

**Women's Psychological Resilience Against Intergenerational Trauma in Nguyen
Phan Que Mai's *The Mountains Sing*****Sabrina Aulia Putri¹ ✉, Sri Sumaryani²**^{1,2}English Literature, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia**Article Info***Article History:*

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This study examines the representations of intergenerational trauma and women's psychological resilience in Nguyen Phan Que Mai's *The Mountains Sing*. The relationships between a grandmother and her granddaughter, Dieu Lan and Huong, show that trauma may be passed down through generations along with psychological resilience in the context of historical trauma. This study investigates how family members' psychological experiences are shaped by historical trauma caused by significant socio-political events, such as the Great Hunger, the Land Reform, and the Vietnam War. This study focuses on how important these events are in affecting family members' dynamics throughout the story. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory served as the theoretical foundation for the study, which employed a qualitative descriptive method through close reading of characterization, conversation, and descriptive passages. The results show that traumatic experiences and emotional suffering are passed down through generations through family narratives and inherited grief, while resilience is developed through the preservation of family continuity. These findings contribute to trauma studies by deepening the understanding of the intergenerational transmission of trauma and resilience. They also enrich literary studies by offering a trauma-based interpretation of *The Mountains Sing* that highlights women's experiences and family continuity.

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INTRODUCTION

War frequently has long-term implications beyond physical destruction that affect the psychological well-being of individuals and societies. Armed conflicts not only cause immediate destruction but also "eventful" and ambient pressures that build up over time and have long-term psychological effects due to interrelated cycles of risk across a lifetime (Pearlin et al., 2005). In this context, the Vietnam War (1955-1975), which related to clashes between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, caused unspeakable suffering as a result of the war, during which civilians were highly affected by bombardment, forced displacement, and murders carried out by both sides (Duong, 2023). Long-lasting psychological suffering, such as

anxiety, depression, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, is closely linked to exposure to war-related violence and may last throughout a person's lifetime (Frazier, 2018; Singhal, 2019). The psychological and emotional challenges imposed by conflict extend beyond those who experience it personally, as the impacts can be transmitted through the family system and shape the psychological development of descendants (El-Khalil et al., 2024).

In addition, having long-lasting psychological effects on those who witness the traumatic events can be brought on by war and conflict and have an impact on families and social situations that span across generations (Amping et al., 2024). This idea explains how traumatic events in one generation have psychological and emotional impacts affecting

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the lives of later generations (Roberts et al., 2012). Trauma is most commonly transmitted through family dynamics, when suffering is passed down to future generations as a result of unacknowledged experiences, fragmented narratives, and inherited coping mechanisms (Karim et al., 2025). In this case, descendants may display emotional and psychological impacts associated with prior traumatic experiences within the family system even though they were not directly exposed to the initial occurrence (Cacace & Summers, 2025). Intergenerational trauma has been shown to have long-lasting effects on family dynamics, mental health patterns, and coping mechanisms in communities that have experienced conflict (Eyerman et al., 2017).

Within the context of the Vietnam War, gender roles gradually changed with women's responsibilities spreading from the home into larger social and economic areas (Ngo, 2024). Women operated within a Confucian value system that imposed socially prescribed expectations for moral behavior and household responsibilities (Nguyen, 2009). Women frequently assumed critical caregiving roles in this changing environment, which proved critical for maintaining social cohesiveness and household stability in the face of prolonged disruption and uncertainty (Suen et al., 2025). Their experiences show not just the enduring social and psychological results of war-related trauma but also their capacity for resilience and adaptation in the face of continuous suffering (Sorensen, 1998).

Nguyen Phan Que Mai's *The Mountains Sing* (2020) portrays the lives of Vietnamese women during and after the war. The novel retells the story of Tran Dieu Lan and her granddaughter Huong, who experienced several important twentieth-century Vietnamese historical events, including the Great Hunger of 1945, the Land Reform movement, and the Vietnam War. The novel illustrates how political conflict and historical tragedies impact family dynamics across generations through its interconnected narratives. Importantly, it shows how women face extreme personal adversity while being dedicated to preserving cultural legacy and defending their family. Within the framework of Vietnamese history, *The Mountains Sing* offers a useful literary depiction of both intergenerational trauma and women's resilience.

Several academics have researched literary works about trauma, memory, and historical violence. In *The Mountains Sing* and other

Vietnamese novels, Quispel (2023) explores the connection between ghosts, collective memory, and historical pain. Lê (2023) uses the idea of "transtrauma" to examine the ongoing effects of inherited trauma among young Vietnamese Americans. Similarly, Churchill et al. (2022) examine the long-term societal effects of wartime military forces to assess the intergenerational consequences of the Vietnam War. In a range of literary contexts, other studies have examined postmemory, cultural identity, memory transmission, and narratives related to trauma (Gusain & Jha, 2022; Chakraverty, 2023; Noreen & Ahmad, 2024). Overall, these studies show that research has largely focused on the long-term effects of historical trauma.

