

**TRAUMA OF WAR IN WOMEN: READING NGUYEN PHAN QUE MAI'S  
*THE MOUNTAINS SING***

A dissertation submitted to the Dept. of English

Bodoland University for the accomplishment of Masters Degree



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## **Declaration of the Candidate**

I hereby declare that this dissertation titled as “Trauma of war: Reading Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai’s *The Mountains Sing*” is my own creation under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Debajyoti Biswas.

In my best knowledge this work has not been submitted any other institution or university for any degree.

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## CERTIFICATE

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It is certified that the dissertation titled as “Trauma of War in Women: Reading Nguyen Phan Que Mai’s *The Mountains Sing*” was prepared by Hemashree Sarkar, Roll No. PGENG408A 22018 for the accomplishment of the M.A in English course of Bodoland University.

She has executed the research under my supervision and guidance.

Dr. Debajyoti Biswas

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I cannot thank my respected mentor Dr. Debajyoti Biswas enough for his wise counseling, supervision and guidance. This dissertation would not have been completed without his supervision. I would also like to thank Dr. Pratusha Bhowmik for her guidance, instructions and support.

I express my gratitude to all the professors of Bodoland University, Dept. of English, Dr. Manab Medhi, Dr. Rustam Brahma, Dr. Chandrima Sen and Dr. Zothani Khiangte for their precious inputs.

Last but not the least I am extremely grateful to my parents for their love, support and encouragement so far. I'm thankful to each and everyone who has helped me so far to complete this project.

## Abstract

War is one of the major causes for creating uncertainty in society. Perhaps it is restricted to the battlefield but its repercussions exceed far beyond the battlefield. Besides the bloodshed and massacre, the mental distress, trauma of war, PTSD, and suicidal ideation are some of the major aftereffects of war. The trauma of war is probably one of the most dominant themes of Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's novel *The Mountains Sing*. It is a literary representation of the Resistance War (1955-75) of Vietnam and the misery it caused to the Tran family. Death, violence, and bloodshed are the unavoidable part of war. This research will be an attempt to work on the area of war trauma faced by women during and after the war. The story revolves around the life of Dieu Lan, who is a victim of war. She shares the terrible experience of her father's assassination by the Japanese soldiers. The autobiographical tone of the novel in a way indicates the suffering of the novelist herself. This project will be a discussion about the trauma and consequences of war in the life of Dieu Lan along with the other members of her family specially the woman. Although she was not directly engaged in war, how it alters the events of her life is the main concern of this research.

Key Words: War, Trauma, Women, Suffering, Violence, Death

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Trauma as a discourse of thinking has evolved around the nineteenth century. Trauma stands for one's reaction to terrifying events. Observing the impact of trauma individual reaction towards it is distinctly different. Freud explains "trauma", "as any excitations from the outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield there is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus which have broken in and binding of them" ( Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.7). Violence, death, loss, and displacement caused by war disrupt the stability which most of the time leads to psychological issues. On the other hand Ferenczi who was a medical officer during the World War I in the Austro-Hungarian Army has defined "traumas" as "sudden affect that that could not be physically controlled (the shock) causes the trauma" (1916/17,p.129). In relation with the types of trauma American sociologist Kai T Erikson (1991) explains that "a bow of the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that no one can react to it effectively....By collecting trauma...I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds, people attacks to each other and impairs the prevailing sense of community."

Though the concept of war is deeply rooted with masculinity, still women suffer equally as man does. War leaves scars on its victims both physically and mentally. "Trauma" and "gender" two are closely associated with each other yet it seems gender bias even now. The literary representation of trauma is men centric mostly. Women-centric discussion and representation are subdued compared to men. The women part of a war description remains silent. In the words of Kumari Jayewardena-"women are the victims of war... as widows, they've faced the trauma of being single parents, and the livelihood of families is affected" (AZ

Quotes.com). Dieu Lan is a victim of the Resistance War of Vietnam who single-handedly mothered her six children. It's been seen that mostly the people who are associated with war gets the opportunity to tell their story of struggle. But nobody initiates to talk about the commoners specially the women and children, though they suffer equally with the elite class. So the story of Dieu Lan remains unsaid, unnoticed besides her family member. So "the underrepresented women and children who often suffers the consequences of war the most but must hide their sorrows to become pillars of strength comfort for returning soldiers" (Nguyễn Phan Quế, *Climbing many Mountains* n.pag.). She was so busy with her struggle for surviving and protecting her children that she was never the subject of a story, or never had the chance to share her sufferings with the world.

Literature of war is loaded with the struggle of the soldiers, political conflicts, and sacrifices of the fighter .But those narratives barely talks about those woman who has lost their family and children, who were raped brutally and tortured by the soldiers. Their trauma of war remains under the shadow. It has been witnessed that the vulnerability of women towards the psychiatric outcome of war is deeper compared to the men.

"Women as storyteller of suffering are the epitome for understanding the lived spaces of war. Yet, even academic research reinforces the silencing of a woman's words in war. Stories become part of medical apparatus and pathologised. Lives are reduced to prevalence figures which are then translated into reports such as the WHO's recent urgent call to address mental health needs in conflict." (Ahmad. A, 2019)



Women remain voiceless while suffering atrocities, physical abuse and torture. Even in this 21st century women cannot openly talk about physical harassments in public. Nagoc the eldest daughter of Dieu Lan is a doctor by profession. Yet she was hesitating to share with her family that she was raped by the Japanese soldiers while treating the injured soldiers. In this novel almost all the women character has an unsaid story of trauma and physical abuse. It has been witnessed that the vulnerability of women towards the psychiatric outcome of war is deeper compared to men. Men physically participates in the war whereas a woman fights with their mental strength.

