

# Trauma, sexuality, and identity in *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras and *Burning Grass on The Field* by Doan Minh Phuong

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## **Abstract:**

This paper examines the relationship between sexuality and trauma in two works, *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras and *Burning Grass on The Field* (*Dot co ngay dong*, in Vietnamese) by Doan Minh Phuong. Using trauma studies as a critical perspective to compare the two works, we focus on the relationship between sexuality and trauma, analyse the construction of identity of traumatized characters, and clarify the role of sexuality in such a process. Juxtaposing a newly released Vietnamese literary work, *Burning Grass on The Field* next to the well-known novel *The Lover* is also expected to reveal more meaning for the seemingly asymmetrical works. This can be seen as our effort to blur the division between the so-called classics and the other, contributing partly to decolonizing human literature.

**Keywords:** Dot co ngay dong (in Vietnamese), sexuality, *The Lover*, trauma, trauma studies.

**Classification number:** 9.2

## **1. Introduction**

Since Sigmund Freud's pioneering studies on the concept of trauma, there have been many research works on trauma, which lay a strong foundation for the development of trauma literature [1, 2]. Cathy Caruth has followed discussion on trauma studies and pointed out specific aspects of trauma studies, including the temporal nature of trauma, the relationship between trauma and reality and the abilities to interpret and understand trauma [3].

As a result of the two World Wars spanning over thirty years and significant changes in modern life, there was a *lost generation* that suffered many physical and mental injuries. Accordingly, literature and research on trauma have become popular, mainly focusing on collective trauma such as war trauma or trauma of genocide. In Vietnam, trauma

literature has only been considered since the Doi Moi period in 1986. Abandoning ideal heroism, Vietnamese literature raises scepticism towards wars and their consequences, viewing them as reasons for trauma. Besides, research on trauma literature approaches narratives from different perspectives. However, trauma studies have not been applied as a tool to compare *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras and *Burning Grass on The Field* by Doan Minh Phuong. Therefore, re-reading *The Lover* and *Burning Grass on The Field* from the perspective of trauma studies is our contribution to delve into the layers of meaning of a novel that has been well-known for over 40 years (since 1984) in correlation with a newly released work (in 2020).

In M. Duras's *The Lover*, the protagonist's mental trauma was caused by several issues, including

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material deprivation, struggles between French and Vietnamese cultures, and being victimized by a colonial system. Additionally, her Chinese lover is also a typical traumatized character. In terms of social status, his colonial background made him inferior to his lover. In their relationship, he was taken over by the girl and then abandoned by her. Each character has their own trauma, so reading this work from the perspective of trauma studies can help one to understand more aspects of trauma in literature.

While M. Duras is a French author writing about her experiences in Vietnam, Doan Minh Phuong is a Vietnamese writer who immigrated to Germany at the age of 21. Like M. Duras, Doan Minh Phuong's childhood memories have directly affected the creation of fractured and traumatized characters. Therefore, *Burning Grass on The Field* could be seen as an author's *mimesis* of broken memories.

Using trauma studies as a critical perspective to compare *The Lover* and *Burning Grass on The Field*, we aim to focus on the relationship between sexuality and trauma, analyse the journeys of constructing the identities of traumatized characters, and clarify the role of sexuality in such journeys. Moreover, placing the newly released Vietnamese literary work, *Burning Grass on The Field*, next to the well-known novel *The Lover* is expected to reveal more meaning for the seemingly asymmetrical works. This is also our effort to blur the division between so-called classics and the other works, contributing partly to decolonizing human literature.

