



Discursive Constructions of Freedom and Female Identity in American and Vietnamese Literature Between the 1960s and 1980s

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Abstract

This study examines discursive constructions of freedom and the ways in which they shape representations of female identity in selected American and Vietnamese literary texts during the 1960s and 1980s. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, and Systemic Functional Linguistics, this study analyzes four typical works of this period, including *The Bell Jar* (1963), *Beloved* (1987), *Paradise of the Blind* (1988, original in Vietnamese), and *The General Retires* (1987, original in Vietnamese). Key theoretical concepts underpinning the deductive thematic analysis comprise metaphor, modality, transitivity, evaluation, silence, temporality, and conditionality. Findings show that freedom is not conceived of as a stable or fully realized condition but rather something constrained, negotiated, and often deferred. In the American texts, limitations on freedom are more often expressed through psychological instability and institutional control, whereas they are more frequently naturalized through moral duties, social expectations, and collective obligations in the Vietnamese texts. These constructions contribute to shaping female identity by weakening agency, restricting voice, and reinforcing emotional labor and sacrifice. This study is significant for discourse analysis, feminist literary studies, and cross-cultural literary research in showing that freedom and female identity are intrinsically and dynamically constructed and negotiated through language.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, female identity, freedom, literature, Systemic Functional Linguistics

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Introduction

Freedom is often understood as a fundamental human value associated with self-initiated actions or activities and a lack of inhibition (Kienpointner, 2024). Female freedom is portrayed in literary works as susceptible to systems of power and ideology embedded in discourse (Fairclough, 1995, 2023), gendered social structures that constrain women's autonomy (de Beauvoir, 1956), and intersecting relations of race, class, and gender (Hadisi & Ameri, 2021; Hooks, 1984). Therefore, it is possible to examine not only whether female characters are free or constrained, but also how these conditions are expressed through language. From a discourse perspective, linguistic choices can position women as agents or as subjects acted upon, reinforce particular social duties, and shape the forms of resistance available to them (Fairclough, 1995, 2023; Lazar, 2005). Such patterns are important because they connect representations of freedom with the social and ideological conditions that influence female identity. Existing research tends to discuss freedom in broad philosophical, moral, or institutional terms, while feminist discourse research has concentrated more specifically on the relationships between language, gender, and power (Fairclough, 2023; Kienpointner, 2024; Lazar, 2005; Tayefi, 2021). It remains unclear how linguistic features provide a more specific way of understanding this construct not simply as a literary theme, but as an element negotiated through the language used to represent women and their experiences.

This gap becomes especially noticeable in cross-cultural literary research. American and Vietnamese literary traditions depart from different historical, ideological, and cultural contexts, and these differences shape the ways in which women's lives and experiences are depicted (Jamieson, 1993). However, comparative studies are often restricted to cultural contrast, without sufficiently examining the linguistic and discursive mechanisms through which such meanings are constructed. A further problem lies in the tendency to treat female identity as something that can be described directly through plot, character role, or symbolic meaning (Lionnet, 1995; Oleksandra et al., 2024). While these dimensions are important, they do not fully explain how identity is shaped through language. Given the relatively limited discourse-oriented comparative research on how freedom and female identity are signified in such sociocultural literary contexts (Gifford, 2020; Pola, 2013), this study provides a situated account of these constructs through selected American and Vietnamese works. It aims to examine how linguistic and discursive resources express freedom and position female characters in relation to agency, voice, social obligation, and sacrifice. The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How is freedom discursively constructed in selected American and Vietnamese literary texts between the 1960s and 2000s?

RQ2: In what ways do these discursive constructions of freedom reflect female identity in these texts?

Literature Review

Discursive Conceptualization of Freedom

Freedom is often treated as a universal condition associated with the capacity to act without constraints (Kienpointner, 2024). This view, however, does not fully account for the social and ideological conditions under which freedom becomes possible or restricted. Critical Discourse Analysis and feminist theory approach this limitation from different but complementary perspectives. Fairclough (1995, 2023) locates meaning within relations of discourse and power, drawing attention to the ways social realities are produced and legitimized through language. Feminist theorists extend this concern by showing that access to freedom is unevenly structured by gender and other relations of domination. De Beauvoir (1956) emphasizes the social construction of women's subordinate status, whereas Hooks (1984) reiterates the intersecting effects of gender, race, and class. Although these perspectives differ in emphasis, they subscribe to the view that freedom cannot be understood independently of the structures that define whose choices are recognized, restricted, or made socially acceptable. For the present study, this convergence is important because it shifts attention from freedom as an abstract ideal to the conditions through which it is represented and limited in literary discourse.

