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From "Discipline" to "Enlightenment": A Study of the Transformation of Drama's Role in Women's Education and Its Contemporary Educational Applications

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Abstract

Since its inception, theater has served an educational function, subtly influencing and reshaping audiences' perceptions through embodied emotional experiences and public viewing mechanisms. Currently, the awakening of feminist consciousness is characterized by "imbalance, othering, and spontaneity," necessitating a shift from emotional resonance to rational reflection; theater, in this context, serves as a potential vehicle for education. At the same time, as an integral group of characters on the theatrical stage, the evolution of female characters subtly reflects the trajectory of gender norms from traditional to modern times. Therefore, this study, grounded in the educational function of theater, systematically traces the historical evolution of female characters in drama and explores the prospects for applying theater in contemporary women's education. Employing literature analysis and close textual reading, combined with practical case studies of educational theater, the study identifies three distinct phases in the evolution of drama: from "discipline" to "enlightenment," and finally to "self-expression." It concludes that drama serves as an effective educational tool to foster women's awareness and affirmation of their own identities. The findings indicate that theater has not only undergone a historical transformation from a "tool of discipline" to a "medium of enlightenment," but can also serve as an educational tool in contemporary women's education, providing more robust cultural support for the deep-rooted acceptance of gender equality.

Keywords

women, discipline, enlightenment, educational theater, gender education

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, theater has played a vital role in education and moral instruction. Ancient Chinese theater adhered to the tradition of "using literature to convey moral principles," while Western theater served as a tool of city-state politics. Today, educational theater is experiencing a resurgence. As an integral part of theater, female characters embody diverse educational meanings and connotations, subtly shaping the audience's perceptions. Female characters in theater across different eras serve as cultural barometers, documenting the evolution of gender norms. Currently, the awakening of female consciousness has reached a new peak; while ideas have been fully liberated, this has also brought about certain challenges. This awakening exhibits characteristics of "imbalance, othering, and spontaneity," largely stemming from the

stimulation of fragmented information, which makes women prone to emotional resonance while lacking rational reflection. As one of the ideal mediums for presenting feminine charm, theater also serves as an effective vehicle for educational influence, offering valuable insights into the trajectory of women's awakening and effective pathways for women's education.

However, existing research largely remains at the stage of linear categorization of female characters, with few studies delving deeply into the integration of educational functions and gender education. Furthermore, as an emerging educational method, educational theater has scarcely been applied to the field of gender education in global practice. Therefore, this study addresses the aforementioned practical challenges and theoretical gaps, holding dual significance: on a theoretical level, it fills the gap in existing research regarding in-depth analysis of the educational mechanisms of female characters in drama; on a practical level, this study aims to respond to the real-world need for the development of women's education and to provide a new cultural tool for gender equality education.

To achieve this objective, this study employs literature analysis and close textual reading to systematically examine female representations in drama. Beginning with three phases—"discipline," "enlightenment," and "self-narration"—the study elucidates the historical evolution of the didactic functions embedded in female representations and conducts an in-depth analysis of the underlying mechanisms of discipline and enlightenment. Building on this foundation, the study seeks to explore the potential applications of drama in contemporary women's education. Drawing on case studies from Hualin Primary School and Xihua University, this paper identifies three practical pathways for educational theater: "substitute experiences," "spaces for self-exploration," and "training grounds for expression." These pathways explore how theater can help women transition from "narrated objects" to "self-narrating subjects," thereby providing cultural support for the deep-rooted establishment of gender equality.

2. Discipline in the Old Era

2.1 The Educational Tradition of Drama and Its Influence on the People

The performance forms of Chinese drama originated from the ritual practice of "divine possession of the shaman" during sacrificial ceremonies. It subsequently evolved from "entertaining the gods" to "entertaining the people," and developed into an independent art form during the Song Dynasty [1]. After breaking away from ritual and becoming an independent art form, theater in both the East and West gradually developed cultural characteristics that shaped values: to ensure its survival, Chinese opera aligned itself with the literary tradition of "using literature to convey moral principles"; Western theater, meanwhile, was closely linked to city-state politics, achieving civic education through the cathartic effect of tragedy, thereby reconstructing the audience's cognition through embodied emotional experiences. In the process of fulfilling this educational function, vivid female characters often became the most important vehicles. In *The Collection of China's Ten Great Classical Tragedies*, edited by Professor Wang Jisi, seven works—accounting for 70% of the collection—feature women as their primary subjects; similarly, in Western classical drama, female figures such as Juliet and Nora shine with equal brilliance. These characters not only embody the ideological leanings of their creators but also serve as cultural symbols for disseminating ideas and shaping social mores.