## 2. What is trauma?

Conceptually, the term trauma can be understood in many ways, and the definition of trauma is dynamic and changes over time. According to the *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* (2023) [4], trauma is defined from two angles. Firstly, it is understood

in the medical context, referring to injuries to the human body. Secondly, trauma is defined from a psychological point of view as "a mental condition caused by severe shock, stress, or fear, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time" and as "a very frightening or upsetting experience". Meanwhile, in the *Vietnamese Dictionary* (2003) [5], trauma is defined as "a state of injury in a body part affected from outside". Thus, the term trauma is understood both as physical and mental injuries. The latter, focusing on mental damage, can be seen as a psychoanalytic or psychological concept. Within the scope of this analysis, we use trauma from a mental and psychological perspective to clarify some issues mentioned in the introduction.

As a relatively commonly used term in humanities and social sciences, the connotation of the term trauma is continually being explored and deepened. In Sigmund Freud's work (1961) [6], trauma is understood as "experiences of pain". Specifically, he defined trauma as "an event so overwhelming that it cannot be processed normally at the time of its occurrence, so that its memory is effectively blocked but returns to haunt the victim until it is appropriately confronted and dealt with". This has greatly influenced many trauma studies, including the classic work of trauma criticism, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and The Possibility of History*, by Cathy Caruth (1991) [7].

Freud made the point of *belatedness* (*Nachträglichkeit* in German). Accordingly, trauma is not only what happens at the time of the traumatic event. Trauma is also the return of events that are beyond human tolerance. *Belatedness* refers to the return of trauma through an individual's recalling of what happened. In other words, trauma can delay its onset and arrive with flashbacks that occur when people revive memories of events that crossed the threshold. However, in order to recall or revive

memories of those traumatic events, Freud refers to a second event, which occurs after the first event that caused the trauma. This second event takes the form of the first event. At this point, the victim once again has to go through the old experiences and it is during this experience that the trauma returns with the victim's clear awareness of suffering. Freud also emphasized that "trauma does not reside in the original event; rather, it is constituted in a conjunction of two events, neither of which is trauma itself" [6]. This means trauma exists in recollection. It itself does not cause pain, but the act of repeated remembrances causes someone to fall into a state of distress.

Realizing trauma in the form of memory also emphasizes the relationship between trauma and memories as well as the effects of trauma on each other. As Cathy Caruth (1991) [7] explained, trauma is "the repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" and "the traumatizing event and the intrusive repetition of the event via dreams and hallucinations". Thus, the awareness of trauma persists through the recall of memories that have been disrupted by the human consciousness.

In the article "The awakening pains", Hoang Phong Tuan (2012) [8] used the phrase "wailing wounds" to refer to the fact that mental injury will always try to remind us of the certain existence of trauma that has not been forgotten. The calls or cries of trauma are also a form of belated return of trauma that connects with unrecognized memories. From there, it reminds us of forgotten pain that seems to have fallen into the subconscious.

In his writings about the relationship between memories and trauma according to Andrew Barneby's analysis (2018) [3], Sigmund Freud (1961) [6] suggested that when a shocking memory is blocked, it becomes a trauma. The trauma itself does not originate solely from an overwhelming

event; rather, it surfaces when the awareness of that trauma is triggered. After experiencing pain, people often avoid or delay accepting the fact that they persevered through tough times with terrible experiences. As a result, their trauma, hurt, and pain may be forgotten, even though they continue to expand day by day. In other words, trauma can be likened to a ghost that occasionally resurfaces to remind traumatized individuals of their traumatic experiences. However, to recover from personal trauma, victims need to separate trauma from the places and times that the traumatic events occurred, which constitutes the first context of trauma. Thereby, traumatized individuals become aware of their trauma only after the traumatic event has already occurred.

Trauma can be seen as a remarkable event in a person's life that alters their perception of the world and themselves. Traumatic experiences occur so suddenly and so overwhelmingly that it disrupts the linear progression of human maturation. At that time, trauma plays the role of a turning point, affecting all later development in a person's life. In *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud (1961) [6] wrote that trauma "lead[s] to a traumatic neurosis the protective shield against stimuli is broken through and excessive amounts of excitation impinge on the mental apparatus". Trauma directly or indirectly reveals the "secrets" deep in the subconscious. At that time, perception is changed, memory is interrupted, and identity is corrupted. Furthermore, because trauma can be triggered by events in the community, it has ripple effects beyond the individual level. By reconstructing the identity of each individual, trauma can redefine the identity of an entire group over a given historical era. This capacity to transform the appearance and nature of a society on a large scale underscores the profound impact of trauma.