This broader understanding also suggests that freedom operates at more than one level. Psychological accounts foreground the capacity for internal autonomy and the effects of trauma, memory, and emotional instability on the self (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001), while Berlin (1969) and Foucault (1977) direct attention toward external structures that regulate action through political, institutional, and ideological power. These dimensions are analytically distinct, but literary representations frequently bring them together: external constraints may be internalized as psychological conflict, while individual choices remain shaped by wider social conditions. From discourse-oriented perspectives, the ability to articulate experience, refusal, or resistance is closely connected to relations of power, making the tension between voice and silence relevant to questions of freedom (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2005). Freedom may therefore be negotiated, conditional, or deferred within existing structures of authority (Fairclough, 1995, 2023; Hooks, 1984).

Female Identity

Identity is a multidimensional construct that defies specific definitions and varies from one sociocultural context to another and across historical settings. According to Côté (2006), identity has been variably interpreted as a reflection of social affiliation, a representation of certain aspects of human self-definition, or an attachment to different labels such as personal identity and social identity. Regarding female identity, Butler (1999) points out that conceptualizations of gender are deeply rooted in repeated social practices and expectations, reiterating the role of discourse in shaping how this notion is constructed and maintained. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis further shows that language plays a central role in sustaining gendered power relations. Lazar (2005) argues that discourse naturalizes

expectations of women as obedient, self-sacrificing, and emotionally responsible, thereby reinforcing inequality. In literary contexts, these patterns are reflected in representations of women within constrained social roles. Showalter (1977) notes that women's writing develops within restrictive cultural frameworks, while Gilbert and Gubar (2020) highlight how female characters are often positioned within limiting symbolic roles. These approaches to defining identity differ in theoretical focus, but they challenge the assumption that female identity simply reflects an already existing or natural category. Instead, it emerges through recurring expectations about how women should act, speak, and relate to others.

In the present study, female identity is viewed through the lens of agency versus passivity, voice versus silence, moral and social roles, and emotional labor and sacrifice. Firstly, agency versus passivity refers to whether female characters are represented as active participants in shaping their lives or as individuals positioned as acted upon by external forces (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Lazar, 2005). Secondly, voice versus silence concerns the extent to which women are able to articulate their thoughts, emotions, and forms of resistance, or are instead constrained to silence (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2005). Thirdly, moral and social roles relate to the expectations imposed on women in terms of family obligations, duty, and broader societal responsibilities (Butler, 1999; Hadisi & Ameri, 2021; Lazar, 2005). Finally, emotional labor and sacrifice reflect the normalization of endurance, self-denial, and the prioritization of others' needs over one's own (Hooks, 1984; Lazar, 2005). These dimensions of female identity provide a structured framework for analyzing how female identity is constructed, negotiated, and constrained across literary texts. It is important to note that these dimensions are interlaced, as restricted agency may be reinforced through silence, social obligation may require emotional sacrifice, and the ability to speak may itself constitute a form of agency.

Cross-cultural Construction of Freedom and Identity

The construction of freedom and female identity varies across cultural contexts because literary representations are shaped by different historical experiences, ideological frameworks, and social values. In American literary texts, freedom is often associated with individual autonomy, self-direction, and personal agency, especially in traditions that value freedom from external interference and the moral authority of the self (Berlin, 1969; Otter, 2010; Pylynskyi, 2020). As a result, limitations on freedom are frequently represented through institutional forms of control, particularly surveillance, normalization, and examination, which may be internalized in literary representation as inner conflict and emotional instability within the subject (Foucault, 1977). In Vietnamese sociocultural contexts, freedom in literary texts is more often configured in relation to moral duty, family responsibility, collective obligation, and ideological expectations, reflecting a sociocultural framework shaped by Confucian hierarchies, familial institutions, and bureaucratic systems of authority (Frenier & Mancini, 1996; Malarney, 2002; Woodside, 1971). Individual desire is superseded by social roles and communal values, attributing the construction of freedom and identity to cultural values such as filial duty, patriarchal authority, and spiritual belief (Nguyen, 2011; O'Harrow, 1995).

Female identity is also disparately constructed in Vietnamese and American literature. Vietnamese female characters are positioned within systems of moral obligation and familial expectations, where personal autonomy is often subordinated to collective responsibility. Such representations align with broader Vietnamese sociocultural frameworks, in which individual desire is frequently negotiated within the constraints of social and ideological norms (Frenier & Mancini, 1996; Tran, 2006). In American texts, female identity tends to be constructed through tensions between selfhood and restriction at the psychological level, whereas Vietnamese texts more frequently emphasize the conflict between personal autonomy and socially sanctioned duty. A cross-cultural perspective is therefore necessary because it allows examining not only how freedom is limited in different ways, but also how the meanings of agency, obligation, sacrifice, and identity are organized differently across literary and cultural traditions.