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai is a Vietnamese writer, poet and novelist who have penned eight books of poetry and authored short fiction and nonfiction in Vietnamese, received many prestigious award along with “The Ha Noi Writers associations poetry of the Years” of 2010. This work of creation is a literary presentation of the people of Vietnam who have witnessed the ferociousness of The Resistance War. The writer herself has mentioned in the acknowledgement section that this novel was written with autobiographical undertones. About the autobiographical tone of the novel writer Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai says –“While this novel embraces some of my family stories, I interviewed hundreds of people and fictionalized their stories into *The Mountains Sing*. I read hundreds of fiction and non-fiction books about Vietnam which helped me gain a deep understanding of our turbulent history”. (*Book Club Kit* n.pag, 1)

The depiction of the two key characters of the novel Dieu Lan and Huong is a mix of fiction and non-fiction. About the grandmother Dieu Lan, the author remarks “Grandma Dieu Lan in *The Mountains Sing* is the grandmother I always wished for. Both my grand mothers had died before my birth and I wanted to have a grandma who would sing me lullabies, tell me the legends and tales of my village, as well as teach me what I needed to know about my family

history”(2). On the other hand “Huong embodies my own experiences growing up in Vietnam and witnessing the war’s devastating effect” (3).

The storyline of this novel focuses on the beautiful relationship among grandmother-granddaughter duo and they share a delightful connection with each other. Within this novel the novelist shares the experiences that the Tran family had while surviving the historical events of Viet Nam as “the French occupation, the Japanese invasion, the Great Hunger and the Land Reform Act (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 17) before the devastation of the American War. The story line of the novel evolves the timeline of the plot keeps on changing alternatively among these two. So as per the demand of the plot the narrator keeps changing yet the story continues on its own and this disrupts general flow of the storyline. Simultaneously the two stories were continually playing. One half is the story of Huong which she narrates by herself about the experience of the American War and the other half is the story of her grandmother Dieu Lan and her experiences of the Japanese Invasion, The Land Reform Act and the Great Hunger. Though these stories of her family she learns from the stories of her grandma. This chemistry of their relationship has helped to grow and survive all the challenges that life has thrown in front of them. The grandma told her stories to Huong to comfort her which she later remembers as a hope for her life time. Both the character shares a significant role while shaping the life of one.

In this novel the novelist Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai has distinctly shown through the characters that man and woman reacts differently in the same situation because of their difference and construction. Both the siblings Ngoc and Dat had faced the terror of war and managed to survive yet both of them have very different perspective about the war. Dat after losing his feet is anxious to come out of his house and face the world. He suffers from of social

anxiety and ended up inside his room. About the effect of trauma Bell states that “as an emotional and psychic injury and in psychoanalysis it is argued that such injuries are often repressed, remaining unhealed and leading to various forms of acting out” (Bell 2006, 7). Ngoc’s assimilation with her past memories in the forms of nightmare is creating chaos in her life. She blames herself for betraying her husband. The thought keeps on haunting that her husband would probably deny their marriage and call it off. “Who would want to touch a woman who had been trampled by other man?” (Nguyễn Phan , *The Mountains Sing* p-213). This character is a replication of how women had been victimizing even after not committing any crime as such. Her mind gets shock realizing that her body is not pure enough to get back with her husband once he come back from the battlefield. The author reciprocated idea of “rape” and how people treated this as a crime during the time of war.

All through this novel “the trauma” that all the character had faced is during their life time is either because of the direct engagement with war or it triggered by the war. The trauma that Dieu Lan, Dat and Ngoc is struggling with comes under the first category where as Huong is a part of the other category. But all of them faced loss, displacement, political and social shifts because of war. So initially the trauma had created a chaos in lives respectively. Dieu Lan all through her life keeps on trying to avoid the contact of people because she had endured the assassination of her father, murder of her mother by the wicked ghost and death of her husband and brother. Dieu Lan “blames myself for my father’s death. If I had not been driving the cart, we would have gone faster and my father wouldn’t have met Black Eye” (Nguyen Phan. *The Mountains Sing* 80). Dat who has lost his legs, grows social anxiety and started staying indoors. He even Ngoc is judging herself, her dignity, honesty and loyalty towards her husband and family.

*The Mountains Sing* is about the life story of a common woman Dieu Lan and her story of war trauma how it changes the course of her. It is her story of overcoming the trauma of war.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Through this research I have tried to explore the traumatic effect of war on common women in the novel *The Mountains Sing* authored by well known Vietnamese novelist Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai. This novel depicts the life of a woman and the struggles and obstacles that she had face during the war and it's after effect as well. There are so many renowned essayist, critics, writers, scholars, researchers from all around the world have widely discussed and written about this topic. Numerous articles, books, papers, journals related to this topic have published. R Srinivasa Murthy and Rashmi Lakshminarayana (2005) have published a research paper titled as *Mental health consequences of war: a brief review of research findings* where they discussed about the significant impact of war upon the civilian population. It increases the activity of various mental disorders. As the research has discovered that the sufferings and vulnerability of women and children is more compare to men. Jenny Young Kijowski (2015) has presented a dissertation on "*Gender and Trauma from World War I to the War in Iraq: Narrative in the Aftermath of Loss*" where she has widely discussed about the role of gender and how it position the victim of her trauma. Gender ideologies affect the internalization of trauma. Mostly the narratives of trauma are very much influenced by the ethics and ideologies of the victims of it. In the research paper of Samia Hanif and Inayat Ullah (2018) "*War Trauma, Collective Memory and Cultural Productions in Conflict Zones: Kashmir in Focus*", they have make an attempt to look into the traumatic experiences of the Kashmiri people during the partition of the Indian subcontinent in the year of 1947. During these phase of partition the people of Kashmir were victim of collective