2.2 The Image of the "Virtuous Wife and Good Mother" in Ancient Chinese Drama: The Moral Education of Women Under the Discipline of Patriarchal Ethics

This tradition of moral education, embodied through female characters, is most vividly reflected in ancient Chinese drama through the portrayal of "virtuous wife and good mother" figures, which is underpinned by the disciplinary logic of patriarchal ethics [2-4].

Rooted in the soil of traditional Chinese culture, drama inevitably bears the cultural characteristic of "concerning human culture to transform and enlighten the world" [5]. Under this influence, classical Chinese drama even evolved into educational plays specifically aimed at political governance and social moral education. Within these educational plays, "virtuous" dramas represented by female characters gradually came to dominate, revealing just how numerous the disciplinary constraints on ancient women in society were. The female characters Dou E and Zhao Wuniang in *The Injustice to Dou E* and *The Story of the Lute* are representative examples. While they embody profound traditional virtues, on a deeper level, they also

carry educational implications, serving as ideological tools through which creators convey their concepts. By "sacrificing themselves, remaining loyal to their husbands, and being filial to their parents," they are elevated to the pedestal of "virtuous women," setting an "example" for all women and thereby achieving a disciplinary effect.

How is this discipline achieved? First, it concretizes abstract patriarchal ethics into the standardized image of the "virtuous wife and good mother." For instance, in *The Story of the Lute*, Zhao Wuniang's actions—such as tending to her in-laws while living alone in an empty room, eating coarse grains herself while feeding her in-laws rice, cutting her hair to sell for money to bury her in-laws, and traveling a thousand miles with her lute to search for her husband—each serves as a visual embodiment of the "Three Bonds and Five Constants." Moreover, such figures possess a high degree of "emulability": Zhao Wuniang is an ordinary woman; she is praised for her behavior of "self-sacrifice and the fulfillment of both loyalty and filial piety," rather than for any "innate exceptional qualities." Drama transforms abstract moral norms into imitable daily practices, fostering in the audience a sense of identification and aspiration—the belief that "if she can do it, so should I." Second, the play achieves internalization through emotional mechanisms. It places the "virtuous wife and mother" in a situation of suffering to evoke sympathy. When Zhao Wuniang sings, "Chaff and rice were once intertwined; now, scattered by the winnowing basket, they fly in separate directions," while eating chaff, the audience's emotions are stirred, and sympathy transforms into identification. Finally, the drama reinforces value identification through a "good deeds are rewarded" conclusion—Zhao Wuniang receives an imperial commendation, and Dou E's wrongful death is posthumously vindicated. This system of rewards and punishments conveys a clear message to the audience: virtuous women who adhere to ethical norms will ultimately be rewarded. Thus, the audience gains a form of "vicarious experience" through emotional resonance. They need not personally endure suffering, yet they emotionally identify with the characters, experiencing the entire story vicariously, and adopt the characters' behavioral patterns as standards for self-evaluation. For instance, when Dou E makes three solemn vows at the execution ground—blood staining white silk, snow falling in June, and a three-year drought—the audience, deeply moved, feels the power of "chastity and loyalty," thereby internalizing it as a code of conduct.

Thus, whether it was Zhao Wuniang or Dou E, they were both "narrated objects" constructed by the discourse of patriarchal ethics. Portrayed as "virtuous wives and good mothers," they suffered, sacrificed themselves, and were honored on stage, serving as role models for female audiences of that era and disciplining women to adhere to wifely duties and sacrifice themselves for others. Being celebrated was the means by which their value was realized, yet they never gained the power to narrate their own destinies—this is the fundamental characteristic of drama in an era of discipline.