These theoretical concerns inform the four dimensions of freedom examined in this study, including (1) psychological, (2) social and ideological, (3) linguistic, and (4) deferred or negotiated freedom, and those related to female identity, such as agency, voice, social roles, and sacrifice. For RQ1, these dimensions provide a basis for examining how freedom is discursively constructed across the selected texts. RQ2 builds on this analysis by considering how the same constructions reflect female identity in terms of agency and passivity, voice and silence, social and moral roles, and emotional labor and sacrifice.

Method

Research Design and Analytical Approaches

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995, 2023), Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2005), and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Rather than quantifying linguistic patterns, this study seeks to examine how meanings of freedom and female identity are discursively constructed within selected American and Vietnamese literary texts. These approaches, therefore, allow a nuanced examination of how women's constructions of freedom and identity are linguistically framed and constrained within historically and ideologically situated systems of power.

Following Fairclough (1995, 2023), discourse is conceptualized as a form of social practice embedded within broader ideological and institutional structures. Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model informs the analysis by examining discourse at three interrelated levels. At the textual level, attention is given to lexical choice, grammatical structures, modality, and metaphor. At the discursive level, the focus shifts to how meanings are produced, circulated, and interpreted. At the social level, discourse is situated within wider historical, political, and ideological contexts. This model enables the study to connect linguistic form with social meaning, revealing how literary narratives simultaneously reflect, reinforce, and contest dominant ideological norms.

Drawing on [Lazar \(2005\)](#), FCDA foregrounds gender as a central axis of power and examines how discourse reproduces and legitimizes patriarchal structures while attending to moments of resistance and rearticulation. FCDA focuses on the ways in which language positions women within systems of authority, normalizes inequality, and constructs expectations of femininity through everyday discourse. Within this study, FCDA is employed not merely as an analytical framework for examining how freedom and female identity are discursively constructed. It provides tools for analyzing how agency versus passivity is structured through narrative representation, how voice versus silence is controlled or suppressed, and how social and moral roles are imposed and normalized through discourse. It also allows examine how women are linguistically positioned in relation to duty, obedience, sacrifice, and emotional labor, and how these representations shape the meaning of female identity within wider ideological structures.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by [Halliday and Hasan \(1989\)](#), provides grammatical tools for analyzing how language encodes agency, responsibility, evaluation, and power. SFL conceptualizes language as a meaning-making resource that simultaneously performs ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. Key analytical categories in this study include transitivity, which identifies who is represented as acting versus being acted upon, modality, which expresses degrees of obligation, permission, necessity, and certainty, and interpersonal meaning, which reveals stance, judgment, and evaluative positioning ([Halliday & Hasan, 1989](#)). These linguistic resources enable the analysis to trace how freedom, authority, and female subjectivity are grammatically constructed across narrative contexts.

Text Selection

This study examines four literary works published between the 1960s and the early 2000s. The texts were selected purposively on the basis of three considerations. First, each gives substantial attention to women's experiences of autonomy, constraint, obligation, or resistance in local sociocultural contexts. Second, each contains recurring situations relevant to the analytical dimensions established in this study, including psychological, social and ideological, linguistic, and deferred or negotiated freedom, together with questions of agency, voice, social roles, and sacrifice. Third, selecting two works from each literary tradition provides a balanced basis for examining how comparable concerns are represented within different historical and sociocultural settings. The purpose is therefore not to treat the four works as culturally or historically equivalent, but to examine them through a common analytical framework. The American texts include *The Bell Jar* ([Plath, 1963](#)) and *Beloved* ([Morrison, 1987](#)). The Vietnamese texts include *Paradise of the Blind* (*Những thiên đường mù*) ([Duong, 1988, 2002](#)) and *The General Retires* (*Tướng về hưu*) ([Nguyen, 1987, 1992](#)).

The Vietnamese works required an additional consideration because both were originally published in Vietnamese and subsequently translated into English. The English versions are used to facilitate cross-textual comparison, but translation is not treated as fully reproducing the lexical and cultural meanings of the source

texts. Where an interpretation depends on culturally specific wording, evaluative meaning, modality, or another linguistically significant feature, the Vietnamese original is consulted and given interpretive priority. The translated and original versions were therefore used together where necessary, allowing the analysis to maintain a common comparative framework while remaining sensitive to language-specific meanings.

Summary of Selected Texts

The Bell Jar (Plath, 1963) follows Esther Greenwood, a young woman who struggles with psychological breakdown while confronting social expectations surrounding femininity, career, and marriage in mid-twentieth-century America. As Esther becomes increasingly alienated from the roles imposed on her, the novel explores the tension between apparent opportunities and lived restrictions. Medical treatment, social judgement, and internal instability contribute to shaping her experiences. The novel is particularly relevant to this study because it presents freedom as psychologically fragile and socially regulated rather than fully available or secure.