The above-mentioned discussion on trauma leads us to determine the following characteristics:

*First*, the term trauma can refer to both physical and mental injuries caused by events beyond human tolerance. Trauma can be caused by various reasons, resulting in both individual and collective trauma.

*Second*, trauma can serve as a marker of one's life history or even shape one's history. However, it is a history that individuals may struggle to fully comprehend. Trauma creates cognitive fractures that block an individual's ability to understand or accept his or her own history.

*Third*, trauma may not surface immediately following the extreme event, but it may resurface later through flashbacks. Trauma exists through remembering the traumatic event. Trauma comes back again and again in human life like long, nagging cries to remind us of the existence of a broken and painful past.

*Fourth*, trauma can be confined to the oblivion of consciousness, resurfacing delayed and belatedly, but trauma cannot be erased or ignored. Trauma cannot be alleviated or forgotten until individuals face it to thoroughly explain and heal it.

*Last but not least*, trauma is a milestone that shapes memories and alters the future by reconstructing human identity. Trauma contributes to creating new identities. When entire communities experience the same trauma, not only are individual identities changed, but the collective identities of the community are also reconstructed.

### **3. Trauma and sexuality in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* and Doan Minh Phuong's *Burning Grass on The Field***

Both Duras and Doan Minh Phuong were born in the twentieth century and grew up experiencing exile, and to some extent, the traumas of their times.

These experiences served as inspiration, driving forces, and materials for writing. M. Duras (1914-1996), whose real name was Marguerite Germaine Marie Donnadieu, was a French novelist known as a multi-talented woman in writing and filming. The most remarkable period in her life was probably her first 18 years when she lived in Indochina, particularly in Vietnam. There, she was influenced by the culture and lifestyle of the indigenous people, which is reflected in her vivid memories of the Saigon and Cho Lon areas. As the author herself admitted in an interview for the weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur*: "I cannot explain but feel that my place of birth, where I spent my young times, becomes a brighter and brighter present to the end of my life, as if it were my destiny, as if it is distant part of my life that created my whole life". All of these experiences were vividly expressed, particularly in her later trilogy of novels, including *The Lover*, which chronicles her life in Vietnam.

Duras's extremely complicated journey into adulthood, associated with the colonialism, made her deeply aware of the contradictions that existed in colonial society. Witnessing the war from within Europe gave her a more profound and multifaceted perspective of the human tragedies during wartime and post-war. Therefore, most of her works exploit the human condition of trauma. The author writes about trauma from the perspective of someone who has not only observed but has also lived with trauma. Most of all, her stories show a deep understanding of trauma from within. Thus, Duras's writings about trauma include not only portray pain, but also create a forum for trauma to speak out.

While Duras was a young French woman who reluctantly grew up with the people of Indochina, Doan Minh Phuong could be considered as an active immigrant. Doan Minh Phuong was born in Saigon, then immigrated to Germany to reunite with

her family at the age of 20. For Duras, returning to France was a repatriation, but for Doan Minh Phuong, going to Germany was a diasporic journey. Similar to Duras, Doan Minh Phuong's childhood and adolescence were very tough, surrounded by the constant fire of war during the first 20 years of her life. She then left her hometown and lived in exile in a foreign country. Hence, Doan Minh Phuong's works always feature trauma characters who have lost and long for their homeland. This leads to Doan Minh Phuong's common theme, which is the search for memories and identities of "no-home-men".

