



FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN EARLY TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY NOVELS BY WOMEN WRITERS FROM THE MEKONG DELTA: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65934/mkusj.2026.02.1146>

Received: 06/01/2026

Reviewed: 26/02/2026

Accepted: 28/06/2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of female subjectivity in early twenty-first-century novels by women writers from the Mekong Delta through the theoretical perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist conception of the subject. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism, the study explores how female subjectivity is constructed through women's lived experiences, particularly in the contexts of love, marriage, and family life. Through textual analysis of selected novels by Dạ Ngân, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Ngọc, Nguyễn Thị Mây, and Nguyễn Thị Diệp Mai, the article argues that these writers portray women not as passive objects within patriarchal discourse but as autonomous subjects who negotiate, challenge, and redefine traditional gender roles. By foregrounding women's emotional experiences, personal agency, and identity formation, these narratives contribute to the deconstruction of conventional gender stereotypes while affirming the complexity and legitimacy of women's gendered identities. The study highlights the distinctive contribution of Mekong Delta women writers to contemporary Vietnamese feminist literature by demonstrating how regional literary voices engage with broader feminist concerns regarding subjectivity, gender equality, and women's social existence. In doing so, the article enriches current scholarship on feminist literary criticism and contemporary Vietnamese literature.

Keywords: female subjectivity; feminist literary criticism; Simone de Beauvoir; Mekong Delta literature; women's writing; gender identity.

Introduction

Enlightenment philosophy, as articulated by René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, laid the foundation for theories of subjectivity. From the conception of man as the center of knowledge, action, and meaning, Enlightenment philosophy affirmed the central role of the individual: "I think, therefore I exist" (Descartes). Along with the development of society, theories of subjectivity also evolved in accordance with each historical period. From the rational, free subjectivity of the 17th-18th centuries (Descartes, Kant), the subjectivity linked to historical and social circumstances of the 19th century (Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche), to the conceptions of 20th-century philosophers with different approaches to subjectivity: the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan; structuralism and post-structuralism-the subject being formed within discourse, ideology, and power relations-of Louis

Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, a long intellectual trajectory has established a rich theoretical foundation for contemporary discussions of subjectivity.

Feminist theorists also engage with theories of subjectivity to theorize the female subject. Beyond arguing to clarify that the universal concept of subjectivity in traditional philosophy is essentially male, feminist theorists affirm the feminine subject's ability to exist independently, resisting the notion of being seen as "the other" in patriarchal societies, and asserting the diversity and expressiveness of the female subject. This suggests that feminist theorists have offered insightful interpretations of the feminist subject. In particular, the concept of the female subject as a product of social construction (Simone de Beauvoir) and a performative element (Judith Butler) to affirm the independent existence of women in society, breaking down the "other" position in patriarchal

societies, are important arguments contributing to women's liberation, promoting gender equality, and recognizing gender diversity in life.

Novels by female authors from the Mekong Delta in the early twenty-first century—such as Dạ Ngân, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Ngọc, Nguyễn Thị Mây, and Nguyễn Thị Diệp Mai—make a significant contribution to feminist discourse by foregrounding female subjectivity. Drawing on feminist theories of subjectivity, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's conception of the subject, this article examines the representation of female subjectivity in these novels. Within these texts, the female subject is constructed through women's lived experiences in love, marriage, and family life.

1. Methods

To clarify this research, in addition to applying the feminist perspective on subjectivity as articulated in *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, this study employs the following principal research methods:

- Analytical-synthetic method: This method is used to examine and synthesize the manifestations of female subjectivity in novels written by female authors from the Mekong Delta in the early twenty-first century.

- Comparative method: This method is employed to compare representations of subjectivity in novels by female authors from other regions, thereby elucidating female subjectivity as a dynamic process of identity formation in contemporary life rather than as an isolated phenomenon.