Beloved (Morrison, 1987) centers on Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman haunted by the trauma of slavery and the memory of her dead daughter. Although slavery has formally ended, the novel demonstrates that freedom remains incomplete because trauma continues to shape memory, identity, and bodily experience. Through haunting, silence, and fragmented narration, Morrison shows how the past remains active within the present. The text is important to this study because it reveals how freedom may be legally acknowledged yet psychologically deferred and how female identity is constructed through suffering, maternal responsibility, and survival.

Paradise of the Blind (Duong, 1988) follows Hằng, a young Vietnamese woman who reflects on her family history and the burdens imposed by ideology, filial duty, and social expectations. Through her relationships with her mother and aunt, the novel critiques post-revolutionary Vietnamese society and the moral pressures placed on women to sacrifice themselves for family and political ideals. Rather than presenting freedom as direct liberation, the text portrays it as constrained by obligation and inherited responsibility. It is especially relevant to this study for its representation of moral duty, emotional labor, and the tension between personal autonomy and collective expectations.

The General Retires (Nguyen, 1987) depicts the return of an aging military general to his family home after war, where tensions emerge between traditional authority, domestic life, and changing social values. Although the general appears to embody public honor and patriarchal order, the story gradually reveals the often-invisible labor and sacrifice performed by women within the household. Female characters are positioned within roles of caregiving, endurance, and domestic responsibility, frequently without recognition or meaningful autonomy. The text contributes to this study by illustrating how female identity is shaped through moral obligation and how freedom is limited by family and social structures.

Analytical Procedures

This study drew on the six stages of deductive thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), including (1) gaining familiarity with the data set, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. In this approach, the analysis “tend[s] to be driven by the researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). The unit of analysis is the literary passage, including narrative description, character dialogue, and other segments in which freedom or female identity becomes linguistically salient. Each passage was coded according to one or more of the theoretical dimensions of freedom (i.e., (1) psychological, (2) social and ideological, (3) linguistic, and (4) deferred or negotiated freedom) and female identity (i.e., agency, voice, social roles, and sacrifice). Passages were selected when they contained evidence relevant to one or more of the analytical dimensions and could be examined through discourse features such as metaphor, modality, transitivity, and evaluation. Metaphor shows how psychological freedom is represented through symbolic constructions of enclosure, instability, limitation, and aspiration. Modality reveals the degrees of obligation, restriction, permission, and possibility, thereby illuminating the discursive construction of social and ideological freedom. Transitivity illustrates patterns of agency and passivity, showing whether female characters are represented as active participants or as individuals acted upon by external forces. Evaluation traces how moral judgment and affective positioning are linguistically produced, particularly in relation to emotional labor, sacrifice, and socially prescribed gender roles.

The same analytical categories were applied across the four selected texts while remaining sensitive to language-specific and cultural meanings. For the Vietnamese works, interpretive priority was given to the Vietnamese wording rather than assuming direct equivalence between the original and translated versions. To strengthen analytical credibility, coding and interpretations were reviewed iteratively and agreed upon between the two researchers. Passages that were ambiguous or appeared relevant to more than one category were reconsidered in relation to their surrounding textual context and the working definitions of the analytical dimensions.

Results

Discursive Constructions of Freedom

Psychological Freedom

Psychological freedom in the selected texts is constructed as fragile and provisional rather than as a stable condition. In Plath (1963, p. 302), the metaphor “to the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream” frames psychological experience through enclosure. At the textual level, the noun phrase “bell jar” evokes a bounded space that separates the subject from the surrounding world. This metaphorical confinement continues in “The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head” (Plath, 1963, p. 274), where the verb

“hung” and the spatial phrase “a few feet above” represent constraint as temporarily displaced rather than completely removed. From a CDA perspective, these linguistic choices can be interpreted as constructing psychological freedom as vulnerable to circumstantial restrictions.

A comparable instability is realized differently in Morrison (1987). In “Nobody saw them falling” (Morrison, 1987, p. 205), the pronoun “nobody” foregrounds the absence of recognition, while the participial form “falling” presents the experience as unfolding rather than resolved. Temporal limitations become more explicit in “For a moment, looking up, Sethe entered the perfect peace they offered” (Morrison, 1987, pp. 205-206). The phrase “for a moment” restricts the duration of “perfect peace,” linguistically positioning her inner tranquility as temporary. These observations do not necessarily denote that psychological freedom is inherently unstable; instead, within the passages examined, metaphor and temporality repeatedly represent it as ephemeral. Psychological freedom is therefore discursively constructed through patterns of enclosure, instability, and momentary presence.

These findings indicate that psychological freedom in the selected texts is constructed as precarious rather than secure. Through metaphorical enclosure and temporally restricted moments of relief, the excerpts represent inner autonomy as something repeatedly threatened by disruption.