trauma. So they tried to bring out the real essence of the eternal sufferings of the Kashmiri's investigating the fictional narratives depending on the memory of past. A very few literary narratives have been released in this sensitive yet important issue. People of Kashmir have been suffering from traumatic experiences as a community. This research also shows how the nature of community trauma is different from individual trauma. Dr. Nitin Chopra's novel *The Life of Tolka* (2023) is a collective depiction of the war and its impact on masses. The novel is based on the recent Russia-Ukraine war scenario and the chaos that it had created in the lives of the people of Ukraine more precisely about all those foreign students who were staying for study purpose. Throughout the novel the novelist tries to make a comparison about before and aftermath of the destruction and violence has created by war through various photos and description of different places around the country. In this novel, the novelist tries to convey the message that war can never bring peace to a valley rather it destroys it. In an article by Suaad Al Orami and Osman Antwi-Boateng (2023) titled as *Surviving Patriarchy: Ukrainian Women and the Russia-Ukraine War* where they discussed about the war and the participation of women. War is a men oriented business. Women as a community have always been excluded from the battlefield. In this article both the researchers argues that the contribution of women in war is not limited in nursing the combat, serving food and taking care of the children. The concept of war has changed. Women were asked to participate into the deeper section of the war when they showed up in the front row. The women folk of Ukraine proved themselves to be worthy and strong to participate in various operations. This article basically overview on the cope mechanism that the Ukrainian women have used to overcome the helplessness and patriarchy. *The Traumatic Effect of the Japanese War on Women in Rani Manicka's Selected Novels* is an article by four scholars Somia Ayaicha, Manimangai Mani, Mohamed Ewan Bin Awang and Rania Khelifa Chelihi (2022)

where they discussed about the overall impact of the World War II. The devastating Second World War (1939-45) leaves a deep impact on almost everyone who came in contact of it. Malaya was ruled by the Japanese for four years. In her novel Manicka Rani depicts about the inhumanity of the Japanese army and the suffering of the women. The marginalization that women faced and how it shattered and traumatize their identity. The traumatize women used different coping mechanism to survive the war. This article is an overview upon the atrocities of the Japanese soldiers during the four years of acquisition in Malaya by studying some selected female characters of these novels of Monicka Rani. Bridget E Keown (2019) presented a dissertation titled as "*She is Lost to Time and Place*": *Women, War Trauma and the First World War* where the major concern was about the women of Ireland and England. This dissertation covers the unnoticed sufferings stories of women because of the lack of data into lived experiences of women at the time of First World War. It analyzes the experiences of trauma and how it was expressed by the British and Irish women during the First World War. An article titled as *Women at War: Implications for Mental Health* (2011) published by Lissa Dutra and some other scholars. In this article they've written about the women combats mental health outcome after getting deployed to Iraq to support the Iraqi freedom movement for thirty days. Though in this article they have talked about the sexual harassment in military and exposure to the combat experiences, examining fifty four active duty women and critically analyze the impact of PTSD and depressing symptoms. Almost three quarters endorsed exposure to the combat experience and more than half of them experienced deployment related sexual harassment. So as the research shown military sexual harassment can cause PTSD symptoms and other psychological disease.

## **Aims and Objectives**

In this research I have tried to explore the overall traumatic effect of war on womankind. The novel of Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, *The Mountains Sing* is a literal representation of Vietnamese people's sufferings during the Resistance War. But I have made an attempt to explore the overall suffering of trauma of the womankind during and after the war. War induced trauma is not kept limited within the soldiers. Rather it breaks through the battle field and spreads all across the country. It is an inseparable part of war. This novel *The Mountains Sing* the novelist tries to bring out the sufferings of the common folks specially the women. Dieu Lan a survivor of the war is a victim of war induced trauma. Through Dieu Lan and the other women characters of the novel I'm trying to explore how trauma can make life chaotic and messy and change the path of life as well.

This study will be an attempt to explore the trauma of war from the perspective of a woman who is not directly engage with the battle field yet had gone through great destruction and sufferings due to the war. Moreover war was a used excuse to all the physical harassment, rape, murder and various atrocities were faced by women. A details account of this violence against women will be a concern of this research.

## **Research Methodology**

In this research study *Impact of war trauma of women: Reading Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's The Mountains Sing* qualitative research has been done here. This novel is a literary representation of the Vietnamese War and Land Reform Act which has caused immense suffering to the com of Vietnam. But I have tried to find out the difference between the reaction of man and woman towards trauma, violence, death and loss and highlight the women's perspective of trauma of war. In this study of mine I have tried to explain women as a victim of war is no less than a man's suffering caused by war. Women's disassociation with the battlefield does not spare the suffering. My aim in this research is to explore the traumatic affect of war on women in Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's novel *The Mountains Sing* in special reference with the character of Dieu Lan, Ngoc and Hương, the three important female protagonist of the novel.

To support my argument I have conducted research related to the War trauma literature and studies. Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, Hungarian neurologist Sandor Ferenczi, American writer David J. Morris, American sociologist Kai T Erikson are among some of the widely known figure of trauma studies, who has offered their views and definitions regarding this area of study. In this research of mine I have tried to point out that during the crisis of a war it is the women folk who suffers utmost. The torture comes in the form of rape, murder, physical assaults and so on.