2. Results

Simone de Beauvoir's Conception of The Subject in *The Second Sex*

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was a social theorist and a pioneering feminist thinker who also authored novels, essays, short stories, and philosophical monographs addressing social and cultural issues. *The Second Sex* stands as one of her most influential contributions to feminist thought. Grounded in existentialist philosophy—particularly Jean-Paul Sartre's assertion “there is no determinism—man is free, man is freedom” (2007, p.29)—Beauvoir examines women from multiple perspectives, including biological facts, psychoanalysis, history, mythology, and

women's lived experiences from childhood to old age. Through this comprehensive analysis, she challenges the notion that gender is biologically predetermined at birth. Beauvoir argues that women's status as “the second sex” is not natural but imposed by patriarchal ideology. Within this framework, man “is the subject, he is Absolute” (Beauvoir, 2010, p.26) and women “is the Other” (Beauvoir, 2010, p.26), occupying a subordinate, dependent position within male-dominated social relations. This theoretical stance opens the way for understanding the female subject not as a fixed essence but as a process of formation shaped by socio-historical conditions. As Beauvoir famously states, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Beauvoir, 2010, p.330).

Because femininity is not an inherent biological or psychological trait, women are compelled to reconfigure the meanings and qualities associated with gender. This process entails constructing a form of female subjectivity grounded in women's own identities rather than in roles imposed by patriarchal ideology. In patriarchal society, women are attributed “inert, impatient, shrewd, stupid, insensitive, lewd, fierce, and humiliated. Man projects all females at once onto woman. And the fact is that she is a female” (Beauvoir, 2010, p.41). Within such constraints, subjectivity can only emerge when women transcend these imposed limitations and assert themselves as free and active beings. As Beauvoir argues, women “must refuse the limits of their situation and seek to open paths to the future; resignation is only a surrender and an evasion; for woman there is no other way out than to work for her liberation” (Beauvoir, 2010, p.753). In this regard, female subjectivity in Beauvoir's conception is understood as a dialectical process in which women first recognize oppressive social conditions and then strive to transcend them in order to construct their own identities.

Beauvoir's feminist conception of subjectivity carries both philosophical significance and a profound influence on gender studies and feminist criticism. Accordingly, the female subject is closely linked to action and to the reproduction and affirmation of female value. When applied to novels by female authors from the Mekong Delta in the early twenty-first century, this theoretical

perspective reveals that female subjectivity is articulated through representations of women's positions in love, marriage, and family life. Such representations function to affirm the presence and agency of the female subject.

The Female Subject and The Woman's Position in Love

Romantic love is often regarded as one of the most profound and multifaceted emotions in human experience. However, within patriarchal societies, the suppression of women's voices has also entailed the suppression of women's expressions of love. Love-and particularly the initiative in pursuing romantic relationships-has traditionally been constructed as a male prerogative, while women's emotional experiences were expected to remain concealed and unspoken. In Vietnamese medieval literature, the discourse of love is overwhelmingly articulated through male voices. Women's emotional lives in romantic relationships are mediated and represented within texts authored by men. As Nguyễn Thị Ngân observes, "love in traditional literature has traditionally been the 'privilege' of men" (2020, p.57). Although Kiều's love is portrayed as bold and intense, it is ultimately filtered through the narrative perspective of Nguyễn Du. Similarly, the passionate relationship between Phạm Kim and Trương Quỳnh Thư in *Sơ kinh tân trang* is projected through Phạm Thái's viewpoint. Works such as *Chinh phụ ngâm* and *Cung oán ngâm khúc*, despite their profound existential emotions and depictions of women's longing for marital happiness, likewise reveal female voices only through male-authored discourse. In these cases, women's voices function merely as forms of "speaking for" or "speaking on behalf of women," rather than as autonomous expressions (Khanh, 2016, p. 173). Hồ Xuân Hương represents a rare exception; however, her poetic voice was historically labeled rebellious and morally transgressive. Even into the early twentieth century, this gendered imbalance largely persisted. Although female writers began to appear, they remained few in number and were still constrained by patriarchal norms that governed literary production. During the period of national resistance, romantic love was often relegated to the private sphere and subordinated to collective

ideals of patriotism and national struggle. As a result, the literary field continued to be dominated by male voices. The emergence of female prose writers such as Nguyễn Thị Cẩm Thạch, Vũ Thị Thường, Nguyễn Ngọc Tú, Hà Khánh Linh, and Lê Minh Khuê marked a gradual shift, yet their presence remained limited in comparison to the overwhelming dominance of male authors. Moreover, as Trần Thiện Khanh notes, much of women's writing during this period tended toward "masculinization and epicization," prioritizing national liberation over the representation of individual subjectivity and sexual desire (2016, p.183).

