driven comparative approach in its methodology, paying close attention to non-closure, repetition, bodily endurance, and narrative voice. By incorporating Dhouli and *Recitatif*, the study aims to shed light on a common narrative logic which permits life to continue without intrinsic resolution or explanatory synthesis, not to undermine cultural specificity.

II. METHODOLOGY

Recent advancements in narrative theory have progressively contested the elevation of internal consciousness as the principal source of narrative significance. In his study of embodied narratology, Ralf Schneider points out that “the acknowledgment that human cognition is shaped by, and thus indissolubly linked with, lived bodily experience in spatial and social surroundings embodiment, for short has given rise to an approach that ranks among the most successful ones in the recent development of literary theories” (Schneider). By understanding embodiment, narrative analysis is reoriented from inner psyche to the situational and material

circumstances that shape experience. This allows repetition and physical endurance to serve as organizing principles for the text rather than as thematic addendum.

In this paper, embodiment is defined as the narrative preference for material continuity, endurance, and bodily presence above internal self-expressivity or psychological reflection. In this sense, embodiment enables instances to continue without converting physical experience into introspective awareness. Theresa Schilhab and her peers assert that embodied cognition in narrative transcends mere representation of physicality; it actively shapes perspective and narrative involvement, highlighting bodily experience as a pre-reflective framework through which perception and meaning are organized before conceptual or verbal expression (Bienkowski, Schilhab, and Burke). This kind of apprehension is especially pertinent to writings that defy internal interpretation.

The idea of narrative restraint is closely related to embodiment. In this context, narrative constraint refers to a formal technique that purposefully restricts access to moral remarks, emotional explanation, and internal motivation. Instead of indicating a lack of narrative, restraint serves as a control mechanism that focuses attention on body persistence, repetition, and silence. Narrative withholding restructures profundity by urging readers to focus on what is unsaid, deferred, or inherently lacking.

The rejection of closure additionally amplifies this structured orientation. The term “non-closure” describes endings that defy narrative resolution and do not convert survival into a moral or psychological synthesis. The lack of closure in texts with a restrained structure does not negate significance; rather, it emphasizes survival as a continuous state rather than a final outcome. Existence continues independent of narrative control, elucidation, or post hoc rationalization.

The combination of embodiment, narrative restriction, and non-closure offers an analytical framework for analyzing Dhouli and *Recitatif* outside prevailing theme approaches. This paradigm makes it possible to compare and contrast how life is told through endurance and structural repetition as opposed to internal voice or psychological depth by emphasizing form as the primary source of meaning-making.

III. ANALYSIS

Mahasweta Devi's Dhoulī delineates survival through a narrative framework that continually prioritizes physical endurance over psychological expression. The text initially positions life within exterior systems of movement, labour, and routine, rather than within consciousness or introspection. Existence manifests through timetables, environments, and physical conditions, creating a narrative realm where continuity is maintained mechanically rather than reflectively.

The initial scenes emphasize this rationale through the terminology of transit and ties. It records "The bus left Ranchi in the evening and reached Taharr around eight at night" (Devi 1). This precision of movement portrays existence as predetermined and impersonal. The quote that follows, "Rohatgi Company's bus was the only link between Taharr and the rest of the world," (Devi 1) emphasizes the extent to which survival has been controlled by societal structures rather than individuals.

Dhoulī's presence throughout this space is portrayed without internal contact. When she first introduced, the narration emphasizes her visibility without using voice: "Dhoulī was standing in front of Parasnath's shop. She could hardly be seen in the dim light" (Devi 1). The narrative reflects corporeal positioning while withholding psychological articulation, establishing constraint as a controlling formal approach. Dhoulī appears as a body placed in location rather than an inner being articulated through cognition or reflection.

In the same way, physical pain is documented without the use of interpretation. The narration states, "A terrible pain rose in her chest. The pain grew and pressed downwards" (Devi 2). The lack of emotional elaboration or metaphor serves to further support the text's rejection of converting physical experience into internal meaning. As evidenced by the fact that "she returned home in the dark" (Devi 2), action immediately follows sensation. Pain is experienced rather than processed, and it is recorded as a physical reality rather than a mental occurrence.