2.3 "Virtuous Women" and "Prostitutes" in Ancient Greek and Roman Drama

Female characters in ancient Greek and Roman drama bear a striking resemblance to those in Chinese drama: their true value lies in their loyalty to love and family, and once separated from love or family, their identities become blurred [6]. On the other hand, ancient Greek drama served an educational function for the city-state, and its disciplinary mechanisms blended the authority of divine oracles with civic ethics, thereby dividing female characters into two extremes: the "virgin," for whom sacrifice is a virtue, and the "prostitute," for whom personal desire is a sin. Euripides' "Alcestis" and "Medea" are representative of these two archetypes.

While *Alcestis* centers on a wife sacrificing herself to save her husband, the narrative consistently focuses on the husband, Admetus. Moreover, Alcestis's willingness to die for her husband stems not from love, but primarily from a sense of duty as a wife and mother—a reflection of the author's belief that women should sacrifice themselves for their husbands. In *Five Tragedies of Euripides*, Luo Niansheng points out that while Euripides sympathized with women's tragic plight, this sympathy indirectly reinforced gender inequality under male supremacy [3]. As he states: "The death of Alcestis is the tragic consequence of the irrational system in Athenian society at the time that demanded women sacrifice everything for men." This image of the "virgin martyr" disciplines women's thinking, leading them to believe that their value lies in sacrificing themselves for their husbands. In contrast to Alcestis, Medea is portrayed as a "dangerous woman." Driven by her love for Jason, she betrayed her homeland and even killed her own children. Notably, in the play, Medea—for the first time in Western literary history—voices an indictment as a woman: "Among all rational

and sentient beings, we women are the most unfortunate…" This line demonstrates a courage that transcends its era. However, this does not alter the author's critique of her—Medea is ultimately portrayed as an "irrational, dangerous Other," and her "infanticidal revenge" narrative provided a psychological archetype for later generations. This mirrors the disciplinary strategy of "hystericalization of the female body" identified by Foucault [6-7]. These images of "mad, dangerous women" are not objective descriptions, but rather "disciplinary tools" constructed through the collusion of medical discourse and patriarchal culture. They serve as proof that "women are creatures of the senses," thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of discipline.

In ancient Greek drama, this mechanism of disciplinary enforcement is achieved through narratives of fate. First, women's fates are often determined by oracles: Alcestis's death in place of another is because "the Fates permitted it," while Medea's revenge is presented as the evil consequence of "desire that has gone beyond bounds." Such narratives elevate the ethics of the city-state to the will of the gods—violating these ethics is not only a social transgression but also an offense against the gods. Second, plays were performed publicly during city-state festivals, and behavioral norms were reinforced through collective viewing: Alcestis's sacrifice was publicly celebrated, while Medea's revenge was publicly condemned. This dual mechanism of sacralization and publicization made female audiences aware that their own behavior was scrutinized not only by the city-state but also by the gods.

Whether Alcestis or Medea, neither transcends the category of "narrated object" constructed by the city-state's discourse. Women remain confined within the identity cage of "living for others"; every decision must consider others and be subject to public judgment—the slightest hint of self-interest causes them to slide from saint to harlot. Thus, whether in the East or the West, women are "narrated objects." Through the creation of exemplary, contrasting female archetypes, drama internalizes patriarchal ethics and the city-state's order into women's self-discipline. This is precisely what Foucault revealed: how cultural narratives shape docile subjects.

3. The Transformation of the Enlightenment

3.1 Ideological Shift

Since the 18th century, the Enlightenment has placed "reason," "freedom," and "equality" at the center of intellectual discourse, and the long-neglected plight of women began to receive attention. Western Enlightenment thought broke the long-standing constraints and disciplinary controls imposed on women by the family and religion. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft was the first to systematically argue that men and women should have equal access to education. She criticized society for deliberately undermining women's talents to "keep them in their place," and she urged: "Grant women equal rights, and they will surely demonstrate character as excellent as that of men." Although her views were not widely accepted at the time, they laid the foundation for nineteenth-century feminism. In contrast, Chinese women had long been influenced by the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues," lacking a sense of self-awareness. It was not until the late Qing Dynasty, with the eastward spread of Western learning, that "women's liberation" became a central issue for progressive intellectuals. Thinkers such as Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, and Lu Xun linked women's destinies to national modernization. As a result, attention was directed toward the lives and thoughts of women in the late Qing dynasty, and practices such as the abandonment of foot-binding and the establishment of girls' schools received some encouragement under the influence of these new ideas. The May Fourth New Culture Movement further brought "women's liberation" to the forefront, propelling women into becoming subjects capable of being "discovered," "spoken for," and "liberated."