The primary data and research has been used in this dissertation to analyze the impact of war trauma in this novel employing the three important female characters and their experience of war in this novel. The secondary sources like books, journals, articles are used to support and analyze the information provided by the primary data and sources. The findings of this research can penetrate into the existing knowledge in the field of the war trauma literature.



## Chapter 2

### Trauma, war and their co-relation in this novel

War is not just a mere clash between two countries over political conflicts and insurgencies. It causes injuries, bloodshed, murder, death, displacement and destruction. The physical injuries are cured by physician but the mental agony and disturbance caused by war was not even a matter of concern before 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term “trauma” came into light after the devastation of World War I and II. So the war brings PTSD, panic attack, anxiety, guilt, suicidal tendency and other mental disease along with the victory. War and trauma these two are co-related each other very tightly. It is an inseparable fact of the grim reality. This novel deals with the Resistance War of Vietnam and its destruction in the contemporary time and it’s after effect on the people. War leaves scar of the haunting events and massacres which causes various psychological diseases. As a representation of the masses the novelist brought out the story of the Tran family’s battle to survive the war.

“Regardless of its name, even today the war continues to kill children in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, with millions of tons of unexploded ordnance still buried in the belly of the earth”( Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing*.p.160)

From the onset World War I to the contemporary Russia-Ukraine or Israel-Hamas conflict of arms, death spares no one “regardless of its name”( Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 160). The bullets do not know how to classify between enemies and friend. Irrespective of one’s identity and gender it kills people. War is responsible for displacement, separation and destruction in the Vietnam. War trauma and violence are the two sides of a coin. Que Mai through this novel extracted the fear and anguish of war through the lances of the woman characters. Each member of the Tran family has a story which contains the trauma of war.“ a

generation of Vietnamese who have no choice but to inherit the trauma of war brought home by returning soldiers” (“Book Club kit”n.pag). Three generations of this family has been carrying the baggage of trauma and it still continues to affect their lives. Characters like Dieu Lan, Ngoc and Huong of Tran Family belongs from three generations accordingly. Yet all three of their lives are respectively disturbed by the war. One cannot have the same amount of compassion and love for life and family after witnessing the atrocities of war.

“Trauma destroys the fabric of time. In normal time you move from one moment to the next, sunrise to sunset, birth to death. After trauma you may move in circles, find yourself being sucked backwards into an eddy or bouncing like a rubber ball from now and then to back again... .In the traumatic universe the basic laws of matter are suspended: ceiling fans can be helicopters, car exhaust can be mustard gas”. (Morris. David. J. *The Evil Hours*)

The grandmother Dieu Lan was living life in a constant fear of losing her another child or perhaps a family member. The hardship and loss Dieu Lan has faced during the war changed her view about the world and society. She witnessed the treachery of their neighbors turning into monster to kill them but once those traitors survived because of the Tran family. This act of unfaithfulness even affected her personal relationship with the family members. This growing fear of her even created complications between her and Huong, her granddaughter. Being an obedient child to her grandma Huong on the other hand surrounded herself with study, books and kittens and piglets avoiding social contact with the other kids of her age. As a consequences of what Huong’s grandma has faced in her lifetime, it seems that somehow Huong is not liberated enough to enjoy her life unlike the others of her age. Dieu Lan has created a barrier between her family and the society. Relationship within the Tran family was not pleasing to look

at. War leaves “endless impact on a life” (Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience*). Ngoc blames her mother for the death of her brother Thuan, whereas Hường on the other hand believes that her mother has killed someone and cheated on her father. Both Ngoc and Dieu Lan pleads themselves to be guilty for the destruction of their family. The incident took place in different circumstances at their respective time. After the accidental death of her husband and brother, Dieu Lan had to take the responsibility of her family amidst the ongoing war in Vietnam. She being the mother of five has taken some drastic decision to survive the war. One of them was to leave her four children away during her journey towards Hanoi. It was devastating and heart breaking for a mother to leave her children behind all alone in such do or die situation. As a mother the sacrifices Dieu Lan has made perhaps was not the best, but all of them survived The Great Hunger. A mother leaving her child behind like Dieu Lan or to kill her to protect from the predator in disguise as man, like “Sethe” did to her daughter “Beloved” are some of those examples that mothers had been doing since ancient time to protect their children from the predators. “if I hadn’t kill her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her.”(Morrison. *Beloved*.p.236).This was the explanation of Sethe about killing her daughter. Both the character have set the bar very high extremity about a mother and their aggressive nature about the protection of the children. Dieu Lan’s heated argument with her daughter as “You can’t even imagine how much it hurts to have a dead son” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* p.101) vividly shows her helplessness and guilt that she possesses throughout her life about a particular decision that she took about leaving her elder one behind while moving towards HaNoi.