Instead of constructing endurance as a trajectory, repetition structures it as a condition. The story states, "Sleep eludes her" (Devi 5), Time passes without change, marked by repeated physical states rather than narrative progression. This trend is

reinforced by the elimination of personal memory in the understated statement, "Dhoulī did not remember getting married" (Devi 8). The absence of remembrance is neither explained nor interpreted; rather, it serves structurally by denying the narrative an interconnected interior past.

As the story progresses, survival becomes progressively reduced to function. Care is expressed through advice rather than behavior: "Keep some gur with you. If he cries at night, put some into his mouth" (Devi 33). Motherhood, like labour, is portrayed as bodily control rather than emotional identification. Interpersonal bonds are redefined as necessary practices, with affect replaced by everyday activity.

Beyond expressing endurance, these structural tactics modify the narrative understanding of survival itself. The persistent withholding of interior voice undermines the notion that endurance gains significance through contemplation, recollection, or moral consciousness. Survival is not portrayed as an experience that requires interpretation; rather, it is described as a situation that continues regardless of self-expression. Life is positioned as something that persists without needing explanation, reorienting narrative meaning away from interior depth and toward material continuity.

The instability of biographical coherence is one consequence of this restriction. The story hinders the development of a solid personal identity in the realist sense by declining to provide a continuous interior history for Dhoulī. Memory gaps function structurally to deprive the story of a retrospective center rather than being addressed as psychological issues that need to be fixed. In the absence of a salvageable internal history, Dhoulī's existence cannot be arranged into a logical developmental trajectory. Endurance resists transformation into progress and remains anchored in repetition rather than evolution.

The ethical tone of the story is likewise changed by this official decision. Suffering frequently necessitates moral positioning or an explanation in traditional realist fiction. Body aches and fatigue are depicted in Dhoulī without any interpretive framework, depriving readers of the solace of moral conclusion or emotional congruence. The lack of internal commentary increases the opacity of suffering rather than lessening it. Pain is experienced

rather than comprehended, leading to ethical suspension rather than apathy. The story declines to tell the reader how to interpret or reconcile what is witnessed.

This logic is further solidified by the way time is treated. While chronology progresses, meaning does not build up. Temporal movement only increases endurance; it does not provide development, resolution, or transformation. The book challenges the notion that duration equates to significance by letting time pass without a narrative payoff. When survival is prolonged without the prospect of future change, it becomes durational but not developmental. These connotations are reinforced by the story's failure to provide closure at the conclusion. The final query, wasn't everything supposed to change from today? Everything? The day Dhoulis was finally enter the marketplace? Or is it that, for girls like Dhoulis, nature accepted such a fate as only natural. (Devi 34) It denies the reader a final interpretive stance. Survival just persists in the face of uncertainty; it is not redeemed, clarified, or resolved. The inability to integrate endurance into ideological coherence or moral synthesis is a purposeful formal refusal rather than a narrative failure.

When combined, these tactics show that Dhoulis radically reconfigures how existence is narratively sustained rather than only portraying pain or marginality. The narrative portrays survival as a structural state rather than a psychological journey through embodied endurance, repetition, and the methodical suppression of inner voice. It challenges realism presumptions about character, meaning, and narrative purpose by showing how life continues without reflection, resolution, or narrative solace.

Toni Morrison's *Recitatif* uses a narrative technique that emphasizes fragmentation, stillness, and retroactive ambiguity over routine or embodied labour to generate survival. The work rejects the notion that memory serves as a location of self-awareness or clarity from the very first lines. Rather than articulating the inner, memory silent "Maggie couldn't talk" is shown to be unstable, fragmentary, and resistant to psychological coherence, placing survival within a framework of narrative withholding. With remarkable efficiency, the opening memory creates this indeterminacy. The narrator remembers that "it didn't matter that we looked like salt and pepper standing there ... we were eight years old and

got F's all the time" (Morrison 607). A rejection of hindsight is indicated by the emotionless tone and lack of emotional emphasis. Memory is portrayed as truth without interpretation, devoid of emotional nuance or contextual explanation. Recollection suspends meaning rather than clarifies the past, emphasizing uncertainty as a controlling narrative condition.