Since 1975, and particularly following the *Đổi mới* (Renovation) period, Vietnamese literature has undergone significant transformation, marked by the increasing presence and growing influence of female writers. Many authors made a strong impression on critics and readers from their earliest works, including Phạm Thị Hoài and Y Ban, followed by a generation of prominent female writers such as Dạ Ngân, Võ Thị Hảo, Bích Ngân, Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ, and Phan Thị Vàng Anh. These writers have brought women's voices into the national literary sphere, challenging the long-standing marginalization of female expression. As Hélène Cixous asserts, "women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem" (1976, p.881). From this perspective, female writers no longer merely mediate women's emotions through dominant male discourse; instead, they directly and boldly reveal the hidden dimensions of the female inner world. Consequently, representations of romantic love in the works of female authors during the Renovation period are characterized by sincerity, intensity, and a heightened sense of agency.

In novels by female authors from the Mekong Delta in the early twenty-first century, romantic love is explored in a comparable yet distinct manner. With their increasing presence, these writers articulate female subjectivity through intimate emotional experiences, allowing women's gender identities to emerge clearly within romantic relationships. In contrast, in many works by male authors, women's love is frequently portrayed

as passive and submissive. Even when female characters harbor deep affection, they tend to remain restrained, waiting for men to initiate emotional expression. From a male-centered perspective, women's love is often construed as an act of submission or resignation. Such representations originate from the dualistic logic embedded in patriarchal ideology. As Kerridge notes, patriarchal thinking is structured around hierarchical binary oppositions-male/female, culture/nature, reason/emotion, and mind/body-which form the ideological foundation of gender inequality (1998, p.127). Within this system, men occupy a privileged position of control and dominance, while women are relegated to a subordinate status. Female authors from the Mekong Delta challenge this framework by reconfiguring romantic love as a site where female agency and subjectivity can be asserted

Within concrete social institutions-such as the economy, politics, culture, religion, education, and occupational structures-patriarchal ideology positions men as the central actors, while women are metaphorically cast as dependent and secondary participants. In symbolic or intangible domains associated with moral and spiritual values-such as morality, personality, dignity, and emotional expression-men function as the normative standard, whereas women are defined relationally as points of reference rather than autonomous subjects (Vân, 2020, p.114).

Female authors from the Mekong Delta offer a distinctive perspective on women's experiences of love. From a feminine standpoint, these writers affirm the desire for love as an essential dimension of women's subjectivity. Their female characters are frequently portrayed as emotionally committed and proactive in sustaining romantic relationships. Moreover, these women are often willing to make significant sacrifices-even at considerable personal cost-in order to live authentically, to love, and to be loved. In *A Small Family*, Dạ Ngân depicts Mỹ Tiệp's arduous journey in her pursuit of true love. In order to live with Đình, Mỹ Tiệp must sacrifice many aspects of her life, including enduring social stigma and separation from her children. Similarly, Thúy, in *Returning the Rose to the Land*, accepts the stigma of being perceived as an intruder in

Vy and Tuấn's relationship and directly confronts Vy to express her genuine feelings, despite her awareness of moral transgression. These narratives suggest that, from a female perspective, love is not characterized by passivity or emotional restraint but by agency, intensity, and the courage to claim one's own desires. Such representations constitute an "exploring the nature of the female world and outlook" (Barry, 2009, p.117) on love.