“Some four decade after the Vietnam War, little is understood of how non-national civilian women have made sense of their experiences both in a war zone

and returning to a hostile society and how this has affected their mental well being over a lifetime”.(McCormack.L.2009)

Ngoc is another important character who bears the trauma of the Vietnam War. But her part of suffering is different from the rest of the family. She was the only one in the Tran family who has witnessed most terrific and disgusting side of war. She was brutally “raped” by the Japanese soldier during her service as nurse in the camp. The calamity of that night continues on haunting “Whenever sleep or darkness approached, they rushed at me....” (Nguyen Phan, *The Mountains Sing*, p.208).The hostility and cruelty of the war crushed her self-worth as women of purity. This terrible incident has evolved a sense of guilt within her. Ngoc believes that it was her fault that she being a women was not strong enough to protect herself and fight against those monsters, “I betrayed your father since I wasn’t strong enough to fight them” ( Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p.217). She declares herself to be the guilty one as if it was her fault that she was “raped” by the Japanese soldiers. Her conscious self perpetually reminds her about the dark secret that she had somehow managed to hide from her family especially from her daughter. One can imagine the hardship that she was facing while justifying this mishap to herself. “I wasn’t afraid of the bombs, but I was fearful that he would discover about my body being soiled, and that I’d killed an innocent soul....” ( Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing*.219) this is the statement that she has made while describing her sufferings to her daughter Hương.

“Sitting next to my uncle Dat and listening to his story that night, I realized that war was monstrous. If it didn’t kill those it touched, too away a piece of their soul, so they could never be whole again”. ( Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing*, p-199)

Unlike every other women of the family Huong also was grappling with the aftermath of the horrible Vietnam War and The Land Reform Act. Death, displacement, lost, suffering of the Tran family along with every other family of Vietnam is the gift of the war. She was among those who has not physically experienced but had seen her grandma, mother and the rest of the family member going through hell of suffering. Her life takes a major turn when she discovers about her mother getting “raped” by a bunch of Japanese soldier. “I had caught a glimpse of my mother’s sorrow, I had to see what type of monster it was” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing*.p.207 -208). She explains the horror of this devastating incident as “Sometimes something is so terrible that you need to pretend that it doesn’t exist” (.Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* p.207). She being a fifteen years old girl who has expecting pamper and care from her mother was terrified that “I couldn’t imagine how the war had swallowed into this stomach, churning her into someone different before spitting her out” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing*.p.74-75).

Almost all the member of her family we’re going through the terror of war. The war has claimed the life of her father and uncle and her uncle Dat has lost his leg. Her mother who has left for the battle field in search of her father but it was all in vain. For Huong it took much longer to cup up with the possible death of her father. Her ingrown fear about the war continues to grow. The crisis in their lives has caused by the war trauma.

“for those who undergo trauma is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out if it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis”.(Caruth. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*)

The continues haunt can be seen in the case of Dieu Lan when she came to know the family background of Tam the boyfriend of Huong. She has a haunting memory of witnessing her

mother getting killed by the “Wicked Ghost” at the field. This memory troubled her when she comes to know that the wicked ghost is the Grandfather of Tam. “She called for Heaven and Earth. She looked terrified. More terrified than I’d ever seen her” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-334). She was so terrified with the fact that she asked her granddaughter to leave Tam then and there. Her personal memories of trauma related to her mother create immense hardship for Huong to deal with. Because she was in love with Tam and it is very hard on her to choose one to stay with. She inherits the trauma of and burdens of her family specially her grandma cause she was raised by her grandma Dieu Lan. When he grandma utters, “I’m really sorry Huong....Tam’s grandfather ...Tam’s grandfather is Wicked Ghost.”( Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p- 334). She knows the hardship that her grandma had faced while raising her kids amidst the hurricane of war and insurgencies. Even after that she was blamed for not loving her children’s enough.

The nightmare of Ngoc keeps reminding her about the children that she has lost though she never accepted it as her. Yet she feels the anxiety of killing a children being a doctor. It is an oxymoron that a doctor is responsible for the death of a pre mature baby. “Tears blinded me as I gulped down the bitter liquid. I was killing my baby. My own baby” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-215). She was unable to accept the fact that “The enemy group of men....they did horrible things to me. One of them ...fathered the baby” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-217). Though it was an accident that she was unable to prevent yet it haunted her every day and night. She has deep rooted mindset that a woman is supposed to stay loyal to each other physically, mentally and emotionally and this accidental unwanted pregnancy disrupted the idea of purity. So to prevent the psychic cold war inside her brain and prove her loyalty to her husband she decided to kill the baby. It was a reflex of her loyalty and dedication towards her

husband that she took the decision to get rid of the baby. Her inner psyche played with her and she became a victim of guilt and self hatred.

Though Houg does not come into the direct contact of war atrocities yet the course of her life altered by the actions of her family member. The death of her father was one of the terrible things that war has caused her. Her father whom she loved and adored the most went for war and never came back again. Father's death, mother's psychic instability, uncle's lameness snatches away the happiness of her life. The conflict between her uncle Sang and her grandma was another matter for concern. She was so scattered with the inner conflicts of her family that she never tried to share her opinion about her father's death or mother's accidental pregnancy. She develops an inner thought that "those I loved so dearly could be taken away from me so suddenly" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p- 335). Meanwhile her encounter with her boyfriend also helped to develop such a thought of Houg. After witnessing the mysterious identity reveal of Tam's grandfather "I couldn't go back to him. I could no longer love him. He was the flesh and blood of Grandma's worst enemy" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-335). The Wicked Ghost was fully responsible for the trouble and sufferings of Dieu Lan and having an intimate relationship with her Houg was very much aware about that. So she was in a dilemma of choosing one to stay with. On one side there was the love of her life and on the opposite there was her family. Though she chose to pick her family yet "No matter how hard I tried, though, I found myself mumbling Tam's name whenever he was not with me. I missed our talks, our laughter, our fights. At the same time, I feared that if I accepted Tam back, it would be a betrayal for my grandma" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p- 335).