3.2 The Image of Women in the Enlightenment Era

Against this intellectual backdrop, the portrayal of women in drama underwent a transformation. Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* introduced the iconic figure of Nora, a woman awakening to her true self. Initially a "doll" within her household, Nora began to awaken after seeing through her husband's selfishness and hypocrisy, thereby redefining her identity: "I am myself first and foremost, and only then do I assume other roles. Therefore, I must love myself first before I have the capacity to love others." This statement places the identity of "a person" above that of a wife or mother, and

she challenges the social structure: Does a person have the right to live according to their own will? She is no longer the submissive "ideal wife and mother," but an awakened "person," inspiring countless female audiences with the message: "I, too, can become an independent person."

Fan Yi in the modern Chinese play *Thunderstorm* represents a different kind of character. She is not simply an "awakened woman," but a "madwoman" destroyed by social institutions. The author attributes her "madness" to society's oppression of women, rather than to any inherent emotional traits of women themselves. Fan Yi's tragedy reveals the structural predicament of women within feudal families: she possesses a strong will to live but has nowhere to channel it; she harbors an independent spirit yet remains trapped in the cage of her identity as "Mrs. Zhou." In Foucault's view, "madness" is the act of resistance by the disciplined after they have reached the point of despair. Fan Yi's "madness" is a product of institutional violence; she prompts the audience to shift from "judging the individual" to "reflecting on the system," and from "moral judgment" to "structural critique."

However, these "new woman" characters are mostly shaped by male playwrights—who, acting as "spokespersons," narrate women's awakening and resistance, inevitably creating a paradox of enlightenment. The female characters they depict carry men's imaginings and expectations of women, yet these very imaginings and expectations, to some extent, constitute a new form of discipline: Nora is Ibsen's ideal projection, and Fan Yi is Cao Yu's vehicle for indictment. Although they broke free from the stereotypical portrayal of female characters, women remained objects "spoken for"—male intellectuals could depict women's suffering but could not reveal their true desires; they could shape women's resistance but could not grant them autonomous voice. Take Fan Yi as an example: her portrayal of "madness" was destructive rather than constructive, perpetuating the disciplinary tradition that "resistance equals destruction." Even later, when women's liberation was incorporated into the male-dominated agenda of social reform and became a political tool, women's agency remained unmanifested. This precisely points to the direction for breaking through the portrayal of women in drama: women must truly become "subjects who speak for themselves"—not merely as characters on stage, but as playwrights, directors, and dramatists. Only when women seize the power of speech can they escape the predicament of being "spoken for."

3.3 The Dawn of the Era of Women's Self-narration

In 2022, Australian playwright Susie Miller's one-act play *Preliminary Evidence* ushered in the era of female-led narratives. Written by a woman, told from a female perspective, and starring a female lead, the play tells the story of Tessa, a female lawyer who, after being sexually assaulted, discovers that the legal system she knows so well is unable to deliver justice. What the audience sees is not a "new woman" shaped by a male playwright, but a real, complex, and contradictory female subject telling her own story. From "speaking in the language of the law" to "speaking in her own words," Tessa's transformation marks women's shift from being "spoken about" to "speaking for themselves." Unlike the Disciplinary Era, which told women "how they should be," and unlike the Enlightenment Era, which told women "how they could be," this era tells women "this is who I am"—women's bodily experiences, emotional journeys, desires, and pain are stories worthy of being told in their own right, without the need for translation through male discourse. When women seize the power of speech, the female image is no longer a projection of male imagination but a presentation of the female self.

From the era of discipline to the Enlightenment, and on to the era of women's self-narration, the metamorphosis of female characters in drama represents a long-term shift from "objects of narration" to "subjects of self-expression." Theater in the era of discipline taught women to be obedient; theater in the Enlightenment era inspired women's awakening; and theater in the era of self-narration empowers women to define themselves. Though this transformation is not yet complete, it points to the future direction of women's theater: as more and more women gain the power of speech, theater will no longer be a tool for disciplining and constraining women, but will become a public space where women express themselves, construct their own agency, and change the world.