Considered as the most successful work of Duras's career, *The Lover* won the 1984 Goncourt Prize and placed Duras into the ranks of the most important writers of the twentieth century. *The Lover* centres around a love story of a fifteen-and-a-half-year-old white girl and her twenty-seven-year-old Chinese lover. Duras exploits three relationships around the main female protagonist: the mother-daughter relationship, the sexual affair, and the colonizer-colonized relationship. The author portrays a series of human pain and trauma during the colonial period, which was a collective trauma. The novel highlights the childhood trauma of a child who grew up in a dysfunctional family where violence threatened her safety, and her voice was not heard or recognized. It also touches on the pain of a wife who had lost her husband, a mother who was desperate for money but still obsessed with her white identity while trying to hide her inferiority, weakness, and helplessness. The novel explores the shame of a "non-white" man with his white lover and the failure of love against the power of money. *The Lover* thoroughly expresses the human feelings of loneliness, alienation, and uncertainty of identity. The characters are constantly placed in a situation of being the "other" in their world.

The contrast between self and the other is reflected in the characters' appearances, dialogues, and social status, all being unable to find themselves in the world outside. Thus, the characters become marginalized, trying to connect to the world while being deeply aware of their own lonely world. It is how the "wailing wounds" were created in *The Lover*.

Similar to *The Lover*, Doan Minh Phuong's *Burning Grass on The Field* is also about a tragic love that has placed the protagonist "I" floating in the middle of life, where she is abused, imprisoned, raped and eventually turns to prostitution. She meets another victim, Quyen, a deaf and mute girl in a brothel who was raped by her own father. Then, the characters' lives intertwine with each other's sufferings, love, and empathy, with love being a cross-cutting theme connecting the disjointed stories, the author touches on the common pain of humanity. First of all, *Burning Grass on The Field* is about the arduous and painful journey that one has to go through to find oneself. In addition, the novel is about a person's fragile fate as they face the absurd and brutal power of the ruling class, as well as the pain that a person must experience to protect their ideals and conscience from power and violence. Finally, *Burning Grass on The Field* recreates the process of overcoming the traumatic memories living of the victims. In this way, Doan Minh Phuong also demonstrates an important characteristic of trauma: it exists in the very event that caused pain, but more than that, trauma returns in the victim's recollection. To overcome trauma, victims must face persistent pain to continue to exist.

In conclusion, both *The Lover* and *Burning Grass on The Field* are epitomes of a world of trauma. The two works contain the manifestations and characteristics typical of trauma while vividly portraying the effects and sequelae of trauma on

each character's life. Above all, these writings about trauma show the characters' awareness and efforts to overcome trauma. In the following sections, we will focus on other aspects of the relationship between sexuality and trauma to clearly express their effects on one another, including how sexuality can be both an origin of trauma and play an important role in the journey to construct identity.

### 3.1. *Sexuality is the origin of trauma*

Focusing on the love story of a French girl with a wealthy Chinese young man in Saigon, *The Lover* revolves around a colonizer-colonized relationship built on mutual interests of money and love. In this relationship, the girl holds power as evident from the following passage, "it depends on her alone" [9], and decides whether the relationship will continue. In contrast, the Chinese lover is destined to be "under her control" from the beginning. Despite being poor and needy, the French girl prevails in the love affair while the young man only has money as a weapon to protect himself. This pushes the Chinese lover to suffer due to his uncontrollable desire for love from the white girl.

The Chinese lover's suffering is expressed through his weakness and helplessness when he could not win the love from the white girl. At the beginning of their relationship, he is aware of the only reason he can approach the white girl. He says: "You only came here because I'm rich" [9]. Then, his obsession with never receiving the girl's love becomes his persistent fear of losing her forever. "He lives in terror lest I meet another man. I'm never afraid of anything like that. He's also afraid, not because I'm white, but because I'm so young, so young he could go to prison if we were found out" [9]. Just like that, his fear, insecurity, and inferiority in turn are expressed through painful bursts of tears and pain, which sometimes cannot be

hidden. "He moans, weeps. In dreadful love. And, weeping, he makes love. At first, pain, and then the pain is possessed in its turn, changed, slowly drawn away, borne toward pleasure, clasped to it" [9]. In the very moments of love and pleasure with the white girl, the Chinese lover experiences his pain. The stronger his infatuation is, the deeper his sense of the smallness of his body, position, and status. "The skin is sumptuously soft. The body. The body is thin, lacking in strength, in muscle, he may have been ill, maybe convalescent, he's hairless, nothing masculine about him but his sex, he's weak, probably a helpless prey to insult, vulnerable" [9]. He is lonely and miserable in his own love.