The novelist intricately brings out the story of all three important women characters of this novel. The struggles of their life and the trauma and atrocities they've faced are

interconnected. Both the character Ngoc and Huong goes through a dilemma of decision making. Ngoc suffers from ideological inner conflict whereas Huong has to make decision either in favor of her heart or reasonable mind.

“War stripes away our illusions of safety and exposes the fragility of life” (Aleksievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*)

The uncertainty of life has been in the life of Dieu Lan. The Trans were among the wealthy landlords of their village. Yet the Land Reform Act dismisses everything within a few hours. Their life was threatened by the extremist. So to save the lives of her children she escapes the village and moving towards HaNoi. Besides leaving the village she had nothing in favor of her so she left the village with her six children. In order to buy food Dieu Lan sold her silk blouse. The silk blouse was “My brother’s precious gift to me” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-233). While thinking about the devastation of the Tran family “Never could I have thought that so much violence would crash down onto our family” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-233). This Land Reform Act of Vietnam sheds blood of so many innocent souls that has no relation with the social injustices. Among those the Trans were also included because they always helped the poor. The essence of safety was lost because the American bomber spares nothing, neither the houses nor the schools. The displacements and chaos caused by the ongoing Land Reform Act was the root cause of trauma that the Tran family faced. Ideological conflicts in politics created the chaos and in the name of equality and justice man were killed and women were physically assaulted.

The intertwined trauma of war tied all three of the important female protagonist together. The three women characters represent three generations experience of trauma. To Dieu



Lan it caused social anxiety, disbelief and hiding of emotion, whereas trauma attacked Ngoc in disguise of guilt and self deprecation and to Huong it was a disaster that destroyed her family.

### Chapter 3

#### The Journey of Overcoming the Traumatic Past

“The challenges faced by Vietnamese people throughout history are as tall as the tallest mountain. If you stand too close, you won’t be able to see their peaks. Once you step away from the currents of life, you’ll have the full view....”

(Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-2)

In this novel *The Mountains Sing* each of the women characters goes through the hardship, challenges and complexities intertwines with the turbulent history of Vietnam. Amidst all the chaos and ravages of war Dieu Lan and Ngoc finds out the resilience to overcome the loss of the loved ones Nguyễn Phan in this novel brings out the story of an ordinary women and her struggle of winning over her fears and apprehension about war. As a part of the devastation the mass of Vietnam have faced challenges equivalence to the tallest mountain of the country. Throughout this period of conflict, insurgencies and bombing people have faced difficulties for the fundamental and basics if life. Even the Tran family who once known among the wealthy families of the village, came to a situation as Hương expresses as “grandma had to pretend as if she was full”. Irrespective of the family history the wealth of the rich people were looted and destroyed by the Marxist extremist of the country. The anonymous mass killing was continued in the name of equal distribution of wealth. People were executed for fighting their own nation’s safety, liberty and freedom.

As the story developed the novelist Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai draws a graph of growth and development in the relationship among the three important women characters of the novel. She particularly empowers the female relationship and the role they play in the life of each other and came up with defense mechanism to get over from the devastation of war. Each of them complimented the journey in overcoming the fear and start again. Throughout the novel the grandmother Dieu Lan has been a source of inspiration for both her daughter and granddaughter. The bold decision and courageous behavior resembles her as strong powerful women of her age. She had enough strength to take the decision of leaving the village and move for HaNoi all alone with her five children. Dieu Lan shares very deep adorable and generous relationship with her granddaughter. She resembles the mother figure to Hương because she never had the chance to create a strong bond with her mother. Hương was protected under the shelter of her grandma. In her words “She never allowed me to go anywhere alone, even during the month absent of bombs” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-7). In the second chapter of the novel we have witnessed the over protectiveness of Dieu Lan towards her granddaughter. It is the consequences of her past experiences that she had in her life. Hương disclose that “I wondered what aunt and uncles had said about grandma being over protective of me because terrible things had happened to her children?” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-7)

She had a heart of gold. Amidst the crisis of bombing and firing she helped her student to get a shelter and save life. The novelist develops the graph of Dieu Lan’s character with full of ups and down. Since her young age she has been witnessing death and it continued till her old age. Death of her father, mother, brother, son and son-in-law all are caused by the war.

All the three characters have their own way of overcoming the obstacles of their lives. Let’s talk about each of the women and their story of overcoming their trauma of nightmares of

war. The character of Dieu Lan goes through a revolutionary changes and developments throughout the story. Dieu Lan being the lady of the Tran family holds a very optimistic view upon life. “The war might destroy our houses, but it can’t extinguish our spirit” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-11). Even at the age of sixty she has a heart full of compassion and that tries to help needy. This character of grandma is a source of inspiration for Huong to overcome the misery of life. Hope is the only thing that keeps her together all along even after losing almost everything. As Huong was continuously learning about the life of her grandmother through the stories she “was astonished when grandma told me how her life had been cursed by a fortune teller’s prediction, and how she had survived the French occupation, the Japanese invasion the Great Hunger and the Land Reform.” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-17)

The relationship that Dieu Lan shares with Huong is very pure and complete within. Amidst the post war destructions this little lady Huong who has lost her father, mother is not well enough to have a discussion about the emotional upheaval of her. In the midst of crisis uncle Dat handed over the gift of her father. It is a bird, named as “Son ca means The Mountains Sing” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-126). This gift of her father arouses hope for life. Having a close association with her father this is an emotional moment for her to have a gift that her “father carved it himself” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-128) but not the physically present in front of her. Amidst the crisis of life Dieu Lan was the source of inspiration for her. The presence of her is enough to make her feel safe and secure. She believes that if “I press my face against her long, black hair that smells like my mother’s. “As long as I can inhale her scent, I will be safe” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-5). The intergenerational bond between Huong and Dieu Lan provides a sense of emotional comfort to both of them.