Social and Ideological Freedom

Freedom is also represented through linguistic forms that position social and ideological expectations as inevitable and, to some extent, obtrusive. In Plath (1963, p. 5), this pattern appears in “I was supposed to be having the time of my life.” From an SFL perspective, the semi-modal expression “supposed to” encodes an externally oriented expectation rather than an unrestricted personal preference. At the level of CDA, this modality can be interpreted as positioning the character against socially recognizable norms for conveying her feelings. Such linguistic evidence therefore implies obligation and imposition, restricting her own space for emotional response.

In Nguyen (1987), generalization contributes to a different form of constraint. The statement “Mỗi người đàn bà đều có thiên tính người mẹ” (Nguyen, 1987, p. 61) [Every woman has a mother’s nature] (Lockhart, 1992, p. 141) combines “mỗi” [every] with “đều” [all], presenting the proposition without individual exception. The phrase “thiên tính người mẹ” further represents motherhood as an inherent attribute. Within CDA and FCDA, this generalizing structure can be interpreted as naturalizing maternal responsibility by presenting it as a defining characteristic of women rather than as one possible social role. A similar pattern appears in “Tao là mẹ mày! Thật đấy! Chúng nó nói không sai đâu!” (Nguyen, 1987, p. 61) [I’m your mother! It’s true! What they say is right!] (Nguyen, 1992, p. 141). The pronoun “chúng nó” [they] introduces an external collective voice, while “không sai đâu” [right] positively evaluates that voice. Linguistically, the character supports her position through reference to the judgment of others. From a CDA perspective, this can be interpreted as legitimatizing her viewpoint through collective authority.

In Duong (1988), evaluative and modal language associate endurance with moral value. The statement “Làm người cốt nhất là không được thối chí. Chỉ một phút xuôi tay, mọi sự sẽ đổ nát” (Duong, 1988, p. 7) [To live with dignity, the important thing is never to despair. You give up once, and everything gives way] (Duong, 2002, p. 14) uses “không được thối chí” [never to despair] to frame perseverance as necessary rather than optional, while “xuôi tay” [give up] denotes involuntary surrender. This proverb-like use of language reinforces an evaluative contrast between endurance and limited resistance. Within FCDA, these patterns can be interpreted as positioning perseverance and self-denial as socially contingent responses to hardships.

These findings demonstrate that freedom is discursively restricted, as individuals are positioned within frameworks of social and ideological expectations that appear evident rather than imposed. When norms are framed as universal, they become more difficult to challenge, and alternative forms of behavior become less visible.

Linguistic Freedom

Linguistic freedom in the selected texts concerns not only whether characters speak but also the conditions under which expression becomes available or restricted. In Plath (1963, p. 261), the repeated sequence “Joan had walk privileges, Joan had shopping privileges, Joan had town privileges” reiterates the noun “privileges.” This lexical repetition represents ordinary activities as permissions granted within an institutional setting rather than as self-initiated actions. From a CDA perspective, the wording can be interpreted as locating the conditions of action and expression within institutional authority.

In Morrison (1987), restriction appears within the character’s own formulation. In “I don’t have to remember nothing” (Morrison, 1987, p. 216), the semi-modal expression “don’t have to” rejects an obligation to remember, showing that the utterance rejects further engagement with memory. This linguistic evidence can be interpreted as a form of discursive withdrawal from painful recollection.

A different pattern appears in “It was not a story to pass on” (Morrison, 1987, p. 232). The formulation does not identify a particular person as the source of the restriction. Instead, the proposition presents the limitation on transmission without an explicit agent. From a CDA perspective, leaving the source of regulation unspecified can be interpreted as making the restriction appear generalized rather than individually imposed.

These findings suggest that linguistic freedom is constructed through lexical repetition, modality, and agentless formulation. As the selected excerpts reveal, expression is conditioned by institutional authority, the character’s relation to memory, and restrictions whose source is not always explicitly identified.

Deferred and Negotiated Freedom

Deferred and negotiated freedom is constructed through linguistic patterns that make autonomy conditional on circumstances beyond the individual. In Plath (1963, p. 274), this conditionality is explicit in the exchange “That depends,” Doctor

Nolan said, “on you and me.” The verb “depends” marks contingency, while “you and me” distributes participation between the two characters. From a CDA perspective, freedom in this transaction is achieved through negotiation within an existing structure of authority rather than independently exercised. Similarly, in “Philomena Guinea was buying my freedom” (Plath, 1963, p. 282), “buying” from an SFL transitivity perspective is a material process in which Philomena functions as the agent and “my freedom” as the goal of the process. Linguistically, this construction of freedom is represented as something acquired through another person’s material intervention. Temporality also contributes to deferred freedom. For example, the phrase “for a moment” that comes along with the description of Sethe’s pursuit of peace (Morrison, 1987, p. 205) limits her duration of enjoyment. This lexical choice denotes temporary relief, showing freedom as provisional.