Moreover, from a female perspective, love is understood as an intimate interrelation between emotional experience and bodily sensation. Female characters regard corporeal experience as an integral dimension of romantic love rather than as a separate or secondary element. Within this framework, emotional attachment constitutes the foundation from which bodily sensations arise. This dynamic is clearly illustrated in Dạ Ngân's portrayal of Mỹ Tiệp. Each time Mỹ Tiệp recalls the moment when she and Tuyên embraced in the trench after an enemy raid, she experiences pain and regret. That physical contact, detached from genuine emotional love, becomes a source of sorrow rather than fulfillment. In her married life, Mỹ Tiệp repeatedly feels a sense of emptiness-"a constant feeling of boredom, fleeting yet deeply oppressive" (Dạ Ngân, 2008, p.155). She becomes acutely aware of the disjunction between emotional attachment and bodily sensation, recognizing that "due to the absence of love for Tuyên," her unloved heart "immediately undermines the physical sensations of her flesh" (Dạ Ngân, 2008, p.155). By contrast, in her relationship with Đình, Mỹ Tiệp experiences a harmony between emotional connection and bodily response. During her visit to Đình in Hanoi, love is articulated not only as emotional intimacy but also as a resonance of the body, suggesting a reintegration of affect and corporeality. Through this representation, female desire is affirmed as embodied, emotionally grounded, and integral to female subjectivity.

Tiệp discovered herself to be bold and skillful, her skin moving in a tender, sweet rhythm. Shifting from a defensive position, she surged into one of initiative and dominance, a stark contrast to her first experience. Heat coursed through her body from her heels to the crown of her head, and she no longer knew where she was drifting, whether

legitimate or illegitimate, moral or immoral, only that she was finally herself as she had imagined, fulfilled in a deep and harmonious way (Dạ Ngân, 2008, p.157).

Because of the harmony between emotional attachment and bodily desire, separation intensifies Mỹ Tiệp's longing for Định. After leaving him, she "remembered the craving," describing her body as "someone accustomed to eating meat but suddenly forced to become vegetarian" (Dạ Ngân, 2008, p.257). Although Mỹ Tiệp recognizes this desire as a form of "shameless hunger," it remains persistent and uncontrollable, "as constant as hunger for food and thirst for drink" (Dạ Ngân, 2008, p.257). Through this depiction, bodily desire is not portrayed as mere instinct but as an embodied expression of emotional intimacy, reinforcing the inseparability of affect and corporeality in female subjectivity.

Proactiveness in love, the harmony between emotional attachment and bodily sensation, and the yearning for authentic love emerge as central themes in the representations of romantic relationships in novels by female authors from the Mekong Delta. These thematic concerns are also evident in the works of Vietnamese female writers during the Renovation period, such as *Xuân Từ Chiều* and *Ugly Women Don't Get Gifts* by Y Ban, *Silence Under the Deep Abyss* by Đỗ Bích Thúy, and *Many Ways to Live* by Nguyễn Quỳnh Trang. Together, these works demonstrate a shared feminist orientation in which love is articulated as a space for female agency, embodied desire, and the affirmation of women's subjectivity.

In *Silence Under the Deep Abyss*, Đỗ Bích Thúy portrays Súa as a woman subjected to forced marriage, having been abducted by Phổng and compelled to become his wife. Phổng's brutal coercion gradually numbs Súa's emotional life, reducing her to a state of silence and emotional inertia. She accepts her role as Phổng's wife without resistance, likened to a pumpkin that is "heavy, cold, and silent" (Thúy, 2019, p.83). Although Súa retains an awareness of emotional connection and the possibility of family happiness, she remains unable to transcend the deeply internalized customs and prejudices that govern her existence. These social constraints form a

"silent abyss"-invisible yet insurmountable-within which female subjectivity is stifled. By contrast, Y Ban's works foreground female agency in love and emphasize the harmony between emotional attachment and bodily sensation. In particular, *Xuân Từ Chiều* offers a direct depiction of women's sexual lives. Beyond portraying the everyday experiences of female characters such as Chiều, Xuân, and Từ, Y Ban engages in what may be described as a "decoding" of female sexual desire. Writing from a female perspective, she articulates women's sexuality openly and concretely, challenging long-standing taboos and reclaiming sexual expression as a legitimate dimension of female subjectivity.