Similarly, in Doan Minh Phuong's *Burning Grass on The Field* (2020) [10], sexuality is the origin of trauma for both female characters, May and Quyen. First of all, the first traumatic event, considered a milestone of May's life, was her reluctant separation from G, her lover. However, the following events sink her into immense pain. After G's arrest, May lives alone in their house and is attacked by V, a director who wants to completely bring G down and banish G from life.

"It was a man. I don't remember if I bolted the door inside. Anyway, the man, by the door or the window, is already inside my house. I sat on the bed, clutching my knees and staring at the door frame leading to the outside room. I am unusually awake. The world has abandoned me, there is nobody to call, no god to ask for protection.

[...]

I had just put my hand on the doorknob when a strange man's hand grabbed the top of my wrist, threw the scarf around my neck, pushed me into my room and shoved me to the ground, where I folded the duvet under my bed to make a place to sleep. The man twisted the scarf around my neck with

one hand - causing me to use both hands to try as hard as I could to remove the sash from my neck to breathe - and with the other hand to tore my shirt, unbuttoning a row of buttons and tearing a half of the shirt on the right side" [10].

The unexpected meeting between May and V, at first glance, looks like a sexual assault and abuse case. V broke into May's private house, performed violent acts, suppressing and humiliating her. May was attacked by surprise, deprived of her ability to defend herself, and received absolutely no help from anyone. Although he did not rape her, his act was still the act of sexual abuse and assault. Being attacked physically and mentally, May became a victim of sexual trauma. May's unspeakable shock, humiliation, and silence are manifestations of the outburst of trauma. Her trauma even interrupts her perception of pain, leaving her alone with emptiness, helplessness, and a broken consciousness. "I do not scream, not because I could not be heard but just because I do not know how to do so, how to make the cry escape from my throat to go outside. [...] and I know, every feeling, if I have a feeling, becomes a disgrace, the presence of the body and the sensations it carries are disgraceful" [10].

After this event, May became "something like a lover or V's wife for seventeen months, or two years if the time she was brought to Elysia, then to the brothel at Huyen Tran street was counted" [10]. In the brothel at Huyen Tran street, May becomes a prostitute: "What is prostitution, you know? It is the interruption. There's not a single thing I know about myself left" [10]. At the age of thirty-two, May was forced to receive guests in a brothel, and each time she experienced what she calls "an agreed-upon rape". "The man and I were both deceived by our instincts, his instinct to ejaculate and my instinct to protect my ovary. When there is a conflict the

strong side wins, and here power is represented by money, he pays five hundred thousand, he wins, I get five hundred thousand, I lose. So a rape becomes a deal" [10].

When being raped, May felt dislocation, ruin, collapse, and especially death. As she envisioned "prostitution" as an "interruption", her receiving guest was trauma that broke the victim's life. A life that was torn in half, before and after the trauma. At the moment she began to have sex with the guests, her life was broken into two pieces and every atom was broken; the only thing left was death. The author forgoes describing painful feelings and goes straight to death as a way of showing the serious state of her trauma. Trauma occurs and changes the character's life forever, bringing her straight to a state of life that is not as good as death.

The fact that May was attacked and then sexually assaulted made her a typical trauma victim. May's trauma is not described physically, but mentally. She had no scratches or wounds, only had a sharp and clear sense a disintegrating inner vitality. The trauma pushed the character to her limit, separating her from the past and her old self to a state of ignorance.