Although studies on trauma have developed significantly, research specifically focusing on *The Mountains Sing* remains limited. Existing research on the novel mainly focuses on collective memory, cultural identity, and historical trauma. However, the relationship between intergenerational trauma and women's psychological resilience in the novel has not been sufficiently explored.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on how intergenerational trauma and women's psychological resilience are represented in *The Mountains Sing*. Using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, this study analyzes how traumatic experiences are passed down through generations and how women respond to these painful legacies. Two research questions were developed in line with this objective:

1. How is intergenerational trauma represented in *The Mountains Sing*?
2. How do female characters show resilience in dealing with intergenerational trauma in the novel?

This study argues that *The Mountains Sing* portrays intergenerational trauma as a continuous process transmitted through family relationships and dynamics, while women's psychological resilience is shown as an active process that enables survival, adaptation, and the preservation of family continuity across generations.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to investigate how intergenerational trauma and women's psychological resilience are portrayed in *The Mountains Sing* (Nguyen, 2020). A qualitative technique is applicable because the study's object is a literary text that contains non-

numerical data in the form of words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, and narrative descriptions (Mohr, 1999). The analysis focuses on how traumatic events are passed down through generations and how female characters deal with the long-lasting consequences of historical violence.

The Mountains Sing provided the primary data for this study, which focused on issues regarding trauma, memory, suffering, family dynamics, and women's experiences. Secondary data about trauma studies, intergenerational trauma, and women's resilience in post-conflict contexts were collected from books, journal articles, and other reliable sources. Documentation and close reading approaches were used to locate significant textual information, which was then categorized based on the study's focus on intergenerational trauma and women's psychological resilience.

The data were examined using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, as described in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). To investigate how trauma is portrayed and passed down through the generations of the story, concepts of belatedness, traumatic memory, and transmission were used. The findings are presented in descriptive terms to illustrate the relationship between women's resilience and intergenerational trauma within the historical context of Vietnam.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that *The Mountains Sing* presents intergenerational trauma as a long-term psychological and emotional legacy that extends beyond individuals who have experienced specific historical tragedy. Trauma is defined by Caruth (1996) as a delayed and constant experience that manifests as fragmented memories, silence, and ongoing emotional anguish. In the novel, the psychological environment of future family members is altered by the traumatic elements that are passed down through narratives, emotional inheritance, and unresolved grief.

According to Li et al. (2022), a catastrophic event in a group's history that affects not only the individuals directly affected but also entire communities and even future generations is referred to as collective trauma. Trauma persists through memory, silence, and emotional fragments that influence how later generations perceive their own relationships and lives (Mohatt et al., 2014). This perspective is also

reflected in *The Mountains Sing*, as war-related events continue to impact the family's emotional lives across generations.

The study highlights two important findings from *The Mountains Sing*, which are the portrayal of intergenerational trauma as a psychological condition that is passed down through generations, and women's psychological resilience as a reaction that preserves survival, family continuity, and hope in the wake of war-associated suffering.

Representations of Intergenerational Trauma

The findings reveal that intergenerational trauma in *The Mountains Sing* is represented through the transmission of traumatic memories, unresolved grief, and emotional suffering across generations, particularly through the relationship between Tran Dieu Lan and her granddaughter, Huong. This representation demonstrates that family narratives function not only as a means of preserving collective memory but also as a medium through which historical trauma continues to shape the psychological experiences of future generations. According to Nauta et al. (2026), the implications of war-related violence can be passed down through family narrative, in which ideas, emotions, and actions related to past events may affect future family members instead of those who directly experienced the violence. This finding is related to Caruth's (1996) argument that traumatic experiences cannot be fully processed at the moment they occur because trauma typically endures through acts of storytelling; it will reappear through stories and methods of observation that let future generations experience the psychological consequences of past events.

Dieu Lan presents the value of storytelling and family narrative as a way to preserve the family's legacy right from the start of the story. She tells Huong about her early years and the important events that changed the dynamics of their family later on. She says:

"My beloved granddaughter, don't look so shocked. Do you understand why I've decided to tell you about our family? If our stories survive, we will not die, even when our bodies are no longer here on this earth" (Nguyen, 2020, p.19).

The statement demonstrates how family stories are used to transmit memories to future generations. Despite never having a personal experience of the Great Hunger or the Land Reform, Huong has grown emotionally attached to them through her grandmother's narrative. A significant example of this circumstance may be

seen in the memories Dieu Lan developed regarding her experience and trauma during the Great Hunger, when she saw her mother murdered. She tells Huong in her narrative: “The Great Hunger gobbled down such a big part of my life, taking away not just my mother but also my sister” (Nguyen, 2020, 91).