The Vietnamese texts contribute to this pattern through continuing obligation rather than explicit negotiation. As discussed earlier, Nguyen’s “Mỗi người đàn bà đều có thiên tính người mẹ” (Nguyen, 1987, p. 61) [Every woman has a mother’s nature] (Nguyen, 1992, p. 141) and Duong’s “không được thối chí” (Duong, 1988, p. 7) [never to despair] (Duong, 2002, p. 14) present maternal responsibility and perseverance as continuing and assigned expectations framed within the sociocultural context of Vietnam. Because these expectations are repeatedly legitimized within social discourse, the possibility of autonomy remains postponed rather than directly denied.

These findings show that deferred or negotiated freedom is constructed as conditional, mediated, and temporally unstable. The presence of power in interpersonal exchanges, circumstantial restrictions and sociocultural obligations are the key elements shaping the construction of freedom in the selected texts.

Discursive Constructions of Female Identity

Agency vs. Passivity

Female identity in the selected passages is constructed through different configurations of agency, including cases in which grammatical aspects do not correspond to effective control. In “Only I wasn’t steering anything, not even myself” (Plath, 1963, p. 6), the subject “I” occupies the grammatical position associated with agency, but the negation “wasn’t” denies the realization of that control. From an SFL transitivity perspective, this linguistic evidence presents agency as grammatically available but practically unacknowledged. Within FCDA, this can be interpreted as a construction of female subjectivity in which the capacity for action is present but constrained.

Morrison (1987) realizes diminished agency through a different grammatical pattern. In “The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became” (Morrison, 1987, pp. 294-295), the parallel comparative structure establishes an inverse relationship between the two characters. The relational process “became” represents Sethe’s condition as changing in relation to Beloved rather than through an independently directed action. From an FCDA perspective, the positioning of the female subject as dependent on another may represent a form of constrained selfhood.

In [Nguyen \(1987\)](#), agency is mediated through collective validation. In “Tao là mẹ mày! Thật đấy! Chúng nó nói không sai đâu!” ([Nguyen, 1987, p. 61](#)) [I’m your mother! It’s true! What they say is right!] ([Nguyen, 1992, p. 141](#)), the character refers to “chúng nó” [they] as support for the legitimacy of her position. The external voice helps consolidate the character’s claim of her agency. From a CDA/FCDA perspective, this suggests that identity is partly negotiated through socially recognized authority rather than individual assertion.

These findings show that female agency in the selected texts is structurally limited through different linguistic mechanisms. Negation, relational comparison, and collective legitimation each preserve the appearance of subjecthood while restricting effective control over action.

Voice vs. Silence

Voice in the selected passages is constructed not simply as the presence or absence of speech but through the conditions under which refusal, memory, and narration become available. In [Plath \(1963, p. 119\)](#), the statement “It never occurred to me to say no” makes refusal linguistically present through “to say no,” while the construction “never occurred to me” represents that possibility as absent from the character’s conscious consideration. This means that the character is not simply silent but the option of verbal refusal is cognitively blocked. From an FCDA perspective, these lexical choices convey a restriction on the discursive availability of resistance. As such, identity is constructed through the character’s powerless and submissive voice.

A comparable dynamic appears in [Morrison \(1987\)](#), where silence operates through collective discourse. In “It was not a story to pass on” ([Morrison, 1987, p. 323](#)), the passive construction removes any identifiable agent responsible for the prohibition. Instead, silence is presented as embedded in mutual understanding. Because the phrase “to pass on” refers to the intergenerational transmission of stories, the restriction functions as a shared discursive boundary. Through CDA, this can be interpreted as a form of discursive regulation whose authority remains implicit.

These findings show that voice in the selected texts is governed by discursive conditions rather than mediated by the mere capacity to speak. Female identity emerges within restricted frameworks of articulation in which voice remains possible but is bounded by how the characters recognize and express their agency.

Moral and Social Roles

Moral and social roles are constructed in the selected texts through linguistic patterns that characterize particular forms of behavior as expected or valued. The evaluative and generalizing language used in the texts portrays particular qualities as intrinsic to womanhood, thus shaping the terms through which female identity is understood.

In [Nguyen \(1987, p. 61\)](#), “Mỗi người đàn bà đều có thiên tính người mẹ” [Every woman has a mother’s nature] ([Nguyen, 1992, p. 141](#)), the determiner “mỗi” [every] together with the inclusive marker “đều” [all] removes individual variation.

The phrase “thiên tính người mẹ” further represents maternal disposition as inherent. From an FCDA perspective, these grammatical and lexical expressions associate femininity with nurturing and maternal responsibilities as if they were natural and self-evident qualities, thus narrowing the available ways in which female identity is represented.