The characters in *The Lover* and *Burning Grass on The Field* demonstrate sexuality as an origin of trauma, a spark that burns and destroys characters' lives. Love, sex, abusive words, and violent behaviour can all become sources of pain and hurt. Sexuality becomes an origin of trauma when it is not associated with pure love at the beginning of the relationship. With the Chinese lover, his relationship with the white lover was built on the basis of love-money interests. Similarly, the fact that May was sexually assaulted and abused is considered an act of indirect revenge of her lover's

opponent. All of this places the characters in a state of trauma where they are tormented and made to suffer by love, deviance, and bad desires.

### 3.2. Sexuality plays role of creating identity

Identity is defined as “the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that make people different from others” (*Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*). According to M. Bamberg, et al. (2022) [11], “identity connotes (personal) characteristics that are embraced as stemming from a sense of temporal continuity (i.e., a particular contour of temporal change), and those characteristics distinguish this person or entity from (vis-à-vis) other entities in terms of generalizable membership categories”. This also implies that identity is made up of countless unique characteristics of an individual, including gender and sexual instinct. Biological gender, sexual orientation, and sexual needs are all involved in the construction of identity. Being aware of one’s own sex life also shapes who we are. Beginning with the most basic self-knowledge, people can seek, change and define themselves.

In the process of constructing identity, sexuality can be directly or indirectly involved in shaping identity. In particular, when sexuality is placed in relation to trauma, it has clear and important effects on how people perceive themselves. Studying two cases of *The Lover* and *Burning Grass on The Field* through the lens of trauma studies, we realize that sexuality plays a particularly important role in constructing identity, which is shown specifically in two aspects. Firstly, sexuality is the origin of loss of identity. At the same time, sexuality contributes to creating identities.

When viewed through the lens of trauma studies, the experience and recollection of sexual trauma can result in individuals being tormented and tortured by painful obsessions. In Hoang Phong Tuan’s article (2012) [8], “The awakening pains”,

he refers to this human condition as “wailing wounds”, meaning that pain cannot be relieved and people must experience and bear their pain over time. When attempting to set aside the pain of dealing with trauma, individuals may deny that they experienced traumatic experiences. This also means that when the characters deny their past, they contribute to the formation of their identity. In such a case, a self without past, recollections, or memories forms an empty self. In this way, people can lose their identities due to their painful sexual experiences.

In *Burning Grass on The Field*, Doan Minh Phuong built a world of ignorant characters. Their names and figures were all blurred with illusory space and time, which signifies their lost identities. As an example, the character May continuously questions her identity. Being sexually abused interrupts her life and damages her identity. When she was in Elysa, she felt humiliated and lonely:

"I gradually lost consciousness of the world and inside of me, gradually lost my memory, emotions, anticipation, grievances, loneliness and desires.

[...]

Once, I found myself getting out of my body, somehow, I stood back to the wall opposite the painting with blue light. I saw silhouettes of people nearby standing, lying, sitting, or some sort of person among them; and there must have been me in those shadows, eating, sleeping, making love, or doing nothing, in front of the painting was emitting a faint blue light, like a calm sky. I easily blend into that sky, calmly, but it’s not peace. A sky without space, and time, something is very wrong. But even that falsehood is not discernible and unnoticed by any consciousness" [10].

May was sexually abused by V, turned into his sex object for seventeen months, and then imprisoned in Elysa to become a prostitute. This

series of events undoubtedly turned the character into a victim of sexual trauma. May was not only traumatized physically but also mentally. She lost the consciousness of her existence, seeing herself as a shadow with a naked, small, and wounded body. As a result, the pieces that create human identity such as “memory, emotions, anticipation, grievances, loneliness and desires” left May. In other words, she no longer knew who she was.