Dieu Lan was so fatigued by the stress that she constantly regretted herself for not being able to help her mother at the time. She states that she keeps seeing her mother’s death in her sleep:

“For months after my mother’s death, whenever I slept, I saw her slumped against cracked soil. I’d wake up screaming, telling her that I was sorry for not being able to save her. I was twenty-five years old, and had seen both my parents die” (Nguyen, 2020, 91).

The Land Reform movement also caused trauma for Dieu Lan, which led her to flee her home in search of a safer place to live. “A group of people armed with bricks, knives, large sticks, and angry faces were dragging Minh and Cong across the yard. In their brown farmer clothes, my brother and son were shoeless, their feet spattered with mud and blood. They were being pulled by the hair as well as their arms. Less than an hour ago, I’d been with them in the rice fields” (Nguyen, 2020, 139). During this event, the landless farmers, who started the Land Reform movement to Dieu Lan, successfully captured Minh and Cong. After that, they would be kidnapped and subjected to torture by enraged landless farmers who believed she was exploiting the farm’s workers just because she was rich.

Years later, after these events, she decided to tell Huong the stories. She said:

“Guava, I need you to understand why I didn’t tell you about your grandpa, your great uncle Cong, and your uncle Minh until now. In your schoolbooks, you won’t find anything about the Land Reform nor about the internal fighting of the Viet Minh. A part of our country’s history has been erased, together with the lives of countless people. We’re forbidden to talk about events that relate to past mistakes or the wrongdoing of those in power, for they give themselves the right to rewrite history. But you’re old enough to know that history will write itself in people’s memories, and as long as those memories live on, we can do better” (Nguyen, 2020, p. 166).

Trauma transmission is not restricted to deliberate narration. It also happens when descendants have to piece together fragmentary contacts with the past on their own. After Huong found her mother’s diary and learned about a pregnancy that was terminated during the war,

this issue became relevant. Unaware that the pregnancy was brought on by sexual assault, Huong initially sees the circumstance as a betrayal of her father. Huong’s understanding of her mother’s identity and her family’s history is significantly changed by the news. She started to connect her mother’s experience with the problems her grandmother had previously described as she tried to comprehend the agony endured by the Tran family generations. Huong states as she tries to drown herself in the river:

“Closing my eyes, I saw Grandma as a young child, being cursed by the fortune-teller; I saw my mother in the jungle, drinking herbal medicine to abort her baby. We had all been cursed, generations of the Tran family” (Nguyen, 2020, p. 216).

According to Caruth (1996), trauma persists as it is not fully assimilated when it occurs. Instead, it returns through fragmented memories and indirect interactions with the past. Huong’s belief that several generations have been “cursed” is a reflection of her understanding that her family has been constantly changed over time by suffering. She inherits an overall emotional pattern, in which suffering, grief, and vulnerability happen over generations as a type of collective psychological burden, rather than just particular occurrences.

Another illustration of how intergenerational trauma endures is Huong’s decision to write about her family’s experiences after the death of her oldest uncle, Minh. Just before he passes away from cancer, Minh is finally reunited with his family after decades of separation brought on by the Land Reform and war. Huong states:

“I wrote for an uncle I’d been robbed of, who was a leaf pushed away from its tree, but at its last moment still struggled to fall back to its roots. I wrote for a grandma, who’d hoped for the fire of war to be extinguished, only for its embers to keep burning her” (Nguyen, 2020, p. 324).

Although these experiences appeared long before she was born, Huong’s act of writing illustrates not just Minh’s death but also the decades of forced separation, silent suffering, and shakable love that shaped both his and Dieu Lan’s lives. Caruth (1996) stated that trauma endures through witnessing and transmission, which enable subsequent generations to take in experiences that were not present at the moment.

Huong ensures that the effects of war are still recognized by turning her family members’ pain into a collective memory. As a result, *The Mountains Sing* portrays intergenerational trauma

as a continuous process that is maintained not by the actual occurrences but instead by the memories, narratives, and familial relationships that preserve those tragedies for future generations.

Women's Psychological Resilience

The findings demonstrate that women's psychological resilience in *The Mountains Sing* is portrayed as a continuous process of endurance, adaptation, and meaning-making that enables female characters to preserve family continuity despite enduring historical trauma. Through the characters of Dieu Lan and Huong, Nguyen Phan Que Mai presents resilience not as the absence of suffering but as the capacity to survive and transform painful experiences into strength for future generations. This portrayal aligns with trauma theory by Caruth (1996), which suggests that confronting, reframing, and communicating traumatic memories enables individuals to negotiate the lasting effects of trauma rather than allowing those experiences to determine their future.