In Duong (1988), evaluative language links femininity to moral worth developed through hardship. This is evident in “Gừng già gừng rụng, gừng cay, anh hùng càng cực càng dày nghĩa nhân” (Duong, 1988, p. 7) [They say ginger root becomes stringy, but pungent with age. Unhappiness forges a woman, makes her selfless, compassionate] (Duong, 2002, p. 14). The proverb-like wording “Gừng già gừng rụng, gừng cay” carries culturally specific associations with resilience and value intensified through hardship, since ginger in Vietnamese sociocultural discourse symbolizes sharpness, endurance, and lasting strength. Similarly, “anh hùng càng cực càng dày nghĩa nhân” equates suffering with the accumulation of compassion, righteousness, and moral depth. Through the use of evaluative and culturally resonant language, endurance and selflessness are presented not merely as responses to hardship but as desirable feminine qualities shaped through suffering.

A related pattern appears in “I was supposed to be having the time of my life” (Plath, 1963, p. 5). The semi-modal phrase “supposed to” marks an external expectation concerning the character’s emotional response. Through SFL modality, this linguistic device positions the subject against a standard that does not originate solely from her own preference. Within FCDA, this provides evidence for examining how socially recognizable expectations contribute to the construction of female identity.

These findings reveal that discourse does not merely reflect social roles but actively contributes to shaping the norms through which femininity is understood. By framing caregiving, perseverance, and emotional selflessness as natural, necessary, or morally valuable, the selected excerpts define the boundaries within which female identity can be recognized.

Emotional Labor and Sacrifice

Emotional labor and sacrifice in the selected texts are realized through linguistic patterns that connect care and responsibility with personal cost. They are discursively constructed as recurring processes through which female identity is reduced in relation to others. This process appears in the statement “Đặng không chết, vì do Thu đẩy ngã. Còn Thu lại bị tàu điện cán gãy nát chân” (Nguyen, 1987, p. 64) [Thu had saved him, but in doing so her legs had been broken by the tramcar] (Nguyen, 1992, p. 144). The English translation conveys the overall meaning of the experience, but it does not reproduce the causal structure of the first Vietnamese clause explicitly. Literally, “Đặng không chết, vì do Thu đẩy ngã” is equivalent to “Đặng survived because Thu pushed him down.” From an SFL transitivity perspective, Thu is first represented as the agent in “Thu đẩy ngã” [Thu pushed him down] in which her intervention prevents Đặng’s death. In the following clause, however, she becomes the victim in the adverse passive construction marked by “bị” [by], as she is struck by the tramcar and suffers severe injury. The contrastive conjunction “còn” [but] further sets Đặng’s survival against Thu’s bodily injury. At

the linguistic level, the passage therefore moves from female agency to female victimization or sacrifice. Within FCDA, this linguistic expression associates agency and care with sacrifice whereby female identity is recognized through personal loss in the act of saving others.

A comparable evaluation of female identity is realized in [Morrison \(1987\)](#) through relational structure. In “The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became” ([Morrison, 1987, pp. 294-295](#)), the parallel structure establishes an uneven dynamic in which one identity expands at the expense of another. The verb “became” signals gradual transformation, suggesting that emotional labor operates cumulatively over time. Here, identity is not abruptly undermined but progressively reconfigured through relational imbalance. From an FCDA perspective, this relational structure can be interpreted as a form of self-diminishment associated with sustained care and responsibility.

In [Duong \(1988\)](#), the relationship between obligation and resistance is expressed through modality and metaphor. In the statement “Không thể tiêu phí cuộc sống bởi những cánh hoa tàn héo, những tối tăm, lầm lạc của quá khứ” ([Duong, 1988, p. 338](#)) [I can’t squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes] ([Duong, 2002, p. 258](#)), the imagery of “faded flowers” and “these shadows, the legacy of past crimes” evokes the past with decay, exhaustion and moral burden. The wording suggests that the character is resisting not a single duty, but an accumulated legacy of obligation that continues to shape the present. From an FCDA perspective, this can be interpreted as a moment in which obligation remains discursively present but is actively resisted.

These findings show that emotional labor functions as a discursive mechanism that aligns female identity with personal cost, self-reduction, and sacrifice for others. The discursive construction of female identity exhibited in the text was achieved through the character’s shift from an agent to a victim in [Nguyen \(1987\)](#), relational diminishment in [Morrison \(1987\)](#), and an interaction of modality and metaphor in [Duong \(1988\)](#).