The emotional baggage of carrying this fear has become a part until her granddaughter helped her to release it. “Nothing matters when I have you” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-57) is such a strong statement to make for a women like Dieu Lan. After the losing her children and home her determination to rebuild her life shows the amount of mental strength that she holds. She fights with her another self of her every day about the decision that she made. “YEARS HAVE PASSED since the day I left Dat behind, but I still question my decision and the ones I’d make next” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-185). Though she had valid reasons to left him behind yet “her guilt is still too overwhelming foe me to feel that I’m good enough as a mother” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-185). No matter how hard situations life throws at her she protects her family at any cost. She believes that as a mother “I had to stay strong for my children” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-136). From a timid woman who was afraid to go out alone to became a “trader” and quit teaching she has crossed a long way of life. The collective efforts of both their family rebuild the home and works together to protect it. As a woman who have witnessed all, only “hoped for the fire of war to be extinguished” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-324). The act of revisiting family histories helps the character to overcome the past trauma and helps them to heal and ultimately make peace with it. Almost all the characters lost someone or something that has deep emotional attachment and hard to lose.

Across the novel these two women have constantly supporting each other. Huong helped her grandma to overcome the fear of the “wicked ghost” who has killed her mother. As it has been said that time places everything in place. As the time passed by Dieu Lan also realizes the fact that “Tam has nothing to do with what happened” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-337). What happens in the past shall remain in the past; it should not create chaos in the present.

The believe that Dieu Lan holds that “blood will tell, but blood evolves and can change too” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-337) and Tam has also changed and does not carry the ideologies of his Grandfather. Huong’s association with the family of wicked ghost helped Dieu Lan to make peace with the haunting past of her. Though the encounter of both the family was accidental yet eventually it ended up with a notion of new beginning.

Huong’s engagement with her mother was not very welcoming after her returned from the war scene. Her mother’s unusual behavior mysterious blabbering creates such a situation where she doubts her mother to be a murderer. After knowing the actual reason she says “I wanted everything to turn dark. Get smaller and disappear. Disappear and take me with it” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-217). Huong supported her mother o overcome the guilt of “discover my body being soiled and I’d killed an innocent soul” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-219). Huong imagines the horror that her mother has gone through while coming back to her. She acknowledges her mother’s strength that she stood up and takes a stand for the comrades. It gives her a sense of pride to learn about the strength of her mother has. Though the pregnancy of her mother was not an incident to remember yet she often thinks about the baby who is no more. She tries to figure out how she would have been reacted if he was alive. “Would I have been able to love the way a sister was supposed to love her brother or would I hate him because half of his blood come from the man who had attempted to kill my mother’s soul” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-220). Huong after knowing the story of her mother she intends to provide her a comfortable and feel free atmosphere where she can be at peace. She tries to have conversations with her regarding various topics related to study. She takes an initiative to break the ice between her mother and grandma along with the other members of the family so they can have normal conversation about the things that they are afraid

to mention. She is gradually coming back to normal life after her engagement with the daily activities. Her multifaceted approach to engage her mother was breaking the shackle of trauma.

“Life is great, Guava, because whenever I was put down there were always kind people who picked me up” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-241)

The point that the novelist here wants to make through the character of Dieu Lan is that life is all about ups and down. Struggle and challenges are an inevitable part of life. Everyone has to face the harsh realities of life. During this journey of life we meet people some of them are good and some are bad. Despite of experiencing difficulties and negativities, the presence of compassionate and kind people will create a vast difference so that we focus on the positive aspect of life. Dieu Lan who has come across the last stages of life have met various people. She met people like the “Wicket Ghost” or the Japanese soldiers who tried to kill people and created chaos in the lives of others. She also encounters with people who are extremely kind and generous and always ready to help others. Mrs. Tu, Mrs. Thao, Master Think and Mr. Van come under the category of those kind people who helped her to get over the challenges of her life. Mrs. Tu was the one who helped her to escape when the Marxist extremist tried to kill them in the village. Mrs. Thao saved the life of Hanh and sheltered them for one night during their journey towards HaNoi. Master Think is the master of her and she took shelter after arriving at HaNoi. Mr. Van who is responsible for the transition of Dieu Lan’s life. Through these lines of her Dieu Lan tries to convey the message to her granddaughter that life will challenge with obstacles and will surprise with blessings.

The Mountains Sing of Nguyen Phan Que Mai is a novel that approves the fact that life is full of blessings and curses. This is the story of Dieu Lan and her bravery during the Resistance

War of Vietnam. The discussion is mainly about her experiences of war induced trauma and along with her daughter and granddaughter and how she faced it and overcome it. The family relationship plays a key role in their lives. Dieu Lan shares a very casual yet deep emotional relationship with Huong. Throughout the story this duo takes the responsibility to bring back the old beautiful days of the Tran's

## Conclusion

Nguyen Phan in her novel *The Mountains Sing* talks about trauma of the Viet Nam War in relation to the history of the country along with the people. In her novel she depicts the story of a woman who has lost almost everything in yet survived the war. Often history keeps aside the story of a real hustler that. As a family the Tran's have gone through so many devastating clashes induced due to political and ideological conflicts. This novel is among those which praise the forgotten part of the history where a woman fights with the society to survive her family.