The character of Maggie, whose existence in the story is characterized almost exclusively by physical description, serves to highlight this aversion to psychic transparency. Maggie is recognized as "The kitchen woman with legs like parentheses. Maggie fell down there once" (Morrison 608). Her interiority is inaccessible, and her body becomes the main focus of the narrative. The fact that Maggie is silent "Maggie couldn't talk" (Morrison 608) further solidifies her status as an embodied being devoid of narrative voice. In the narrative, she is portrayed as a vulnerable physical character rather than as a thought or language-based consciousness.

The way the narrator reacts to Maggie's fall is equally important. Although the story abruptly omits resolution, the acknowledgement that "Roberta and me watching...we should have helped her up" (Morrison 608) raises the prospect of moral judgment. Fear replaces action, and silence replaces explanation. The text does not offer moral clarification or retrospective accountability; instead, it sustains ambivalence, refusing to stabilise responsibility or motive. Ethical meaning is deferred rather than resolved. The narrative construction of survival in *Recitatif* is significantly impacted by these formal decisions. The text undermines the notion that memory produces understanding by denying memory the power to justify or redeem past deeds. Memory serves as a place of uncertainty, modification, and contradiction rather than as a tool for coherence. Survival is not described as a process of moral development or learning; rather, it endures in the face of uncertainty, molded by what cannot be completely remembered or resolved.

This reasoning is further supported by the narrative's handling of silence. Silence functions as a structuring tool that thwarts interpretative closure rather than as a lack of meaning. Together, Maggie's silence, the narrator's omitted explanations, and the memory gaps keep the story from establishing a consistent internal narrative. The text uses silence as a means of

sustaining existence without turning experience into psychological synthesis. The story's last phrase, "What the hell happened to Maggie?" (Morrison 620) is the result of this reluctance. The question is still open, emphasizing non-closure as a purposeful formal tactic. The conclusion exacerbates uncertainty rather than dispels it, depriving the reader of a definitive interpretation. Survival is suspended in unresolved memories and cannot be redeemed by knowledge or ethical clarity.

Recitatif portrays survival as a state maintained without internal justification or ethical closure through narrative withholding, silence, and fragmentation. Similar to Dhouli, the work defies realism norms that value narrative resolution and psychological nuance. But whereas Dhouli maintains life by repetition and physical endurance, Recitatif does so through silence, uncertainty, and memory lapses. Survival endures in both situations without synthesis, presenting life as continuous rather than narratively concluded.

IV. COMPARATIVE FINDINGS

Comparative analysis reveals a common formal logic between Dhouli and Recitatif that cuts over variations in representational mode, narrative surface, and cultural context. Both works portray survival as a narrative state maintained by restraint, rather than as a psychological process or moral accomplishment. In this view, survival is sustained by physical perseverance, repetition, silence, and structural withholding rather than being resolved into meaning. By emphasizing form over topic, the parallel demonstrates how storytelling method itself serves as a conduit for life without internal integration.

The current shift in narrative theory toward embodiment offers a helpful framework for comprehending this convergence. According to Marco Caracciolo and Karin Kukkonen, Narrative meaning is not solely derived from disembodied intellect, but rather from the interplay between literary form and physical experience. According to this interpretation, Recitatif's emphasis on physical presence and vulnerability and Dhouli's emphasis on bodily labor and weariness can be interpreted as formal organizing principles rather than thematic details. While internal voice is suppressed in both works, narrative continuity is anchored by bodies.