Similarly, in *The Lover*, the Chinese lover also experiences loss of identity due to sexual trauma. However, unlike May, his trauma is the result of failing to control his desires. It is apparent that the Chinese lover has particularly strong feelings for the French girl. This emotion results from the passionate and burning desire for a lover from an inferior status. Consequently, he is tormented by overwhelming lust, combined with the cruel realization that he would never be able to obtain the love he desires. This is the origin of the character’s psychological trauma.

To the girl’s family members, “he does not cease to exist but he’s no longer anything to me. He becomes a burned-out shell [...] My lover’s denied in just that weak body, just that weakness which transports me with pleasure. In my brother’s presence he becomes an unmentionable outrage, a cause of shame who ought to be kept out of sight” [9]. As for the character himself, he was also aware that she came to him because he was rich and “he knows already she’ll never love him” [9]. While he existed faintly in the eyes of the girl, he had no name and no defined identity. Gradually, the Chinese lover struggles with his identity, increasingly doubting himself, grappling with several labels such as “not white” and “a Chinese guy, ugly and sickly”.

Since sexuality contributes to creating an individual’s identity, their perception of themselves can be affected when they are sexually violated.

While this experience can negatively impact the process of identity creation, sexuality can also be involved in the search for human identity or as a healing therapy for traumatized victims.

In Marguerite Duras’s *The Lover*, sexuality plays an important role in the creation of identity of the character “I”. The story begins when she enters puberty, preparing to explore the world and to find the self. While her body and mind do not seem ready for adulthood, curiosity about herself prompted her to commit to fiercely and enthusiastically exploring her identity. She began with the first and most basic understanding of herself, which was the awareness of her “white” identity, namely, about her beauty with braids, skin, “childish breasts”, and “the face of pleasure I still don’t know the smell of”. Through her monologues, the reader finds that one of her first senses of self is the sense of sexuality. From her first meeting with the Chinese man, she knew and understood that she liked him. Until they began their relationship, she always knew that she wanted him. Even before any sexual experience, the girl was aware of her deep desire: “You didn’t have to attract desire. Either it was in the woman who aroused it or it didn’t exist. Either it was there at first glance or else it had never been. It was instant knowledge of sexual relationship, or it was nothing. That too I knew before I experienced it” [9].

It is worth mentioning that before her understanding of sexuality and instincts, the girl was not portrayed clearly. Initially, her identity was formed by defaults as a white girl and the daughter of a teacher at an all-girl’s high school. The portrait of “I” was compared both to other white women and to indigenous girls in Vietnam. This difference makes the character see herself as “the other”. Because, compared to other white women, this poor, sickly, fifteen-and-a-half-year-old girl who

grew up in the colony was not actually a member of the white group. As for the local girls in Sai Gon or Sa Dec, she was clearly different even though she grew up in the same place as them.

Moreover, the character's upbringing reflects her initial identity. She was born into a French family living in the colony and grew up in poverty. Her father died early, her mother was always sad and miserable, and the two older brothers were prone to violence. Within her family, she was not her mother's beloved child as she was not called by name but referred to as one of the "two younger children". The only child in her mother's eyes was the drug-addicted and sadistic eldest brother. While growing up in this family, "I" was deprived of the sense of self, her own uniqueness, and even her clothes were reworked from the mother's old ones. Before she knew what she wanted, it was already determined what she would become: "My mother is a teacher and wants her girl to have a secondary education. 'You have to go to high school.' What was enough for her is not enough for her daughter. High school and then a good degree in mathematics. That was what had been dinned into me ever since I started school. It never crossed my mind I might escape the mathematics degree; I was glad to give her that hope" [9]. At first, she struggled with becoming *the other*, always longing for acceptance and living her mother's dream. These childhood experiences could be viewed as a form of childhood trauma, creating gaps in the character's perception of herself. However, this trauma also becomes a great motivation, compelling the character to search for her identity. Her experiences with sexuality were her first steps in her journey.