Dieu Lan's will to regain her inner strength despite years of displacement, the death of family members, and the separation from her children following the Great Hunger and the Land Reform events is one of the novel's most persistent examples of perseverance. She actively seeks out ways to protect herself and the people she loves without allowing any suffering to paralyze her. After going through a lot and not being able to locate her son Minh, Dieu Lan enrolls in self-defense training at Kim Ngan Temple. Thinking back on her choice, she narrates to Huong:

"I must tell you, Guava, that I detest violence. But life taught me that I must build up my inner strength and physical skills to defend not just myself, but also those around me" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 250).

This passage demonstrates how, in the novel, resilience emerges from sustained exposure to trauma without its absence. Long after the initial event has passed, trauma continues to influence the survivor's current life (Caruth, 1996). Dieu Lan's reaction, however, shows that survivors can actively learn coping mechanisms to deal with painful memories while still defending individuals they care about. As a result, her resilience serves as a persistent and deliberate reaction to the trauma rather than a means of healing from it.

Along with this personal determination, the novel portrays how hope is a kind of familial strength that is passed down across generations.

Within this context, Huong is still determined to locate Uncle Minh's wife and children who immigrated to the United States following the war. She considers:

"I hadn't told Grandma yet, but Tam and I were looking into ways to search for them, using their pictures. I wanted to be like Grandma: never give up hope" (Nguyen, 2020, p.326).

This quotation shows the generational transmission of trauma and the ability to endure and overcome the emotional struggles. Huong's inherited resilience model helps her deal with the impact of her experience without letting it dominate her. Therefore, as a protective barrier against intergenerational trauma, enabling descendants to continue rebuilding the familial bonds that were previously broken by conflict.

The deepest expression of resilience, however, occurs when inherited hatred is intentionally broken rather than sustained. As part of the formal introduction on both sides regarding Tam's marriage proposal to Huong, this scene occurs during a family visit to Tam's house. When the family arrived, they encountered a surprising person. At the house, they meet Tam's grandfather, and Dieu Lan immediately recognizes him as the "Wicked Ghost", who is responsible for her own mother's death during the Great Hunger. The devastation is felt by Huong, who runs away after the shocking news. As she flees, she says: "I couldn't go back to him. I could no longer love him. He was the flesh and blood of Grandma's worst enemy" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 335).

This case illustrates how the agony of the experience that occurred generations before she was born suddenly becomes unbearable for her when it is related to someone she loves and is comfortable with. The ancestral wound, which had previously appeared as transmitted memories, abruptly and powerfully resurfaces in the present. Following this situation, Dieu Lan, who has suffered the most loss, decides to forgive rather than carry on inherited anger. She informs Huong, who is still desperate about the news:

"Huong, I've been thinking... Tam has nothing to do with what happened. I used to believe that blood will... but blood evolves and can change, too. Young people can't be blamed for what their ancestors did" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 337)

This response is particularly unexpected because the immediate victim herself offers forgiveness despite the traumatic events that changed her family dynamics in the past. By purposefully separating Tam from his

grandfather's deed, Dieu Lan shows perseverance that extends beyond individual survival to intergenerational healing. This choice demonstrates that inherited trauma does not act as a destiny. Future and later generations can rebuild their relationship with the past and establish lives that are no longer ruled by ancestral wounds alone.

Through these manifestations, *The Mountains Sing* makes clear that the psychological impacts of war continue to affect subsequent generations' relationships, even after they have passed away a long time ago. At the same time, the novel also shows that inherited suffering is not an unavoidable fate, as the women's acts of forgiveness, perseverance, and narrative can still tear apart and change traumatic cycles.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how war-related suffering endures across generations through narrative, inherited memory, and unresolved grief by analyzing the representation of intergenerational trauma and women's psychological resilience in *The Mountains Sing*. The relationships between Dieu Lan and Huong illustrate how traumatic events are deeply rooted in family memory and continue to influence the psychological well-being of descendants who were not present at the initial events that shape their family dynamics. While Huong's act of writing turns personal grief into collective memory that preserves the family's history across time, Dieu Lan's narrative of her past enables Huong to emotionally inherit losses she never directly experienced.

Additionally, rather than merely bearing the burden of inherited trauma from the events that occur in the past, the novel shows a story of how women actively respond to it through resilience. As demonstrated by Dieu Lan's determination to regain her strength, Huong's commitment to preserving family memories, and Dieu Lan's conscious choice to forgive, resilience is the ability to endure and adapt. These two conclusions show the tight relationship between intergenerational trauma and women's psychological resilience in the novel, since the same familial bonds that led to suffering also provide the female characters with the courage to persevere through and get past their trauma.

Furthermore, this study is limited by its focus on a single theoretical framework and a single literary work. Future research on the long-term psychological effects of conflict and

displacement may benefit from extending the analysis to additional literary works in Vietnamese and Southeast Asian literature. Using other frameworks, such as feminist or postcolonial theory, might also lead to different perspectives on the effect of war.

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