Despite this common reasoning, embodiment functions in a very different way. Durability is maintained in Dhouli through practical necessity and repetitive physical labour. With narrative focus on the mechanics of survival, life continues through routine, instruction, and physical management. In contrast, embodiment is most prominent in Recitatif during exposed and vulnerable moments, especially when Maggie is silent. According to Theresa Schilhab and her co-researchers, Before intellectual or verbal articulation, embodiment in narrative functions as a pre-reflective organization of experience. This distinction explains how Recitatif maintains survival by embodied ambiguity and quiet, whereas Dhouli maintains it through corporeal repetition.

The methodical rejection of narrative closure in the two texts is another area of similarity. Traditionally, closure turns endurance into meaning by providing psychological resolution or ethical clarity. But this change is resisted in both stories. Narrative restraint redirects interpretive attention away from interior motivation toward formal patterning and repetition, as noted by Ralf Schneider. This restraint is shown in Dhouli through the maintenance of physical endurance and the suspension of change. It manifests in Recitatif as unresolved memories and unsolved questions. Non-closure serves as a formal tactic in both situations rather than as a narrative failure.

The ethical aspect of survival is likewise altered by this comparable rejection of closure. Both writings preserve ethical suspension rather than directing readers toward moral judgment or affective identification. Readers are forced to face endurance without comfort as suffering and vulnerability are depicted without any interpretive guidance. According to cognitive narrative theory, this kind of withholding does not remove meaning; rather, it repositions it within structural ambiguity and reader discomfort. Thus, survival is maintained as a continuous narrative state rather than resolved into ideological coherence.

This study shows how formally different texts might converge in their portrayal of existence sustained without interior voice by putting Dhouli and Recitatif in interaction. Both pieces defy realist norms that value psychological nuance and explanatory resolution through embodiment, narrative constraint, and non-closure. Through story form itself, survival

is revealed as a state that endures rather than as a feat or epiphany. This comparative viewpoint emphasizes the importance of form-oriented study in comprehending how literature embodies endurance that transcends identification, ideology, and thematic classification.

V. CONCLUSION

Through a form-oriented comparative lens, this work has analyzed Dhouli and *Recitatif* to make the case that survival in both texts is maintained without the use of narrative closure, psychological synthesis, or internal voice. In contrast to prevalent thematic and ideological interpretations, the article has emphasized non-closure, narrative restraint, and embodiment as key formal methods that allow life to continue without an explanation. The analysis shows how endurance is constructed as a narrative condition rather than expressed as a psychological or ethical conclusion by concentrating on narrative technique rather than representational substance.

Dhouli relies on repetition, functional continuity, and endurance to sustain their way of life. Systematic denial of interior access undermines biographical coherence and prevents pain from being transformed into moral revelation or narrative advancement. Routine, endurance, and physical perseverance shape life, which keeps endurance durational rather than progressive. Survival in *Recitatif* is maintained by unresolved introspection, silence, and fragmented recollection. The story presents uncertainty as a necessary aspect of life rather than a problem that has to be fixed since it refuses to stabilize memory or offer moral closure.

Both works formally reject internal explanation and closure, which is where they converge despite having different cultural contexts and narrative surfaces, according to the comparative reading presented here. In both situations, survival is preserved by self-control rather than being justified by reflection or reconciled by narrative synthesis. This convergence emphasizes how important story form is in creating life representations that defy realist norms of psychological nuance and cathartic conclusion.

This article advances comparative literary research by illustrating how endurance can be narratively sustained without interior voice by placing Dhouli and *Recitatif* within current ideas of embodiment and

narrative restriction. By implying that narrative form itself is a crucial location for comprehending survival, this method creates an opportunity to rereading texts that have mostly been interpreted through ideological or identity-based frameworks. This form-oriented concept may be extended in future studies to other works that defy psychological interiority, especially testimonial texts and short fiction, where survival is organized by bodily routine, repetition, or silence. To further highlight narrative form as a fruitful critical lens, comparative studies across language, cultural, or general barriers could look at how narrative restraint functions differently in texts influenced by colonial, postcolonial, or diasporic contexts. Finally, the investigation confirms that life in these stories continues structurally, materially, and without resolution rather than because it is explained.

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