Thanks to her love story with a wealthy, young Chinese man, the protagonist gained a new perspective of herself through the awareness of

her power over her lover. Most importantly, she became conscious of her independence. In her relationship with her Chinese lover, "from the first moment she knows more or less, knows he's at her mercy" [9]. She realized that she could control him and make him love and suffer for her. Right after their first sexual encounter, she knew "that the time has now probably come when she can no longer escape certain duties towards herself. And that her mother will know nothing of this, nor her brothers. She knows this now too. As soon as she got into the black car, she knew she's excluded from the family for the first time and forever. From now on they will no longer know what becomes of her" [9]. This sexual relationship was a milestone on her journey of maturation and identity shaping. This event marked a turning point for a teen girl to become a woman. In such a moment, she knew that she no longer belonged to her mother and followed her dream of having a master's degree in mathematics. She became herself, with a secret, private life, experiencing suffering and loneliness. In that moment, the character's identity was formed at will, which was the self she searched for and wanted to manifest.

In *Burning Grass on The Field*, sexuality is also used by Doan Minh Phuong as a tool for the character to discover her identity. However, when Duras considers sexuality as the key to liberating the main character's identity, in *Doan Minh Phuong's* works, sexuality helps the character find her new identity after experiencing trauma. In this novel, May's quest for identity was formed by recalling and reinforcing sexual memories.

In *Burning Grass on The Field*, May is both the main character and the narrator, and she is concerned with numerous questions, including the question of identity. In the beginning, May

expressed her concerns about identity with existential questions: “Who are we, what can we bring to the people here and what can we bring back for ourselves?” [10]. The character always searched for herself through others and never saw her “own face”. May also doubted herself: “I’m in the border area, I’m still here and just a single accidental touch could push me into a place that is no longer real, I will no longer exist”. She was aware of her fragile existence and her weak fate: “This life will never be real. Life is not real; it is just before and after the circle of abstract and illusory links” [10]. May’s journey of chasing love, running away from pain, and searching for identity makes up the rest of the novel.

May’s first love story with G gave her a sense of completeness and fullness. Love and memories of G were what kept her alive: “All I remember was not about himself but my feeling about him. Those feelings have become a part of my life and shaped who I am” [10]. Through her interactions and connections with G, May captured her spiritual world. During the years she spent in Elysia and brothels, May clung to love with G to nourish her soul. The never-real conversations between her and G and the illusions of G’s eyes watching her helped May continue to live and fight for her own decaying body. Her identity was constructed through love and memories of love. Indeed, the feeling of love contributed to forming her identity and kept her alive.

However, May’s identity was not stable or solid. Her soul always seemed to be waiting to step out of her body whenever she was tormented by trauma. In these moments, she looked for a new identity through Quyen’s story. May and Quyen shared an invisible, voiceless love that was rooted

in empathy and harmony. Therefore, through Quyen, May saw herself as someone bothered by her traumatic memories and past. Both of them were traumatized people who had been raped and forced into prostitution. While traumatic events disrupted May’s memories and awareness of her life, pushing her into a state of losing her identity, it was Quyen’s life that helped her look back and recall her memories. Thereby, Quyen and May’s affection for Quyen became the catalysts for May to create a new identity. That is why, even though she had mentioned death before, May was still alive at the end of the novel.

#### 4. Conclusions

Trauma literature and trauma studies are both widely studied, most of which focused on collective trauma caused by historical events, while individual trauma was overlooked. Additionally, research on the relationship between sexuality and trauma only considers sexuality as a means to postpone or delay trauma.

The two case studies of Marguerite Duras’s *The Lover* and Doan Minh Phuong’s *Burning Grass on The Field* explore the role of sexuality in shaping human identity. Firstly, sexuality can help individuals raise their own awareness about their ego, a complex but unique self that is waiting to be manifested. Sexuality can also awaken vitality within each individual, reviving a person’s faith in themselves. Moreover, sexuality can heal trauma and help individuals face their past, accept themselves, and construct a “new me”.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

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