4. Contemporary Applications of Drama

The above examination of historical transformations ultimately remains confined to the realm of dramatic texts and stage performances. A more fundamental question thus emerges: at this critical juncture where

women's consciousness is evolving from "spontaneity" to "self-awareness," how can we transform the ideal of "self-expression" into tangible, experiential practice? In other words, can drama cease to be merely an aesthetic object to be viewed and analyzed, and instead become an educational method in which everyone can participate, experience, and reconstruct their sense of self? In light of this inquiry, Drama in Education has come into focus—with its unique mechanisms of "process-oriented" and "role-immersion," it offers a practical and feasible pathway for the awakening of female consciousness.

4.1 Case Study: The "3+3" Drama Model at Hualin Primary School

Drama in Education refers to a method that applies theatrical techniques to classroom instruction. Through creative drama, improvisational performances, and role-playing, it enables participants to exercise their imagination and express their thoughts through interaction, learning through hands-on practice [8]. It breaks away from traditional learning models, instead emphasizing "embodied experience"—where knowledge is deeply understood through physical participation, situational experience, and role immersion [5, 9].

These theoretical characteristics provide a solid foundation for the application of Drama in Education in girls' education. Taking the "3+3" Drama Model at Hualin Primary School as an example, we will examine how it has been effectively implemented in primary school girls' education [8]. Hualin Primary School has developed the "3+3" drama education model (combining "three lessons" with "three competencies"), accumulating rich experience in girls' education at the primary level. With "self-awareness, emotional expression, and social understanding" as its core objectives, this model uses role-playing, scenario creation, and forum theater to allow girls to experience shared female experiences in a safe environment. In a drama class themed "Brave Enough to Say No," the teacher created a realistic scenario in which the girls took turns playing different roles, such as victims, bystanders, and interveners. Through role-playing, they not only practiced coping strategies but, more importantly, realized that in the face of abuse, silence is not the only option; and as bystanders, a simple "Stop!" might be the very thing that saves someone else.

The innovation of this model lies in three aspects: First, it transforms abstract concepts of gender equality into tangible, actionable physical practices. Traditional gender education often remains limited to knowledge transmission or moral preaching, whereas drama allows girls to "become" victims, bystanders, or interveners through role-playing, enabling them to understand power imbalances and the possibilities for action through embodied experience. Second, it creates a safe "experimental space." Within the dramatic context, girls can boldly practice behaviors such as refusal, seeking help, and intervention, without real-world consequences even if they make mistakes. This "psychological distance" is precisely the core strength of educational theater—participants are emotionally invested yet retain the space for rational reflection. Third, it facilitates a transition from individual awareness to collective resonance. When a girl playing the victim says, "I don't want to," the observers in the audience also experience the same inner struggle and awakening. This collective emotional resonance is far more impactful than individual reading or classroom discussions [10-11].

The replicability and feasibility of this model are equally clear: First, it has minimal hardware requirements; it can be conducted in a standard classroom, provided the teacher possesses basic drama facilitation skills. Second, the scenarios are rooted in students' daily lives (such as school bullying or family conflicts), making it easy to evoke empathy without relying on complex scripts or professional props. Third, the "3+3" model organically integrates drama activities with the existing curriculum, serving as a supplementary format for moral education, mental health education, or class meetings, thereby reducing the institutional costs of implementation. Fourth, the forum theater format allows students to "call a halt" at any time and propose alternative solutions. This open structure not only respects the agency of each participant but also enables teachers to flexibly adjust the pace of instruction based on student responses. Therefore, Hualin Primary School's practice provides a replicable model for grassroots schools to implement drama-based gender education.

4.2 Practical Approaches

4.2.1 Alternative Experiences: Enabling Girls to Experience the Shared Plight of Women

The core value of educational theater lies in providing "alternative experiences"—participants do not have to personally endure hardships, yet they can experience the emotional impact and dilemmas of decision-making within a safe environment. In traditional societies, the discipline of women is often enforced through "intimidation": if you do not comply, you will meet a fate like Medea's. Educational theater, however, allows girls to ask themselves, "If I were her, what would I do?" while playing a role, and to practice coping strategies in a virtual setting. Take the Forum Theater production *Non-Standard Answers* at Beijing Normal University High School as an example. When students take the stage to resolve the "conflict between interests and academics," they are actually practicing how to handle dilemmas they might face in real life. One student shared: "I used to feel that my parents didn't understand me, but after playing the role today, I realized that their 'opposition' was also rooted in concern."