Từ, an intellectual woman with a university education, consistently reflects on her emotional responses during intimacy with her husband. The characters Mỹ Tiệp, Uyên, Súa, and Từ discussed above all aspire to a harmonious integration of emotional attachment and bodily sensation in both love and married life. This aspiration reveals a reveals a marked awareness of self-awareness and highlights the intrinsic interconnection between affect and corporeality in female experience. Nevertheless, these characters differ in how such harmony is articulated. While Mỹ Tiệp and Uyên foreground emotional attachment and express bodily sensations in a more restrained and subtle manner, Từ articulates her pursuit of sexual pleasure in a more direct and assertive way. By contrast, Súa remains unable to overcome deeply entrenched social prejudices and customs, which prevents her from fully experiencing love. In comparison, Mỹ Tiệp and Uyên actively challenge these constraints, daring to transgress social norms in order to attain fulfillment in their romantic lives. Despite variations in narrative expression-whether subtle or explicit-bodily awareness and sexual desire, inseparably intertwined with emotional attachment, emerge as central thematic concerns in the works of female writers. Through these representations, female subjectivity is affirmed as both emotionally grounded and embodied.

From a female perspective, romantic love is articulated across multiple dimensions. Women's experiences of love are frequently represented as passionate, intense, and proactive, emphasizing

a dynamic engagement rather than emotional passivity. Central to these representations is the close interrelation between emotional attachment and bodily sensation, which together shape a distinct feminine articulation of love. Such portrayals do not merely concern personal feelings but also reflect how women in contemporary society negotiate their emotional lives and intimate relationships. In this way, representations of romantic love contribute to the affirmation of women's identities and subjectivities in modern social contexts.

Female Subjectivity and Women's Position Within Marriage and Family

If women seek genuine emotions and a harmonious integration of emotional and physical experiences in love, then in their roles as wives and mothers, they are often expected to demonstrate their value primarily through nurturing and sustaining the family. In patriarchal societies, men are traditionally perceived as breadwinners, while women are assigned to domestic labor and caregiving. Paid work outside the home grants men economic power and, consequently, the authority to manage family finances and assume the role of household head. In contrast, women's domestic labor, though essential to family survival, is not recognized as economic value, thereby positioning wives as dependent and subordinate. As Lorber observes, "all men benefit from the "patriarchal dividend"-women's unpaid work maintaining homes and bringing up children; women's low-paid work servicing hospitals, schools, and myriad other workplaces; and women's emotional nurturing and caretaking" (2001, p.7).

This notion has persisted and gradually become normalized in marital relations. As a result, the wife's role is commonly associated with sacrifice, endurance, patience, and obedience, whereas the husband's role is linked to leadership, authority, and decision-making. Consequently, women's contributions to family life are often undervalued or rendered invisible. However, from a female perspective, the role of the wife and homemaker is understood differently. Women are regarded as the "commanders" of the household, the keepers of the family's emotional warmth and cohesion. The work of building, nurturing, and sustaining the home constitutes a distinctive value of women within the

family. As Beauvoir notes, "She is the soul of the house, the family, and the home, as well as larger groups: the town, province, or nation" (2010, p. 230). This value does not arise from obligation or imposed duty but from women's capacity for love and emotional abundance. From this perspective, homemaking is an expression of affection and care rather than a compulsory responsibility. Therefore, other family members-especially men-must recognize, respect, and acknowledge the significance of women's contributions to family life. Many novels by female authors from the Mekong Delta depict this role as a core feminine value shaping women's lived worlds. Characters such as Thảo Hạnh in *Horizon* and Tím in *Silent Waves* exemplify this representation.

Thao Hanh is an intellectual and a civil servant working in a state agency. Despite her education and professional qualifications, she prioritizes family happiness over career advancement. "What is a career, what meaning does it have, if the family is not happy?" (Nguyễn Thị Thanh Ngọc, 2005, p.26). In choosing to preserve family stability, Thảo Hạnh assumes responsibility for domestic labor so that her husband, Phuong, can focus on his studies abroad. She transfers from Can Tho to Soc Trang to live with her mother, changes jobs to become a teacher due to workplace oppression, moves out of her parents' home under family pressure, and takes on additional work to supplement her income. Although the burden of earning a living exhausts her physically, she remains convinced that family reunion and happiness will eventually be restored. Similarly, Tím devotes herself to sustaining her family. Aware that her teaching salary is insufficient, she sells goods at the market and undertakes baking work to provide for her children. Despite constant hardship, she consistently places her family's well-being above her own comfort. As she declares, "I don't want my child to suffer. I must live, even if I have to endure many other hardships and difficulties. I must guide my child's steps on the challenging path of life" (Mây, 2019, p.266).