Discussion

Findings of this study align with discourse-based approaches that treat meaning as socially produced rather than naturally given. The discursive constructions of freedom and female identity implicated in the four texts support [Fairclough’s \(1995, 2023\)](#) view that discourse functions as a form of social practice through which meanings are shaped. Freedom is not represented as a self-evident state of liberation but as a condition mediated by ideology, social expectation, trauma, and institutional authority. This finding responds to feminist perspectives such as those of [de Beauvoir \(1956\)](#) and [Hooks \(1984\)](#), who argue that women’s access to autonomy is structurally constrained rather than universally guaranteed. From an SFL perspective, the present study contributes to illuminating more precisely how freedom is constructed through recurring linguistic features, including metaphor, modality, transitivity, and evaluation. The findings also align with feminist and discourse-oriented research that interprets female identity as socially and discursively produced. In particular, they support [Butler’s \(1999\)](#) account of gender as performative and [Lazar’s \(2005\)](#) argument that discourse naturalizes

expectations of femininity through obedience, self-sacrifice, and emotional responsibility. The findings expand contemporary literary research on female identity, explicating it not only as restricted at the thematic level but also as constructed through linguistic patterns that weaken agency, regulate voice, and moralize care and endurance.

The study also supports trauma-based approaches to subjectivity and freedom, particularly in relation to the American texts. [Caruth \(1996\)](#) and [LaCapra \(2001\)](#) concur that trauma disrupts continuity, coherence, and the possibility of full recovery. The findings are consistent with this view since *The Bell Jar* and *Beloved* repeatedly construct freedom as fragile, deferred, and psychologically unstable rather than secure or fully recoverable. However, the Vietnamese texts complicate any attempt to explain limitations only through trauma or inner fragmentation. This distinction can also be understood in relation to broader patterns beyond the literary corpus. The findings of this study suggest that limitations on freedom are constructed through multiple discursive dimensions, including psychological instability, social expectations, and ideological constraints.

The contrast identified between American and Vietnamese texts aligns with cross-cultural frameworks that highlight differences between individual autonomy and socially embedded obligation ([Berlin, 1969](#); [O'Harrow, 1995](#); [Woodside, 1971](#)). However, the analysis also extends these perspectives by demonstrating that, despite these differences, both traditions ultimately produce comparable constraints on female identity through distinct linguistic and discursive mechanisms. These findings suggest that the construction of freedom identified in this study is not limited to specific texts but reflects broader patterns in cultural discourse. This discursive construction of freedom closely aligns with contemporary literature that emphasizes familial and collective obligation in Vietnamese social contexts ([Frenier & Mancini, 1996](#); [Tran, 2006](#)). However, the four texts do not provide sufficient evidence to treat these differences as general characteristics of Vietnamese or American discourse. Rather, the comparison suggests that freedom can be constrained through different but sometimes overlapping discursive routes.

Conclusion

This study shows that freedom in the selected American and Vietnamese literary texts is discursively constructed through a range of linguistic features, including metaphor, temporality, modality, evaluation, silence, and conditionality. In the American texts, freedom is frequently constructed through images of psychological fragility, institutional regulation, and temporary relief, suggesting that autonomy remains vulnerable and difficult to sustain. In the Vietnamese texts, freedom is more often shaped through naturalized duty, moral expectation, and collective obligation, where constraint appears culturally legitimate rather than openly imposed. Despite these differences, both contexts construct freedom as dependent on wider psychological, social, institutional, and ideological conditions rather than as a simple state of self-determination. Findings also demonstrate that these discursive constructions of freedom directly shape representations of female identity. Female identity appears limited, negotiated, and closely shaped by external expectations. In the American texts, these limitations often appear through

psychological instability, silence, and institutional control, whereas in the Vietnamese texts, they are more commonly expressed through moral obligation, family responsibility, and socially valued sacrifice. These findings suggest that women in these texts are not represented as fully autonomous subjects but as figures whose selfhood is discursively shaped by power, obligation, and constrained forms of agency.

Theoretically, this study brought the discursive constructions of freedom into direct relation with female identity. Instead of treating freedom only as a philosophical or political concept, the analysis shows how its meanings can be examined through linguistic patterns that position female identity in relation to agency, voice, obligation, and sacrifice. Methodologically, the study combined CDA, FCDA, and SFL as an integrated framework, thus offering a systematic way of examining how freedom and female identity are discursively constructed across different literary and sociocultural contexts within the selected texts. Several limitations exist in the present study. The corpus contains only four literary texts, so the findings cannot be generalized to American or Vietnamese literary discourse more broadly. Second, the study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, which inevitably involves a degree of researcher subjectivity. Although this subjectivity has been mitigated through systematic theoretical grounding and close textual analysis, interpretation remains shaped by the researcher's analytical decisions and positioning. Third, the analysis of Vietnamese texts may be affected by issues of translation and cultural nuance, as certain connotations may not be fully transferable across languages and cultural systems. Future research could expand the dataset to more American and Vietnamese literary works across a wider time range and cultures to reflect other literary traditions at different historical moments.

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