4.2.2 Space for Self-Exploration: Exploring "What Kind of Woman Do I Want to Be" in Virtual Contexts

Educational theater provides a "space for self-exploration." In reality, women's identities are often predefined as daughters, wives, and mothers, but theater allows participants to temporarily shed these roles, step into fictional characters, and explore "if I were not myself, who would I want to be." In the "Women's Studies Theater" project at China Women's University, students reenacted the traditional guanji ceremony through drama to understand the disciplinary logic behind the construction of female identity, and then reconstructed a modern coming-of-age ritual for women: using ears of wheat as a central symbol, they achieved a value breakthrough from "identity discipline" to "self-realization." When the girls "become" women under traditional Confucian teachings and personally experience the sensation of being "restrained," the mechanisms of discipline cease to be abstract knowledge and become a visceral reality; when they "become" the protagonists of a modern coming-of-age ceremony and declare their "self-realization," they are constructing their own identity.

4.2.3 The Training Ground for Expression: Practicing the Art of Telling One's Own Story to Reclaim the Right to Speak

In the era of discipline, women were "objects to be narrated"; in the Enlightenment era, they were "objects to be spoken for"; whereas the ultimate goal of educational theater is to empower women to become "subjects who speak for themselves." This requires training in expression—practicing the art of telling one's own story in one's own words. In forum theater, participants can "call a halt" and propose alternative solutions; in process drama, participants collaboratively create the script. As the theme of *Non-Standard Answers* states: "Life may have a certain answer, but there is no 'standard' one." When girls speak in the first person—saying "I want," "I refuse," and "I choose"—they are not only practicing communication skills but also constructing a self-identity as speaking subjects. From the silence of the era of discipline, to being spoken for in the Enlightenment era, and finally to self-expression in the era of educational theater—the reclaiming of the right to speak is precisely the core path to the construction of female subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the portrayal of women in theater has undergone a transformation from "discipline" to "enlightenment" and ultimately to "self-expression." Through three pathways—substitute experiences, spaces for self-exploration, and training grounds for expression—educational theater helps women transition from being "narrated" to "self-expressing." The core conclusion is that educational theater offers new possibilities for contemporary women's education; only when girls can define themselves through theater can the chains of discipline be truly broken.

This study offers valuable insights for future research in this field. Theoretically, it overcomes the limitations of existing research, which has tended to present the evolution of female theatrical characters in a linear fashion. By examining the "educational function" perspective, it reveals the mechanisms of discipline and enlightenment underlying this transformation, thereby providing a new analytical framework for the intersection of theater studies and gender studies. Practically, the three pathways identified in this study—

"alternative experiences," "space for self-exploration," and "training ground for expression"—along with detailed analyses of typical cases such as Hualin Primary School—provide replicable and scalable operational models for grassroots schools to implement drama-based gender education. Finally, at the methodological level, this study combines close textual analysis with educational drama practice cases, demonstrating a research paradigm that integrates historical transformation analysis with contemporary application exploration, which can serve as a reference for subsequent related research.

Future research should focus on the following areas for in-depth exploration: First, studies evaluating the effectiveness of educational theater in women's education. Current research is predominantly qualitative in nature and lacks quantitative data support; future studies could design experimental research to measure changes in indicators such as women's consciousness and self-efficacy before and after theatrical interventions. Second, differentiated research on female groups of different age groups. The case studies in this research are primarily concentrated at the elementary and university levels, with insufficient targeted research on female students in secondary schools or in rural and remote areas. Third, how female creators (playwrights, directors, and drama educators) can systematically engage in the development of educational drama curricula to ensure the implementation of women's voice from the outset. Fourth, the potential for integrating digital technology with educational drama, such as how new technologies like virtual reality and AI-assisted role-playing can expand the boundaries of "alternative experiences." It is hoped that future research will continue to delve deeply into these areas, thereby promoting the tradition of drama education to play a greater role in the cause of gender equality.

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