As it's been witnessed from that the marginalized people mostly remains unnoticed by the first person narrator. But this novel covers up the life story of a very ordinary woman who survived The Hunger Strike, The Land Reform Act and The Resistance War on her own. This novel depicts each character and their history of overcoming the trauma of war and suffering in details. Their story of struggle and suffering of war trauma shaped their lives and relationship with each other. By examining the characters journey during the war scenario we have encountered the vulnerability of human psyche in the face of war induced trauma. Despite the disengagement of the masses, the war trauma extends beyond the battlefield. It often makes life hard and miserable and we've witnessed in throughout the novel. To start with, Diêu Lan the lady of the house avoids social contact, community engagement because of her terrible past mishaps that made her life more hard. It even creates complications in her personal life as well. Her distant relationship with her children is a byproduct of war trauma. She witnessed her father's assassination, mother's murder by the wicked ghost and sudden demise of her husband and brother, death of her son and son-in-law, so much to take up on one life. The "war not only takes lives but also the hope, positivity and innocence of the survivors" (Chopra. *Life of Tolka*,



36) and destroys the spirit of living. The trauma that has been represented here is not merely fictional. The author herself has mentioned in the acknowledgement section of the book that “*The Mountains Sing* is inspired by the experience of my own family and those around me” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing*, 340)

Although this a fictional representation of misery of the Vietnamese people, yet it was inspired from the real scenario of war in Việt Nam that caused by the American invasion. Que Mai through this story brings out various types of trauma that we usually face during war and other violent confrontation such as individual trauma, collective trauma, collective trauma, community trauma etc. The trauma in this novel has been transmitted from one generation to another. This concept of transmission of trauma can be closely understood through the illustration of the relationship between Diêu Lan and Huong. The death, loss and displacement leave irremovable scars on her psyche. The reason behind it is the death and betrayal that she has faced throughout her life. Grandmother Dieu Lan transfers her traumatic memories through stories unintentionally to Huong her granddaughter who grows up in a post war environment still showed by the lingering effect by the conflict. The novelist sheds light on the dark side of the war where a woman was raped by the soldiers though she was a nurse or the killing of Diêu Lan’s brother by the aggressive and adverse mob. So in the war “we lose not just bodies but also the dreams and aspirations of a generation” (Aleksieich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*) and it can collapse the economy of a family, community even a country. Ngọc’s experience of war is a perfect example of decaying of a bright and successful career. She was a nurse who ended up being a woman who is afraid facing the world. Both the sibling Ngọc and Đạt has given up on their lives because of social anxiety.

This novel the novelist makes an attempt to show the world that what actually happened in Việt Nam during the American invasion. Because the west especially America have always been very sophisticated when it comes to the narrative of Vietnamese part in the Resistance War. The theory of trauma had never been very concern about the other parts of the world besides west more precisely the American perspective of trauma. The domination of American domain is still continued because of the political dictatorship. So the trauma of the rest of the world remains mostly unseen and unasked. So this disengagement caused between the European and non European created the line of distinction. The condition of Việt Nam and Diêu Lan is somewhere similar to look at. Because unlike Diêu Lan the narrative of Vietnamese perspective of war trauma also remains silent.

Despite the profound trauma of war and violence that they endure, the Trans show a remarkable protest against it and a stern will power to survive the war. This strong will power is rooted from their family bonding, inner strength, cultural values and positive attitude. This is a story of hope and prosperity over the nightmares, death, blood, violence and destruction of war. Hope is the key to survive any obstacle that comes across in the pathway of life. The family values of sticking together revived “those happy moments” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-9) to the family after such devastation. Staying by the side of the family no matter how hard the situation is one of the key causes of keeping the Trans together.

Dieu Lan as a character is an ocean of positivity and mental strength .The grandmother is best suitable example of hustler. She survived the hunger strike, the Vietnam War while being single mother to her five children yet continued to fight back the obstacles of life. About the war and death she says “I don’t believe in violence. No one has the right to take away the life of another human being” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-14). A perfect example for self

sufficient empowered woman. The story of her life is enough to give us a thunder of thrill. She represents all the strong Vietnamese women who have faced immense adversity and yet keeps on fighting for the better future of the family. Her story inspires her young granddaughter Huong to face life fiercely. The life of Huong surrounded by the learning's of her grandmother as she is the closest one to her. The books and stories of her grandmother Huong learns about her ancestors, family history and the history of her motherland. Amidst the atrocities of war, "it was Grandma's stories that kept me and my hopes alive" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-17). Through the stories of her grandma she connects herself with the heritage, the grief of the family and finds strength and will power in the experience that she heard from her. Over the course of her life she adheres to the ideologies of her grandma and follows the philosophy of her life. Huong's mother Ngọc takes inspiration from Diêu Lan her mother to overcome her trauma of war and social anxiety. Ngọc emphasizes the struggle of her mother for the sake of the Tran family. "She's been through great hardship and is the toughest woman I know" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* .p-16)

The novel stresses on the fact that the physical scars caused by the war may disappear but the process of inner healing the soul is only possible through love, care and time. Eventually everything falls in place at the right time. Each of the characters journey signifies distinct qualities of life. The journey of Huong illustrates potential of growth even after losing the most loved of her life. Diêu Lan's life manifests how one can rises from the ashes like a phoenix. Ngọc's life story shows the importance letting go sometime it's not our fault it's the situation. The bonding of the grandma-granddaughter duo illustrates the continuity of life and always there is full possibility of transformation.

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