These portrayals reveal that qualities such as love, protection, and endurance are intrinsic to women's gendered identities. While these women possess the strength to live independently, their

desire for familial warmth, emotional security, and mutual care remains central. Thus, the hardships endured by Thảo Hạnh while raising her children alone during her husband's absence, or by Tím in sustaining her household, represent not submission but a process through which women affirm their position as the emotional and organizational center of the family. Importantly, because these women understand that their role as “domestic leaders” is not an imposed duty, they are prepared to abandon it when it is no longer acknowledged or respected—particularly by their husbands. Thảo Hạnh decisively chooses divorce upon discovering her husband's continued infidelity. Tím ceases her exhausting economic sacrifices when she realizes that her labor is consistently devalued. She returns to her teaching career, devotes herself to her children, and emotionally withdraws from her unfaithful husband. In doing so, these women assert their agency and reaffirm their subjectivity within marriage and family life.

Affirming women's roles within the family has become a recurring theme in the novels of Vietnamese female writers in the early 21st century. In *Barefoot*, Thùy Dương portrays Mrs. Ca as an intellectual woman from Hanoi's upper class who persistently strives to preserve family traditions despite numerous hardships. Similarly, Mrs. Mây in Đỗ Bích Thủy's *Shadow of the Oak Tree*, a Tày mother living in Lào Chải, devotes her entire life to nurturing and sustaining her family. For forty years as a daughter-in-law in the Nông family, she faithfully fulfills her role as the keeper of the hearth in the stilt house. “He plows, she cultivates the fields; he harrows, she leads the buffaloes to trample the rice paddies” (Thủy, 2020, p. 175). Over decades, she and her husband labor on the land and raise more than a dozen children. Although these women come from different regions, social classes, generations, and cultural backgrounds, they share a common commitment to maintaining and nurturing their families. Through such portrayals, female writers articulate a collective voice that redefines the role of women as homemakers, not as a subordinate or self-effacing position, but as a meaningful and value-generating role that deserves recognition and respect within both the family and society.

Thus, through their portrayals of women's gendered identities in love, marriage, and family life, female authors from the Mekong Delta, along with Vietnamese women writers of the early 21st century, illuminate the often-silenced dimensions of women's inner lives, revealing their emotional depth, agency, and active roles within both intimate relationships and the familial sphere.

Women's prose narrates stories of love, marriage, and family not by adopting an “external” perspective, where male writers often describe, comment on, or interpret themes traditionally associated with women, but by articulating women's own emotional experiences: the subtle tremors of happiness, pain, and intimacy that are distinctive to female subjectivity (Anh, 2016, p.278).

These dimensions of women's lives are not defined as duties or obligations imposed upon a “second-class” subject, as suggested by the dualistic logic of patriarchal societies. Rather, they are understood as inherent qualities and expressions of female gendered identity. The emotional nuances of women's love, their desire for happiness and harmony with their partners, both emotionally and physically, their concern for building a fulfilling family life, and their care for husbands and children all reflect core aspects of feminine subjectivity. As Hồ Khánh Vân observes, this represents both an ideological and practical form of awareness (2020, p. 145), contributing to the construction of a new value system in which women are recognized as active subjects rather than passive objects (Vân, 2020, p. 145).

Conclusion

Feminist perspectives emphasize that gender is shaped through historical, social, and cultural processes rather than determined by biological sex. Gendered values are therefore not fixed but are constituted through how individuals present themselves and act in the world. From this standpoint, no gender is inherently superior to another; instead, individuals emerge as subjects who create meaning and value through their actions, thoughts, and lived experiences. This feminist understanding is clearly reflected in the novels of female authors from the Mekong Delta, whose characters consistently assert their

agency within relationships of love, marriage, and family. Through such representations, these works contribute to dismantling gender stereotypes and affirming women's value and subjectivity in contemporary social life.

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